Multiple Critical Perspectives

MARXISM ARCHETYPE HISTORICISM FEMINISM

Teaching William Shakespeare's
Twelfth Night
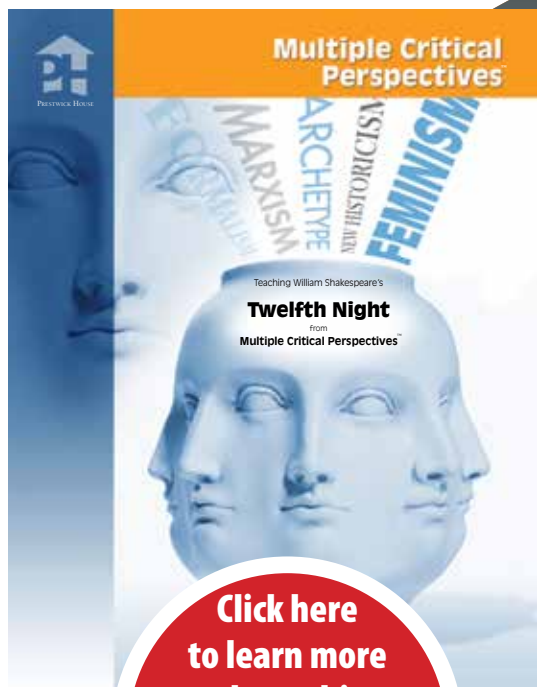from
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Activity Pack

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Teaching William Shakespeare's

Twelfth Night

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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Prestwick House

General Introduction to the Work

Cast of Characters

Main Characters

Orsino – Duke of Illyria

Sebastian – a young Gentleman, brother to Viola

Olivia – a rich Countess

Viola – in love with the Duke

Olivia's Household

Maria – Olivia's Woman

Sir Toby Belch – Uncle of Olivia

Sir Andrew Ague-Cheek

Malvolio – Steward to Olivia

Fabian – Servant to Olivia

Clown – Servant to Olivia

Minor Characters

Antonio – a Sea Captain, friend to Sebastian

A Sea Captain – friend to Viola

Valentine – Gentleman attending on the Duke

Curio – Gentleman attending on the Duke

Lords, Priests, Sailors, Officers, Musicians, and other Attendants

Marxist Theory Applied to *Twelfth Night*

Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in a. society controlled that society—that is, whoever owned the factories essentially "owned" the culture. This idea is called **dialectical materialism**. Marx believed that the entire world was progressing toward communism: that the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the workers, rather than a few wealthy individuals. The Soviet Union was inspired by a perversion of Marx's philosophy. Marxism has also inspired uprisings across the globe, and various attempts have been made at implementing his ideas.

To read a literary work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marx viewed literature as both a reflection of culture and a catalyst for cultural change. Proponents of Marxist theory believe that literature can even instigate revolution.

Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the collective political subconscious of a culture. Marx believed that oppression existed in the political subconscious of a society—manifesting itself in the form of social hierarchy.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies

Activity One

Examining Power Structures

1. Have the students review Act II, Scene III, in which Malvolio interrupts the Twelfth Night festivities taking place in Olivia's house, and the others plot their revenge.

2. Next, have students review Act IV, Scene I. Here, Olivia scolds Sir Toby for fighting with Sebastian.

3. Finally, read the following quotation from Sir Toby, in Act IV, Scene II: "I would we were well rid of this knavery. If he may be conveniently delivered, I would he were, for I am now so far in offence with my niece that I cannot pursue with any safety this sport to the upshot."

4. As a class, discuss the following questions:

    • In Olivia's house, who wields the greatest power? Where does he or she get this power? How can you tell?

    • Based on the distribution of power, which character(s) in Olivia's house would represent the bourgeoisie? Who would represent the proletariat?

    • What role does Malvolio play in the power structure of Olivia's house? Why does Olivia send Malvolio to scold the others, rather than doing so herself?

    • What reasons do Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Feste, and Maria give for wanting to punish Malvolio, at the end of Act II, Scene III? Might they have other, unspoken reasons, as well? What does their response to Malvolio say about the power structure of their society? Does this contribute to a Marxist interpretation of the play?

Mythological/Archetypal Theory
Applied to *Twelfth Night*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a-life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

3.   **Archetypal Situations**

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to…) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.

- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.

- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)

- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.

- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.

- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisiacal life and viewpoint to a tainted one.

- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.

- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her step-mother and stepsisters, etc.).

- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.

Variations on the end of the world include

- Armageddon: the final battle between good and evil according to the Christian New Testament (book of Revelation), in which evil is finally vanquished, evildoers receive their eternal punish-ment, and God reigns over a newly-created Heaven and Earth;

Feminist Theory Applied to *Twelfth Night*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the "modern woman."

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Questions for A Feminist Reading

1. Copy and distribute the following handout.

2. Divide the class into four groups, assigning one question to each.

3. Reconvene the class, and have each group share its response to the assigned question.

4. After each group presents its findings, open each question to the class for discussion.