

## Studying

# TWELFTH NIGHT



### TOP TIP

1

#### Watch and learn!

As with any text, it is necessary to **read** *Twelfth Night*, in the first instance. It's simple: the better you know the text, the easier you will find it to **quote** from, **reference** and **remember**.

Remember, though, that *Twelfth Night* was written to be **performed**! At first glance, Shakespearean humour can seem alien to

modern audiences. Do yourself and Shakespeare a favour and **go and see the play acted in front of you**! It will help your understanding of the play, as the **actors** and the **staging** bring to life the **puns**, **innuendos** and other **comedic devices**!

So, whether it's in the West End or a local performance, try and see at least one live production.



### TOP TIP

2

#### Are you joking?

With *Twelfth Night* regarded as Shakespeare's last comedy, it helps to know why, where and how the humour is generated.

When tackling language, it can be helpful to think about **who** is saying it and **why**. We are much more likely to have **puns** and **wordplay** from Feste and Viola, **double-entendres** and **innuendos** from Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, and sharp **satire**, **irony** and **wit** used in scenes with **Malvolio** and those complicit in the plot against him!

REMEMBER: The idea is not to understand absolutely everything you read, but to focus on **key passages** and the way that the play is written.

### TOP TIP

3

#### Signpost

Make your essay as **easy to follow** and **engaging** as you can by **signposting your ideas**.

There are many phrases you can use to guide the examiner through your argument, such as: 'On the other hand ...'; 'This idea is explored by ...'; 'It is important to mention/remember that ...'; 'There is one other factor to consider ...'; 'Conversely ...'; 'One could argue that ...'

that ...'; 'There is one other factor to consider ...'; 'Conversely ...'; 'One could argue that ...'

REMEMBER: **Always** keep the essay title in mind! After each paragraph, ask yourself, 'Does this answer the question?'

### TOP TIP

4

#### Don't overpack – unpack!

It is tempting to make a good point as quickly as possible, but you risk 'overpacking' your sentences and paragraphs. Don't rush: **unpack** your argument.

Take it **step-by-step** to **clarify** and **refine** your **argument**. There's nothing more frustrating than a good point made badly – it can take the punch out of your essay!

The key to not overpacking your answer is – surprise, surprise – **planning effectively** before you begin your response! Check out the **Essay wizard** and **Essay plans** in the **Revise** section of our online guide for tips and guidance on writing your way to a great grade!

### TOP TIP

5

#### A clue in the name

Taking a **thematic** approach to *Twelfth Night* will really help you to **unlock** the plot and characters, as well as to make interesting and imaginative contextual inferences. The **title** gives us a clue to some of the central themes.

Remember, the play's full title is *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. The **double title** reflects the

theme of **doubling** in the play (twins, double identities, double plot). The word 'will' reveals a link to the theme of **puns** and the **subjectivity of language**. Consider the number of ways in which we can interpret the word 'will'.

Does it refer to the **will** of the individual – the idea of new possibilities and identities (Viola as Cesario; Olivia as wife; Malvolio as count)? Or perhaps, should we consider 'will' to mean 'desire', i.e. what do you **want**? This links to the themes of **Excess** embodied by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, and points to its opposite in the form of puritanical **Malvolio**.



### TOP TIP

6

#### Double drama

*Twelfth Night* is essentially made up of two plots: the main plot involving the twins, Olivia and Orsino, and the sub-plot around the 'gulling' of Malvolio. Think about how these plots contrast with one another and the **interplay** between them.

Think about the role of **juxtaposition** and the **effect** of such a technique. How does the **double plot structure** link to both the **themes** of *Twelfth Night* and the **effect** of the **comedy**? How does it create **dramatic irony**?

Also consider how this play compares to Shakespeare's other comedies, for example, *As You Like It* and *The Comedy of Errors*. Are there any **prevalent motifs** or **tropes** across these comedies? What does this tell us about the way that Shakespeare structures his comedies?

REMEMBER: To get a **high grade**, consider the way in which the structure of Shakespeare's comedies **evokes** particular **audience responses**.

### TOP TIP

7

#### Know your literary criticism!

Whether you use **psychoanalytic theory** or you apply a **feminist reading** to the play, make sure you are aware of the **critical debates** that surround *Twelfth Night*.

Try and group together different critical perspectives on *Twelfth Night* – perhaps using a spider-diagram to organise the different

opinions for each school of thought!

REMEMBER: Literary criticism can be used to **bolster** your argument as well as providing something to **argue against**! Be brave and argue well!

### TOP TIP

8

#### Key critics are theatre critics!

Do not forget that *Twelfth Night* is a **play**, and therefore designed to be **watched**. **Theatre reviews and critics** are crucial when examining the **play in performance**.

**Articles, reviews and interviews** with actors and directors are readily available on the internet. Don't just opt for the big West End performances – why not scour local or regional newspapers for reviews of fringe productions?

This approach should give you an idea of how twenty-first-century audiences are reacting to *Twelfth Night*, and reveal any trends in the **staging** of Shakespeare's comedies today!

### TOP TIP

9

#### Know your context!

Knowing the **context** of the play is key to understanding the presentation of important characters.

For example, look at **puritanical Malvolio** – why is he treated with such contempt by the other characters? What was going on in England and Europe at this time?

But don't just **assume** that **Shakespeare followed the rules**! Ask yourself whether *Twelfth Night* follows theatrical and societal tradition, or whether this play pushes the **boundaries**.

Do you think that *Twelfth Night* **subverts** rather than **reinforces** the values of **Shakespeare's age**? To what end?



### TOP TIP

10

#### Twelfth Night and other texts

*Twelfth Night* lends itself extremely well to imaginative comparisons with other texts. Below are some of the main themes of *Twelfth Night* and the texts that could be studied alongside it:

- ✓ **Gender and transformation**: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*
- ✓ **Love and obsession**: Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*
- ✓ **Art as artefact/language vs reality**: John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
- ✓ You could also draw parallels between Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Twelfth Night* in terms of **genre**, **characters** and the themes of **language**, **identity**, **narcissism** and **desire**.

REMEMBER: Don't shoehorn **contextual references** in to an argument – only mention them if they are **relevant** to your essay title and mark scheme!