

Themes in *The Comedy of Errors*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *The Comedy of Errors* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

Themes

- The search for identity
- Alienation and the need to belong
- Power and status in relationships

Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *The Comedy of Errors* which support the play's themes)

- Magic and witchcraft
- Money, gold, jewellery and other material objects
- Water, tears, oceans and seas

Themes

The search for identity and the need to feel whole.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: Egeon's story of his family's troubles lays the foundation for the play's confusion of identities. It also highlights the need for intimate relationships as central to a sense of personal identity.
- Act 1 Scene 2: Antipholus of Syracuse expresses his sadness at his separation from his mother and brother. The confusion begins when Dromio of Ephesus invites his 'master' home to dinner.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Antipholus of Syracuse seeks fulfillment with Luciana, asking her to 'teach me, dear creature, how to think and speak.'
- Act 4, Scene 3: Antipholus of Syracuse's sense of self continues to be eroded by the confusions and conflicts.
- Act 5 Scene 1: The confusions are cleared up, the family reunited and the Dromios in particular are delighted to discover themselves in one another.

Alienation and the need to belong.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: Egeon tells the story of his separation from his wife and one of his children and his continuing effort to reunite his family.
- Act 1 Scene 2: Antipholus of Syracuse expresses his sadness at the separation from his mother and brother. The confusion begins when Dromio of Ephesus invites his 'master' home to dinner.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Antipholus of Ephesus is excluded from his own home while his twin brother dines with his brother's wife.
- Act 4 Scene 3: Antipholus of Syracuse continues to be confused by the greetings of people he has never met and his encounter with the Courtesan further unnerves him.
- Act 4 Scene 4: Antipholus of Ephesus is enraged and powerless in the face of the continuing confusions and contradictions and protests the plan to cure him of his madness.
- Act 5 Scene 1: When the confusions are explained, Antipholus of Ephesus is eager to reestablish his former life and connections and Antipholus of Syracuse seeks domestic happiness with Luciana.

Power and status in relationships and the fragility of these bonds when power is abused.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 2: Dromio complains of mistreatment by the man he thinks is his master but is in fact Antipholus of Syracuse.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Adriana and Luciana debate the qualities needed for a successful marriage.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Luciana scolds Antipholus of Syracuse for his flagrant betrayal of his wife, recommending secrecy in extramarital affairs; he, in contrast to Luciana's recipe for a good marriage, declares his wish to be schooled by her.
- Act 4 Scene 2: Luciana tells Adriana of her 'husband's' approaches to her. Adriana is furious but, confessing still to love him, arranges to rescue him from prison.

Motifs

Magic and witchcraft as alarming and alienating explanations of the confusions in the story.

For example:

- 'They say this town is full of cozenage, / ...Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind, / Soul-killing witches that deform the body'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'How can she thus, then, call us by our names, / Unless it be by inspiration?'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'O, for my beads! I cross me for sinner. / This is the fairy land. O spite of spites! / We talk with goblins, owls, and sprites'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'O, Sir, I did not look so low. To conclude: this drudge or diviner laid claim to me'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'There's none but witches do inhabit here'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Sure, these are but imaginary wiles / And Lapland sorcerers inhabit here'
Act 4 Scene 3
- 'Thou art, as you all are, a sorceress'
Act 4 Scene 4
- 'Good Doctor Pinch, you are a conjurer'
Act 4 Scene 4
- 'I charge thee, Satan, hous'd within this man'
Act 4 Scene 4
- 'I see these witches are afraid of swords'
Act 4 Scene 4

Money, gold, jewellery and othe material objects as the currency of relationships in the business culture which characterises Ephesus.

For example:

- 'Tell me, and dally not, where is the money?'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'I greatly fear my money is not safe'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Sister, you know he promised me a chain'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'that chain will I bestow - / Be it for nothing but to spite my wife - / Upon mine hostess there'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'And then receive my money for the chain'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'While I go to the goldsmith's house, go thou / And buy a rope's end'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'here's the note / How much your chain weighs to the utmost carat / The fineness of the gold and chargeful fashion...'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Some tender money to me; some invite me; / Some other give me thanks for kindnesses; / Some offer me commodities to buy...'
Act 4 Scene 3

- 'Why, sir, I gave the money for the rope'
Act 4 Scene 4
- 'Alas, I sent you money to redeem you'
Act 4 Scene 4
- 'He is my prisoner; if I let him go, / The debt he owes will be required of me'
Act 4 Scene 4

Water, tears, oceans and seas as emblems of separation, loneliness and isolation.
For example:

- 'My wife, more careful for the latter born, / Had fasten'd him unto a small spare mast, / Such as seafaring men provide for storms'
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'I to the world am like a drop of water / That in the ocean seeks another drop'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'For know, my love, as easy mayest thou fall / A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
And take unmingled that same drop again, / Without addition or diminishing, / As take from me thyself and not me too'
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note, / To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'I will fall prostrate at his feet / And never rise until my tears and prayers
Have won his grace to come in person hither / And take perforce my husband from the abbess'
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'And these two Dromios, one in semblance, - / Besides her urging of her wreck at sea'
Act 5 Scene 1