

**Topic: *Twelfth Night***

**Course Title: Sources and themes**

**Paper: CC4**

**SEMESTER: 2**

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## ***Twelfth Night*** -William Shakespeare

Arguably, Shakespeare's final comedy before he moved on to the uncharted territory of problem plays, ***Twelfth Night*** is often labelled as a Festive comedy. The association of the play with carnival, with its obvious consequences of turning the world upside down, challenging authority and offering a counter- authority is one way of approaching the play-text.

**First performance:** The play was written for a Performance on the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> January ( Twelfth Night – the final night of the twelve days of Christmas festivities) 1601. Refer to the feast of Epiphany, Lord of Mirule etc.

**Sources:** Shakespeare's ultimate source is an Italian play, *Gl' Ingannati*, Barnabe Riche's prose tale of *Apolonius and Silla*, as well as his own early play *The Comedy of Errors*. *The Comedy of Errors*, deploys mistaken identity as well as identical twins and the play was translated in Bangla by none other than Vidyasagar.

### **Major themes and key issues:**

1. The notion of romantic love- the play explores the idea of love in several possible aspects. It also scrutinizes the kinds of love and their probable implications.
2. ***What you will***- Can be taken as either Shakespeare's working title, or the alternative title or subtitle to the play's main title. It is about interpretation and

reception. It's almost as if Shakespeare draws us to the make belief world of Illyria, which is in fact "staged" in an equally illusory space- the theatre- calling us to examine the doubleness that is so central to the play text.

3. Power and hierarchy-The subplot concerns itself with the question of social organisation, class as well as contemporary questions on laws such as the old law of primogeniture.
4. Disguise, Masks and Masquerade- Cross dressing and disguise is central in ***Twelfth Night***. Much of the fun and delight derives from this as mistaken identities gives rise to several twists and turns in the plot. Disguise and masks operate on multiple levels in the play.
5. Gender- Shakespeare explores and pushes the limits of gender but is not able

to cross over. Olivia is contained and bound by the demands of her time. Or that is what we feel about this woman of substance.

## **Movement and Closure**

All plays begin in a crisis and *Twelfth Night* is no exception. Act 1 introduces the characters and provides the necessary background for the audience/reader to participate in the play. This is known as the “exposition”. We are also familiarized with the major issues in the first act.

The second, third and fourth Acts build up the plot and the rising action is also referred to as the “complication”.

Confusions and intrigues abound and there is always the awareness of the pervading

instability. Language and its slipperiness adds to the general ambience of instability.

The final act is where the knots are untied and this is the third movement of the play: “resolution”. The obstacles are finally removed and the playwright's comic vision is brilliantly encapsulated in the Fool's song.