

Topic: *Twelfth Night*

Course Title: Structure / Plot

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Twelfth Night Or What You Will was written several years after ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, and performed around 1602. The title refers to the Feast of Epiphany, which is celebrated on 6th January. It is useful to examine the notion of Carnavalesque because Twelfth Night is in fact mentioned as one of the principal festivals associated with “Carnival” in the pre- industrial Europe. In fact, some historians regard it as the winter counterpart of Midsummer's day in the yearly festive cycle (hence the necessity of considering ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***). Twelfth night festivities contain the ethic of carnival and are inherently subversive. The customary celebrations with a cake containing a dried bean, the crowning of its recipient as the king of the feast etc. are all intended to burlesque the powerful and undermine their authority. This is the “release” granted legitimately to

underdogs, every year, when they can come together and vent their frustration and anger, before returning to “normal” life, the following day.

Structure / Plot

Plot: The plot is the backbone of a play. It is the arrangement of the events/ action, in a plausible manner, in order to present a story on stage. Plot consists of Exposition, Complication(also called rising action), Climax, and Resolution. Resolution traces the falling action and ends with denouement.

- ***Twelfth Night*** has a double plot. It is a play based on mistaken identities in the Plautine tradition, similar to Shakespeare’s earlier comedy ***The***

Comedy of Errors. However, the confusion generated in ***Twelfth Night*** is not only due to mistaken identities because of the twins. Viola's disguise adds to the intrigue and complications in the play due to overlapping identities.

- The two plots could be referred to as the main plot and the sub plot. The main plot foregrounds the love interest of the high-born elites: Duke Orsino, Countess Olivia and Viola. The subplot consists of more fluid characters like Sir Toby, Malvolio, Maria, Sir Andrew and the Fool, and it presents the more realistic preoccupation of the play. (Interestingly, Sir Toby, as the title suggests, is a high – born yet he and Sir Andrew figure on the subplot.)
- **Exposition:** In ***Twelfth Night***, the first Act familiarizes us with the characters and also introduces the central themes. This is

the “Exposition”. We are provided the necessary information, the background as well as a few other details so that we can sit back and participate in the action on stage because a play is all about the **triple bond- bond between the author, actor and the audience.**

- **Complication:** The second, third and fourth Acts witness the rising action. Complication and confusion abound as the love interests clash. And added to this is the “doubleness of vision” that is so central to the play. The confusions arising due to mistaken identities, identical twins, disguise all contribute to the movement of action. Allied to this central movement, there is a steady progression of the subplot that brings out “class” tension, the Puritan debate among other things. Shakespeare explores the unpleasant or

harsher aspects within “Ilyria” through the subplot and sets up a major face off between the pro- festive and anti- festive forces in the play.

- **Resolution:** The grand finale arrives in Act Five but not before some moments of real terror. The knots are finally untangled, recognition and reversal coincide, and lovers are finally united. But whether the closure is festive or contrived, is left to the audience's consideration. The Fool's final song, which is technically “outside” the body of the main play-text, acts as a grim reminder of reality.