

**Topic: *Twelfth Night***

**Course Title: Characters**

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## **Characters/ Subjectivities**

As students of literature we are aware and equipped to probe characters and note characterization/s minutely. The rule is simple. We need to interact with and respond to them as in real life: look for signs through language and action. And most importantly, remain faithful to the play-text.

It is essential to consider certain criteria while dealing with characters in a play. In a play- text we look for subjectivity and continuity as in real life situations. So, it is essential to consider the **agency** or **personhood**, the **awareness** and the element of **truth/ veracity** in representation of the character on stage. Also, one has to respond and react as audience/reader and participate in the action on stage, similar to real life.

In “**The First Night of *Twelfth Night***” (1954) Leslie Hotson wrote at length on the real Duke Orsino- Don Virginio Orsino- and the Elizabethan connection. Without going into these topical referral points, we can look at Orsino, as he appears before us. In a play there are two ways in which we meet people and form our perspective/s.

**First**, as the **subject** appears before us, the language, the manners and the actions (or lack of it in case of Orsino).

**Second**, on the basis of what others say/ inform in course of the play.

The agency or personhood and the question of veracity or truth are crucial to our understanding. For example, Viola is introduced as a high-born ship-wrecked lady who is swept ashore in Illyria. What is/are the sign/s that tell us she is high- born even before we get to know

her? Shakespeare deploys the Captain ( who is a functional character in the play) to do the job. And when we hear the Captain addressing Viola as “lady” (Act 1, Scene 2, line 2) we **believe** or **rely** on the Captain's perspective. Very soon we witness Viola's comic transformation as she disguises and **becomes** Cesario. But there is no break in the continuity of her character/personhood.

On the other hand, we see Olivia in the play first as the head of a rather disordered household. Then she falls in love and dares to pursue the man she desires, challenging the order and structure of the society that she governs and is governed by. The unfair end to her desire leaves us heart broken by the end of the play. Despite being one of the most formidable among Shakespeare's comic protagonists, Olivia's agency is suddenly withdrawn as it were as the playwright literally silences her at the most crucial juncture of her life as well as the play.

## **What the others tell us**

This is the other category we need to consider while assessment. For instance, when we hear Duke Orsino talking about Countess Olivia in the play's opening scene we visualize her as sentimental and weepy. This is the image Olivia wants to project and has succeeded as well.

However, when we finally meet her in scene 5 she is far removed from Orsino's or the world's view of her. Other than a brief mention of the dead brother when the Fool proves her foolishness in mourning for a dead brother in heaven, there is no hint of sadness. The mourning, apparently, is a mask.

These are the signs we need to look at and pay attention to in order to engage in a meaningful character analysis.