

Themes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

Themes

- Love and marriage
- Order and disorder
- Appearance and reality
- Creative imagination

Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which support the play's themes)

- Nature
- The Moon
- Sleep and dreams
- Eyes
- Plays, rehearsals and roles/parts
- Magic

Themes

Love and Marriage and the difficulty of making relationships work.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: Theseus describes his courtship of Hippolyta and the confusion of the four lovers begins with Egeus' formal complaint about his daughter's involvement with Lysander.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Oberon and Titania quarrel over the Indian boy; Helena confronts Demetrius in the wood.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Lysander falls in love with Helena on awakening with the love juice in his eyes: the lovers are in great confusion.
- Act 4 Scene 1: Titania expresses her love for Bottom who has been transformed into a donkey.
- Act 5 Scene 1: Three weddings and a fairy blessing bring all to a happy conclusion.

Order and disorder and the need for a balance between the rational and irrational, between rules and magic, in the interests of love, harmony and creativity.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: Theseus describes Hermia's punishment if she disobeys her father, prompting the lovers' escape to the woods.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Titania describes the consequences for the natural world of her quarrel with Oberon.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Bottom's transformation disrupts the Mechanicals' rehearsal.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Puck's mistakes bring the lovers to great confusion.
- Act 4 Scene 1: Titania expresses her love for Bottom who has been transformed into a donkey.
- Act 5 Scene 1: Three weddings and a fairy blessing bring all to a happy conclusion.

Appearance and reality and how people and events are often not as they seem.

Some related scenes:

- Act 3 Scene 1: Bottom's transformation disrupts the Mechanicals' rehearsal.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Puck's mistakes bring the lovers to great confusion.
- Act 4 Scene 1: Titania awakes from her fantasy and the lovers comment on how like a dream recent events seem to them now.
- Act 5 Scene 1: The play within the play highlights the theme of illusion and reality.

Creative imagination and its reliance on the unconscious, the magical, the mysterious.

Some related scenes:

- Act 4 Scene 1: Titania awakes from her fantasy, the lovers comment on how like a dream recent events seem to them now and Bottom tells of his vision.
- Act 5 Scene 1: Theseus describes the poet's art, the play within the play provides its comment on artistic enterprise and all ends in harmony with the fairies' blessing of the sleeping house.

Motifs

Nature representing the magical world of the forest in contrast to Theseus's court; also as disrupted by the disharmony between the fairy king and queen.

For example:

- 'And through this distemperature we see/The seasons alter...'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'I know a bank where the wild thyme grows...'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'You spotted snakes with double tongue...'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Out of this wood do not desire to go: / Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no. / I am a spirit of no common rate...'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'I'll follow you, I'll lead you about a round, / Through bog, through bush, through brake, through briar: / Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound...'
Act 3 Scene 1

The Moon reflecting change, disruption and unpredictability, romance, the magical and mysterious, a journey.

For example:

- 'Four happy days bring in/Another moon'
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'I'll met by moonlight, proud Titania'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Therefore the moon, the governess of floods, / Pale in her anger, washes all the air...'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'We the globe can compass soon, / Swifter than the wandering moon'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Now the hungry lion roars, / And the wolf behowls the moon'
Act 5 Scene 1

Sleep and dreams which take us to mysterious places, are states of innocence and vulnerability, cause confusion and the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality.

For example:

- 'Ay me, for pity! what a dream was here!'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Tell me how it came this night / That I sleeping here was found / With these mortals on the ground'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'It seems to me / That yet we sleep, we dream'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'God's my life, stolen hence, and left me asleep! I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream...'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Why, then, we are awake: let's follow him / And by the way let us recount our dreams'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom'
Act 4 Scene 1

Eyes as emblems of perception and perspective, as entryways to the heart, windows on the soul

For example:

- 'I would my father look'd but with my eyes'
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind'
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'Reason becomes the marshal to my will / And leads me to your eyes, where I o'erlook / Love's stories written in love's richest book'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'And then I will her charmed eye release / From monster's view, and all things shall be peace'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When every thing seems double'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven...'
Act 5 Scene 1

Plays, rehearsals and roles/parts as symbols of magical transformation and of experimentation and preparation; also as ironic comment on the insubstantiality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its themes.

For example:

- 'Nay, faith, let me not play a woman; I have a beard coming'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'You can play no part but Pyramus'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'We will meet; and there we may rehearse most obscenely and courageously.
Take pains; be perfect: adieu'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so; / And, being done, thus Wall away
doth go'
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended: / That you
have but slumbered here / While these visions did appear'
Act 5 Scene 1

Magic as representing the unseen, the unpredictable, the irrational and inexplicable.

For example:

- 'And this same progeny of evils comes/From our debate, from our dissension'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'That very time I saw, but thou couldst not, / Flying between the cold moon and
the earth, / Cupid all arm'd...'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'The juice of it on sleeping eye-lids laid / Will make or man or woman madly dote
/ Upon the next live creature that it sees'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'I'll put a girdle round the earth/In forty minutes'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'But who comes here? I am invisible; / And I will overhear their conference'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Churl, upon thy eyes I throw / All the power this charm doth owe'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound...'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'Now, until the break of day, / Through this house each fairy stray. To be best
bride-bed will we, / Which by us shall blessed be'
Act 5 Scene 1