

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Shakespeare

Context: 1590s Renaissance	Plot	
Elizabeth I (the virgin queen) reigned England. Several female characters seem to represent her: Hippolyta her military prowess; Titania her patronage of dancing, music and the arts. Oberon also makes reference to her virginity (she famously chose not to marry or have children) & escaped assassination.	Act one: Theseus (Duke of Athens) prepares to marry Hippolyta (Queen of the Amazons). He is approached by Egeus who complains his daughter refuses to marry the suitor of his choice, Demetrius and that he should be allowed to assert the law of Athens: to kill Hermia for her disobedience or send her to live in a nunnery. Theseus tells Hermia she should obey her father but she refuses, secretly plotting to run away with her love Lysander. She confides in Helena who is in love with Demetrius therefore tells him so that they can pursue the lovers together. Meanwhile, a group of actors discuss a play they will perform at the royal wedding.	
English country fairy lore: people believed fairies & mischievous spirits existed (especially the lower classes). They often appeared in stories and were well-known figures in English folklore.	Act two: Oberon and Titania (King & Queen of the fairies argue over a changling boy. Oberon plans to get revenge by asking his servant Puck to pour love potion on Titania's eyelids so that she will fall in love with the first thing she sees on opening her eyes. Oberon observes Demetrius dismissing Helena and tells Puck to give him a dose of the potion too. Puck pours the love potion onto Lysander's eyes by mistake who wakes and sees Helena, falling in love with her and following her through the woods. Hermia wakes to find Lysander is gone.	
English traditions: on Midsummer eve, English men & women would tell supernatural stories round bonfires in the woods. The 'rite of May' involved youths singing & dancing in the woods. These traditions came under attack from Puritans: is Shakespeare defending them?	Act three: The actors rehearse and Puck turns Bottom's face into the head of a donkey. The other actors run away but Titania wakes and falls in love with Bottom. He instructs her fairy maids to tend to his every need. Puck tells Oberon Titania has fallen in love with a donkey but Oberon is confused when he sees Helena and Lysander. Realising Puck's mistake, he pours love potion onto Demetrius' eyes who wakes and sees Helena so that now both men are in love with Helena. Helena believes the men are mocking her and that Hermia is in on the joke. Lysander and Demetrius challenge each other to a dual. Puck places an antidote on Lysander's eyes as he sleeps.	
Characters Theseus: Duke of Athens; represents power & order Egeus: father of Hermia Hermia, Helena, Lysander & Demetrius: young Athenian lovers Oberon & Titania: King & Queen of fairies Puck: Oberon's servant/jester. A mischievous fairy who enjoys playing pranks on mortals. Arguably, the play's protagonist. Nick Bottom: a foolish and arrogant weaver who wants to play all the parts in the wedding play. Hippolyta: Queen of the Amazons who is to wed Theseus	Act four: Oberon orders Puck to remove Titania's love spell and return Bottom's head to normal. Theseus and Egeus find the lovers in the wood and Demetrius declares that he now loves Helena. Theseus suggests that the two pairs of lovers get married on the same day that he marries Hippolyta. Bottom rejoins his fellow actors.	
	Act five: The play is performed to the audience's amusement and the fairies bless the marriages.	
	Vocabulary	
	Hierarchy (n): a rank according to status or power	Prophetic (adj): predicting the future
	Patriarchal (adj): ruled by men	Egotism (n): over-confidence/self-absorbed
	Allusion (n): a reference to something	Stereotype (n): a fixed idea of a type of person/thing
	Submissive (adj): obedient/passive (following orders)	Patron (n): a person who gives financial support to something
	Benevolent/malevolent (adj): kind/cruel	Malicious (adj): intending to do harm
	Elopement (n):run away secretly	Ethereal (adj): heavenly/spiritual
	Parody (n): an imitation for comic effect	Grotesque (adj): ugly (often comically)

Anchor Quotes	Example of an Analytical Paragraph: How does Shakespeare present power in the play?	
<p>'as she is mine, I may dispose of her, which shall be either to this gentleman or to her death.' (Act 1 Scene 1, Egeus)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal pronoun 'she' dehumanises Hermia – expresses Egeus' anger or lack of respect/care? • Possessive pronoun 'mine' reveals he perceives her as a possession emphasising the sense of dehumanisation • The choice he offers Hermia ('either...'or'...) is to be trapped in a loveless, unhappy marriage to death exposing his harsh attitude/lack of paternal love. • 'gentleman' positive noun – he seems to care more for Demetrius than his own daughter • 'death' – particularly emotive noun: would rather his daughter die than defy him. Criticism of patriarchal strictness of Renaissance era? 	<p>An unyielding patriarchal father who shows no mercy, Egeus' behaviour and language in the first scene of the play demonstrates his concern with power and punishment over his daughter's happiness. He reveals a desire to 'dispose of her', with use of the verb 'dispose' conjuring up images of unwanted possessions to be thrown away, making the audience instantly aware of his harsh attitude towards Hermia, devoid of any paternal love. Obsessed with maintaining the hierarchy where he is entitled to choose his daughter's suitor, Egeus refers to his daughter using the possessive pronoun 'mine', even alluding to the alternative as her 'death'. Contextually this is significant because, the Renaissance era was a patriarchal world with an established hierarchy where daughters married men of their fathers' choosing or faced severe punishments. However, even Theseus, the ultimate patriarch as Duke of Athens, is eventually willing to prioritise the lovers' happiness over the demands of the law, revealing a benevolent side to his character. Perhaps by characterising Theseus in this way, Shakespeare wished to draw the contemporary audience's attention to the problems around this Renaissance insistence of all power and control being held by men particularly with regards to emotions which are complicated and cannot be forced.</p>	
<p>'My mistress with a monster is in love' (Act 3 Scene 2, Puck)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noun 'mistress' denotes seniority yet Puck still ridicules Titania – another reminder of the patriarchal society where men rule (even in the fairy Kingdom) • 'monster' – there is a sadistic pleasure in what Puck has done as shown in the undertone of pride, partly because he wishes to please Oberon. • 'love' – a reminder from Shakespeare of the complexities of love: it can be irrational and transcend social boundaries such as class or even type of being as seen here by the unity of fairy and beastly animal 	<p>Stylistic features of the paragraph:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic sentence featuring noun appositive • Topic sentence featuring participial phrase • Short, embedded quotes • Grammatical terminology • Modal language (adverb) for possible interpretations 	<p>Content features of the paragraph:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic sentence linked to how power is presented in the play • Examine words used by Shakespeare and the connotations/ image evoked • Effect on the audience • Link to context (Renaissance England, patriarchy and the position of women) • Link to elsewhere in the play • Shakespeare's intentions
<p>'If we shadows have offended, Think but this, ..., That you have but slumber'd here While these visions did appear.' (Act 5 Scene 1, Puck)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puck's epilogue plays on the power of the imagination. • Noun/metaphor 'shadows' begins to end the suspension of audience's disbelief – actors not real beings just transient shapes. • Noun 'visions' also fits semantic field of fantasy. 		