



A Midsummer Night's Dream

William Shakespeare
(1595)

PLOT

First Act. The play opens in the palace of Theseus, Duke of Athens, who is about to marry Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Egeus goes to the duke to ask for advice about the behaviour of his daughter, Hermia. She wants to marry Lysander, whereas her father's choice is Demetrius. On the other hand, Helena, a friend of Hermia's, loves Demetrius. Hermia and Lysander plan to leave Athens and to meet in the wood, where they can marry secretly.

In the meantime Demetrius, informed of Hermia and Lysander's elopment, decides to follow them and Helena follows Demetrius.

Second Act. The act is set in the wood near Athens, which is where the lovers plan to meet. Here an entirely different world is presented: Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairies, appear. They have just quarrelled because Titania insists on keeping one of Oberon's pages. To get what he wants, Oberon decides to enchant the queen. He sends his helpmate, the spirit Puck or Robin Goodfellow, to fetch a pansy, a flower possessing magic love juice. While Titania is sleeping, Oberon charms her by putting the juice on her eyelids, and instructs Puck to apply the same to Demetrius so that he will fall in love with Helena. Unfortunately Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius who promptly falls in love with Helena. So Hermia is in love with Lysander who now loves Helena who loves Demetrius who loves Hermia.

Third Act. A theatre company of Athenian workmen is rehearsing *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a traditional tale of love, to be performed at Theseus's marriage. One of the actors, the weaver Bottom, has an ass's head placed on his shoulders by Puck. Bottom's song wakes Titania, who falls in love with him as a result of the love potion.

Fourth Act. Oberon tells Puck to put a magic herb on Titania's eyelids to break the spell. Oberon puts to sleep all the other humans who are in the wood to restore order to everyone's feelings. The lovers are awakened by Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus, who forgive the couples. Bottom's return to normality is also shown.

Fifth Act. The scene takes place in Theseus's palace again, where the marriages between Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius are celebrated. During the ceremony the play *Pyramus and Thisbe* is performed by Bottom and his theatre company.

SETTING

As the title itself says, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a sort of 'dream'. Most of the action takes place at **night**, with the characters continuously falling asleep and dreaming. They do not control their thoughts and words, but act under the influence of illusion and enchantment.

The rest of the title concerns the 'superstition' of Midsummer Night (21st June). At this solstice, herbs were thought to be especially powerful, as were the 'supernatural' creatures such as fairies.

The action takes place under the **moon**, which was associated with madness, revelry and femininity, and in the **wood**, a place filled with mystery from Celtic times right through to the Middle Ages (→ 1.1, 1.12).

CHARACTERS

Shakespeare used the **fairies**, who were essential mythological figures in the celebration of nuptials, in an original way, mixing them with mortals and making them responsible for the wonderful complications of the plot. In creating these aerial beings, he drew inspiration from the Greek nymphs and fauns, and changed the repulsive, evil fairies of the Elizabethans into mischievous, but benevolent creatures. They are associated with the natural world and flowers; they also influence the weather, and their quarrels can have disastrous effects on the climate. These fairies are immortal; they can change their appearance or vanish at will; they move without constraints of time or space. They share in mortal activities such as feasting and revelry. Their presence in the play provides the link between the three worlds: the lovers' world, the workmen's world and the magic world of the wood.

Oberon is the king of the fairies, **Titania** is their beautiful queen, and **Puck**, **Robin Goodfellow**, the hobgoblin of folklore, the court jester who performs malicious tricks. His existence has the effect of foregrounding strange happenings, and the apparent unaccountability of the world to the laws of cause and effect.

The names of the little fairies – Peasblossom, Mustardseed, Cobweb, Moth – confirm that Shakespeare's use of the supernatural in the play was lively and entertaining.

Nick Bottom is a weaver, one of the six 'rude mechanicals'. Together with **Peter Quince**, a carpenter, and **Tom Snout**, a tinker, he starts a series of antics that provide a contrast to the machinations of the aristocratic lovers. Their hilarious production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* represents comic relief but is also a play within the play, which reflects some of Shakespeare's thoughts about theatre performance and actors.

THEMES

The main theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is **love**, seen as an unpredictable, inconstant feeling. Connected with it is the theme of change and transformation, embodied by the character of Bottom, the weaver who is transformed into an ass and with whom Titania falls in love (→ Text Bank 10). Thus, love is represented as the result of enchantment rather than the effect of deep passion and affection.

The sense of romance is enhanced by the constant presence of the moon, which provides a background to almost all of the action in the play. **Nature** is a rich source of imagery with the varieties of flowers and animals which inhabit the wood.



STYLE

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a masterpiece within Shakespeare's early comedies because of the blending into one story of a series of **apparently unrelated plots**. **Speech varies** according to the characters involved:

*Key idea***Music**

Songs are scattered here and there in the play adding to the atmosphere of enchantment. The special introduction of music and dances is an element taken from the tradition of the masque, as is the farcical interlude of the play-within-the-play. This device has the purpose of parodying the main story by replacing delicate and poetic feelings with rudeness and comedy. It also enables the author to comment on artistic creation and especially on dramatic art.

Theseus and Hippolyta speak in blank verse; the lovers in rhyming couplets; the fairies usually employ rhymed verse, but use blank verse when they quarrel; the rustic actors use prose, and even the play *Pyramus and Thisbe* has a metre of its own.

**CURIOSITIES**

A Midsummer Night's Dream was probably written for private performance during a wedding festivity, and only afterwards adapted for public representation.

Its sources are to be found in the various forms of popular entertainment and in the literature available to the age, such as the translation of Plutarch's works by Sir Thomas North in 1579, Spenser's *Epithalamion* (1595), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (translated into English in 1596).

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ the plot and answer the following questions.**

- 1 Who is Hermia in love with at the beginning of the play?
- 2 Who does her father want her to marry?
- 3 Who is the king of the fairies?
- 4 What is Robin Goodfellow called in the play?
- 5 What does Oberon ask Puck to bring him?
- 6 Who does Lysander fall in love with in the wood?
- 7 Which character is given the head of an ass?
- 8 Is he a tailor, a carpenter or a weaver?
- 9 Who falls in love with him?
- 10 Who marries Demetrius at the end?

2 READ the rest of the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 When and where is the story set?
- 2 Can you explain the meaning of the title?
- 3 Where did Shakespeare take inspiration from to create the fairies? How did he change them?
- 4 What is the function of the fairies in the play?
- 5 What role does Puck play?
- 6 How is the theme of love presented?
- 7 What characterises speech in the play?
- 8 What is the function of music?



Fairyland

In the following extract, the world of the fairies and that of the humans are blended together in a dreamlike atmosphere. Titania and Oberon have just quarrelled and, as a result, the natural seasons have been disrupted. Oberon tells Puck to get the magic Cupid's flower. Then, alone, he plans to put some of the love juice on Titania's eyelids, which will make her 'full of hateful fantasies' (Act 2, Scene 1, line 258). Oberon then orders Puck to take some juice too and go through the woods to look for a couple of Athenians. Oberon means Demetrius with Helena (whom Demetrius dislikes) but Puck finds the lovers Hermia and Lysander instead.

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Act 2, Scene 2

[Enter TITANIA, Queen of fairies, with her train.]

TITANIA Come now, a roundel¹ and a fairy song:

Then, for the third part of a minute, hence²—

Some to kill cankers³ in the musk-rose buds⁴,

Some war with rere-mice⁵ for their leathern wings,

5 To make my small **elves** coats, and some keep back

The clamorous **owl** that nightly hoots⁶ and wonders

At our **quaint** spirits. Sing me now asleep;

Then to your **offices**, and let me rest.

[She lies down.]

[The FAIRIES sing.]

1ST FAIRY You spotted snakes, with double tongue,

10 Thorny hedgehogs⁷, be not seen;

Newts⁸ and blind-worms⁹ do no wrong,

Come not near our Fairy Queen.

CHORUS [*dancing*] Philomel¹⁰, with melody,

Sing in our sweet **lullaby**,

15 Lulla, lulla, lullaby, Lulla, lulla, lullaby,

Never **harm**,

Nor **spell**, nor charm,

Come our lovely lady **nigh**.

So good night, with lullaby.

20 **1ST FAIRY** Weaving spiders¹¹ come not here:

Hence you long-legged spinners, hence:

Beetles black approach not near:

Worm nor **snail** do no offence.

CHORUS [*dancing*] Philomel, with melody,

25 Sing in our sweet lullaby,

Lulla, lulla, lullaby, Lulla, lulla, lullaby,

Never harm,

Nor spell, nor charm,

Come our lovely lady nigh.

30 So good night, with lullaby.

[TITANIA sleeps.]

2ND FAIRY Hence, away: now all is well:

One aloof¹² stand sentinel.

[Exeunt all but TITANIA and the sentinel. Enter OBERON.]

He drops the juice on TITANIA's eyelids.]

OBERON What thou seest when thou dost wake,

Do it for thy true-love take;

35 Love and languish for his sake.

- 1 **roundel**. Rondò (componimento musicale).
- 2 **hence**. Via di qua.
- 3 **cankers**. Cancro della pianta; *qui*: bruchi.
- 4 **musk-rose buds**. Boccioli della rosa muschiata.
- 5 **rere-mice**. Pipistrelli.
- 6 **hoots**. Chiurla (della civetta e del gufo), grida.
- 7 **hedgehogs**. Porcospini.
- 8 **Newts**. Tritoni.
- 9 **blind-worms**. Vermi ciechi.
- 10 **Philomel**. Filomela, personaggio dell'antica mitologia greca. Secondo la tradizione romana fu trasformata in usignolo dagli dèi dopo essersi vendicata del marito, Tereo, colpevole di averla ingannata.
- 11 **spiders**. Ragni.
- 12 **aloof**. A distanza.



Be it ounce, or cat, or bear,
Pard¹³ or boar with bristled hair¹⁴,
In thy eye that shall appear
When thou wak'st, it is thy dear:
40 Wake when some vile thing is near.

[Exit.]

[Enter LYSANDER and HERMIA.]

LYSANDER Fair love, you faint¹⁵ with wand'ring in the wood;
And to speak troth¹⁶ I have forgot our way.
We'll rest us. Hermia, if you think it good,
And tarry for¹⁷ the comfort of the day.

45 HERMIA Be't so¹⁸, Lysander: find you out a bed:
For I upon this bank will rest my head.

[She lies down.]

LYSANDER One turf shall serve as pillow for us both,
One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth.

HERMIA Nay, good Lysander: for my sake¹⁹, my dear,
50 Lie further off²⁰ yet; do not lie so near.

LYSANDER O take the sense, sweet, of my innocence!
Love takes the meaning in love's conference.
I mean that my heart unto yours is knit²¹,
So that but one heart we can make of it:
55 Two bosoms interchained with an oath²²,
So then two bosoms and a single troth.
Then, by your side no bed-room me deny,
For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie.

HERMIA Lysander riddles²³ very prettily²⁴.
60 Now much beshrew²⁵ my manners and my pride,
If Hermia meant to say Lysander lied.
But, gentle friend, for love and courtesy
Lie further off – in human modesty:
Such separation as may well be said
65 Becomes a virtuous bachelor²⁶ and a maid,
So far be distant – and good night, sweet friend:
Thy love ne'er alter till thy sweet life end!

LYSANDER Amen, amen, to that fair prayer, say I –
And then end life when I end loyalty!
70 Here is my bed: sleep give thee all his rest.

[He lies down.]

HERMIA With half that wish the wisher's eyes be pressed.

[They sleep apart.]

[Enter Robin Goodfellow the PUCK.]

PUCK Through the forest have I gone,
But Athenian found I none
On whose eyes I might approve
75 This flower's force in stirring²⁷ love.
Night and silence – who is here?
Weeds of Athens he doth wear:
This is he, my master said,
Despised²⁸ the Athenian maid:
80 And here the maiden, sleeping sound,
On the dank²⁹ and dirty ground.
Pretty soul, she durst not lie
Near this lack-love³⁰, this kill-courtesy.

13 Pard. Leopardo.

14 bristled hair. Pelo irsuto.

15 faint. Ti indebolisci.

16 troth. La verità.

17 tarry for. Aspettiamo.

18 Be't so. Così sia, d'accordo.

19 for my sake. Per amor mio.

20 Lie further off. Sdraiati più lontano.

21 knit. Legato, unito.

22 oath. Voto, giuramento.

23 riddles. Parla per enigmi.

24 prettily. Leggiadramente.

25 beshrew. Maledetti.

26 bachelor. Giovane non sposato, scapolo.

27 stirring. Suscitare.

28 Despised. Disprezzava.

29 dank. Bagnato, umido.

30 lack-love. Senza cuore, crudele.



- 85 Churl, upon thy eyes I throw
All the power this charm doth owe:
[He drops the juice on LYSANDER's eyelids.]
When thou wak'st, let love forbid
Sleep his seat on thy eyelid.
So awake when I am gone;
For I must now to Oberon.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------|----|-------------------|
| 1 | ninna nanna | 6 | gufo |
| 2 | vicino | 7 | incantesimo |
| 3 | bizzarri | 8 | compiti |
| 4 | elfi | 9 | scarabei |
| 5 | lumaca | 10 | danno |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ again Titania's first speech, where the world of the fairies is described.

- 1 Which phrase shows they can travel at great speed?
- 2 Which action shows that they affect the natural world benevolently?
- 3 What creatures inhabit this world?

3 WHAT kind of song are the fairies singing in lines 9-30?

4 WHAT are they trying to protect Titania from in the last few lines of the song?

5 READ Oberon's speech again.

- 1 Write the first two lines in your own words; this is Oberon's spell.
- 2 In the last line, what does he hope will be the result of this spell?

6 FOCUS on the dialogue between Hermia and Lysander. What does Lysander want to do and what does Hermia decide?

7 READ Puck's speech again.

- 1 In which line does Puck actually see Hermia and Lysander?
- 2 Make sure you know the plot of the play. Why does Puck think he has found Demetrius and Helena?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

8 SAY what kind of atmosphere is created by the introduction of the fairies singing and dancing. Choose among the following.

- | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|--------|--------|
| comedy | lightness | charm | relief |
| ambiguity | reconciliation | humour | |



- 9 CIRCLE** some examples of the features (alliteration, assonance, rhyme) that give musicality to the characters' speech. Focus on the way each character speaks. Match the elements of the two columns below.

What effect does the use of poetic language create?

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Titania | A rhymed verse |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> the fairies | B rhyming couplets |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> the lovers | C blank verse |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Oberon | D rhymed heptameters |
| 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Puck | (seven-syllable lines) |

- 10 FOCUS** on the characters of the fairies and discuss if they appear to be good or evil creatures. Justify your answer quoting from the text.

- 11 CONSIDER** the two lovers.

- 1 Explain the wordplay in line 58.
- 2 They are talking about sleeping together. Is their language physically passionate or cleverly formal? Give examples.
- 3 Do you think the audience's reaction to the lovers should be to smile (amusement) or to sigh (sentimentality)? Explain your answer.

- 12 FIND** all the plants and animals in the text. Does this serve to make the world of the fairies more strange and mysterious, or to make it more easily imaginable?

- 13 ALL** the characters are speaking about sleep. Write a sentence about each protagonist (Titania, the fairies, Oberon, the lovers, Puck) using the word 'sleep' or 'asleep'.

- 14 COMPLETE** these sentences which describe three examples of irony.

- 1 Oberon puts a spell on Titania, immediately after her fairies have
- 2 Hermia states that love will never alter, then immediately afterwards Puck
- 3 Cupid is blind, but Cupid's flowers' magic works on the

- 15 CHOOSE** the ideas of love developed in the passage from the list below. Support your answer(s) with reference to the text.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 A blind, unpredictable feeling. | 5 A form of madness. |
| 2 An entertaining fantasy. | 6 A profound sentiment. |
| 3 A distorted passion. | 7 An infatuation. |
| 4 The result of enchantment. | |

➤ **COMPETENCE: FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

- 16 LOOK** back at the Celtic attitude to nature and at medieval ballads (→ 1.1, 1.9). Explain the folk tradition that Shakespeare was following; also point out how it had changed by the early 17th century.

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

- 17 DISCUSS.** As modern society becomes less superstitious, is the supernatural still credible in books, films, etc.?