Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for
A Midsummer Night's Dream
by
William Shakespeare

Book Information

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream
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This is a play about love and that love is a dream or perhaps a vision that is irrational. Love is not a feeling that can necessarily be defined.

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Character Traits, Self Improvement; Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Love; Fantasy/Imagination, Dreams; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Series, Folger Library Shakespeare

Main Characters

Demetrius   the man whom Egeus wishes Hermia to marry; he is put under a charm and falls in love with Helena

Egeus   Hermia's father, who petitions Theseus to enforce the law of Athens on his daughter because she refuses to marry Demetrius whom he has chosen for her

Francis Flute, Peter Quince, Robin Starveling, Snug, Tom Snout   Athenian workmen who perform <I>Pyramus and Thisbe</I> at the nuptial feast of the lovers

Helena   a maiden who loves Demetrius and is Hermia's friend

Hermia   a maiden who loves Lysander; her father, though, demands that she marry Demetrius

Hippolyta   the Queen of the Amazons; she becomes betrothed to Theseus

Lysander   the man who loves Hermia and intends to elope with her

Nick Bottom   a weaver who plays the role of Pyramus in a nuptial play; he becomes the object of Titania's affection for a time while wearing an ass's head

Oberon   the King of the Fairies, who devises a plan to enchant Demetrius so he will love Helena and enchant Titania so that he may procure her servant boy

Puck, or Robin Goodfellow   a hobgoblin in the service of Oberon; he creates mischief among the lovers

Theseus   the Duke of Athens and recent conqueror of the Amazons; he is to wed Hippolyta, the Amazon Queen

Titania   the Queen of the Fairies, who comes under a spell and falls in love with Bottom
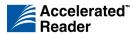
Vocabulary

beguile   to amuse, to pass time pleasantly

edict   a command or decree having the backing of the law

extempore   spoken or done with little rehearsal, ad-lib

paragon   an ideal, a model of excellence

paramour   a mistress or beau; a person with which one has a non-marital sexual relationship

Synopsis

Theseus, the Duke of Athens, asks Philostrate, his master of revels, to prepare the city for the festivities of his upcoming wedding to Hippolyta, the Queen of the recently defeated Amazons. Egeus enters with his daughter Hermia and her two admirers, Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus favors Demetrius for a husband, but Hermia prefers Lysander. Egeus comes to Theseus to demand that Athenian law be enforced upon Hermia, forcing her to marry Demetrius. Theseus upholds the law, admonishing Hermia to obey her father's wishes or else be subject to a life of chastity or death.

Lysander and Hermia plan to flee to Lysander's aunt who lives outside of Athens (and therefore not subject to Athenian law) and elope. They plan to meet in the woods outside the city the following night. Hermia shares the plan with her friend Helena, who was once courted by Demetrius. Helena still desperately loves Demetrius and plans to tell him of the elopement, knowing he will pursue

Hermia, but hoping to regain his favor.

Meanwhile, some Athenian commoners plan to put on a play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. Parts are decided, and they agree to practice and meet in the woods the following evening for a rehearsal.

In the woods that next night, the Fairy King, Oberon, and Fairy Queen, Titania, are quarreling over a servant boy. Titania refuses to relinquish him to Oberon. In order to force Titania to give him the boy, Oberon orders his servant Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, to get the nectar of a flower that was once hit by Cupid's arrow and drop it in Titania's eyes. The nectar causes a person to fall in love with the first creature he or she sees. While Robin is out on his errand, Helena and Demetrius enter the woods. Oberon makes himself invisible and listens as Helena courts Demetrius, but he returns her affection with scorn. Oberon takes pity on Helena and wants to help her. When Robin returns with the nectar, Oberon tells him to use some on Demetrius so that he will return Helena's love. Robin goes off to find him, and Oberon squeezes the remaining nectar into Titania's eyes as she sleeps.

Robin comes upon Lysander and Hermia sleeping in the woods. He mistakenly thinks Lysander is the Athenian that Oberon was referring to and squeezes the nectar into his eyes. Helena, who has been left behind in the woods by Demetrius, awakens Lysander. The charm of the flower works, and Lysander falls in love with Helena. Helena, not understanding his affection, takes his advances as a mockery and tries to escape him. Lysander follows her. When Hermia awakes she fears Lysander has either been killed or has left her, and she goes in search of him.

The commoners now enter the woods near the sleeping Titania to rehearse their play. Robin comes upon them and, loving mischief, gives Bottom (a weaver and actor) an ass's head. Frightened, the other men run off, and the abandoned Bottom begins to sing. This awakens Titania who, because of Cupid's charm, instantly falls in love with the ridiculously ugly Bottom. Titania takes him away to sleep in her chamber.

When Oberon hears the news of Titania's new love, he is pleased. But when Demetrius and Hermia enter and Oberon sees Demetrius's affection for Hermia, he realizes Robin made a mistake with the love potion. Oberon tries to right the mistake by ordering Robin to place the juice in Demetrius's eyes and to make sure Helena is there when he awakens. Although this is accomplished, Helena is distraught over this sudden flood of attention and now thinks Lysander, Demetrius, and Hermia have conspired to mock her. Hermia is devastated also, since she has lost the favor of her beloved Lysander. Lysander and Demetrius agree to duel for Helena's hand and go off into the woods.

Oberon again tries to right the mistake. He orders Robin to confuse the men until they are weary and fall sleep. Then, Robin places an antidote in Lysander's eyes that removes the charm and makes the whole incident seem like a dream.

Titania now enters the scene with Bottom. When they fall asleep, Oberon tells Robin that he will lift the charm from Titania, as she has relinquished the servant boy to him, and asks Robin to restore Bottom to his natural form. Titania wakes as if from a dream, and she and Oberon, their quarrel now ended, plan to bless Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding the next night.

Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus enter the woods to see Theseus's hounds on the May Day celebration. They chance upon the four lovers asleep in the woods and wake them. Lysander again finds himself in love with Hermia, and since Demetrius's charm was never reversed, he loves Helena. Egeus continues to demand that Demetrius marry Hermia, but when Demetrius declares his love for Helena, Theseus overrides Egeus and declares that the couples will remain as they are and will all be married along with himself and Hippolyta. As they leave the woods, Bottom awakes and tries to make sense of his "dream" as he heads toward Athens.

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In Athens, the commoners are gathered, ruing Bottom's absence. Bottom enters and informs the group that he is ready to perform and that Theseus has indeed chosen to watch their play.

At the wedding feast, Philostrate tries to persuade Theseus to choose something other than the play *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Theseus insists his choice is a good one. The wedding parties and guests are all amused by the bumbling performance of Bottom and the other commoners and entertain themselves by mocking the actors. When the play is over, the couples exit to their beds. The fairies enter and pronounce a blessing on the couples. Robin addresses the audience members and asks that they think of what they have seen as a dream.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding
What makes the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* so humorous?

Bottom and the other performers are simple-minded and do not realize the effect they are having on their audience. They perform the play in all sincerity, fully believing the lion would scare the viewers or the audience would need detailed information about the moon and wall. The reader has the additional perspective of observing that Lysander and Hermia do not see themselves mirrored in the play.

Literary Analysis
In what way does Shakespeare illustrate the adage "love is blind"?

"Love is blind" is most vividly demonstrated in Titania's relationship with Bottom after Robin puts the ass's head on him. Titania finds Bottom's traits endearing and leads him to her bower and once there, dotes on him. Only when her vision is cleared and she is no longer in love does she look upon the incident as a nightmare.

Inferential Comprehension
How is Titania and Oberon's relationship similar to the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta?

There appears to be a power struggle between Titania and Oberon over the custody of a servant boy. Oberon uses magical means to obtain the boy from Titania, and thus "wins the battle." Once this is settled, there is a reconciliation, and Titania and Oberon appear to reestablished their relationship. Theseus and Hippolyta's relationship also develops because of a power struggle. Theseus had conquered the Amazons and "won" Hippolyta for his bride. She appears satisfied with the arrangement.

Constructing Meaning
If you were to audition for a role in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which role would you like to play and why?

Answers will vary. Students should identify the characteristics of a particular character that is attractive to them based upon their own experiences or personalities. Many students may appreciate the mischievous nature of Robin Goodfellow or the comedic performance of Bottom. A serious student may choose the powerful Hippolyta or the defiant Hermia.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The Fairies' world is the woods outside of Athens. Have the students reread the passages that describe the Fairies and their haunts. Students can then pretend they are scenery designers and sketch their own set designs for the fairy scenes. They may wish to include lighting directions to help create an enchanted mood.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors
Shakespeare used characters in this play from Greek mythology. Have the students choose Greek characters and research their roles in Greek myths. They should also learn how the Greeks viewed and explained the natural phenomena surrounding them in their world. The

students can then comment on how this knowledge enriches their appreciation of the play.

Understanding the Author's Craft When students first encounter Shakespeare, they may find the language antiquated and difficult to follow. Furthermore, Shakespeare makes use of inversions in sentence structure, in which verbs or direct objects or complements are placed before the subject. Have the students review the play and find text examples of these inversions and write them down as they appear. Then assign them to rewrite the sentences in the normal order. Have them identify their locations by act, scene, and line numbers. Discuss with the students the possible historical or artistic reasons for this style of writing.

Comparing and Contrasting Several modern day versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been staged or written for film. Have the students obtain one of these versions and compare and contrast Shakespeare's version to the other. Comparisons should be made in terms of setting, character development, language, etc. This can be done individually or as a class project.