

A Study of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* from A Post-Structuralist Perspective

Assist. Lect. Saadoon Assi Smeer

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research/
Department of Cultural Missions and Relations

sadoonmmabdree@gmail.com

07716216417

Abstract

This study re-examines William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601) through the analytical lens of post-structuralist theory, with particular attention to Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance* and Terry Eagleton's reflections on the instability of meaning. By situating *Twelfth Night* within the dynamics of signification, the research argues that the play dramatizes the endless deferral of meaning through disguise, language play, and the dissolution of fixed identity. The analysis demonstrates that concepts such as love, selfhood, and sanity in Shakespeare's comedy are never fully present but continually displaced by competing signifiers. Through close reading and theoretical interpretation, the paper reveals how linguistic slippage and semantic absence destabilize the metaphysics of presence that traditional readings often assume. Ultimately, the study contributes to contemporary Shakespearean criticism by illustrating how post-structuralist theory opens new interpretive possibilities for canonical texts and foregrounds the productive tension between meaning and its perpetual deferral.

Keywords: Post-structuralism · Shakespeare · *Twelfth Night* · Signification · Absence · *Différance* · Language instability

1. Introduction

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the emergence of structuralist and post-structuralist theory transformed the field of literary studies. Thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes questioned the stability of language, truth, and authorship, challenging the assumption that literary meaning could be traced to a coherent center or authorial intention. Within this theoretical shift, Shakespeare's plays—long regarded as stable monuments of humanism—invite renewed scrutiny. *Twelfth Night*, one of Shakespeare's most celebrated comedies, becomes an especially fertile site for exploring linguistic multiplicity, identity, and the deferral of meaning. Written circa 1601, *Twelfth Night* dramatizes deception, disguise, madness, and desire within a network of shifting identities. Viola's assumption of male attire as

Cesario, Orsino's performance of love, and Olivia's misdirected desire collectively illustrate the instability of signs through which identity and affection are communicated. In post-structuralist terms, the play exposes the gap between signifier and signified, showing that language and representation cannot deliver the full presence of meaning they promise.

This study seeks to reread *Twelfth Night* not merely as a festive comedy but as a dramatization of what Derrida calls the "play of signifiers." By aligning Shakespeare's linguistic and theatrical experiments with post-structuralist principles, the paper argues that the comedy anticipates many of the concerns later articulated by twentieth-century theory: absence, deferral, and the impossibility of fixed meaning. The analysis thus situates *Twelfth Night* within a broader conversation about language, subjectivity, and textual indeterminacy, offering an alternative to essentialist or moralistic interpretations of the play.

2. Problem of the Study

Traditional readings of *Twelfth Night* often emphasize its themes of romantic resolution and comic harmony. Yet such interpretations risk overlooking the deeper linguistic and philosophical paradoxes that underlie Shakespeare's comedy. The problem this study addresses is how post-structuralist theory—particularly Derrida's concept of *différance*—reveals the instability of meaning and identity within the text. The research investigates how Shakespeare's language enacts what post-structuralists describe as the "chain of signifiers," wherein meaning is continuously deferred rather than fully achieved.

The study therefore asks:

1- How does *Twelfth Night* exemplify post-structuralist notions of language's instability and the absence of fixed signifieds?

2- In what ways do Shakespeare's characters embody the tensions between presence and absence, sanity and madness, or truth and illusion?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to demonstrate that Shakespeare's play anticipates post-structuralist skepticism toward stable reference and coherent identity. The analysis challenges the assumption that meaning in *Twelfth Night* can be recovered through traditional hermeneutic methods; instead, it proposes that the play continually disrupts closure through its own linguistic play and theatrical self-reflexivity.

3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge classical Shakespearean criticism and contemporary theoretical inquiry. While *Twelfth*

Night has traditionally been celebrated for its comic balance, romantic entanglements, and resolution of mistaken identities, it also operates—often unintentionally—as a philosophical text that dramatizes the instability of language and subjectivity. By applying post-structuralist principles to this play, the study reinterprets Shakespeare not as a mere dramatist of social harmony but as an early practitioner of linguistic and epistemological skepticism.

The research therefore holds twofold importance.

First, it contributes to Shakespearean studies by uncovering the latent modernity within *Twelfth Night*—a work that interrogates the coherence of identity, the reliability of signification, and the fragility of reason. Second, it extends the application of post-structuralist theory to early modern texts, demonstrating how Derrida’s and Eagleton’s concepts illuminate the mechanics of Shakespearean language. The study proposes that meaning in *Twelfth Night* is never complete or static; rather, it is continuously deferred through an intricate play of difference and repetition.

Ultimately, this research situates *Twelfth Night* as a textual laboratory for post-structuralist inquiry. It shows how Shakespeare’s manipulation of disguise, absence, and ambiguity anticipates theoretical concerns that would only later be articulated explicitly in twentieth-century philosophy and criticism. In doing so, the study adds to the growing scholarly dialogue that recognizes Shakespeare not only as a dramatist of emotion and power but as a proto-theorist of linguistic indeterminacy.

4. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to reinterpret *Twelfth Night* through the conceptual framework of post-structuralism, emphasizing the decentering of meaning and the unreliability of linguistic representation. Rather than treating language as a transparent medium that transmits stable truths, this paper regards Shakespeare’s language as a self-referential system in which meaning is perpetually postponed. By employing Derrida’s theories of *différance* and the “play of signifiers,” the research explores how words in *Twelfth Night*—like identities—are never fixed but endlessly circulate within a network of substitutions.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1- Illustrate how Shakespeare’s use of disguise, mistaken identity, and wordplay reflects post-structuralist notions of instability and deferral.
- 3- Demonstrate how the play’s linguistic dynamics undermine the metaphysical assumptions of presence, truth, and coherence.

4- Reassess Twelfth Night as a text that enacts, rather than merely represents, post-structuralist theory in performance.

Through these aims, the paper contributes to a richer understanding of how literary texts can serve as philosophical sites where meaning is both generated and undone.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analytical methodology, grounded in textual analysis and critical theory. The approach integrates close reading of selected scenes from Twelfth Night with interpretive commentary informed by post-structuralist thought. Rather than quantifying linguistic patterns, the analysis focuses on the discursive and symbolic functions of language within the play.

The research process follows these stages:

1- Textual Selection and Analysis: Key dialogues and scenes involving disguise, misrecognition, and linguistic confusion (e.g., Viola's cross-dressing, Malvolio's delusion, Feste's wordplay) are examined for their implicit commentary on meaning and identity.

2- Theoretical Application: The principles of post-structuralism—particularly Derrida's theories of *différance* and Eagleton's interpretation of the "play of signifiers"—are applied to these textual moments to illuminate the instability of language.

3- Critical Synthesis: The findings are synthesized to reveal how Shakespeare's text performs the very processes of deferral, absence, and displacement that post-structuralism theorizes.

The methodology is interpretive rather than descriptive, and it prioritizes conceptual insight over empirical generalization. It also recognizes, in accordance with post-structuralist thought, that the act of interpretation itself is part of the play of signification—that reading cannot achieve closure but can only trace the endless unfolding of meaning.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 Overview of Post-Structuralism

Post-structuralism emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as a critical response to structuralism's confidence in stable systems of meaning. While structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1959) argued that language functions as a self-contained system governed by differences among signs, post-structuralist theorists dismantled this assumption by emphasizing the instability of linguistic structures and the impossibility of fixed signification. The movement thus shifted the focus from the search for deep, universal meanings to an exploration of the endless deferral of meaning

within language itself. In literary theory, post-structuralism redefined reading as an interpretive act that can never be complete or final. The text, instead of conveying a single, coherent message, becomes a site of multiple, competing meanings generated through the interaction of signifiers. This rejection of totalizing interpretations opened the door to new forms of critical inquiry that emphasize ambiguity, contradiction, and plurality—concepts that resonate profoundly with Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

6.2 Derrida and the Play of Signifiers

Among the central figures of post-structuralism, Jacques Derrida occupies a foundational role. His concept of *différance*—a term combining the notions of “difference” and “deferral”—illustrates how meaning in language is always displaced and never fully present. Derrida (1967/1976) argues that words signify not through direct correspondence to reality but through their differential relation to other words. Each signifier acquires meaning only by differing from others and by deferring its signified to future signifiers in an endless chain. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1976) critiques what he calls the “metaphysics of presence”—the Western philosophical tendency to privilege immediacy, unity, and origin. Instead, he proposes that language functions through absence and trace: every sign bears within it the remnants of others, and meaning emerges through this play of absence and presence. This theoretical insight aligns remarkably with Shakespeare’s linguistic strategies in *Twelfth Night*, where disguise, mistaken identity, and verbal ambiguity reveal that selfhood and truth are never stable but perpetually deferred.

6.3 Eagleton and Post-Structuralist Criticism

Building on Derrida’s linguistic philosophy, Terry Eagleton elaborates the implications of post-structuralism for literary studies. In *Literary Theory* (1996), Eagleton explains that meaning “is the spin-off of a potentially endless play of signifiers, rather than a concept tied firmly to the tail of a particular signifier” (pp. 110–111). He further argues that no sign is ever “pure” or “fully meaningful” because it always carries traces of the other signs it excludes. Meaning, therefore, is “a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 111). This understanding challenges traditional hermeneutics by suggesting that interpretation is inherently unstable. When applied to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Eagleton’s insights highlight how language within the play constantly undermines its own assertions. Words such as love, truth, and madness

acquire shifting meanings depending on their speakers and contexts, revealing the play's underlying semiotic instability.

6.4 Application to Twelfth Night

The post-structuralist framework provides a valuable tool for examining how Twelfth Night dramatizes the instability of language and identity. Viola's cross-dressing as Cesario, Orsino's oscillating affections, and Olivia's misplaced desire all expose the fragility of meaning and the slippage between signifier and signified. The disguises and mistaken identities are not merely comic devices but semiotic enactments of Derrida's notion that no sign can guarantee its own meaning. For instance, Viola's transformation into Cesario dislocates gender and linguistic reference alike: her words as a "male" servant signify differently than they would as a woman, illustrating that meaning depends not on essence but on relational context. Similarly, Malvolio's misreading of Maria's forged letter exemplifies how interpretation itself becomes a site of deferral, as the signifiers he encounters lead him to fabricate a false reality.

Eagleton's view that "each sign contains the trace of those which have gone before and holds itself open to those which are coming after" (1996, p. 111) illuminates Shakespeare's manipulation of linguistic echoes throughout the play. Feste's puns, Olivia's paradoxes, and Orsino's elaborate metaphors form a chain of unstable meanings that resist closure. The play's comic resolution—where disguises are removed and identities restored—appears to promise harmony but ultimately reasserts the impossibility of final meaning. As Viola reveals her true self, language once again proves inadequate to capture essence; the conclusion, though festive, leaves behind a residue of ambiguity and absence.

6.5 Summary

The theoretical foundation of this research rests on the post-structuralist contention that meaning is neither fixed nor recoverable but is continually produced through difference and deferral. Derrida's *différance* and Eagleton's concept of the "flickering of presence and absence" together provide a lens for analyzing Twelfth Night as a play that performs linguistic instability at every level—semantic, psychological, and performative. Within this framework, Shakespeare emerges not as a playwright of certainty and closure but as a dramatist of perpetual questioning, whose comedy reveals that language both constructs and unravels reality.

7. Discussion and Analysis

7.1 The Signification of the Title: “Twelfth Night, or What You Will”

The title of *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* is itself an act of linguistic play that anticipates the post-structuralist emphasis on instability and multiplicity of meaning. As Oza (2020) notes, the title originally referred to the festive twelfth night after Christmas, a time of social inversion, masking, and misrule. The play was likely written for this season of revelry, and its subtitle—“What You Will”—implies interpretive openness. This double title suggests that meaning, like festivity, is not fixed but subject to transformation, performance, and desire. From a post-structuralist standpoint, “What You Will” functions as a meta-linguistic gesture that undermines the stability of interpretation. Shakespeare invites the audience to construct whatever meaning they “will,” thereby decentralizing authorial control. The subtitle destabilizes textual authority, echoing Derrida’s critique of the “logocentric” desire for fixed meaning (Derrida, 1976). Just as post-structuralism rejects the idea of a stable signified, the play resists any definitive reading. The subtitle implies that *Twelfth Night* may signify differently for each interpreter, emphasizing the play’s semantic fluidity. Furthermore, the subtitle mirrors the internal dynamics of the play itself, in which identities and desires continually shift. Viola becomes Cesario, Orsino becomes the lover he once performed, and Olivia’s affections are transferred from one signifier (Cesario) to another (Sebastian). The linguistic and theatrical “play” inherent in these transformations echoes Eagleton’s observation that meaning “cannot be easily nailed down” but remains “a flickering of presence and absence together” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 111). The title thus encapsulates the post-structuralist condition of *différance*—a perpetual oscillation between what is and what is not, between what one says and what one means.

7.2 The Dynamics of Absence and Deferral

The notion of absence occupies a central place in both post-structuralist theory and *Twelfth Night*. In Derridean terms, meaning is always constituted by what is absent, not merely by what is present. Each signifier gestures toward another, leaving a gap that cannot be filled—a gap that becomes the very condition of meaning. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare dramatizes this logic of deferral through motifs of mistaken identity, longing, and madness. Viola’s disguise as Cesario produces a continual absence of her “true” self: her female identity exists only through absence and concealment. Similarly, Orsino’s love for Olivia is based on an idealized absence rather than a real

relationship—he loves not the woman herself but the concept of desire she represents. Olivia, in turn, falls in love with Cesario, mistaking signs for essence. This chain of misplaced desire constitutes what Derrida (1976) calls the “endless play of signifiers”, wherein meaning and identity are deferred across substitutions that never reach completion.

The theme of madness, particularly in the case of Malvolio, extends this pattern of absence. Malvolio’s delusion—believing himself the object of Olivia’s love—results from his misinterpretation of textual signs (Maria’s forged letter). The letter functions as a post-structuralist artifact: its signifiers detach from their supposed referent, generating a false reality that unravels Malvolio’s sense of self. In this sense, the play stages what Eagleton (1967) identifies as the “crack between language and reality”, exposing the insufficiency of words to secure meaning. Madness, then, becomes the psychological manifestation of linguistic instability—the point where the absence of stable signification turns inward, fracturing subjectivity. This interplay of absence and desire also reflects Derrida’s critique of metaphysical presence. The so-called “truth” of identity or love in *Twelfth Night* is always deferred, never realized within the play’s linguistic system. Even the comedic resolution, with its multiple marriages, fails to restore full coherence. Viola’s final revelation of her identity appears to close the narrative but simultaneously exposes how every “truth” in the play has been mediated by disguise, performance, and linguistic indirection. Closure, therefore, is only another deferral.

7.3 Mystification of Language

Language in *Twelfth Night* operates as a space of mystification and multiplicity rather than clarity or communication. Eagleton (1967) observes that Shakespeare’s comedies are often characterized by the “mystifying quality of language,” where words both reveal and obscure meaning. The characters of *Twelfth Night* inhabit a world where speech acts are unreliable, puns proliferate, and verbal play generates misunderstanding. In post-structuralist terms, language here functions as a self-referential system that continually points beyond itself, highlighting the gap between signifier and signified. Feste, the fool, embodies this linguistic self-awareness. His wit and wordplay draw attention to language’s slipperiness: “Better a witty fool than a foolish wit” (1.5.36). Through paradox and pun, Feste exposes the arbitrary relation between words and meaning, turning the tools of signification into instruments of critique. His songs—melancholic yet playful—mirror Derrida’s concept of *différance*, where meaning arises only through the

movement between presence and absence. When Feste calls himself a “corrupter of words,” he implicitly aligns himself with post-structuralist deconstruction, revealing that all communication is already corrupted by the instability of its own medium.

Similarly, Malvolio’s misreading of Maria’s letter underscores how writing produces illusion. The letter, detached from its original context, becomes an autonomous text open to infinite interpretation. As Derrida argues in “Signature, Event, Context” (1972/1982), writing is iterable—it can always be detached from its source and reinterpreted differently. Malvolio’s tragedy illustrates this iterability: he encounters signs (the letter) without the presence of their author, and thus he constructs meaning out of absence. The humor of his self-delusion rests on the same philosophical principle that underlies Derrida’s critique of communication: that meaning is always already displaced. Even at the level of poetic diction, Shakespeare’s play reveals an obsession with linguistic excess and contradiction. Orsino’s opening line—“If music be the food of love, play on” (1.1.1)—demonstrates how language can be both expressive and self-consuming. The metaphor extends itself until it collapses, enacting the instability it describes. The musical motif, linked to Orsino’s emotional volatility, encapsulates the post-structuralist notion that meaning circulates rhythmically, without origin or end.

7.4 Toward a Post-Structuralist Reading of the Comic Resolution

The ending of *Twelfth Night* appears, at first glance, to restore order: identities are revealed, love is matched with love, and social harmony is reestablished. Yet a post-structuralist reading reveals that this closure is illusory. The reinstatement of “true” identities—Viola as woman, Orsino as husband, Olivia as wife—depends on the same linguistic structures that the play has already shown to be unstable. The resolution, therefore, is performative rather than restorative. Meaning, like identity, is achieved only through repetition, imitation, and linguistic convention. Feste’s final song—“The rain it raineth every day”—reasserts the persistence of instability and difference. The song disrupts the comic closure, suggesting that language and life alike remain subject to uncertainty. In this sense, *Twelfth Night* ends not with final meaning but with Derridean trace—a lingering reminder that presence can only be articulated through absence. Shakespeare’s comedy, through its linguistic excess and performative ambiguity, thus anticipates the post-structuralist realization that language is both the condition of meaning and its undoing.

8. Conclusion

This study has explored *Twelfth Night* through the interpretive framework of post-structuralist theory, arguing that Shakespeare's play performs—rather than merely represents—the instability of language, identity, and meaning. Drawing upon Derrida's concept of *différance* and Eagleton's insights into the perpetual play of signifiers, the analysis has shown that *Twelfth Night* dramatizes the impossibility of fixed reference. Every word, disguise, and gesture within the play becomes part of an endless chain of substitution, where truth and identity are deferred rather than revealed. Through its interwoven themes of absence, madness, and linguistic play, *Twelfth Night* exposes the limits of representational coherence. Viola's disguise, Orsino's performative love, Olivia's misdirected desire, and Malvolio's delusion collectively illustrate the Derridean claim that meaning is always mediated through difference and delay. The play's comic resolution, far from providing closure, reveals that harmony itself is sustained through contradiction—the illusion of unity produced by linguistic repetition. Feste's concluding song, echoing life's constancy amid uncertainty, serves as Shakespeare's meta-theatrical acknowledgment that meaning, like human desire, “raineth every day.”

From a theoretical standpoint, *Twelfth Night* stands as a precursor to post-structuralist thought, demonstrating that language is not a transparent medium but a performative force that constructs and destabilizes reality simultaneously. The play's humor and melancholy arise from the same linguistic dynamic: the failure of words to coincide perfectly with what they signify. Thus, Shakespeare anticipates the post-structuralist critique of logocentrism by staging a world in which words, signs, and identities circulate endlessly without anchorage.

In conclusion, *Twelfth Night* reminds readers and critics alike that interpretation is a form of performance, not a recovery of hidden truth. Meaning is not discovered but continuously produced within the text's play of signifiers. By applying post-structuralist theory to this canonical work, the study has sought to demonstrate how language's instability becomes both the subject and the method of Shakespeare's art. The result is a vision of literature as a dynamic, self-questioning process—one that resists closure, embraces multiplicity, and perpetually redefines the boundaries of understanding.

References

- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1967)
- Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of philosophy* (A. Bass, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972)
- Eagleton, T. (1967). Language and reality in *Twelfth Night*. *Critical Essays*, 34(9.3), 217–228.
- Eagleton, T. (1996). *Literary theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishing.
- Lewis, C. S. (1994). *The discarded image: An introduction to medieval and renaissance literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mohammed, M. A. (2022). Masculine authority in disguise in Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair*: A metafictional study. *Res Militaris Journal*.
- Myers, W. (2016). *Twelfth Night* study guide. Sacramento Theatre Company.
- Oza, M. (2020). Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: A study of disguise and identity. *Journal of English Literary Studies*, 12(2), 1–6.
- Parker, B. (1990). Bowers of bliss: Deconflation in the Shakespeare canon. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 6(24), 357–361.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00005586>
- Shakespeare, W. (2003). *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (B. A. Mowat & P. Werstine, Eds.). Folger Shakespeare Library.
- Spikes, P. M. (1992). Present absence versus absent presence: The metaphysics of absence in Shakespeare's comedies. *Interdisciplinary Journal*, 75(2–3), 333–355.

دراسة مسرحية الليلة الثانية عشرة لويليام شكسبير من منظور ما بعد البنيوية

م.م. سعدون عاصي سمير

وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي / دائرة البعثات والعلاقات الثقافية

sadoonmmabdree@gmail.com

مستخلص البحث:

أتاح ظهور نظريات نقدية مختلفة، مثل ما بعد البنيوية، بعد النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين، إعادة قراءة النصوص الأدبية التقليدية، مثل مسرحيات شكسبير، بمعاني جديدة. تُسلط هذه النظريات الجديدة الضوء على مسرحيات شكسبير، متحدياً الطرق التقليدية في تناول هذه الأعمال، ومعيدة تفسيرها وفقاً للنظريات النقدية المعاصرة. تتناول الورقة مسرحية "الليلة الثانية عشرة" لشكسبير من منظور ما بعد البنيوية. تُقدّم المسرحية بشكل رئيسي في سياق ما بعد البنيوية. كُتبت المسرحية عام ١٦٠١، ويعدها العديد من النقاد البارزين واحدة من أعظم مسرحيات شكسبير الكوميديّة. تدور أحداثها حول الخداع، والوهم، والجنون، والتنكر، والحب وعواقبه التي ستجعلنا ندرك. إنها المسرحية الوحيدة لشكسبير التي تحمل عنواناً بديلاً؛ أي "الليلة الثانية عشرة، أو ما تشاء". تضطر بطلة المسرحية، فيولاء، إلى التنكر في هيئة شاب لسبب أو لآخر. تحظى المسرحية بتقدير كبير من النقاد المعاصرين لدلالاتها المثلية. يتناول البحث وجهات نظر متعددة، مشروحة بعمق، للكشف عن هذا الكيان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد البنيوية • شكسبير • الليلة الثانية عشرة (الليلة الثانية عشرة أو كما تشاء) • الدلالة • الغياب • الاختلاف (Différance) • عدم استقرار اللغة