Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Twelfth Night

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Plot

- Viola is shipwrecked in Illyria and believes her twin brother Sebastian has drowned. Disguised as a young man, Cesario, she serves Duke Orsino.
- Orsino loves the Countess Olivia, who is mourning her brother and refuses him. Olivia falls for Cesario, and Viola falls for Orsino: a love triangle.
- In the **subplot**, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Maria and Feste trick Olivia's strict **steward** Malvolio with a forged letter, so he appears in yellow cross-gartered stockings, smiling. He is locked up as mad.
- Sebastian arrives, and Olivia marries him, thinking he is Cesario. The twins are reunited, Orsino marries Viola, and Malvolio leaves swearing revenge.

Themes and context

- Love and desire, **disguise** and identity, gender, madness, social ambition, and festivity.
- Written around 1601. Twelfth Night was the last night of Christmas celebrations, when normal order was turned upside down. Boy actors played women, adding to the gender confusion.

Form

- A comedy with mistaken identity, a **subplot** of trickery and marriages at the end, but with a darker edge in Malvolio's treatment.

How to get top marks

- Remember that the comedy has an edge: Malvolio's humiliation goes further than a joke, and the play knows it.
- Use **disguise** to write about gender: Viola, as Cesario, shows how much of love and status depends on how we appear.
- Comment on the mood: music and melancholy run beneath the jokes.

Key terms

Disguise	Hiding your identity, as Viola does as Cesario.
Subplot	A second, smaller storyline, here the trick on Malvolio.
Steward	The servant who runs a household.
Dramatic irony	When the audience knows more than the characters.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What name does Viola use in disguise?
2. Who does Orsino love at the start?
3. Who falls in love with Cesario?
4. How is Malvolio tricked?
5. Who is Viola's twin?
6. Who is Olivia's steward?
7. What creates much of the comedy?
8. How does the play end for Malvolio?

Answers

1. Cesario
2. Olivia
3. Olivia
4. With a forged letter that seems to be from Olivia
5. Sebastian
6. Malvolio
7. Mistaken identity and disguise
8. He leaves swearing revenge

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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