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VIOLA

Who is Viola?

- Viola is a young noblewoman, whose father died when she was thirteen.
- We first see her when she is cast up on the shore of Illyria, following a shipwreck in which her twin brother Sebastian has been lost.
- Amid her grief, she shows courage and resourcefulness in deciding to dress as a boy called Cesario and enter the service of Orsino.

VIOLA: SCHEMER OR CHARMER?

Throughout the play, Viola is a stranger in Illyria, a potentially inhospitable land. She appears as a woman only in her first scene and is not mentioned by her own name until the reunion with her twin brother in the final scene. In Act III Scene 4 she admits that she has consciously adopted Sebastian's appearance – in productions she often borrows his clothing from a chest saved from the wreck – and it may be that her disguise is a way of keeping her brother alive until their eventual reunion in Act V. Like Olivia (their names are virtual anagrams, signalling that they are made up of similar elements but in a different order), she has lost her father and, she fears, her brother; unlike Olivia, she does not respond to loss by retreating into herself, but gives herself up to the restorative powers of 'time' (II.2.37). Writing in the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson described Viola as 'a cunning schemer, never at a loss'; the opposite view was taken by the critic William Hazlitt, who wrote in 1817 that she is 'the great and secret charm' of the play: 'much as we like cakes and ale there is something that we like better' (see **Part Five: Contexts and Critical Debates**).



GRADE BOOSTER A02

Shakespeare uses the technique, which he employs in other plays (e.g. see *Hamlet* I.1 and I.2), of **juxtaposing** sharply contrasting scenes. Viola's plight and her urgent questions and decisive speech (I.2) are the opposite of Orsino's comfortable melancholy (I.1). Find examples of how her language differs from his and other possible contrasts between the two scenes in character, action and setting. Look out for other places in the play where Shakespeare uses these juxtapositions.

CRITICAL VIEWPOINT A03

Emma Fielding, in *Twelfth Night, Actors on Shakespeare* (2002), p. 7, provides a fascinating insight into the supportive and energising effect of Viola's character on the actor playing her: 'she carried me, she supported me, improvising a new way of existing for herself ... She saved me. I suppose I fell for her.'

STUDY FOCUS: VIOLA IN BETWEEN AND GO-BETWEEN A02

Zoë Wanamaker, who played Viola at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (1983–4), described her character as 'the catalyst of the play' who enters the 'locked-up stillness of Illyria' to bring 'life, and chaos, and hope', 'stirring up the place, forcing them all up into a spiral'. Viola is certainly associated with movement throughout the play: she is the go-between for Orsino to Olivia and moves between their households; she has individual conversations with Olivia, Orsino, Malvolio, Feste and Sebastian and, as such, is the major connective force between the different characters and plot strands. Her arrival breaks up the stalemate of Orsino's extravagant and unrequited love for Olivia, and equally dismantles the sterility of Olivia's self-imposed mourning. As Cesario she is able to challenge Orsino's glib sexism about women's inability to love, 'There is no woman's sides/ Can bide the beating of so strong a passion/ As love doth give my heart' (II.4.89–91), with her own heartfelt 'We men ... prove/ Much in our vows, but little in our love' (II.4.112–14). She is also able to identify Olivia's pride (I.5.205), and thus reintroduce her to the world she has ignored. Find more examples of how Viola brings life to Illyria and Illyria to life.

STUDY FOCUS: VIOLA ALONE A02

For all her conversations – swapping witticisms with Feste, parrying Olivia's passionate questioning, at once evading and confessing to Orsino – Viola is in some sense alone for much of the play, unable to open up to anybody because of the disguise she calls 'a wickedness' (II.2.24). She has no confidante other than the audience, although the relative lack of **soliloquies** or **asides** addressed to the audience suggests that she does not really confide in us either. Her encounters with Orsino and Olivia are emotionally charged, but there is the constant echo of what must remain unspoken. Her love for Orsino is ventriloquised as the 'willow cabin' she would, were she he, build at Olivia's gate (I.5.223), or as the pining passion of her ill-fated imaginary sister who, like Viola herself, 'never told her love/ But let concealment, like a worm i'th'bud/ Feed on her damask cheek' (II.4.106–8). Her love can be voiced only in a kind of disguise, dressed as something or someone else, in an emotional and linguistic parallel to her physical disguise as Cesario.

VIOLA: 'I AM NOT THAT I PLAY'

Frequently Viola alludes to the disparity between her real self and the part she is playing: 'I am not that I play' (I.5.153), she tells Olivia at their first meeting. Helen Schlesinger, another RSC Viola, in 1997–8, found in her character an 'elusive' quality, describing it as 'a very lonely part. There's a bit of her that is always hidden', and this oblique aspect of Viola might be thought to remain even at the play's conclusion when the return of her woman's clothing keeps being referred to but never actually happens. Strikingly, for viewers of the play in the theatre (as opposed to readers of the text), she is not named as Viola and so does not attain the individual identity denoted by her forename until Sebastian greets her in Act V, 'Thrice welcome, drowned Viola' (V.1.225). Then she speaks her own name twice in ten lines, the first time to talk about Viola and the second to make the decisive assertion of the self, 'I am Viola' (line 237), but even then only in a long and complex sentence in which the statement is subordinate and heavily qualified. There is a sense, therefore, in which she cannot be a complete person until she is reunited in an embrace with her twin after the play's conclusion. Orsino, significantly, continues to call her 'Cesario' to the end. Perhaps, therefore the play's **symbolic** resolution is in the twins' embrace rather than in the final double marriages, which take place after the end of the play.



KEY QUOTATION: VIOLA A01

Viola: 'I am not what I am.' (III.1.126)

- Viola here uses one of the many riddling expressions concerning the verb 'to be' which occur through the play, to hint that her true self is secret and unknown.
- Viola's divided self is a condition she also identifies in Olivia, 'you do think you are not what you are' (III.1.124).
- When she is apparently closest to the man she loves, Viola's male disguise pushes her beyond reach, and yet this distance makes the woman who loves her want her all the more.
- This gap between self and identity is experienced by the other characters in *Twelfth Night* who all play parts and adopt roles which are not completely them.

CRITICAL VIEWPOINT A03

The shipwreck has **metaphorical** associations with the birth trauma separating the twins and therefore suggests that the whole play is an attempt to return to that privileged togetherness they enjoyed before birth. Stage productions sometimes make use of the same idea, such as the RSC production (1994) in which Emma Fielding as Viola describes 'emerging from billowing silk waves on to an empty shore, a rebirth I suppose and also the only time in the play when she is openly female and openly vulnerable' (*Twelfth Night, Actors on Shakespeare*, 2002, p. 16.)

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

FIVE KEY AREAS

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR ANSWER/ESSAY

- **First, get straight to the point in your opening paragraph.** Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follows up with evidence or a detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't always be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references, which help the essay flow.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to say that adds a further dimension.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

Here's an example of an opening paragraph that gets straight to the point, addressing the question:

'In "Twelfth Night" music is not simply an accompaniment to the action, but an essential means of creating the play's bitter-sweet nature.' How do you respond to this viewpoint?

Immediate focus on task and key words, and example from text

Music begins, ends and permeates "Twelfth Night". Orsino's opening words, 'If music be the food of love, play on' (1.1.1), call for music not merely as entertainment, but as a prime physical need. Indeed, music encompasses and conveys the play's rich and complex pattern of moods, creating through its performance a mixture of sadness and joy which is one of the play's distinctive features.

2. USE OF TITLES, NAMES, ETC.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- **Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, characters, names of authors and so on.** Present them correctly, too, with double quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, *'In Act I of "Twelfth Night" ...'*.
- **Use the full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- **Use the terms 'play' or 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'.** If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, Orsino) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as Malvolio). Or, they write about one aspect from the question (for example, 'disguise') but ignore another (such as 'gender identity'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.

3. EFFECTIVE QUOTATIONS

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant
- Not too long
- Integrated into your argument/sentence.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

Here is an example of a quotation successfully embedded in a sentence:

The more sombre tone of the play's denouement culminates in Orsino's final words, as he evokes a 'solemn combination ... of our dear souls' (V.1.360–1).

Remember – quotations can be a well-selected set of three or four single words or phrases. These can be easily embedded into a sentence to build a picture or explanation around your point. Or, they can be longer quotations that are explored and picked apart.

4. TECHNIQUES AND TERMINOLOGY

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions or people (for example, **rhetoric** or **eulogy** or 'Hazlitt') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly.

5. GENERAL WRITING SKILLS

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- **Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions** such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- **Use terms** such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- **Refer to 'we'** when discussing the audience/reader.
- **Avoid assertions and generalisations**; don't just state a general point of view ('*Malvolio deserves everything he gets because he is vain and vindictive.*'), but analyse closely, with clear evidence and textual detail.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

Note the professional approach in this example:

The imprisonment of Malvolio brings out the latent cruelty inherent in comedy. Nevertheless, while other characters progress beyond their self-delusions towards love of another, Malvolio goes the opposite way. Orsino escapes being 'canopied with bowers' (1.1.41) and Olivia from being a 'cloistress' (1.1.28), but Malvolio's 'self-love' (1.5.73), immediately identified by Olivia, leads him from his self-confinement in yellow stockings and cross-garters to his dungeon of isolation and darkness and finally to his exit from comedy itself, with his threat, 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!' (V.1.355).

GRADE BOOSTER

A02

It is important to remember that *Twelfth Night* is a text created by Shakespeare. Thinking about the choices Shakespeare makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright, but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.