

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. define comedy as a dramatic genre.
2. analyze the structure of a comic plot.
3. define by example the concept of a Green World Comedy.
4. analyze the sources of humor in the play.
5. differentiate between blank verse, rhymed verse, heroic couplets, and prose as used in the play.
6. analyze the effect of changes in rhythm and rhyme scheme on tone, mood, and characterization.
7. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Introductory Lecture

HISTORY OF THE PLAY

Probably composed in 1595 or 1596, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's early comedies, and it was written around the same time that he was beginning to work on *Romeo and Juliet* (hence the theme of thwarted lovers and the farcical graveyard suicide scene in the play-within-the-play). It is unique among most of his other plays in that it does not include any historical figures. Nor is the plot "borrowed" from another body of literature, folklore, or history.

Still, the play is generally regarded as one of Shakespeare's "most learned" plays, drawing on bits of information culled from a variety of sources:

- Plutarch's lives
- Ovid's *Metamorphosis*
- medieval French romance
- Chaucer
- Greek mythology

Many scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a light entertainment to accompany a marriage celebration, even though the couple for whom it was meant to be performed is not known. Still, there is a good deal of textual and background evidence to support this assertion: the wedding theme, the fairies' blessing of the wedding couples at the end of the play. But no evidence of this wedding performance exists. It is absolutely known, however, that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed in London by the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

The feast of John the Baptist was celebrated as an English festival on June 24 (Midsummer Day) Astronomically, this is the day/night of the Summer Solstice, when the sun reaches its highest point in the sky. It is the shortest night of the year. (The Winter Solstice occurs six months later—near Christmas—and marks the lowest point of the sun and the longest night.) It was believed that, on Midsummer Night, fairies and witches held their festival. The Feast of John the Baptist was celebrated with bonfires, music, and dancing. It seems appropriate that Shakespeare would choose this season for his magical wedding comedy.

STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

The Five-Act Play:

Elizabethan playwrights generally followed the convention of the five-act play. The current (twenty-first century) convention for plays, movie, and television shows is the three-act play, in which the first and second acts are sometimes combined to give the appearance of two acts.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act I, Scene I

1. When will Theseus and Hippolyta be married?

2. Explain Theseus' comparison of waiting to a "step-dame or a dowager."

3. Contrast Theseus' attitude toward waiting with Hippolyta's.

4. How did Theseus and Hippolyta become betrothed?

5. What complaint does Egeus bring before Theseus?

6. What choice does Theseus offer Hermia?

Act II, Scene II

1. How does language contribute to the comedy of this scene?

2. What low comedy does Shakespeare employ in this scene?

3. What are the “weeds of Athens” Puck refers to?

4. Explain how accident and coincidence continue to create the comic effect of the scene and the play.

5. What can the audience infer about Hermia and Helena’s physical appearance?

6. On what mildly suspenseful note does Act II end?

Act III, Scene II

1. What further complication to the Athenian lovers plot occurs in this scene?

2. What does Hermia fear? Why?

3. How contrite is Puck for his mistake?

4. Why do Hermia and Helena quarrel?

5. What action is implied by Demetrius' telling Lysander, "If she cannot entreat, I can compel"?

Act IV, Scene I

1. What does Oberon confess to Puck while watching Titania and Bottom asleep?

2. What is implausible about Theseus' explanation for the lovers' being in the woods?

3. What other inconsistency is there in this scene?

4. How is the action of the scene with Theseus and the lovers typical of a Shakespearean festival comedy?

5. How is this reconciliation reached, and why is Egeus upset?

6. How do the lovers remember the events of the night before?

7. How does Bottom remember his experiences?

Act IV, Scene II

1. What is significant about the action's return to Athens.

Act V

1. What theme is reinforced by Hippolyta and Theseus' exchange at the beginning of this scene?

2. Why does Theseus agree to see the mechanicals' play despite Philostrate's protests?

3. What are the sources of humor in the play-within-the play?

4. Explain the pun in Theseus' line: "No die, but an ace, for him; for he is but one."

5. Explain the end of the play.

6. What is the purpose of an Apology at the end of a comedy?
