

## Twelfth Night -Motifs and Symbols

### 1) Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

#### **Letters, Messages, and Tokens**

Twelfth Night features a great variety of messages sent from one character to another—sometimes as letters and other times in the form of tokens. Such messages are used both for purposes of communication and miscommunication—sometimes deliberate and sometimes accidental. Maria's letter to Malvolio, which purports to be from Olivia, is a deliberate (and successful) attempt to trick the steward. Sir Andrew's letter demanding a duel with Cesario, meanwhile, is meant seriously, but because it is so appallingly stupid, Sir Toby does not deliver it, rendering it extraneous. Malvolio's missive, sent by way of Feste from the dark room in which he is imprisoned, ultimately works to undo the confusion caused by Maria's forged letter and to free Malvolio from his imprisonment.

But letters are not the only kind of messages that characters employ to communicate with one another. Individuals can be employed in the place of written communication—Orsino repeatedly sends Cesario, for instance, to deliver messages to Olivia. Objects can function as messages between people as well: Olivia sends Malvolio after Cesario with a ring, to tell the page that she loves him, and follows the ring up with further gifts, which symbolize her romantic attachment. Messages can convey important information, but they also create the potential for miscommunication and confusion—especially with characters like Maria and Sir Toby manipulating the information.

#### **Madness**

No one is truly insane in Twelfth Night, yet a number of characters are accused of being mad, and a current of insanity or zaniness runs through the action of the play. After Sir Toby and Maria dupe Malvolio into believing that Olivia loves him, Malvolio behaves so bizarrely that he is assumed to be mad and is locked away in a dark room. Malvolio himself knows that he is sane, and he accuses everyone around him of being mad. Meanwhile, when Antonio encounters Viola (disguised as Cesario), he mistakes her for Sebastian, and his angry insistence that she recognize him leads people to assume that he is mad. All of these incidents feed into the general atmosphere of the play, in which normal life is thrown topsy-turvy, and everyone must confront a reality that is somehow fractured.

#### **Disguises**

Many characters in Twelfth Night assume disguises, beginning with Viola, who puts on male attire and makes everyone else believe that she is a man. By dressing his protagonist in male garments, Shakespeare creates endless sexual confusion with the Olivia-Viola--Orsino love triangle. Other characters in disguise include Malvolio, who puts on crossed garters and yellow stockings in the hope of winning Olivia, and Feste, who dresses up as a priest—Sir Topas—when he speaks to Malvolio after the steward has been locked in a dark room. Feste puts on the disguise even though Malvolio will not be able to see him, since the room is so dark, suggesting that the importance of clothing is not just in the eye of the beholder. For Feste, the disguise completes his assumption of a new identity—in order to be Sir Topas, he must look like Sir Topas. Viola puts on new clothes and changes her gender, while Feste and Malvolio put on new garments either to impersonate a nobleman (Feste) or in the hopes of becoming a nobleman (Malvolio). Through these disguises, the play raises questions about what makes us who we are, compelling the audience to wonder if things like gender and class are set in stone, or if they can be altered with a change of clothing.

### **Mistaken Identity**

The instances of mistaken identity are related to the prevalence of disguises in the play, as Viola's male clothing leads to her being mistaken for her brother, Sebastian, and vice versa. Sebastian is mistaken for Viola (or rather, Cesario) by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, and then by Olivia, who promptly marries him. Meanwhile, Antonio mistakes Viola for Sebastian, and thinks that his friend has betrayed him when Viola claims to not know him. These cases of mistaken identity, common in Shakespeare's comedies, create the tangled situation that can be resolved only when Viola and Sebastian appear together, helping everyone to understand what has happened.

### **Death**

### **Imagery – the Sea**

## **Q- How is the sea represented and used in Twelfth Night. What does Orsino mean when he says his love is as 'hungry as the sea' ?**

**2) Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.**

### **Olivia's Gifts**

When Olivia wants to let Cesario know that she loves him, she sends him a ring by way of Malvolio. Later, when she mistakes Sebastian for Cesario, she gives him a precious pearl. In each case, the jewel serves as a token of her love—a physical symbol of her romantic attachment to a man who is really a woman. The gifts are more than symbols, though. “Youth is bought more oft than begged or borrowed,” Olivia says at one point, suggesting that the jewels are intended almost as bribes—that she means to buy Cesario's love if she cannot win it (III.iv.3).

### **The Darkness of Malvolio's Prison**

When Sir Toby and Maria pretend that Malvolio is mad, they confine him in a pitch-black chamber. Darkness becomes a symbol of his supposed insanity, as they tell him that the room is filled with light and his inability to see is a sign of his madness. Malvolio reverses the symbolism. “I say this house is as dark as ignorance, though ignorance were as dark as hell; and I say there was never man thus abused” (IV.ii.40–42). In other words, the darkness—meaning madness—is not in the room with him, but outside, with Sir Toby and Feste and Maria, who have unjustly imprisoned him.

### **Changes of Clothing**

Clothes are powerful in Twelfth Night. They can symbolize changes in gender—Viola puts on male clothes to be taken for a male— as well as class distinctions. When Malvolio fantasizes about becoming a nobleman, he imagines the new clothes that he will have. When Feste impersonates Sir Topas, he puts on a nobleman's garb, even though Malvolio, whom he is fooling, cannot see him, suggesting that clothes have a power that transcends their physical function.

### **Jewels :**

## **Q- Feste says of Duke Orsino " Thy mind is a very opal “ . What does he mean, and how is this a use of symbolism ?**