

Twelfth Night

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following paper topics are designed to test your understanding of the play as a whole and to analyze important themes and literary devices. Following each question is a sample outline to help you get started.

TOPIC #1

It is obvious that the play's tapestry contains more than a single plot. Write an essay analyzing the way in which the comic plot involving Malvolio becomes a perverse reflection of the love plot involving Orsino and Olivia. Discuss Cesario's role as go-between for the Duke.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement:** *The comic plot involving Malvolio becomes a perverse reflection of the romantic plot involving Olivia and the Duke.*
- II. Explain the romantic plot.**
 - A. An aristocratic man falls in love with a countess.
 1. The Duke has seen Olivia and desires union with her.
 2. He initially expresses the depth of his feeling in poetic lines.
 - B. Cesario acts as a go-between for the Duke.
 1. Cesario forms a practical complement to the Duke's romantic behavior.
 2. Cesario woos Olivia on the Duke's behalf.
 - C. Olivia rejects the Duke's love.
 1. Olivia says that she cannot love the Duke while she mourns her brother's death.
 2. Olivia, rather, falls in love with Cesario.
- III. Explain the comic plot.**
 - A. Maria plots to gull Malvolio.
 1. There is no genuine source for Malvolio's love; it's the result of a scheme.
 2. The letter left by Maria is falsified.
 - B. Malvolio picks up and reads a falsified letter.
 1. The letter seems to be in Olivia's hand.
 2. It commands him to adopt peculiar behaviors.
 - C. Malvolio proceeds under the influence of a devious trick.
 1. Malvolio thinks Olivia is in love with him.
 2. Malvolio approaches Olivia in yellow stockings and cross-gartered.

IV. Malvolio's love is a perversion of the Duke's and Olivia's.

- A. Malvolio's love is an artificial fantasy—put stress on the “artificial.”
 - 1. Malvolio loves on the basis of a letter and a readiness in his own mind.
 - 2. Malvolio's love has no possibility of being realized because Olivia has no intention of loving him.
- B. Orsino, by contrast, is truly in love with Olivia.
 - 1. Orsino's feelings have a genuine source.
 - 2. Orsino is truly involved in an effort to court a woman.
 - 3. Ideally, he could possibly achieve Olivia.
- C. Malvolio winds up humiliated.
 - 1. Malvolio isolates himself with a sense of being abused.
 - 2. Rather than being an accepted lover, Malvolio winds up wronged and humiliated.

V. **Conclusion:** To the extent that the schemers are cruel, Malvolio's love for Olivia is perverse. Love cannot thrive in an atmosphere of ill will.

TOPIC # 2

Many playwrights have dealt with the theme of love. It's a theme that carries so much interest because of the power it wields in peoples' lives. Write an essay that explores Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of love in *Twelfth Night*.

Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** *The formal design of Twelfth Night illustrates the theme of love as having two key aspects, “loving” and maintaining the relationship.*
- II. **The aspect of “loving” as embodied in the play**
 - A. Define the concept of “loving.”
 - 1. The Duke serves as an example of the true lover.
 - 2. The Duke places Olivia on a pedestal.
 - B. Olivia falls in love with Cesario.
 - 1. Just as the Duke loved Olivia upon seeing her, so Olivia loves Cesario when they meet.
 - 2. Olivia pours forth poetic feeling for Cesario.
 - C. Both Orsino and Olivia are rejected in their loving.
 - 1. Olivia rejects the love of the Duke.
 - 2. Cesario rejects Olivia's love.
- III. **Cesario represents the practical aspect of love that sustains a relationship.**
 - A. Cesario goes to work for the Duke.
 - 1. Cesario's speech shows that he understands the need to be realistic and practical.
 - 2. Cesario diligently attempts to woo Olivia for the Duke.
 - B. Cesario does not give himself over to sentiment.
 - 1. Cesario does not fall in love and utter love speeches.
 - 2. Cesario is a man of action, not of words.
 - C. Cesario has a twin brother.
 - 1. Cesario's twin brother, Sebastian, will prove a similar complement to Olivia.
 - 2. Olivia's love is similar to the Duke's in its romantic nature.

IV. The two aspects of love are brought together in the final harmony of the play.

- A. Sebastian enters Illyria.
 - 1. Sebastian is puzzled over Olivia's immediate affection for him.
 - 2. The two lovers can achieve their other halves because Sebastian joins Viola.
- B. Cesario reveals his true female identity.
 - 1. Olivia and Sebastian have married; Cesario is not a man.
 - 2. The Duke can propose to Viola upon learning of Olivia's marriage.
- C. The couples of the love plot complement each other perfectly.
 - 1. Cesario is the practical aspect that sustains the love which Orsino embodies.
 - 2. Sebastian, like his sister, represents the practical aspect for Olivia's amalgam of love feeling.

V. **Conclusion:** Looking at a theme in an abstract sort of way, as here with love, requires that the play be seen quite like a static work of art. Characters thus become more like poetic symbols than real, dynamic personalities.

TOPIC # 3

The festive atmosphere is so much a part of this play that it should be considered to gain a deeper understanding. Sir Toby, as the "lord of misrule," is the master of ceremonies and surely keeps the party going. Write an essay that explores the function of the foolery and fun within the play.

Outline

I. **Thesis Statement:** *Shakespeare weaves in a festive atmosphere that enhances the enjoyment of the love plot.*

II. Define the festive atmosphere.

- A. The title *Twelfth Night* indicates a holiday and day of revelry.
 - 1. Tradition places a "lord of misrule" in charge of the fun in this play.
 - 2. The holiday includes eating, drinking, and entertainment.
- B. Sir Toby handles the merriment quite well.
 - 1. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew eat and drink for diversion.
 - 2. Sir Toby instigates a fight that provides high-spirited entertainment.
- C. The Clown plays a remarkable role in the festivities.
 - 1. The Clown is a jester who is clever at wordplay.
 - 2. The Clown sings for the Duke and the other characters.

III. The saturnalia is absorbed in the action of the play.

- A. The gulling of Malvolio as an example of high jinks
 - 1. Sir Toby approves of the way Maria orchestrates the scheme.
 - 2. The spectators take eerie pleasure in Malvolio's humiliation.
- B. Imagery underscores the awareness of a holiday
 - 1. Sir Toby uses dance images in a conversation with Sir Andrew.
 - 2. Sir Toby refers to wines and has a reputation for being a drunk.
- C. Feste's role in the festive design
 - 1. He impersonates Sir Topas when speaking with Malvolio.
 - 2. Feste and Cesario have a meeting of the minds in their conversation.

IV. The intersection of the festive element and the love theme

- A. Sir Andrew as one of Sir Toby's men has a mock duel with Cesario.
 - 1. Sir Toby suggests that a show of valor will entice Olivia.
 - 2. Sir Andrew is egged on to confront Cesario.
- B. The content of the Clown's songs relates to the theme of love.
 - 1. The first song Feste sings deals with true love.
 - 2. Feste also sings a song that expresses Orsino's frustrated love.
- C. The last act consists in a dizzying array of interludes.
 - 1. The act has the semblance of a large party with all the characters coming together to share in the roistering.
 - 2. Sir Toby marries Maria in recompense for her cleverness.

- V. Conclusion:** Love can thrive in almost any environment. But, perhaps an ambience that is full of fun and liveliness can best match the emotional high that being in love means for some.