Developed exclusively with the Caribbean Examinations Council®, this study guide will provide candidates in and out of school with additional support to maximise their performance in CAPE® Literatures in English.

Written by an experienced team comprising teachers and experts in the CAPE® Literatures in English syllabus and examination, this study guide covers the elements of the syllabus that you must know in an easy-to-use double-page format. Each topic begins with the key learning outcomes from the syllabus and contains a range of features designed to enhance your study of the subject, such as:

- Examination tips with essential advice on succeeding in your assessments
- Did You Know? boxes to expand your knowledge and encourage further study
- The key terms you need to know supplemented by a comprehensive glossary
- Engaging activities to transfer theory into practice
- Examination-style practice questions to build confidence ahead of your examinations.

This comprehensive self-study package includes a fully interactive CD, containing sample examination answers with accompanying examiner feedback to build your skills and confidence as you prepare for the CAPE® Literatures in English examination.

The Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC®) has worked exclusively with Nelson Thornes to produce a series of Study Guides across a wide range of subjects at CCSLC®, CSEC® and CAPE®. Developed by expert teachers and resource persons, these Study Guides have been designed to help students reach their full potential as they study their CXC® programme.
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This Study Guide has been developed exclusively with the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC®) to be used as an additional resource by candidates, both in and out of school, following the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE®) programme.

It has been prepared by a team with expertise in the CSEC® syllabus, teaching and examination. The contents are designed to support learning by providing tools to help you achieve your best in CAPE® Literature Unit 1, and the features included make it easier for you to master the key concepts and requirements of the syllabus. *Do remember to refer to your syllabus for full guidance on the course requirements and examination format*!

Inside this Study Guide is an interactive CD which includes electronic activities to assist you in developing good examination techniques:

- **On Your Marks** activities provide sample examination-style short-answer and essay-type questions, with example candidate answers and feedback from an examiner to show where answers could be improved. These activities will build your understanding, skill level and confidence in answering examination questions.

This unique combination of focused syllabus content and interactive examination practice will provide you with invaluable support to help you reach your full potential in CAPE® Literature Unit 1.
The origin of the word ‘drama’ is Greek and means ‘to do’ or ‘to act’. It is a much-used word: for example, we might talk about a dramatic encounter, a dramatic story or a dramatic person. Two people chatting on a street corner would not usually be seen as a dramatic encounter – not unless the discussion unveils something unusual or surprising. A dramatic story is one packed with incident, full of suspense and plenty of action. A dramatic person might be someone who exaggerates their emotions, dwelling on the highs and lows of their life and expressing these feelings clearly to an audience. Without an audience (in the sense of someone listening) there is no drama.

The kind of drama we will be analysing is performance drama or staged drama: plays. Clearly the difference between a play and real life is that a play has been organised. Surprises, shocks and spectacle are planned. Most plays are scripted (that is, the dialogue and actions are written down in advance), although many today are improvised (carried out with no formal script). But even with improvisations, the situation, the characters and an issue are often decided on in advance, and the action arises from that.

Plays are performed at a variety of venues:
- in the open air, such as in Trinidad, where ‘Ram Leela’ is always performed in rural villages
- in designated theatres, such as the Barn Theatre, Jamaica or the Cultural Centre, Guyana
- in any area where an audience can gather.

Every play needs an audience, whether this is thousands of people in a large arena or a handful of people in someone’s yard. The performers feed on audience response and each performance will vary depending upon this response. This is part of the fascination of plays – the text of a play may be fixed in print, but in the hands of a director and with different actors its interpretation and its impact on an audience will change, and that audience reaction will influence the actors too. Plays are living entities.

The origins of plays

It is likely that plays of one sort or another have existed since people began to live in communities. Telling stories and bringing them to life for an audience, sharing ideas and recording events through drama, has probably always been something that occurs when people live in groups. But performance that is not recorded or written down is hard to verify.

The earliest records of plays and their performances are Ancient Greek. Thespis, a poet (and the source of the word ‘thespian’, meaning an actor), was supposedly the first writer of tragedy, although none of his work now exists. Some scholars doubt his existence, but he is credited with being an innovator: introducing the idea of a single actor rather than just a chorus. In 534 BCE, he supposedly won a competition with a tragic play, and, according to the Roman poet Horace, he toured with his handcart, performing plays.

**Activity: Performance areas**

How does the chosen theatrical space influence the nature of a production? Think of a play you are familiar with and reflect on how differently it would have to be performed in various different spaces.

**KEY TERMS**

**Chorus**: in Greek theatre this is a group of players who comment on the action as well as dance and sing.
Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are well-known early Greek writers of the genre that became known as ‘tragedy’ and has been hugely influential. Plays such as Medea [by Euripides], Agamemnon [Aeschylus] and Antigone (Sophocles) are regularly performed today and they still resonate with modern society. Medea, for example, deals with jealousy, greed, betrayal and the need to belong. The climax involves matricide: the tragic killing by a mother of her children. These are themes that still shock and absorb an audience.

Comedy was a later development and the first-known comedies were by Aristophanes [448–380 BCE]: The Birds, The Frogs and Lysistrata are still popular today.

A very brief history

In Europe during the Middle Ages, religious plays were common. Originally performed in churches and involving the chanting of dialogue and acting out of religious scenes, they moved out into the community and performances would take place on the church steps or in the marketplace.

Eventually parts were taken not by priests but by laymen, such as members of trade guilds. Plays became linked with festivals, such as Corpus Christi. The guilds would produce a whole series of plays that told the Christian story. Titles included The Fall of Lucifer and The Day of Judgement. These plays are often referred to as ‘mystery plays’.

However, in England by the end of the 15th century, they had been partially replaced by a genre called ‘morality plays’, which usually contained a hero who was confronted with vices and virtues; he sins, but is redeemed in the end.

Medieval drama was influential in establishing stage traditions that survive today around the world, for example the use of stereotypical characters such as the clown or the fool; the mixing of comedy and tragedy; and the reliance on the words of the play because of limited scenery and props. Speech and action were important. Accuracy and consistency over the passage of time or in the different settings were less important.

In 16th-century Italy the Commedia dell’Arte had great impact. Travelling troupes of players produced comedies, which included music, dance, amusing dialogue and much chicanery. Stock characters included Il Dottore, a pompous doctor, and Pantalone, an old man who married a younger woman – Columbine. Her lover was called Harlequin. Farce and pantomime have emerged from these comedies.

In the Elizabethan era in England, drama flourished with playwrights such as Dekker, Webster, Farquhar, Jonson, Marlowe and, of course, Shakespeare. From then to the 21st century, apart from the period when the theatres were closed for 18 years (from 1642 to 1660 by the Puritans after the English Civil War), the theatrical tradition has been strong.

Dramatic traditions are central to most societies. In the Islamic world it was the mid-19th century before drama such as stage plays developed, but there was clearly a dramatic tradition, such as pageants and dramatised oral narrative, shadow plays and puppetry.

Activity: Mapping theatrical history

Using the information opposite and adding any details about theatre history that you can find for the Caribbean, create a timeline chart or a concept map. Doing this will familiarise you with the history, and visual representations are fun to make.

Did you know?

The origins of drama are religious: people danced and acted out stories at religious festivals.

See www.caribarts.org for a brief history of the Caribbean’s thriving theatrical tradition, including mention of festivals and performance during the time of slavery; street theatre and competitions; and the rich arts scene of today.

If you want to find out more about the history of drama, there is a lot of information on the internet: for example, details about medieval drama in Europe at www.luminarium.org/medlit/medievaldrama.htm or the Commedia dell’Arte at www.commedia-dell-arte.com, or there is a section about theatre and performance on the site of the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) at www.vam.ac.uk.
A genre is a type of play that has particular characteristics. For example, if a play is labelled a Romance you would expect action that focuses on emotions, particularly love, and the overall mood to be lighthearted. You would not expect this genre to explore corruption in politics or the causes of the French Revolution in any depth.

Labelling a work of art as belonging to a particular genre is a shorthand way of saying that the audience can expect certain characteristics. This can be helpful – but be wary of labels. The best writers can subvert your expectations and create a work that is difficult to classify. The Tempest, for example, is often called a problem play because scholars find it difficult to categorise. It has elements of several genres, including tragedy, comedy and romance.

There is an amusing scene in Hamlet when a troupe of travelling players arrives at court to entertain everyone. Polonius, one of the King’s advisers, sings the praises of the actors as being the best in the world ‘either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral’. Polonius is always verbose and here he gets carried away with his attempt at covering every category he can think of. Clearly these actors are a talented group, as every conceivable kind of action is within their skill to perform.

Comedy
Our expectations of a comedy are of a story with a happy ending. There may be trouble along the way, but all is happily resolved at the end.

Comedic plots often revolve around motifs like mistaken identity and disguise; rivalry in love; thwarted love; a chaotic world; a lost person who reappears, and so on. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, for example, three worlds collide chaotically: the world of the courtly characters such as Theseus and Hippolyta; the ordinary workmen such as Bottom the weaver and Snug the joiner; and the imaginative world of the fairies. There is jealousy: Oberon (the fairy king) is jealous of Titania’s adopted boy; there is love rivalry between the courtly characters; and everything is turned upside down in the setting of a wood outside Athens. The fairies weave their magic and manipulate the humans. There is farce when Bottom the weaver is given an ass’s head and Titania is made to fall in love with him. Music, dance and much visual spectacle make for what is often referred to as ‘festive comedy’, which has a saturnalian pattern. C. L. Barber, a critic, refers to ‘release through clarification’ – the creative imagination is let loose (released) and truths are revealed (clarification) through the action of the play.

Twelfth Night contains many of the motifs mentioned above, such as mistaken identity and disguise, love triangles and jealousy, and it is sometimes classified as a festive comedy. In common with Shakespeare’s earlier comedies, the ending involves marriage and harmony: a clear resolution.
Comedies today may have more ambiguous endings and the convention of resolving all of the twists and turns of the plot is ignored. Also, some of the best comedies are poignant and the humour is tinged with pathos. In *Waiting for Godot* (1953), a play by Samuel Beckett, two tramps are waiting for something to happen. It is a black comedy, revolving around time, death and the absurdity of human aspirations. Calling this play just a comedy would be an oversimplification. It has both comic and tragic elements. There are plays that are less subtle and which rely perhaps on farce (knockabout humour) to gain laughs, or which predictably end with happy resolutions. Trevor Rhone’s *Smile Orange* (1974) is an example. Comic romantic films also tend to follow the traditional pattern of a happy ending – often a marriage – for example, fairly recent films such as *Notting Hill* (1999), *Love Actually* (2003) or many of the American romantic comedies such as *Just Go with It* (2011) or *She’s Out of My League* (2010).

**Tragedy**

A tragedy ends unhappily – a gross understatement when we consider that all Shakespearian tragedies end with numerous deaths. The stage at the end of *Hamlet*, for example, is littered with bodies. In *Othello*, Desdemona has been murdered by her husband Othello, who has also killed her maid, Emilia, and then commits suicide.

The earliest known tragedies were those of the Greek writers: they similarly involved murders and suicides. Medea, for example, rejected by her husband Jason, kills his new wife *Glauce*, then Glauce’s father, and finally her own children in order to deny Jason any happiness. There is no comedy in this and no complicating subplots. Unity of action, time and place make this a striking drama. The chorus (an invention of Euripides) comments on the action. The play finishes with a comment that humans do not have control of their destiny:

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Many are the Fates which Zeus in Olympus dispenses;

Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.

The things we thought would happen do not happen;

The unexpected God makes possible;

And such is the conclusion of this story.

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Prior to Shakespeare, there were tragedies known as ‘Revenge Tragedies’, the origins of which date back to the Roman playwright, Seneca, whose tragedies focused on bloody action and horror and contained ranting speeches. They were less restrained than Greek tragedies, where much of the horror took place off stage. Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, is very much in this bloody vogue. It ends with the heads of two characters being baked in a pie and presented to their mother to eat. This line of emphasis on horror was followed by other playwrights, such as Webster in his Jacobean tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623).

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**Activity: What makes a good comedy?**

Think of a play or a film that you found amusing. Try to sum up what made you laugh. For example, was it several visually funny scenes, an unexpected twist in the story, one particular character, a whole series of bizarre incidents – or something else? Trying to analyse humour is notoriously difficult. Reflecting at this stage on what you find comic will help you later when you come to analyse humour in particular texts.

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**Did you know?**

Ancient Greek theatre used few actors. You could not afford to have one ‘dead’ on stage.
What is tragic?
Labelling a play as tragic, we then expect to experience and feel particular emotions. But it is interesting to reflect on our use of the word ‘tragic’ and how commonly we speak of ‘a tragedy’ (a phrase frequently used on TV or in journalism). Over a period of about a week, collect examples of the use of the words ‘tragic’ and ‘tragedy’. What kinds of stories and events encourage this labelling? And do these tragedies have anything in common with the plays that we label as tragedies? Has the word lost its power in common speech, or is it just that we are more attuned to recognise tragic elements in life?

Did you know?
History plays enabled Shakespeare to make parallels with current events that his audiences would understand.

Shakespeare’s great tragedies follow some of the conventions that Aristotle outlined as being the characteristics of a tragedy:

- Human beings in action, including an admirable hero who has some kind of character flaw (Othello: jealousy; Macbeth: greed for power) and the bringing down of this hero by his errors/shortcomings/flaws.
- Incidents that arouse pity and fear in the audience (e.g. Desdemona’s murder by her husband in Othello). Pity is closely connected with fear and can involve pain at an evil perpetrated on somebody who does not deserve it.
- Catharsis – the release or purging of emotions created by pity and fear; relief after much tension. Aristotle thought of tragedy in a curative way.
- In Aristotle’s Poetics he has much more to say about the nature of tragedy and he discusses types of character, the metrical composition, and the importance of plot and the moral dimension of tragedies.

Today, we tend to resist labelling plays as purely tragic, but many modern plays contain tragic elements in the Aristotelian pattern, such as the death or downfall of someone who is intrinsically ‘good’. For example, Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman (1949) dramatises the gradual demise of a man struggling to come to terms with his perceived failures in family relationships and at work.

Histories

Shakespeare’s history plays are loosely based on historical facts and they include King John, Richard II, Henry IV (two parts), Henry V, Henry VI (three parts), Richard III and Henry VIII – although Shakespeare did not write them in chronological order. His earliest history play was Henry VI.

Audiences seemed eager for history plays that looked back at earlier crises and dealt with political rivalry and factions and upheavals in the country, and the nature of kingship. But their dramatic power depends upon the dramatist’s ability to create a protagonist who is imaginatively realised, rather than accuracy of information. For example, we see the young Prince Hal [later Henry V] in Henry IV Part I and Part II – a well-rounded character whose friendship with Falstaff and other ordinary citizens shows a prince whose exuberance, risqué behaviour and down-to-earth qualities exasperate his more conventional father, but endear him to the audience.

In Henry V, he rejects these former friendships and takes on the mantle of responsible king. But this causes him many dilemmas and there is conflict between his public role, and its demands, and the private person.

Richard III is subtitled The Tragedy of Richard III, but it does not follow the tragic pattern of Shakespeare’s later tragedies. Richard is a hero-villain who plays many parts with the skill of an actor and orator who can coin memorable phrases. It would be difficult to speak of him as a noble character, but clearly he has many flaws. We may not pity him (in the sense of empathising or sympathising), but we and the other players in the drama certainly fear him. So, despite the subtitle, this play is usually classified as a history – a history that dramatises a period where the rivalry between the House of Lancaster and the House of York leads to betrayal, deceit and murder as Richard schemes to become King.
There were history plays before Shakespeare, such as Edward II by Christopher Marlowe – another Elizabethan dramatist. Since then playwrights have often used historical events or figures as the central focus of their drama, for example, Schiller’s Mary Queen of Scots (1800) or Derek Walcott’s Drums and Colours (1958). Today we would be unlikely to categorise a play as a ‘history’, although dramatists frequently plunder the past, exploring real incidents and fictionalising them. For example, Brian Friel in Translations (1980) bases his drama on the 19th-century mapping of Ireland by the English colonists, and their determination to translate Irish place names into English – with all of the attendant loss of identity and sense of ownership. Timberlake Wertenbaker bases her play, Our Country’s Good (1988), on the colonisation of a small corner of Australia by a group of British prisoners and their guards and officers. However, this historical fact is a starting point for an imaginative play about the restorative power of drama itself: the prisoners produce a play and the involvement of the characters and the effects on the community are explored.

**Theatre of the absurd**

Plays that deal with absurd, incredible situations and present unrealistic situations and characters are often called ‘absurd’. The movement that became labelled as ‘Theatre of the absurd’ developed in the 1950s. The plays seem to ignore all of the usual rules of play writing and audience expectations, and focus on what appears to be a spiritually desolate world. For example, in Waiting for Godot (1953) the audience expectation of some action, some character development and some resolution is subverted. The two tramps wait for something or someone they are uncertain about. The scene is interrupted by a character, Pozzo, who is leading his servant as if he were an animal. The characters discuss death, their hopes, the point or pointlessness of everything, the passage of time, the meaning of language and so on. There is much black humour. The play ends without any sighting of the mysterious Godot.

Other absurd plays include those by Eugene Ionesco, such as Rhinoceros (1959) or The Bald Prima Donna (1950), where Ionesco is concerned with how language itself operates, as well as overriding concerns with death. Edward Albee is also grouped with this genre, and he is famous for plays such as Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962) and The Zoo Story (1958).

**Satire**

Many plays contain satirical elements. Satire involves mockery of individuals, institutions and ideas. But the aim of satire is not just to get a cheap laugh, but to reform or change the attitudes of the person watching. So, there is a serious purpose behind anything that we label as satire.

An English writer – David Hare – has written many satirical plays that are critical of institutions such as the government, the law and the police. In Murmuring Judges (1991), for example, the law is mocked for its attitude to criminal cases: it is all a game, and a competitive game. The police are also exposed as distorting the truth in the interests of gaining a conviction. There are many Caribbean satires, such as Derek Walcott’s Beef No Chicken (1981), or Nation Dance, a recent commentary on Trinidad and Tobago performed by the Centre for Festival and Creative Arts (University of the West Indies).
Chapter 1

Farce

The origin of the word is the Latin farcire, meaning ‘to stuff’. In French medieval plays the insertion (the stuffing in or ‘farce’) of a joke or some lighthearted humour to please the audience is probably where the term originated. It has become associated with the kind of play that involves slapstick humour and general clowning or buffoonery. Many of Shakespeare’s plays contain farcical scenes. For example, the play that the artisans put on in A Midsummer Night’s Dream involves much clowning and falling about on the stage. It is an enactment of a classical love story of Pyramus and Thisbe, but it is played for laughs, with a lion that cannot roar, a character pretending to be the moon and a death scene where Pyramus comes out of character to talk to the audience – ludicrous, but very funny.

Melodrama

The term originated from Greek drama, where it referred to a speech accompanied by music. It is used today to label a play that is very sentimental and where emotions are exaggerated and unbelievable. The plot is usually improbable too, and the characters in the play are recognisably stereotyped, such as the noble hero and the evil villain. In the end, virtue always triumphs.

It is thought that in 1762 Rousseau’s Pygmalion began the fashion for this kind of excessively sentimental and romantic play. It reached a peak of popularity in the 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the most famous melodramas was Maria Marten, or The Murder in the Red Barn, first performed in 1828. The melodrama was based on the real-life murder of a young girl who was supposedly eloping with her fiancé, meeting him at the barn. However, she was later found buried under the barn’s floor. There were many versions of the melodrama, and it was performed all over England.

Many plays, including Shakespeare’s, contain elements that we might call melodramatic – scenes where emotions are heightened or actions and behaviour are exaggerated. For example, in Othello his strongly emotional reaction to what he perceives to be his wife flirting with Cassio seems excessive. But there is no way that a play like this would be classified as a melodrama. The jealousy and rage that Othello feels is convincing, he is shown as a rounded character and psychologically interesting. The play does not show any simple triumph of virtue over vice, and is much more complex and profound in the issues it raises than we would expect of a melodrama.

Key point

Overlapping genres

Labelling types of plays can seem a very exact exercise – but remember that a play can contain many different elements. For example, we might perceive a particular play as predominantly a farce, but it could also contain elements of satire, melodrama or romance. The initial label is only a guide to its form.
Romance

The term is used to label plays that are a mixture of the comic and the tragic. The English dramatists Beaumont and Fletcher supposedly originated the genre (in the early 17th century). The term was not used in Shakespeare’s time, although several of his later plays are often characterised as romances.

As the label suggests, a romance would contain some love intrigue that is usually resolved happily. The play often deals with more serious issues than a comedy, such as betrayal or tyranny. However, the plots tend to be unrealistic and may be illogical, containing elements of the supernatural.

Characteristics of Shakespearian Romances, such as

*The Tempest*, or *The Winter’s Tale*

- **Time:** the conflict often covers a large time span. *The Winter’s Tale* has different settings too.
- **Themes:** the play’s action might involve a character’s transgression, then their journey to redemption, but there are no violent murders or excessive bloodshed. (Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* is finally redeemed and his daughter is brought back to life.)
- **Unlikely plots:** in *The Winter’s Tale* a statue is brought to life; a character is eaten by a bear. In *The Tempest* there is the magic of Prospero.
- **Triumph of virtuous love:** for example, Perdita and Florizel in *The Winter’s Tale*.

We also speak of romantic elements in a play (love and connected intrigue), but the notion of romance also suggests escapism, as well as action, which involves heightened emotion.

Activity: Writing your own play – the opening scene

Doing your own writing can help you to appreciate the difficulties and delights of making drama.

- Decide on a genre (but remember that if you choose satire, for example, you can still include elements of other genres).
- Sketch out a simple plot, with more detail for the opening scene. (Think about the ideas you would like this plot to focus on – what the main themes might be.)
- Decide on a character list – keep it short!
- Decide what action and dialogue you would have in the opening scene. Bear in mind that you need to grab the audience’s attention.

Now write the short opening scene and reflect on the process and what has been difficult or easy.
Elements and features of drama

1.3

The structure of a play

Most plays tend to have similar structures. There is an exposition period near the beginning when a situation is presented to the audience and characters are established. For example, in Twelfth Night the first scenes reveal Orsino’s love for Olivia; the shipwreck and separation of the twins has occurred, and the scene is set for action. Viola and her twin brother Sebastian have suffered peripeteia. Changes in someone’s wealth or status can lead to actions that form the stuff of drama: Viola, in disguise, takes work as a servant to the Duke Orsino. Her real status is hidden and it appears that she has lost everything, including her brother. The plot then thickens: its complication is a result of intrigue and conflict between characters, as well as deceit and mistaken identity. In Twelfth Night the course of true love is not going to run smoothly because Orsino’s love is not returned by Olivia. Further complications occur when Olivia falls in love with the disguised Viola and Viola falls in love with Orsino! Disguise is an element in many plots, especially comedies. But a resolution is usually provided in the end.

Main plot

The main plot is the plot line that dominates the stage. In Othello, his relationship with his wife Desdemona, whom he has eloped with, and Iago’s manipulation of Othello, form the main plot. But there are subplots, such as Lieutenant Cassio’s relationship with Bianca. Shakespeare cleverly makes interconnections between all of the characters, and what may seem like a minor incident, such as Bianca’s taking of the strawberry handkerchief, is influential in the progress of the main plot line.

Climax

We often talk about the climax of a play – the moment when all conflicts come to a head, usually in some dramatic scene. Or there can be several climaxes – momentous moments in a play. For example, in Othello one dramatic climax is when Othello slaps Desdemona and confronts her with his doubts and suspicions about her behaviour. Another is the major climax in the last scene when Othello murders Desdemona.

Denouement

This usually follows the climax and it refers to the revelation, the exposure of motives and rationale, or of plotting – usually providing a resolution to the play. Othello explains his actions to the Duke, and reveals his motivation; Iago is exposed and Othello commits suicide. In Twelfth Night the denouement involves the reuniting of Sebastian and Viola and the revelation about Sebastian’s marriage and Orsino’s realisation of his love for Viola. The plot is unravelled and incidents are explained.
Dramatic unities

Critics sometimes speak of dramatic unities, a term that originated with Aristotle and was developed and adapted by later dramatists. The three unities in drama are usually recognised as:

- **Unity of action.** This means that there should be one main plot and any subplot should be directly linked with the main action.
- **Unity of place.** A play should take place in just one physical area and the stage should not represent more than one place.
- **Unity of time.** The action of the play should not take more than 24 hours (although it is thought that Aristotle originally meant that the time it takes to perform the play should mirror real time).

Early Greek drama obeyed these rules, with singular plots and action that often took place in one area outside a house, in a public space. Shakespeare clearly disregards some of these ‘rules’. *Othello* takes place in several settings and more than one day elapses. However, the play does conform to the unity of action. *Twelfth Night* does not conform closely to the dictats of the three unities. It has the subplot of the taunting of Malvolio, which does not directly affect the main plot but adds an amusing and perhaps poignant element to the play – the trick against Malvolio is very cruel. The unities of place and time are not adhered to either.

To create effective drama, some 17th- and 18th-century playwrights, such as Dryden, argued that these unities should be followed. The notion of a main plot with any subplots being closely linked is one unity that many playwrights adhere to today. If a plot is too shapeless and there are too many subplots then it is difficult for an audience to become involved and to follow the action. So it is understandable that this ‘rule’ has been adopted. However, time lapses and changes of setting are common.

Acts and scenes

Scenes are short dramatic episodes, gathered together in a particular ‘act’. Most of Shakespeare’s plays have five acts, each divided into linked scenes. The first two acts usually set the action in motion and allow the audience to perceive the situation and understand the characters. In Acts 3 and 4 the pace and number of incidents increases, with increasing conflict, and in Act 4 there is often a climax or turning point before the final act, when there may be another climax and revelations and resolutions. However, act and scene divisions were probably not clear on original scripts from Shakespeare’s time. Later editors and publishers might have made the divisions.

Modern dramatists still tend to divide plays into acts and scenes, but the approach varies. A play like *Waiting for Godot*, that does not have a particular climactic moment or any revealing denouement, is divided into just two acts with no subdivisions. The action takes place in one setting and it is as if the action is happening in real time. Beckett’s play is puzzling and unconventional in its action and themes and lack of division into scenes, but conventional in following the three unities.

Activity: Tracking act and scene divisions

Find a play that you have studied and check out how the action is divided into scenes and acts.

- Do such divisions help the director and the audience to distinguish between different episodes?
- If there were no divisions/separate scenes, what effect would this have on the drama and how the director might bring it to life?
Language and characterisation

The language of plays is stylised. It might mimic real exchanges between people, but there will be fewer overlaps (when people talk over each other) so that the audience can follow the speeches easily. Many early plays, such as Greek tragedies and plays by Christopher Marlowe, were written in blank verse: non-rhyming but rhythmical, with even line lengths. Shakespeare developed this blank verse form and wrote many of his dramatic scenes in a metre called iambic pentameter – a rhythm that mimics the human heartbeat and is the closest to natural speech (see page 28). Of course his characters also speak in prose, usually in more down-to-earth, informal scenes. In Richard III, for example, most of the interaction is spoken in blank verse, but in some scenes the dialogue between more lowly characters is in prose. For example, a scene between two murderers or a discussion between two citizens is carried out in more everyday language.

Today writers tend towards naturalism, so very few modern plays are written in this traditional blank verse style. However, there are always exceptions. For example, T. S. Eliot wrote several verse dramas, such as Murder in the Cathedral (1935) (about the martyrdom of Sir Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral). He also used a chorus to comment on the action.

Differentiating between characters

Each character in a play needs to be distinctive (unless they are anonymous members of a chorus), otherwise the audience will be confused. Differentiation between characters can be created through different costumes, physical gestures, timbre of voice and the way in which a character moves and reacts to others on the stage. But the most striking means of creating distinctions is through the language used: what a character says and how it is expressed. Orsino’s first speech, for example, is a lavish, self-indulgent and rather artificial reverie about love; he is in love with the idea of love and the romantic phrases he coins:

KEY TERMS

Naturalism: in drama this means using recognisably realistic speech and settings.
Stage directions can be minimal (as with Shakespeare, where most directions focus on entrance and exit and a brief description of the setting), but they can also give the director and the reader an insight into the author’s view of the character and how the part should be played at any one time. Some writers give elaborate physical descriptions too. Tennessee Williams in A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) is particular in giving details about characters, mood and settings. For example, when describing the main character’s first appearance he includes a lengthy paragraph outlining how she should move and what she should do:

She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party … Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth.

Compare this with some stage directions from Richard III: ‘Enter, Richard, Duke of Gloucester’, or ‘Enter two murderers’. There is the occasional more detailed direction, such as ‘She spits at him’ or ‘The Bearers put down the hearse’. Also, it is usually made clear when an actor is thinking aloud and commenting for the audience’s benefit in what is called an aside. But how a speech is declaimed, the tone of voice, the mood, the emphasis, is left up to the actor and director to decide.

Activity: Analysing stage directions
Choose two plays to analyse. You do not have to be familiar with them, but you will need copies of the texts. Now imagine you are being asked to direct each play. For each one:
- Look at any directions you are given about the set(s) for each scene or act – note the amount of detail (or the lack of it).
- Take the first scene and track the types of directions given. For example, are they mostly about tone of voice or do they also include details about movement, gesture, expression? Make a note of two or three typical directions.

Now compare the use of directions in each text. What advantages or disadvantages are there in having many directions or in having few?
1.4 Stage conventions

Key points

- The stage was raised above a ‘pit’ where some of the audience stood. The more expensive seats were ranged around the perimeter of the playhouse.
- It was a kind of thrust stage with the audience viewing from three sides. Some members of the audience might also sit around the edge of the stage itself.
- There was close involvement between the audience and the players.

The stage and the audience

Greek dramas were performed in the open air with large audiences (as many as 14,000). The audience sat on tiered seating, usually built into the side of a hill. The viewing area was called the theatron. The audience would look at the orchestra – a dominant central space where the chorus performed their singing and dancing. Behind this space was a raised stage where the actors performed, and behind that was the skene (the origin of the word ‘scene’). The skene housed the place where actors changed, where props were stored and where exits and entrances could be made. The skene would form part of the scenery of the play – a backdrop for the action.

In Elizabethan times in England, the theatre thrived and the Rose, the Globe and the Swan are just three of the well-known theatres. Recently the Globe has been rebuilt on its original site on the south bank of the Thames in London (see www.shakespearesglobe.com). The Rose has also recently been excavated (see www.rosetheatre.org.uk). On page 18 there is a drawing of a Shakespearian theatre, together with more details about its characteristics.

Later stage developments in indoor theatres focused on a stage with a proscenium arch, an opening in a wall through which an audience watches a performance. The effect is to create distance between the actors and the spectators. This is very different from street theatre or informal performances in people's houses or other public places, where the audience and the actors are crowded together. Such proximity changes the dynamics of a performance.

Activity: Proximity to the action

What in your view are the advantages and disadvantages of being close to the action?

If you have seen a performance either in a theatre or outdoors, think about it now. Remember where you were sitting and reflect on whether this affected your involvement with the play.

Think of a film version of a play. Consider that when we watch a film, the proximity to the action is dictated by the director and the kind of shots that are used. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having the focus decided for us?

There are still many theatres that have a traditional proscenium arch, such as the Barn Theatre in Jamaica. Many of the older West End theatres in London or on Broadway have kept the proscenium arch, and there is a clear delineation between the spectacle of the stage and the onlookers. However, today, theatre in the round is popular: like a circus arena, the audience can view the action from all sides. Actors moving around the space can bring the action closer to the audience.

Key terms

Proscenium arch: a kind of stage that does not project into the audience. The performance area is clearly separate from the audience and the stage is framed by an arch.
A popular variant on the round stage is a thrust stage, along the lines of the Elizabethan stage, with an audience on three sides. The stage projects far into the audience and its shape can vary depending upon production needs. A steeply raked stage can be used for scenes where particular characters need to be elevated, or different sections of the stage can be raised, lowered or extended to create variety in the setting. The Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon (www.rsc.org.uk) has recently redesigned its main theatre and abandoned the proscenium arch in favour of a large acting area: a flexible thrust stage with entrances and exits from all four corners of the theatre itself.

**Sets**

This refers to the setting of particular scenes. In Shakespeare’s time, for example, the set might include a few pieces of furniture and some drapes to suggest a room in Orsino’s house. Sets became more elaborate in later years. During the 19th and early 20th centuries realism became a key aim, and stages would be packed with furnishings and elaborate backdrops were painted. The move today is generally towards a more minimalist approach, especially in modern Shakespearian productions. Scene changes are suggested by changes in lighting rather than any elaborate alteration in the set. This has led to more fluid performances, with few pauses between scenes (which is not possible if furniture needs to be moved).

**Lighting**

In many of the earlier theatres plays were performed in daylight, so no subtle effects could be created by lighting. In Shakespeare’s time, for example, the audience would be reminded of the time of day or the weather by the characters’ words. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo declares that the bird they hear singing is not the nightingale, but ‘It was the lark, the herald of the morn’, and the audience learn that dawn is approaching and that the lovers will have little time left together. However, some indoor theatres (such as Blackfriars in Shakespeare’s time) would have made use of artificial lighting (candles), and gas lighting was used in the 19th century. However, the effects that are possible today have made the job of a lighting technician and director much more sophisticated. A technician can alter the colour of the lights, the intensity, where they are placed and the movement (spots/flashing lights).

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**Activity: Theatre in the round**

What are the advantages and disadvantages of staging a performance in the round. Think of a play with which you are familiar. Select a scene and then think through how speeches and action would have to be performed if the audience were on all sides.

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**Activity: Minimal sets**

What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a simple, minimal set?
Props (or properties)

These are the movable items such as spears, books and jewellery. Look at the extract below from the list of properties that the Admiral’s Company used in 1598. Some of these props must have been for Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the Great and Dr Faustus. A director must carefully organise which props are needed for which scene.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERFORMANCE WORKSHEET 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Properties</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of properties for the Admiral’s Company, 1598</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 rock, 1 cage, 1 tomb, 1 Hell mouth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tomb of Guido, 1 tomb of Dibo, 1 beadstead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 lances, 1 pair of stairs for Phaeton.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 steeples, &amp; 1 chime of bells &amp; 1 beacon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 heifer for the play of Phaeton, the limbs dead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 globe, &amp; 1 golden sceptre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 golden fleece; 2 rackets; 1 bay tree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 wooden hatchet; 1 leather hatchet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 wooden company; old Mahomet’s head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 lion skin; 1 bear’s skin; &amp; Phaeton’s limbs &amp; Phaeton’s chariot; &amp; Argus’ head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neptunes fork and garland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ‘croser’s staff; Kent’s wooden leg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris head, &amp; rainbow; 1 little altar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 vizards; Tamberlain’s bridle; 1 wooden mattock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cupid’s bow, &amp; quiver; the cloth of the Sun &amp; Moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 boar’s head &amp; Cerberus’ 3 heads.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Caduceus; 2 moss banks, &amp; 1 snake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 fans of feathers; Bellendon stable; 1 tree, of golden apples; Tantalus’ tree, 9 iron targets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 copper target, &amp; 17 foils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 wooden targets; 1 greeve armour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sign for Mother Redcap; 1 buckler.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercury’s wings; Tasso’s picture; 1 helmet with a dragon; 1 shield, with 3 lions; 1 elm bowl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 chain of dragons; 1 gilt spear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 coffins; 1 bull’s head; and 1 ‘vylter’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 timbrels; 1 dragon in Faustus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 lion; 2 lion’s heads; 1 great horse with his legs; 1 sackbut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 wheel and frame in the Siege of London.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 pair of wrought gloves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Pope’s mitre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Imperial crowns; 1 plain crown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ghost’s crown; 1 crown with a sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 frame for the heading in Black Joan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 black dog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 cauldron for the Jew.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.4.1 Props used by the Admiral’s Company, 1598

Costume

In Shakespeare’s day many plays would have been performed in Elizabethan costume even if the settings were entirely different. Today Shakespeare’s plays are often performed in more authentic costumes. For
example, characters in Roman plays such as *Coriolanus* or *Julius Caesar* might wear togas or authentic Roman armour. Also, many Shakespeare plays are now performed in modern costume, perhaps to stress the relevance and universality of the themes and issues raised and to emphasise that the plays still speak to us today. *Richard III*, for example, might be performed in 20th- or 21st-century modern dress to emphasise that political conflict and greed for power are themes that are of as much interest today as in the past.

Costume, and its colour, is clearly very important in order to help create the character impression that a director wants, and also simply to help the audience differentiate between characters. Orsino would usually be richly attired, and Viola, dressed as a boy, would be more plainly dressed. The visual impact is important.

**Stage effects**

**Sounds**

These can range from the music of a Greek chorus or background mood music in *Twelfth Night*, to the strident tones of a trumpet, summoning characters to battle, or the noise of thunder, the rattle of gunshot or an off-stage ghostly voice. The list is endless and the point of sound effects is to reinforce the dramatic impact of a scene and to help create a particular mood.

**Other effects**

Smoke, dry ice, illusions/projections such as the image of a ghost, entrances from below stage or above – these are effects that should also contribute to the dramatic impact of a scene.

**Activity: The impact of stage effects**

Try to recall a theatrical event or performance that made use of a range of stage effects.

- Note all the effects that were used and their dramatic impact on the audience. Did the effects enhance the production?
- When do you think such effects could mar a production?

**Movements on stage**

These are usually worked out in advance: entrances, exits, positioning on stage and movements. Stage areas are labelled from the perspective of the actor, not from the audience’s viewpoint.

When we speak about someone being ‘upstaged’, the origin of the expression is theatrical. It means they have made themselves less visible and dominant by being forced to face away from the audience to address another character. To use another theatrical expression, they have moved into the ‘limelight’ (a reference to an early kind of stage lighting).
2 Drama: *Twelfth Night*

2.1 Shakespearian drama: context and conventions

**Shakespeare’s life**

Shakespeare left his birthplace – Stratford-upon-Avon – to work in London as an actor and a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (a popular acting company that became the King’s Men in 1603). James I granted the company a royal patent, which meant that they could put on 12 performances each year in the royal court. Shakespeare’s career was thriving and he earned enough money to buy himself a grand house in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The King’s Men [and there were no female actors!] performed in many Elizabethan theatres. For example, the Globe theatre, carefully reconstructed on the south bank of the Thames, would have held an audience of 3,000. [Visit www.shakespearesglobe.com for information about this reconstruction.] Ben Jonson (a contemporary playwright of Shakespeare) described the audience at the Globe as ‘a rude, barbarous crew’. Certainly, in the audience there would be hecklers and some who would pelt the players with rotten eggs if they disliked the performance. Putting on a play was not necessarily cheap. In 1613, the Globe management paid £38 (US$61) for a costume for Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII* – an astonishing amount considering Shakespeare’s grand house might have sold for £60 (US$97)! Shakespeare is thought to have left London in 1610 and returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he died in 1616.

Our concern is with the texts and why they are still performed today. It may be a cliché to say that Shakespeare is a global phenomenon, but his plays have been translated into almost every language, from Japanese to Swahili. Plays like *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III* may deal with the romantic fictional country of Illyria and 15th-century England, but they still have the power to thrill us and make us think.

**Shakespeare’s theatre and its conventions**

Figure 2.1.1 shows you what a typical open-air theatre was like.

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*Figure 2.1.1 The Globe theatre*
Main features

1. **Thrust stage** Notice the way the stage projects into the audience. Those in the ‘pit’ (‘groundlings’) would be very close to the action.

2. **Seating** Those who could afford it would be able to sit in the tiered seating, with some shelter – mostly from any cold, wet weather, rather than a heatwave! Or there were seats on the stage itself.

3. **Lighting** Flaming torches or candles might have been used to create atmosphere, but performances were held in daylight. So, to work out the time of day, audiences depended upon the playwright conjuring up a picture of dawn or dusk. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, Curio asks in the first scene, ‘Will you go hunt my Lord?’ Clearly, this would not occur in the middle of the night.

4. **Scenery** This would be minimal: benches, chairs. There was no curtain to hide the stage while scene changes occurred, so once again the audience had to use their imagination. Shakespeare guided them and set the scene through words. For example, in *Twelfth Night* in the second scene Viola asks, ‘What country, friends, is this?’ and the reply is ‘This is Illyria, lady.’ We are then given a simple description of the shipwreck: how after the ship ‘did split’, Viola’s brother bound himself to a ‘strong mast’. It would have been difficult to stage such a scene convincingly, but Shakespeare tells his audience.

5. **Entrances, exits and curtains** There may not have been a full curtain, but extensive use of backcloths and drapes would have helped to create a scene. For example, the court of Orsino could be depicted with heavy drapes at the back of the stage. The recess at the centre back could also be used flexibly. For example, when the characters eavesdrop on Malvolio they could use the centre back recess to hide. Or for the opening scene when Orsino performs his reverie about love, he could be raised on a stage in this recess. The director is limited to two exits/entrances at the rear of the stage, behind which was the ‘tiring house’ where the actors could change.

6. **Underneath the stage** The ‘Hell’ where, for example, ghosts could arise. There was a trapdoor in the stage to allow access. Malvolio might have been imprisoned in this area and in *Richard III* the ghosts would have emerged from below the stage.

7. **The balcony** This was a really useful element that enabled some variety in the staging. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, Feste the clown might have performed some of his music from a high vantage point.

8. **The heavens** The top of the canopy over the stage, with a hole in the ceiling through which scenery could be lowered or from where dramatic entrances could be made – such as the lowering of a statue, a ghost or an enthroned king.

9. **The tower at the top** A flag would be hoisted here to show that a performance was in progress. Also, trumpeters might be placed there to announce the start of a programme with a fanfare. Musicians could add sound effects – to create atmosphere in the battle scenes in *Richard III*; or thunder, gunfire or fireworks.

10. **Props** These could be many and varied, from spears to prayer books to dishes of food. It was easy to bring on props, whereas moving furniture could be more disruptive to the action.

Setting the scene with words was very important, but as you can see, the stage was not a colourless, empty place. Many stage effects could be used to create atmosphere: from cannon shots and thunder to romantic tunes played on a lute.

**Did you know?**

In 2012, as part of the World Shakespeare Festival in the Cultural Olympiad, 37 different companies produced 37 of Shakespeare’s plays in 37 different languages at the Globe. For example: *Richard III* in Mandarin; *Twelfth Night* in Hindi; and *The Winter’s Tale* in Yoruba.

**Did you know?**

There are many debates about whether Shakespeare really did write the plays himself. Some believe it was the Earl of Oxford who wrote them. There are numerous books devoted to disproving Shakespeare’s authorship. Visit [www.shakespeare-authorship.org.uk](http://www.shakespeare-authorship.org.uk) for a summary of some of these debates. Also, see the 2011 film *Anonymous*: a ‘political thriller and pseudo-historical drama’ that champions Edward de Vere (the 17th Earl of Oxford) as the author of Shakespeare’s plays.

**Activity: Staging a scene**

Take a scene from the play you are studying and work out how a director might have used a stage like the Globe, including the use of props and effects. Be inventive – but remember that often the language helps the audience to visualise a scene.
Twelfth Night: a festive comedy

Did you know?

The critic and academic Frank Kermode refers to Twelfth Night as a festive comedy where there is ‘the licence of carnival’ and ‘social rules and conventions were subverted’. The world ‘lost its normal, sane order, suddenly becoming topsy-turvy, slightly mad’.

Compare this with carnival time, such as the Shakespeare Mas – the folk performances on Carriacou when speeches from Julius Caesar are recited in competitive exchanges where there is both physical and verbal warfare.

The early origins of these masquerades were from a time pre-emancipation in the English-speaking Caribbean, when between Christmas and New Year there was a period of carnival: singing, dancing and skits on Shakespeare’s plays. (See the preview of an essay about the Carriacou Mas by Joan M. Fayer and Joan F. McMurray in the Journal of American Folklore: www.jstor.org.)

Did you know?

Shakespeare’s source for the play was probably Barnaby Riche’s story ‘Aponolius and Silla’ in his Farewell to the Military Profession (1581). The tale contains a shipwreck, some cross-dressing, twins of different sexes and a girl who becomes infatuated with a duke. Another possible source is an Italian play, The Deceived (1531).

In the Christian calendar, Twelfth Night marks the end of Christmas celebrations. It is the feast of the Epiphany when the Wise Men came to bring gifts to the Christ child. The 12 nights that precede this event mark a festive period of celebration, a time of carnival. So why did Shakespeare choose this title? There is exuberance, wildness and madness in the play, with plenty of revels and practical jokes. It is a play full of contrasts: from the farcical but poignant taunting of the strait-laced Malvolio, to the hilarious comic scenes between Toby Belch and Sir Andrew, to the celebration of the madness that is love. There is plenty of eating, drinking and general indulgence, reminiscent of Christmas celebrations.

After Twelfth Night everything returns to the ordinary – so this is an extraordinary festive period. Shakespeare also called this play What You Will. What do you think he implied by that? Perhaps we can look too hard for some deep meaning. ‘What you will’ sounds like a shrug of the shoulders – make of the play what you want, the author is giving nothing away!

Approaching the play – simple points!

Plays are obviously meant to be seen and heard. If you can see the play, either on stage or in a film version, then this is clearly the best place to start. An audio version is good too, but watching the characters move and speak will help you to appreciate and understand the action. If you do not have access to any film or audio versions, then the best thing is simply to read the play aloud: listen to the words, imagine the scenes and try to bring them alive. Have fun with the text. In the 2012 World Shakespeare festival, for example, a Brazilian company enjoyed creating its own take on Richard III, producing in Portuguese a ‘spectacular carnival-tinged circus theatre’ version at the Roundhouse theatre. Shakespeare lends itself to imaginative approaches!

Activity: Reviewing a performance

When you have viewed, read or heard a performance, make your own brief notes on the following:

- Your first impressions of the main characters: Viola/Cesario, Orsino, Olivia, Sebastian, Antonio, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Malvolio and Feste. Think about the significance of each of their names and reflect on how the director differentiates between them: how they sound and move and interact with each other.

- Any memorable scenes. Try to explain why a particular episode was striking. Was it a result of the way it was staged (use of effects, use of the stage or film setting, or props) as much as the language?

- Any memorable speeches. How were they delivered and where were they delivered on the stage or in the film setting?

- Any problems you had with the play, such as sections that were odd or difficult to understand, or less convincing moments.

The plot

Rather than reading someone else’s summary of the plot, it is more useful to write your own. It will help you to become familiar with the sequence of events. Familiarity with the plot is just a starting point in your study of the play, and creating your own summary is a useful exercise.
Activity: Viewing different film versions
Watch some parts of the three interpretations of *Twelfth Night*.
Reflect on how each version echoes the times in which it was made: from the settings and the delivery of lines to the use of music and costume.
Also, note the different approaches that each director has. For example, how are key scenes staged? Are there any similarities in the directors’ approaches, even if the context is widely different?

Activity: Creating plot summaries
For each scene you need to note what happens. The obvious, simple way is to write down your summary of events. For example, for Act 1, scene 1 you might write:

Introduction of the love-struck Orsino – a lavish speech about love. He learns that Olivia will be in mourning for seven years (because of the death of her brother) and unable to accept his wooing. He is not deterred and is convinced that if she can show a brother such love, she will be bound to return his affections eventually.

But a more imaginative, visual approach might be more interesting and useful. We all remember pictures and images better than words, so any visual depiction would be helpful. You could:

- Create a captioned drawing for each scene (in film every ‘shot’ is represented in a storyboard). That would be too time-consuming here – but create a simplified version: one ‘board’ for each scene.
- Draw a chart or graph that traces the main action/scenes. Find a way of visually highlighting scenes where there are major conflicts or particularly amusing incidents or scenes of major confusion.
- Experiment with ways of doing this and you will find that this is not a tedious task at all. It will help you to become familiar with all of the twists and turns in this fast-moving plot.

What is distinctive about this plot?
There is a main plot where mistaken identity and disguise cause most of the confusions and trigger the action. The subplot is separate from the main action. It focuses on a comical group of individuals who drink, joke, sing and generally behave in a raucous manner. The scene contrasts with the marginally more serious episodes involving the main characters. However, this ‘comic’ group take teasing and mockery over the edge into the cruel torment and taunting of Malvolio – the bullying of the bully.

How do these plots interconnect? What links them?

Activity: Tracking the plots
Draw a chart to show how the two plots operate in parallel. Highlight where the characters and the action impinge on each other. Keep your summaries brief.

Look at your diagram and briefly sum up what creates a sense of unity in the play. (Think about the role of music, the recurrence of themes and the mirroring of particular actions.)

Key points
The idea in reviewing a performance is to jot down your immediate, first reaction. However, think about how the director has brought the play to life – the deliberate decisions made to ensure the action is convincing.
If you have not seen a performance, your response will be more limited and focused on how the characters speak and interact, plus any use of sound effects.

Exam tip
Your initial brief notes are a useful revision aid that you can revisit after you have completed a thorough study of the play.

Did you know?
Full versions and extracts of the play are available on the internet.
Search on YouTube for *Twelfth Night* (1996), directed by Trevor Nunn, and you can watch all of the episodes. It begins with a very melodramatic enactment of the shipwreck.
A 1969 film version can also be seen on YouTube, as well as the 2006 movie *She’s the Man*. The recent film is a modern adaptation where Viola Hastings pretends to be male so that she can play with the boys’ soccer team at her brother, Sebastian’s, school. Never say Shakespeare is not relevant!
Each character in this play is distinctive in the way they speak and behave and in the roles they play in the action. This action involves madly bewildering confusions of identity, but there is dramatic irony as we, in the audience, are ‘in the know’. We are aware from the beginning that Viola is disguised and we know of Sebastian’s return well before everyone else. This privileged information enables us to anticipate clashes and problems, and to enjoy the eventual unravelling of the confusion. (See page 106 for more on characterisation.)

Each director, of course, will emphasise different aspects of a character and they will ‘perform’ differently dependent upon the director’s interpretation. Concerning stagecraft, Shakespeare gives few stage directions, so a director can enjoy the freedom of staging a scene as they conceive it. For example, the opening scene could have Orsino sitting on a couch, a throne, lying on a bed, or moving around agitatedly or calmly. The joy of directing Shakespeare is this ability to shape the play so that the impact of scenes differs from production to production. When you are reflecting on the main characters always think about how you would make them perform on stage.

Orsino and Olivia

Duke Orsino (see Figure 2.3.1) dominates the opening scenes, with his indulgent reveries about love and his utterly confident lines at the end of the scene when he believes that Olivia is bound to become obsessed with this ‘selfsame king’: ‘O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou …’ There is not a fl icker of a doubt about his love for her and his certainty that it will be returned. Shakespeare gives him some stirring speeches about love and women, but the audience is inclined to laugh gently at this vanity. He woos Olivia by proxy – sending Viola/Cesario as his messenger even though he declares his passion for Olivia, his appetite for her as ‘all as hungry as the sea’. He fancies himself as a philosopher and someone who knows women well. Ironically, he misses the double entendres of Cesario (who has fallen for him) and he has no inkling that she is a woman. In an earlier conversation with Viola he has pontificated about women and he hits upon a truth that he seems unaware of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character studies: Olivia and Orsino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have just completed some brief character studies of these two and you might want to add some of your own thoughts about each of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What role does each character take in the play, that is, how important are they for the working out of the plot, the revelation of themes and the dramatic action?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What are your reactions to each character? It is important to look closely at the text and reflect, for example, on how interested, or not, you are in Orsino, or how Olivia dominates the scenes she is in and why. Make a note of any speeches that you found to be amusing or striking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How would you direct an actor who plays each role? You could express this in the form of a blog or an email to an imaginary actor – spelling out how you would like the part to be played.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is not a flicker of a doubt about his love for her and his certainty that it will be returned. Shakespeare gives him some stirring speeches about love and women, but the audience is inclined to laugh gently at this vanity. He woos Olivia by proxy – sending Viola/Cesario as his messenger even though he declares his passion for Olivia, his appetite for her as ‘all as hungry as the sea’. He fancies himself as a philosopher and someone who knows women well. Ironically, he misses the double entendres of Cesario (who has fallen for him) and he has no inkling that she is a woman. In an earlier conversation with Viola he has pontificated about women and he hits upon a truth that he seems unaware of:
In Act 5 Orsino finally switches his affections to Cesario, so the undying love for Olivia is swiftly erased!

Olivia (see Figure 2.3.2) is more involved in all of the action than Orsino. She appears, at first at least, to be more grounded. She has a wry sense of humour and enjoys witty banter with Cesario and Feste. In her first few scenes she speaks in down-to-earth prose, but then we see a side of her – the commanding mistress, the capable person who knows her own mind – when she suddenly begins to speak in the more formal blank verse when replying to Cesario’s message from Orsino. (See page 28 for more details on blank verse.) She agrees that Orsino has many good qualities and that he is:

A gracious person. But yet I cannot love him.
He might have took his answer long ago.

What a blunt, simple retort. Compare this with the flowery language of Orsino, who at the end of the first scene says:

Away before me to sweet beds of flowers:
Love-thoughts lie rich when canopied with bowers.

Olivia, like Orsino, however, is deceived by appearances – mistaking infatuation for love. She is also impulsive and, like Orsino, at the whim of her so-called passions. Shakespeare, as we have shown, gives her some redeeming qualities. And she does express concern finally for ‘poor Malvolio’ and the treatment he has received.

Viola/Cesario and Sebastian

Viola (see Figure 2.3.3) contrasts greatly with Orsino and Olivia. Critics tend to view her as having the dramatic function of leading Olivia and Orsino away from their fantasies and illusions, helping them to realise what true love is. Obviously, this all happens in the space of a few hours. As the audience we have to ‘suspend our disbelief’. Viola appears to fall in love at first sight, but Shakespeare allows her the whole of the play to develop her passion. As a result, the audience can track her feelings from her immediate reactions to Orsino in Act 1 (‘Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife …’) to the final coming together.

Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
More longing, waivering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women’s are.
Chapter 2

Figure 2.3.3

Activity: Critical views

Look at the following critical views. Explain what you understand by the statements and say whether you agree or not.

‘Viola and Sebastian not only mirror each other ... The pair produce a sea-change in Illyria, an undoing of presumed identity, a necessary renewal in the order of things.’ (From programme notes in the RSC 2012 production, by Sean O’Brien.)

Jesse Goldberg argues that although Viola seems to represent social mobility and sexual androgyny, 'transcending explicit lines of defined roles in society', in fact 'her ease of mobility is predicated on her higher social status with which she begins the play'. In other words, there is no revolution here and 'the rules of class are still present'. (From an essay available on www.studentpulse.com.)

Compare this with Juliet Dusinberre (1975), who suggests that Shakespeare transcends patriarchal social prejudices about women and sees 'men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal.' (From an essay by Maria del Rosario Arias Doblas, ‘Gender Ambiguity and Desire in Twelfth Night’.)

Sebastian plays a more mechanistic role: involved in a whirling scene of mixed identities and then part of the revelation scene when each twin rediscovers the other. The couples and the love matches are finally sorted out.

Character study: Viola

Write your own character study of Viola.

List a quality or characteristic and then provide evidence. So, a starting point might be:

- Brave and determined, a survivor – for example, she takes on a disguise and a new role in a strange land.
- Stubborn and can be blunt. Although she is a servant to Orsino, she is prepared to voice her opinion. She is unsure about the wisdom of wooing Olivia on his behalf. After Orsino says he believes the wooing would come better from a ‘youth’, Viola replies directly with ‘I think not so, my lord.’ She is also direct with Olivia. For example, she says: ‘You are too proud’.

Some other qualities you might like to consider are:

- her facility with words and her wit
- her genuine interest in people rather than status.

Reflect on how you would bring the part to life in a production. What kind of voice, mannerisms and behaviour would you emphasise? How would you portray her in some of the scenes when she acts as an emissary for Orsino?

Exam tip

Always use textual evidence or quotations to support your judgements. Do not pluck ideas from the air!
Character study: Sebastian

Write a character study of Sebastian. Cite the qualities that you think he displays, and outline the role he plays and his relationship with Antonio. You might like to consider the following qualities:

- Strong love for his sister. Read his discussion with Antonio in Act 2 and find some quotations to support this. Also, look at his reactions in Act 5.
- Has engaging qualities that make Antonio loyal and loving towards him. (See the discussion in Act 3, scene 3.)
- Impulsive. He is prepared to trust Olivia and falls in love rapidly (but is genuinely amazed and pleased at Olivia’s attentions).

Reflect on how you would direct an actor in this part. Think of a particular scene (the fight scene, for example) and how you would stage it.

Feste, the fool

Or rather he is no fool! As Feste says to Viola, he is a ‘corrupter of words’: someone who plays with language, who puns and jokes, but who often hits on truths. He is the court jester whom Olivia has inherited from her father. As the American critic Harold Bloom says, he is ‘the most charming of all Shakespeare’s fools and the only sane character in a wild play’. Bloom suggests that he is world-weary, but he ‘carries his exhaustion with verve and wit, and always with the air of knowing all there is to know, not in a superior way, but with a sweet melancholy.’

Character study: Feste

- Make a note of every scene when Feste appears and list some of his sayings, puns or striking phrases. For example: ‘A sentence is but a chev’ril glove to a good wit – how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward.’ Or speaking of Malvolio’s ordeal he says: ‘And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges’. Add your phrases to this list.
- What would the play lack if there were no Feste? (Think about not just what he says, but what he does and how he links plots together.)
- How would you direct an actor to play this part? (Try to look first of all at some different portrayals and then think about what you would emphasise – in movement, tone of voice, etc.)

See page 35 for a discussion of Feste and music and song in the play.
The revellers or pranksters

Sir Toby Belch is a man who enjoys jokes, is self-indulgent and frequently drunk. He embodies one aspect of the spirit of *Twelfth Night*: always seeking pleasure. He could not do without his ‘cakes and ale’ (Act 2, scene 3) and he is always keen to ‘burn some sack’ (drink).

His interaction with other characters, such as Olivia, reveals much: not just about his own incorrigible self-indulgence and fecklessness, but about Olivia too. Initially she seems controlled, compared with Sir Toby. Interestingly, however, she becomes joyously inebriated with her passion for Cesario. Toby Belch’s joie de vivre is infectious and the world is upended: the noblewoman falls for the (apparent) servant.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek is another reveller, but one who is ‘used’ by Sir Toby, who takes money from him, leading him on in the forlorn hope that Olivia will return his favours. Sir Andrew has little hope of winning Olivia, but he is completely convinced that he has a chance. His presence in the play provides opportunities for Sir Toby to flaunt his wit, and in a small way we see the beginning of teasing that starts to turn into something nastier: a forerunner of the tormenting of Malvolio.

The wily Maria plays an important part in the plot, hatching the idea to trick or ‘gull’ Malvolio, the Puritan manservant. Fabian is an additional servant character who joins in the actions and adds to the humour.

These characters provide comedy per se, but they also provide a link to the main ‘love’ plot with Aguecheek’s pursuit of Olivia. Also, the Malvolio gulling provides links with the main action as it highlights the dizziness and madness of love – even Malvolio can be easily convinced that Olivia loves him. Other themes that reverberate in the whole play are echoed here: Malvolio is deluded and vain (like Sir Andrew and Orsino).

Character study: Maria

Here are some phrases that might be used to describe Maria. Look at each one in turn and decide whether you agree with them. Find evidence from the text to support your views.

- A strong woman who knows her own mind.
- Intelligent.
- Witty.
- Malicious.
- Scheming.
- Important to the plot – she makes thing happen.

Character study: Sir Toby Belch

Answer the following questions and you will then have some notes to guide you in your judgements of Sir Toby’s character.

His name

- What is significant about his name?

Interaction with others

- What kind of a relationship does he have with Maria?
- How does he treat Sir Andrew? Find some examples of the way he talks to him and what he does. What do you think of this treatment?

His speech

- Look at the distinct manner in which he speaks (mostly in prose) in every scene in which he appears. His very first words about Olivia’s mourning are: ‘I am sure care’s an enemy to life.’ This shows the audience that this is a character who means to enjoy himself.
- List some examples of the kinds of expressions he uses (his style of speaking) and note down some of his witty exchanges.

His role

- What exactly does he add to the play? Does he just provide light entertainment, or does he make you reflect on any other themes that recur in the play?
- Describe how you believe an actor should look and behave when taking this part. Choose a particular scene and make detailed notes.
Chapter 2 Twelfth Night: The revellers and the comic subplot

Character study: Sir Andrew Aguecheek
Answer the following questions and you will then have some brief notes on Sir Andrew’s character and role.

- Give some examples of his slow-wittedness. For example, look at how Sir Toby mocks him in Act 1, scene 3. Then he says, rather sadly:

  Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has, but I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit.

- What is his role in the play? Think about how he acts as a foil for Sir Toby. Find some examples of their repartee when Sir Toby mocks him relentlessly.

Malvolio and the subplot
Malvolio is one of Shakespeare’s memorable characters: the grumpy Puritan – more of a tragic-comic figure than the others in the play. His very name (literally: ‘ill-wishing’) has a sour quality to it. At the time when Shakespeare was writing, the audience would have been familiar with Puritan views about the theatre: they were against any kind of play or any kind of excessive indulgence. Malvolio is the embodiment of these features and so the butt of humour in the play. Ironically, one of the funniest, farcical scenes is Malvolio strutting in his ludicrous yellow, cross-gartered stockings. The man who would scorn plays and pleasures is sucked into a ridiculous performance, but one that works brilliantly to provide humour for the audience.

Character study: Malvolio
1. What do you understand by Maria’s summary of Malvolio’s character (Act 2, scene 3) when she says he is:

   ‘a time-pleaser, an affectioned ass, that cons state without book and utters it by great swarths. The best persuaded of himself: so crammed (as he thinks) with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him’.

2. Find examples from the play to support her judgements.
3. Look at the following list of statements about the character of Malvolio. For each statement note down your reaction. Find evidence from the text to support your views. The first point on the list has been completed for you:

   ‘He is self-deluded and vain.’ This is shown by his speech when he imagines what it would be like to be ‘Count Malvolio’ (Act 2, scene 5). He also deludes himself that Maria would be inclined to choose him too.

   a. Intolerant of anyone else’s pleasures and dislikes the ‘uncivil rule’.
   b. Has a vivid imagination and is prone to fantasies.
   c. Loyal to his mistress: an efficient and conscientious steward.
   d. Pompous and humourless.
   e. A vulnerable character.
4. What is your reaction to the final trick and his incarceration? Does he deserve such humiliation? Do you have any sympathy for him?

Critical views of Malvolio
Decide what each critic is saying here and then make up your own mind about whether you agree or disagree.

- Frank Kermode referred to: ‘The grumpy puritanical propriety of Malvolio, a man less attuned to carnival merriment than to the severities of Lent. By a cruel carnival trick, it is he who alone is convicted of madness and left out of the general happiness when order returns at the end and true identities and genders are re-established.’ (From the RSC programme notes for the 2001 production)

- Harold Bloom thinks: ‘What happens to Malvolio is, however, so harshly out of proportion to his merits, such as they are, that the ordeal of humiliation has to be regarded as one of the prime Shakespearian enigmas.’ (From: ‘Shakespeare, The Invention of the Human’, 1998)

- Inge Leimberg says: ‘Shakespeare branded self-love as the sickness and the sin of Malvolio.’ (From an essay: ‘M.O.A.I. Trying to share the Joke in Twelfth Night’, available at www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/leimberg00101.htm)
The language in *Twelfth Night* is hugely varied, from the haunting poetry of the songs (see page 34) to the lyrical speeches of Orsino and Viola, to the cursing and the down-to-earth prose of the comic characters, and the punning of Feste. Shakespeare gives each character a different way of speaking so that the audience can clearly differentiate their characters. Having completed your own notes on most of the characters you will be aware of the different kinds of **lexis**, imagery and varied **syntax** used. (See page 29.)

### Blank verse

In more formal scenes or in exchanges between the more courtly characters, Shakespeare uses a traditional blank verse form called **iambic pentameter**. (Blank verse just means verse that does not rhyme.) In this format the standard line has 10 syllables and the basic rhythm is the commonest rhythm in poetry: a rhythm that replicates the lub-dub of the heartbeat.

Here is an extract from Act 1, scene 5, where Viola, acting as a messenger for the Duke, is told by Olivia that she cannot love Orsino. Viola then replies:

---

**VIOLA:**

If I did love you in my master’s flame,

Notice the inflated language of love – linking flame with passion.

With such a sufferance, such a deadly life,

Love is often linked with pain.

In your denial I would find no sense;

I would not understand it.

**OLIVIA:**

Why what would you?

**VIOLA:**

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,

A romantic image – is Viola mocking this language of love?

And call upon my soul within the house;

Write loyal cantons of condemned love,

Again, an emphasis on suffering – the ‘condemned’ lover.
You will notice that sometimes there are 11 syllables in a line and sometimes there are fewer. This allows for some variety in the verse. There are also shared lines. ‘I would not understand it’ has seven syllables, and then Olivia’s ensuing quick question completes the line with four syllables.

The rhythm is based on an unstressed syllable (\(u\)) followed by a stressed syllable (/) and this is called an iambic foot (\(u/\)). This foot is repeated usually five times in a line of 10 syllables and it gives the basic beat of five stressed and five unstressed syllables to the line. Hence: iambic pentameter.

The first few lines have been scanned for you using the \(u\) and / symbols. Carry on scanning the verse (that is, sorting out the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables) until you understand this framework. It is the basic metre that Shakespeare uses, but obviously he will vary it, and when you read the lines aloud you too will vary the stresses and alter your intonation, otherwise the extract might sound like doggerel.

**Lexis and imagery**

Descriptive detail can bring a passage to life in the imagination of the listener. In the speech of Viola, she creates a concrete image (that is, one you can visualise) of a cabin, and she uses verbs and adjectives that are connected with noise to create a paean of praise: she will ‘sing’, ‘hallow’, ‘call upon my soul’ and the hills ‘reverberate’ with her phrases.

She refers to the ‘babbling gossip of the air’ – a figure of speech (we know the air cannot literally gossip – it is personified here), but a very effective one. Everyone will be singing praises to Olivia! The speech builds up to a climax and ends on an exclamatory note. We learn more about Olivia’s susceptibility to an effusive romantic speech, and we learn more about Viola: her command of language; her ability to spin a phrase and to gently mock the elevated language of romance.

And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
Hallow your name to the reverberate hills,
Notice the hyperbole – this is the language of worship.
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out ‘Olivia!’ O you should not rest
Climactic exclamations.
Between the elements of air and earth
Cosmic imagery.
But you should pity me!
Feel affection and sympathy (not the more modern sense).

**KEY TERMS**

**Metre:** a recurring pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

**Doggerel:** often nonsensical, badly written verse.

**Figure 2.5.1** The gulling of Malvolio – he reads the faked letter
Rhyming verse

At the end of a scene Shakespeare sometimes uses rhyme. (See page 58 for more discussion.) Here are some examples.

At the end of Act 1, scene 4, Viola says:

VIOLA: I’ll do my best
To woo your lady. (Aside) Yet a barful strife!
Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife.

Rhyme is memorable and draws attention to what is being said. Using rhyme alters the tone too: it can seem chant-like and threatening or, as in this case, a light-hearted but heartfelt assertion meant only for the audience’s ears. The rhyme here emphasises the subversion of Viola’s first statement – and the audience hears her real thoughts.

Activity: Rhyming examples
Find three or four other examples of rhyming verse. For each example, reflect on the effect on the audience.

Activity: Language and its dramatic effect
1. Here is a selection of some of the key speeches expressed in blank verse in the play. For each extract, scan the verse, working out the iambic pentameter framework.
   a. Orsino’s speech in Act 1, scene 1, which begins: ‘If music be the food of love, play on.’
   b. Viola’s soliloquy in Act 2, scene 2, which begins: ‘I left no ring with her: what means this lady?’
   c. The interaction between Viola and Orsino in Act 2, scene 4, which begins with Orsino saying: ‘What dost thou know?’ to the end of the scene.
   d. Sebastian’s speech in Act 4, scene 3, which begins: ‘This is the air, that is the glorious sun’.
2. Write a few notes about the use of language in each extract. You can use the following pointers to help you make notes:
   a. Comment on the lexis chosen and its impact on you – in particular try to explain why some phrases are striking.
   b. How would the speeches be delivered (the mood and tone)?
   c. What does the extract reveal about the character(s) and their behaviour?
   d. Does the extract make you reflect on any particular themes that recur in the play? If so, which themes and why?
3. Choose some other speeches and analyse them closely in the same way.
Prose

The scenes that involve the comic characters are all expressed in prose. When Olivia speaks to Feste or Sir Toby she also uses informal prose. Malvolio does this too, except in the more serious final scene when he is accusing Olivia of having done him wrong.

Here is an example of prose. Sir Toby is pretending that Malvolio is mad, possessed by devils, and he is teasing him. This scene occurs fairly soon after Olivia has seen Malvolio in his yellow, cross-gartered stockings:

| SIR TOBY: | Why, how now, my bawcock? How dost thou, chuck? |
| MALVOLIO: | Sir! |
| SIR TOBY: | Ay, biddy, come with me. What, man, ’tis not for gravity to play at cherry-pit with Satan. Hang him, foul collier! |
| MARIA: | Get him to say his prayers, good Sir Toby, get him to pray. |
| MALVOLIO: | My prayers, minx! |
| MARIA: | No, I warrant you, he will not hear of godliness. |
| MALVOLIO: | Go hang yourselves all! You are idle, shallow things; I am not of your element. You shall know more hereafter. [Exit] |
| SIR TOBY: | Is’t possible? |
| FABIAN: | If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction. |

With prose there is no set line length. This is just normal conversation with some shorter lines. It is much more informal in the grammatical structure and the vocabulary used. Sir Toby uses colloquial words such as ‘bawcock’, ‘chuck’ and ‘biddy’ – all linked to chickens. He is teasing him and treating him like a bird that needs to be humoured. The prose is full of everyday expressions, such as ‘ay’ (yes) or ‘I warrant you’ (I bet).

The interaction would be performed at a fast pace. Notice Fabian’s comment – the audience would find that very amusing. It is rather like an apology for the action we have seen and what we are about to see. This is an interesting, thought-provoking comment. So prose is not always prosaic!

Sir Toby later says, ‘Come, we’ll have him in a dark room and bound.’ At the time Elizabethans believed that tying someone up and imprisoning them in a darkened room would cure them of their madness.
The comedy is varied in this play: from boisterous knockabout scenes to episodes where the humour depends upon wordplay. Here is a brief summary of the types of comedy – but always be wary of what can look like cut-and-dried categories.

**Punning and wordplay**

We have already seen that Feste is the one who puns the most. For example, in Act 2, scene 4, Orsino gives Feste some money after he has sung to him, money for his ‘pains’. Feste replies:

> FESTE: No pains, sir, I take pleasure in singing, sir.
> ORSINO: I'll pay thy pleasure then.
> FESTE: Truly, sir, and pleasure will be paid one time or another.

The wordplay is on the double meaning of pains meaning effort, and pains meaning trouble. There is also play on the word paid: literally giving money, but also in the sense that pleasure does not happen without having to give something back, some ‘due’. There is also the bawdy innuendo of paying for sexual pleasures.

**Visual impact of farce**

There are many examples of such scenes which depend upon visual effects and knockabout humour. For example, Malvolio’s strutting in his stockings, witnessed by the plotters, has farcical elements: a visually incongruous picture, with the eavesdroppers punctuating the action with their rejoinders. Also, the disguises and mistaken identity lead to some farcical scenes too. Here is an example.

In Act 5, scene 1, Sebastian has fought with Sir Andrew and given him a ‘bloody coxcomb’. Sir Andrew amusingly confronts Viola/Cesario. The resulting confusion has Sir Toby entering, drunk as usual, with a cut head and shouting for Dick Surgeon. Feste says:

> FESTE: O he’s drunk, Sir Toby, an hour agone; his eyes were set at eight i’th’morning.
> SIR TOBY: Then he’s a rogue, and a passy-measures pavin. I hate a drunken rogue.

Here ‘passy-measures pavin’ is obscure. We are not entirely sure what it means, but possibly a drunken slowcoach. A pavane was a kind of dance and perhaps Toby was saying ‘passing measure pavane’, but he slurs his words because he is drunk. Anyway, the irony of his complaint about the surgeon is not lost on the audience.
Malicious humour

Sir Toby cruelly uses the feckless Sir Andrew by exploiting his weaknesses, and there are frequent asides to the audience about his stupidity. In Act 3, scene 2 he says to Fabian:

‘For Andrew, if he were opened and you find so much blood in his liver as will clog the foot of a flea, I’ll eat the rest of th’anatomy.’

Blood was associated with courage, so Andrew is ‘lily-livered’ – not at all brave. The image of the flea is amusing, although the judgement is harsh.

The gulling of Malvolio

The reading of the fake letter causes great amusement. There is the humour of dramatic irony: we know what is happening, we anticipate the scene, which adds to our amusement but also creates tension. We wonder how everything will turn out. The pompous, deluded Malvolio falls for it all – he is so ready to believe that the whole thing is possible. He is particularly seduced by the flattering lines: ‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em.’ Much of the humour of the letter comes from the style, which is rather pompous and wordy, like Malvolio (‘Thy fates open their hands; let thy blood and spirit embrace them, and, to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough and appear fresh’). It builds to a climax with the request to wear cross-gartered yellow stockings. The audience laughs unbelievingly, but Malvolio believes.

Gentler humour

Laughing at a character

We laugh at Orsino’s delusions about love and his inability to see and appreciate the devotion of Viola/Cesario. Despite blunt rejections from Olivia he still stubbornly pursues a hopeless case. In Act 2, scene 4, Viola and Orsino are talking about male and female attitudes to love. Viola has set the scene by saying: suppose there was a woman (herself) who loved Orsino as much as he supposedly loves Olivia, and Orsino had bluntly told this woman that he could not love her, what would Orsino say to her then? Orsino’s reply is amusingly ironic, because the audience know the strength of Viola’s feelings. Orsino says:

There is no woman’s sides
Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
As love doth give my heart; no woman’s heart
So big, to hold so much.

Smiling with a character

We smile with Sebastian when he cannot believe his good fortune. We also smile with Viola/Cesario during all of the wooing scenes with Orsino. We smile with Olivia too – for example, when she has unveiled herself to Viola/Cesario (Act 1, scene 5) and says, ‘Is’t not well done?’ Viola/Cesario replies, ‘Excellent done, if God did all’, and then Olivia’s rejoinder is amusing. She asserts that yes it is all natural and that ‘twill endure wind and weather’. Remember, however, that performances and audience responses differ. One director may stress the gentle humour of this repartee – another may make Olivia sound defensive.

Activity: Humour on stage

Look closely at Act 2, scene 5, one of the most memorable comic scenes in the play. Write down any lines and examples of behaviour that might create amusement on stage.

Did you know

The eavesdropping device is a classic theatrical convention. It is used by Shakespeare in many plays – from tragedies like Othello to comedies such as Much Ado About Nothing. It creates tension: will the perpetrators be discovered or not? In a comedy it can add a pleasurable frisson: will the whole plot be blown apart? And with what consequences?

Activity: Gentler humour

Find several examples of speeches, or particular interactions between characters, when we smile at the action. Try to assess why this is the case. Humour is not easy to analyse, so do not be surprised if you find this exercise tricky.
The play opens and closes with music, and throughout the action there are scripted scenes of singing and music-making. Tunes and words mirror themes and create and alter moods. For example, the first scene contains romantic music, a background to the stylised proclamations of the swooning, lovesick Orsino:

If music be the food of love, play on:

Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall;
O it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound:
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour.

The palace in Illyria is suffused with music and Orsino is hungry for it, comparing the tune and its melancholy falling cadence (the ‘dying fall’) with the heady perfume or the breeze that ruffles a bank of violets. Romantic images!

Here are some of the key scenes where music plays a major part.

A catch (a song)

*Act 2, scene 3*

Sir Toby greets Feste with: ‘Welcome, ass. Now let’s have a catch.’ Music for the revellers is as important as it would seem to be for Orsino. They request a love song and Feste sings. The first verse is hopeful, a simple, rhyming catch addressed to a lover:

O mistress mine, where are you roaming?
O stay and hear, your true love’s coming,
That can sing both high and low.
Trip no further, pretty sweeting;
Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man’s son doth know.

However, the second verse is much more melancholy and has the message *carpe diem* (meaning ‘seize the moment’) because youth does not last. Uncertainty about love and its nature are raised in the song themes that the play is concerned with.
The characters join in with the singing, and the bittersweet nature of the song sets the tone for the whole play: enjoy what you can when you can, because life is short.

However, they also sing snatches that hint at earthier, rowdier songs (‘There dwelt a man in Babylon, lady, lady’). Clearly music and singing give them much pleasure – but such joy is quashed by Malvolio, who objects to their ‘Cozier’s catches’ [shoemaker songs]. Sir Toby and Feste torment him, taking a line each from an old song. It is this singing that Malvolio calls ‘uncivil rule’ and which leads to Maria’s determination to have some revenge. It is the trigger for the ‘gulling’ of Malvolio.

A melancholy love song

**Act 2, scene 4**

Orsino asks the musicians to play a tune that Feste had sung to him, and then finally Feste sings the melancholy song about a lover who wants to die for love and be forgotten. It fits Orsino’s mood perfectly. The opening lines are: ‘Come away, come away death,/And in sad cypress let me be laid.’

Taunting of Malvolio

**Act 4, scene 2**

Feste has been visiting Malvolio in the darkened cell, pretending at times to be the visiting priest – Sir Topas. His final song, with short lines and a chant-like rhythm, sounds mocking and sinister. The Old Vice is a character in a medieval play that would have cut the devil’s long nails with a wooden dagger. Feste links Malvolio with the devil; he himself is the mad character cutting his nails! Malvolio would have been greatly offended at the thought of being called ‘goodman devil’. Here song is used to highlight attitudes to Puritanism and the devil and to show the cruel tormenting of Malvolio.

The final song

Feste sings of life from being ‘a little tiny boy’ to reaching manhood (‘man’s estate’), to taking a wife and finally to being drunk when he’s old. Each stage of life has brought problems. The function of music – to reveal and confirm truths about life and to mirror and create mood – is demonstrated by this moving final song.

The role of music in the play

It would be hard to envisage a production where music did not play a major part. Music could provide background mood in many of the scenes, as well as being foregrounded in the scenes mentioned above. The words of Feste’s songs offer advice about love, the passage of death and time, as well as adding to the mood of festive merrymaking.

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**Activity: Feste’s tone**

Reread the melancholy love song, or listen to it, and then read the dialogue between Orsino and Feste up until Feste’s exit. Is Feste mocking Orsino? Look particularly at his parting words.

**Activity: Analysing the final song**

- Look closely at the first three verses. What has characterised each life stage? For example, in the first verse, ‘A foolish thing was but a toy’ is cryptic. What do you think it means? It could be that silly things that happened were treated as not very important – he was only a child and everything was a bit of a game. Jot down what you think each verse means.

- What do you understand by the refrain ‘For the rain it raineth every day’? Does it mean that life is always grim or just that life goes on? Rainfall is essential – so is there some other message here?

- The final verse reminds us that we have been watching a play. What other sense emerges from this last verse – is Feste confirming that the ending is happy?
Rex Gibson, the editor of the Cambridge Shakespeare edition, speaks about ‘a comedy with troubling undertones’ and ‘an uneasy play about outsiders who lose’ (outsiders such as Malvolio and Antonio).

To get you started, here are comments on two of the themes. You do not have to agree with them, but make use of these ideas if you find them helpful.

**Identity**

As Frank Kermode says: ‘The language of the play has emphasised that identity can always be a doubtful matter’. Viola, of course, is playing a part, and the dialogue between Olivia and Viola highlights this:

| VIOLA: You do think you are not what you are. |
| OLIVIA: If I think so, I think the same of you. |
| VIOLA: Then you think right; I am not what I am. |
| OLIVIA: I would you were as I would have you be! |

Malvolio mistakes the identity of the letter writer, and mistakes the identity of Sir Topas in the final scene. So what is being said about our identities? They shift and change and, as Feste says, ‘What’s to come is still unsure’. Orsino creates a pompous identity, but beneath his obsessive surface there is some genuine affection and empathy. Feste can change roles and identity, at will to suit the occasion. Viola’s integrity, despite her disguised identity, stays intact and the final poignant reunion with Sebastian shows the two halves coming together: the correct identities are established and order is returned.

**Time**

A sense of time passing and the inevitability of events pervade the play. Feste’s final song contains the line ‘But that’s all one’, and Harold Bloom says that this shows ‘Feste’s beautiful sadness of acceptance.’ Throughout the play there are references to time passing. Olivia, for example, says ‘The clock upbraids me with a waste of time’, and Feste refers to time as a ‘whirligig’ (meaning something that goes round and round relentlessly). Orsino is also concerned about the passage of time – especially about the fading of women’s beauty!
Staging the play

Activity: Staging a scene that you have enjoyed
- Write notes about how you would stage this in a modern theatre or space. Think about props, sound effects, character movement and actions. For example, if you choose the gulling of Malvolio, where would you position the eavesdroppers – behind a hedge, a screen or some furniture? How would Malvolio move on stage? How varied would his tone of voice be? Which parts of his speeches would be emphasised more, and which would be quieter?
- Look back at the description of the features of the Elizabethan stage and the illustration of the Globe theatre. Write down how you would stage your chosen scene. For example, would you use the balcony and the recessed area? What props would you use?

Summary questions

Here are some final questions that focus on issues in the play. Thinking about these questions (mostly broad ones) might help you to draw your own conclusions and highlight aspects that we have not had the space to explore.

Activity: More issues to reflect on
- What is Antonio’s role in the play? (Look at how some action is facilitated by him. Look also at his characteristics – his loyalty and courage.)
- Do you feel any sympathy at all for Malvolio? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do you agree that Shakespeare is mocking the hyperbolic, elevated language of love – the artifice of Orsino’s speeches? Does Olivia use equally high-flown language about Cesario?
- How relevant are the concerns of the play to a modern audience? (Think about love and loss, about crowd behaviour, about characters who are different; the position of women, class, attitudes to pleasure, etc., the function of music.)

Doing your own review will help to crystallise your thinking about the play as well as making you very aware of how a play is a living thing – every production and performance is different.

Activity: Reviewing a performance for yourself

Decide on your intended audience, for example, an online magazine, a newspaper or a school or college brochure. Adapt your style and content to suit the chosen audience.
- Introduction: this has to grab the attention of the reader, so give a quick summary of the action and your headline reaction to it.
- The main content: select a few key moments to comment on, focusing on the stagecraft, the acting and audience reaction. Comment also on the different characters and whether or not you found the overall interpretation convincing.
- Conclusion: end the review with an interesting overall comment about the dramatic impact of the production and highlight any new angle that the production has revealed to you.

A cautionary note

The meaning of Shakespeare’s comedy will not necessarily fall into neat and separate thematic boxes. That makes it all the more fascinating and we will each respond differently to the humour, to the lyrical scenes and to the final mad unravelling of events.

It is useful to reflect on ideas and themes in the play, but never forget that it is a play – a theatrical experience that has impact when it is staged and brought to life. And each restaging with different actors will bring fresh interpretations of the play. Read the critics, read the study guide, but above all read the play (and watch it if you can) and think things through for yourself.
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