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Navigating Fate and Agency: A Comprehensive Study of Fatalism in Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive study of fatalism in William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," a timeless comedy that delves into the complexities of human nature, identity, and the tension between fate and agency. Fatalism, a philosophical doctrine asserting that all events are predetermined and inevitable, is central to the play's exploration of the extent to which individuals can control their own destinies. Through a detailed analysis of the main characters—Viola, Orsino, Olivia, Sebastian, and Malvolio—as well as the secondary characters—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—the paper examines how Shakespeare navigates the complexities of love, ambition, and self-discovery in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

Keywords: Fatalism, human nature, identity, agency, destiny, love, ambition, philosophical implications, resilience, adaptability, human condition, relevance, significance, comedy, self-determination, free will, determinism.

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Navigating Fate and Agency: A Comprehensive Study of Fatalism in Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'

Introduction

"Twelfth Night,"¹ one of William Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, presents a captivating exploration of human nature, identity, and the tension between fate and agency. At the heart of the play lies a profound study of fatalism, a philosophical doctrine that asserts that all events are predetermined and inevitable, and that individuals have little to no control over their destiny. The characters in "Twelfth Night" grapple with questions of identity, self-determination, and the extent to which they can control their own destinies, offering timeless insights into the complexities of the human condition.

Fatalism, as a philosophical concept, raises fundamental questions about free will, determinism, and the nature of human agency.² It challenges us to consider the extent to which our lives are shaped by external forces beyond our control, and the degree to which we can actively shape our own destinies. In "Twelfth Night," Shakespeare explores these themes through a rich tapestry of characters and relationships, each of whom navigates the complexities of love, ambition, and self-discovery in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

This paper aims to provide a detailed study of fatalism in "Twelfth Night," focusing on the main characters—Viola, Orsino, Olivia, Sebastian, and Malvolio—as well as the secondary characters—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian. By examining the actions, motivations, and transformations of these characters, we will explore the tension between fatalism and agency and consider the implications of Shakespeare's exploration of these themes for the human condition.

The study of fatalism in "Twelfth Night" offers a timeless exploration of human nature, agency, and the human condition that remains relevant and significant today. The characters and themes explored in the play continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, providing valuable insights into the complexities of love, identity, ambition, and the tension between fate and agency.

Discussion

Viola's character in "Twelfth Night" stands out as one of the most complex and compelling portrayals of fatalism and agency in Shakespeare's canon. Shipwrecked and believing her twin brother, Sebastian, to be dead, Viola is thrust into a situation that tests her resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination. Her actions and decisions throughout the play provide a rich tapestry for exploring the tension between fate and agency.

Viola's decision to disguise herself as a man, Cesario, and enter the service of Duke Orsino can be viewed through the lens of fatalism. She accepts her circumstances and takes proactive steps to control her fate, believing that her destiny is out of her hands. This initial act of disguise and self-determination demonstrates Viola's acceptance of her situation and her willingness to adapt and survive in a foreign and challenging environment.³

However, this act of disguise also showcases Viola's agency and resourcefulness. By choosing to take on the role of Cesario and seek employment with Orsino, she actively shapes her own destiny rather than passively accepting her circumstances. Her ability to navigate the

¹ Shakespeare, W. (1601–1602). *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*.

² Rice, H. (Winter 2018). *Fatalism*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University: Center for the Study of Language and Information.

³ Hodgdon, B. (2002). Sexual disguise and the theatre of gender. In A. Leggatt (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy* (p. 186). Cambridge University Press.

complexities of her disguise, maintain her composure, and effectively serve Orsino highlights her resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination.⁴

As Cesario, Viola becomes a central figure in the play's romantic intrigues, forming a complicated love triangle with Orsino and Olivia. Her interactions with both characters provide further insight into her character's relationship with fatalism and agency.

Viola's growing affection⁵ for Orsino, despite her disguise, demonstrates a form of fatalism where she seems to believe that her romantic feelings are beyond her control. She becomes emotionally entangled in Orsino's infatuation with Olivia, further complicating her own feelings and desires. However, her willingness to act on Orsino's behalf and pursue Olivia's affections on his behalf also demonstrates a significant degree of agency and loyalty, challenging her initial fatalistic view of her romantic feelings.

One of the most pivotal moments in Viola's character arc occurs with the unexpected arrival of her twin brother, Sebastian. His appearance serves as a catalyst for the play's resolution, as their reunion reveals the twins' true identities and unravels the play's various romantic entanglements.

Viola's reunion with Sebastian underscores her agency in shaping her own destiny. Despite the mistaken identities and misunderstandings that have driven much of the play's plot, Viola remains steadfast in her determination to protect and support her brother. Her ability to maintain her composure and navigate the chaotic events leading up to their reunion further highlights her resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination.

Viola's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a nuanced and compelling exploration of the tension between fate and agency. While she initially seems to be at the mercy of her circumstances, she ultimately takes control of her destiny and shapes her own future. Her journey throughout the play is a testament to the power of resilience, adaptability, and the ability to find opportunity in adversity.

Through Viola's experiences and transformations, Shakespeare presents a compelling study of fatalism and its implications for the human condition. Her character challenges the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. In the end, Viola emerges as a strong, complex, and resilient character who deftly navigates the complexities of love, identity, and fate, ultimately shaping her own destiny in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

Duke Orsino serves as a reflection of the play's exploration of fatalism through his romantic and melancholic nature. His character offers a profound study of the tension between passive acceptance of fate and active agency in pursuing one's desires.⁶

Orsino's passionate and consuming love for the countess Olivia sets the tone for much of the play's exploration of love and desire. His opening lines, "If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it; that surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken, and so die," express a belief in love as a force that is beyond his control, something that happens to him rather than a choice he makes.⁷

Orsino's romantic melancholy reflects a form of fatalism where he sees love as a consuming and uncontrollable force. He is caught in a cycle of desire and frustration, unable to move on from his infatuation with Olivia. This fatalistic view of love influences his actions throughout the play, as he sends Cesario (Viola in disguise) to woo Olivia on his behalf, believing that fate will eventually bring them together. Despite his initial fatalistic view of love, Orsino's character undergoes a transformation as he comes to realize his true feelings for Viola. This realization

⁴ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Viola (Cesario). LitCharts.

⁵ "Francis Hutcheson on the Emotions". (2017, November 19). In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions.

⁶ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Orsino. LitCharts.

⁷ Mahood, M. M. (Ed.). (1995). Twelfth Night. Penguin.

challenges his previous fatalistic view and suggests a more active and conscious understanding of his emotions.⁸

Orsino's growing affection for Viola as Cesario demonstrates a shift from fatalism to agency. He begins to recognize and appreciate Viola's qualities and eventually accepts her true identity. His willingness to pursue a relationship with Viola, despite the gender-bending complexities of their situation, showcases a newfound agency and self-awareness that adds depth to his character and challenges the play's themes of fate and agency.

Orsino's emotional complexity and vulnerability further complicate his character's relationship with fatalism and agency. Despite his outwardly confident and noble demeanor, Orsino is emotionally vulnerable and easily swayed by his passions and desires.

His emotional volatility is evident in his quick shift of affection towards Viola (as Cesario) once he believes that she is a man. This suggests that Orsino's feelings are not as deep or genuine as he initially believes them to be but rather a product of his own romantic fantasies and the intoxicating power of love.

Duke Orsino's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a complex and nuanced exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. While he initially appears to be a victim of his own romantic obsessions and beliefs in fate, his eventual growth and self-awareness add depth to his character and challenge the play's themes of fatalism and agency.

Orsino's transformation and self-realization highlight the play's exploration of the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness. His character serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of passive acceptance of fate and the potential for growth and self-realization when one challenges their beliefs and assumptions.

Overall, Orsino emerges as a complex and emotionally rich character who navigates the complexities of love, desire, and identity in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. His character's journey adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. Olivia, the wealthy countess in "Twelfth Night," is a complex and emotionally rich character whose actions and decisions throughout the play provide a profound exploration of fatalism and agency. Her character serves as a reflection of the play's themes of love, desire, and the human condition, and her journey offers a nuanced study of the tension between passive acceptance of fate and active agency in pursuing one's desires.⁹

Olivia's initial vow to avoid the company of men for seven years following the death of her brother sets the stage for her character's exploration of fatalism. Her determination to remain isolated reflects a belief in fate and the uncontrollable nature of her emotions, as she seeks to protect herself from further emotional pain and vulnerability.

However, despite her initial resistance to Orsino's advances and her vow to avoid men, Olivia quickly falls in love with Cesario (Viola in disguise). Her quick and passionate infatuation demonstrates a form of fatalism where she seems to believe that her romantic feelings are beyond her control. This emotional volatility further complicates her character's relationship with fatalism and agency, as she becomes emotionally entangled in a love triangle with Orsino and Viola (as Cesario).

Olivia's character is also characterized by her assertiveness and determination to pursue what she wants. She is not afraid to take control of her destiny, as demonstrated by her determination to win Cesario's love, despite her initial vow and the gender-bending complexities of their situation.

⁸ Jaynes, J. (2000). *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Original work published 1976). Houghton Mifflin. ISBN 0-618-05707-2.

⁹ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). *Twelfth Night Characters: Olivia*. LitCharts.

Her willingness to act on her desires challenges her initial fatalistic view of love and suggests a significant degree of agency and self-determination. Olivia's assertiveness and determination add depth to her character and complicate the play's exploration of fatalism and agency, as she actively pursues her desires and challenges her own beliefs and assumptions.¹⁰

Olivia's eventual realization of her true feelings for Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, serves as a powerful moment of resolution and reconciliation. This realization challenges her previous fatalistic view of love and suggests a more active and conscious understanding of her emotions. Her decision to marry Sebastian, despite the mistaken identities and misunderstandings that have driven much of the play's plot, underscores her agency in shaping her own destiny. Olivia's willingness to challenge her own beliefs and assumptions and pursue her desires demonstrates a significant growth and self-awareness that adds depth to her character and challenges the play's themes of fate and agency.

Despite her assertiveness and determination, Olivia's emotional complexity and vulnerability further complicate her character's relationship with fatalism and agency. Her emotions seem to fluctuate wildly, reflecting a lack of stability and self-control.

Olivia is quick to fall in love and equally quick to despair when she believes Cesario has betrayed her by being loyal to Orsino. Her emotional volatility highlights the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness and adds depth to her character's exploration of fatalism and agency.

Olivia's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a complex and nuanced exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. While she initially appears to be at the mercy of her circumstances and her beliefs in fate, her eventual growth and self-awareness add depth to her character and challenge the play's themes of fatalism and agency.¹¹

Olivia's assertiveness, determination, and emotional complexity highlight the play's exploration of the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness. Her character serves as a compelling study of the tension between passive acceptance of fate and active agency in pursuing one's desires, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.

Overall, Olivia emerges as a strong, complex, and emotionally rich character who deftly navigates the complexities of love, desire, and identity in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. Her character's journey adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.

Sebastian's character in "Twelfth Night" serves as a vital catalyst for the play's resolution and offers a compelling exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. As Viola's twin brother, believed to be dead by the other characters in the play, Sebastian's unexpected arrival in Illyria adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to the narrative.¹²

Sebastian's character is introduced as a survivor of the shipwreck that separated him from his twin sister, Viola. Believed to be dead by the other characters in the play, Sebastian's unexpected appearance in Illyria serves as a pivotal moment that drives the plot towards its resolution. His straightforward and pragmatic character contrasts sharply with the more fatalistic and emotionally volatile characters like Orsino and Olivia, adding a sense of order and stability to the play's chaotic narrative.

¹⁰ "Twelfth Night - Olivia." (2024, April 18). In eNotes Publishing, edited by eNotes Editorial.

¹¹ Anooshahr, A. (2012). Author of one's fate: Fatalism and agency in Indo-Persian histories. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 49(2), 197-224.

¹² Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). *Twelfth Night Characters: Sebastian*. LitCharts.

Sebastian's resemblance to Viola leads to a series of mistaken identities and misunderstandings that drive much of the play's plot. His reunion with Viola reveals the twins' true identities and unravels the play's various romantic entanglements.

Sebastian's role in the unraveling of the mistaken identities adds depth to his character and challenges the fatalistic themes that pervade the play. His ability to maintain his composure and navigate the chaotic events leading up to their reunion highlights his resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination. Despite the mistaken identities and misunderstandings that have driven much of the play's plot, Sebastian remains steadfast in his determination to protect and support his sister, further underscoring his agency in shaping his own destiny.¹³

Sebastian's unexpected relationship with Olivia further complicates his character's exploration of fatalism and agency. Despite the whirlwind nature of their courtship and the gender-bending complexities of their situation, Sebastian's willingness to pursue a relationship with Olivia showcases his agency in shaping his own destiny.

His growing affection for Olivia demonstrates a shift from fatalism to agency, as he begins to recognize and appreciate her qualities. His willingness to challenge his own beliefs and assumptions and pursue a relationship with Olivia adds depth to his character and challenges the play's themes of fate and agency.

Sebastian's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a complex and nuanced exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. While he initially appears to be a victim of his circumstances and the mistaken identities that drive much of the play's plot, his eventual reunion with Viola and relationship with Olivia highlight his agency in shaping his own destiny.

Sebastian's straightforward and pragmatic¹⁴ character adds a sense of order and stability to the play's chaotic narrative. His ability to maintain his composure and navigate the complexities of his unexpected arrival in Illyria further underscores his resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination.

Overall, Sebastian emerges as a strong, complex, and resilient character who deftly navigates the complexities of love, identity, and fate in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. His character's journey adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. Malvolio is one of the most memorable characters in "Twelfth Night," known for his puritanical demeanor, ambition, and eventual humiliation. His character serves as a compelling study of the tension between fatalism and agency, as his ambition and belief in his own destiny lead to his downfall.¹⁵

Malvolio is introduced as the steward of Olivia's household¹⁶ and is portrayed as a strict and humorless figure. His ambition and belief in his own destiny to rise above his current station reflect a form of fatalism that leads to his downfall. Malvolio's strict adherence to decorum and his desire for respect and recognition make him an easy target for ridicule and manipulation by his tormentors.

Malvolio's downfall begins with the discovery of a fake letter planted by Maria, Olivia's maid, which suggests that Olivia is in love with him. This discovery fuels Malvolio's self-delusion and belief that his destiny to rise above his current station is finally coming true. His willingness

¹³ Raphals, L. (2003, October 4). *Philosophy East and West* (Vol. 53). University of Hawai'i Press. pp. 537–574.

¹⁴ Hookway, C. (2008, August 16). Pragmatism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Spring 2010 ed.).

¹⁵ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). *Twelfth Night Characters: Malvolio*. LitCharts.

¹⁶ Post, E. (2007). *Emily Post's Etiquette*. Echo Library. ISBN 978-1-4068-1215-2.

to believe the contents of the fake letter without question demonstrates his susceptibility to self-delusion and adds depth to his character's exploration of fatalism and agency.

Malvolio's humiliation at the hands of Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian is one of the most famous and controversial scenes in the play. It raises questions about the nature of comedy, justice, and the abuse of power. While Malvolio's strict and self-righteous demeanor makes him an easy target for ridicule, the cruelty of his tormentors and the glee with which they carry out their prank can be seen as excessive and disproportionate.

Despite his flaws and the manner of his humiliation, Malvolio's character is also sympathetic in many ways. His ambition and desire for respect and recognition are understandable, and his devotion to Olivia and her household is genuine, if somewhat misguided.

Malvolio's character in "Twelfth Night" serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of self-delusion and the consequences of unchecked ambition and a lack of self-awareness. His downfall challenges the play's themes of fate and agency, suggesting that unchecked ambition and a lack of self-awareness can lead to ruin.¹⁷

His character adds a darker and more complex dimension to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition. While he is often viewed as a comic villain, his character also invites empathy and reflection, making him one of the most compelling and controversial characters in the play.

Overall, Malvolio emerges as a complex and multi-faceted figure who adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of love, identity, and the human condition. His character's journey serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of self-delusion and the abuse of power, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.

The secondary characters in "Twelfth Night"—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—play crucial roles in the subplot involving Malvolio's humiliation and contribute to the play's exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency.

Maria, Olivia's clever and cunning maid, is the mastermind behind the plot to humiliate Malvolio. Her character demonstrates agency and resourcefulness, as she takes active steps to challenge Malvolio's strict and humorless demeanor. Maria's motivation for orchestrating the prank stems from her own frustration with Malvolio's self-righteousness and her desire to seek revenge for his disapproval of her relationship with Sir Toby.

Maria's role in the prank against Malvolio showcases her wit and cunning. By planting a fake love letter from Olivia to Malvolio, Maria sets the stage for Malvolio's downfall. Her willingness to manipulate the situation and deceive Malvolio highlights her agency and determination to challenge the play's themes of fatalism and agency.

Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, is portrayed as a boisterous and drunken character who enjoys the pleasures of life. His motivation for participating in the prank against Malvolio stems from his own amusement and his desire to challenge Malvolio's puritanical demeanor.

Sir Toby's role in the prank adds a comedic and chaotic element to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency. His encouragement and participation in the plot against Malvolio demonstrate his willingness to challenge authority and social norms for his own amusement.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a foolish and gullible knight, is easily manipulated by Sir Toby and Maria into participating in the prank against Malvolio. His motivation for joining the plot stems from his desire to win Olivia's affection and his eagerness to belong to Sir Toby's circle.

Sir Andrew's role in the prank adds a sense of bumbling incompetence to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency. His willingness to go along with Sir Toby and Maria's scheme without questioning the morality or consequences of their actions highlights his own lack of agency and susceptibility to manipulation.

¹⁷ Montesquieu, C. de. (1989). *The Spirit of the Laws* (p. 338). Cambridge University Press.

Fabian is a servant in Olivia's household who also participates in the prank against Malvolio. His character is less developed than the others but still plays a crucial role in the plot's unfolding. His motivation for participating in the prank is primarily to amuse himself and his fellow conspirators.

Fabian's role in the prank adds another layer of complexity to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency. His willingness to participate in the plot against Malvolio showcases his own agency and his alignment with Sir Toby and Maria's desire to challenge Malvolio's puritanical demeanor and seek revenge for his disapproval.

The secondary characters in "Twelfth Night"—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—contribute significantly to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency through their participation in the subplot involving Malvolio's humiliation. Their actions and motivations highlight the complex interplay between fate and agency, as they challenge authority, manipulate situations, and seek revenge for perceived slights.¹⁸

While their actions are often portrayed as comedic and chaotic, these characters also add depth and nuance to the play's exploration of the human condition. Their willingness to challenge social norms, manipulate situations, and seek revenge highlight the potential for agency and self-determination, even in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

Overall, the secondary characters in "Twelfth Night" add complexity, depth, and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition. Their actions and motivations challenge the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.¹⁹

Conclusion

The study of fatalism in "Twelfth Night" offers a timeless exploration of human nature, agency, and the human condition that remains relevant and significant today. The characters and themes explored in the play continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, providing valuable insights into the complexities of love, identity, ambition, and the tension between fate and agency.

The characters in "Twelfth Night" grapple with questions of identity, self-discovery, and self-determination, themes that are highly relevant in today's society. In an era where questions of identity and self-expression are more prominent than ever, the play's exploration of gender, disguise, and the fluidity of identity offers valuable insights into the complexities of human nature.

The secondary characters' willingness to challenge authority, manipulate situations, and seek revenge against perceived injustices resonates with contemporary discussions about power dynamics, social justice, and the abuse of authority. The play's critique of rigid social norms and the consequences of unchecked ambition and self-delusion remain relevant in today's society, where questions of justice, equality, and the abuse of power are ongoing concerns.

The play's exploration of the complexities of love, desire, and relationships offers timeless insights into the human condition. The characters' emotional volatility, vulnerability, and willingness to pursue their desires challenge conventional notions of love and relationships, reflecting the complexities and ambiguities of modern relationships and the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness.

The tension between fatalism and agency explored in the play remains a central theme in contemporary discussions about free will, determinism, and the extent to which individuals can control their own destinies. The characters' struggles with their beliefs in fate and their capacity

¹⁸ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters. LitCharts

¹⁹ Carus, P. (1910). Person and personality. In E. C. Hegeler (Ed.), *The Monist* (Vol. 20, p. 369). Open Court Publishing Company.

for agency and self-determination offer valuable insights into the human condition and the ongoing debate about the extent to which we control our own destinies.

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