

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Introduction to Shakespearean Text

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Background of Playwright

William Shakespeare, Shakespeare also spelled Shakspeare, byname Bard of Avon or Swan of Avon, (baptized April 26, 1564, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England—died April 23, 1616, Stratford-upon-Avon), English poet, dramatist, and actor often called the English national poet and considered by many to be the greatest dramatist of all time.

William Shakespeare

Baptized: April 26, 1564, Stratford-upon-Avon, England

Died: April 23, 1616, Stratford-upon-Avon, England

Notable works

“Hamlet”, “The Taming of the Shrew”, “Henry IV, Part 1”, “The Merry Wives of Windsor”, “King John”, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, “The Merchant of Venice”, “Henry IV, Part 2” “Henry VI, Part 1”, “The Tempest”.

Movement / style: Jacobean age

Notable family members: Spouse Anne Hathaway Shakespeare's parents, wife, and children were all likely illiterate.

Shakespeare first popularized the names Olivia, Cordelia, Jessica, and Miranda (with those spellings). Shakespeare occupies a position unique in world literature. Other poets, such as Homer and Dante, and novelists, such as Leo Tolstoy and Charles Dickens, have transcended national barriers, but no writer’s living reputation can compare to that of Shakespeare, whose plays, written in the late 16th and early 17th centuries for a small repertory theatre, are now performed and read more often and in more countries than ever before. The prophecy of his great contemporary, the poet and dramatist Ben Jonson, that Shakespeare “was not of an age, but for all time,” has been fulfilled.

It may be audacious even to attempt a definition of his greatness, but it is not so difficult to describe the gifts that enabled him to create imaginative visions of pathos and mirth that, whether read or witnessed in the theatre, fill the mind and linger there. He is a writer of great intellectual rapidity, perceptiveness, and poetic power. Other writers have had these qualities, but with Shakespeare the keenness of mind was applied not to abstruse or remote subjects but to human beings and their complete range of emotions and conflicts. Other writers have applied their keenness of mind in this way, but Shakespeare is astonishingly clever with words and images, so that his mental energy, when applied to intelligible human situations, finds full and memorable expression, convincing and imaginatively stimulating. As if this were not enough, the art form into which his creative energies went was not remote and bookish but involved the vivid stage impersonation of human beings, commanding sympathy and inviting vicarious participation. Thus, Shakespeare’s merits can survive translation into other languages and into cultures remote from that of Elizabethan England.

Shakespeare: The Man

Life

Although the amount of factual knowledge available about Shakespeare is surprisingly large for one of his station in life, many find it a little disappointing, for it is mostly gleaned from documents of an official character. Dates of baptisms, marriages, deaths, and burials; wills, conveyances, legal processes, and payments by the court—these are the dusty details. There are, however, many contemporary allusions to him as a writer, and these add a reasonable amount of flesh and blood to the biographical skeleton.

Early life in Stratford

The parish register of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, shows that he was baptized there on April 26, 1564; his birthday is traditionally celebrated on April 23. His father, John Shakespeare, was a burgess of the borough, who in 1565 was chosen an alderman and in 1568 bailiff (the position corresponding to mayor, before the grant of a further charter to Stratford in 1664). He was engaged in various kinds of trade and

appears to have suffered some fluctuations in prosperity. His wife, Mary Arden, of Wilmcote, Warwickshire, came from an ancient family and was the heiress to some land. (Given the somewhat rigid social distinctions of the 16th century, this marriage must have been a step up the social scale for John Shakespeare.) Birthplace of William Shakespeare: Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England.

Stratford enjoyed a grammar school of good quality, and the education there was free, the schoolmaster's salary being paid by the borough. No lists of the pupils who were at the school in the 16th century have survived, but it would be absurd to suppose the bailiff of the town did not send his son there. The boy's education would consist mostly of Latin studies—learning to read, write, and speak the language fairly well and studying some of the Classical historians, moralists, and poets. Shakespeare did not go on to the university, and indeed it is unlikely that the scholarly round of logic, rhetoric, and other studies then followed there would have interested him.

Instead, at age 18 he married. Where and exactly when are not known, but the episcopal registry at Worcester preserves a bond dated November 28, 1582, and executed by two yeomen of Stratford, named Sandells and Richardson, as a security to the bishop for the issue of a license for the marriage of William Shakespeare and "Anne Hathaway of Stratford," upon the consent of her friends and upon once asking of the banns. (Anne died in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare. There is good evidence to associate her with a family of Hathaways who inhabited a beautiful farmhouse, now much visited, 2 miles [3.2 km] from Stratford.) The next date of interest is found in the records of the Stratford church, where a daughter, named Susanna, born to William Shakespeare, was baptized on May 26, 1583. On February 2, 1585, twins were baptized, Hamnet and Judith. (Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, died 11 years later.)

How Shakespeare spent the next eight years or so, until his name begins to appear in London theatre records, is not known. There are stories—given currency long after his death—of stealing deer and getting into trouble with a local magnate, Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote, near Stratford; of earning his living as a schoolmaster in the country; of going to London and gaining entry to the world of theatre by minding the horses of theatregoers. It has also been conjectured that Shakespeare spent some time as a member of a great household and that he was a soldier, perhaps in the Low Countries. In lieu of external evidence, such extrapolations about Shakespeare's life have often been made from the internal "evidence" of his writings. But this method is unsatisfactory: one cannot conclude, for example, from his allusions to the law that Shakespeare was a lawyer, for he was clearly a writer who without difficulty could get whatever knowledge he needed for the composition of his plays.

Career in the theatre

What these words mean is difficult to determine, but clearly they are insulting, and clearly Shakespeare is the object of the sarcasms. When the book in which they appear (*Greenes, groats-worth of witte*, bought with a million of Repentance, 1592) was published after Greene's death, a mutual acquaintance wrote a preface offering an apology to Shakespeare and testifying to his worth. This preface also indicates that Shakespeare was by then making important friends. For, although the puritanical city of London was generally hostile to the theatre, many of the nobility were good patrons of the drama and friends of the actors. Shakespeare seems to have attracted the attention of the young Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd earl of Southampton, and to this nobleman were dedicated his first published poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

One striking piece of evidence that Shakespeare began to prosper early and tried to retrieve the family's fortunes and establish its gentility is the fact that a coat of arms was granted to John Shakespeare in 1596. Rough drafts of this grant have been preserved in the College of Arms, London, though the final document, which must have been handed to the Shakespeares, has not survived. Almost certainly William himself took the initiative and paid the fees. The coat of arms appears on Shakespeare's monument (constructed before 1623) in the Stratford church. Equally interesting as evidence of Shakespeare's worldly success was his purchase in 1597 of New Place, a large house in Stratford, which he as a boy must have passed every day in walking to school.

How his career in the theatre began is unclear, but from roughly 1594 onward he was an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's company of players (called the King's Men after the accession of James I in 1603). They had the best actor, Richard Burbage; they had the best theatre, the Globe (finished by the autumn of 1599); they had the best dramatist, Shakespeare. It is no wonder that the company prospered. Shakespeare became a full-time professional man of his own theatre, sharing in a cooperative enterprise and intimately concerned with the financial success of the plays.

Unfortunately, written records give little indication of the way in which Shakespeare's professional life molded his marvelous artistry. All that can be deduced is that for 20 years Shakespeare devoted himself assiduously to his art, writing more than a million words of poetic drama of the highest quality. Private Life

Shakespeare had little contact with officialdom, apart from walking—dressed in the royal livery as a member of the King's Men—at the coronation of King James I in 1604. He continued to look after his financial interests. He bought properties in London and in Stratford. In 1605 he purchased a share (about one-fifth) of the Stratford tithes—a fact that explains why he was eventually buried in the chancel of its parish church. For some time he lodged with a French Huguenot family called Mountjoy, who lived near St. Olave's Church in Cripplegate, London. The records of a lawsuit in May 1612, resulting from a Mountjoy family quarrel, show Shakespeare as giving evidence in a genial way (though unable to remember certain important facts that would have decided the case) and as interesting himself generally in the family's affairs.

No letters written by Shakespeare have survived, but a private letter to him happened to get caught up with some official transactions of the town of Stratford and so has been preserved in the borough archives. It was written by one Richard Quiney and addressed by him from the Bell Inn in Carter Lane, London, whither he had gone from Stratford on business. On one side of the paper is inscribed: "To my loving good friend and countryman, Mr. Wm. Shakespeare, deliver these." Apparently Quiney thought his fellow Stratfordian a person to whom he could apply for the loan of £30—a large sum in Elizabethan times. Nothing further is known about the transaction, but, because so few opportunities of seeing into Shakespeare's private life present themselves, this begging letter becomes a touching document. It is of some interest, moreover, that 18 years later Quiney's son Thomas became the husband of Judith, Shakespeare's second daughter.

Shakespeare's will (made on March 25, 1616) is a long and detailed document. It entailed his quite ample property on the male heirs of his elder daughter, Susanna. (Both his daughters were then married, one to the aforementioned Thomas Quiney and the other to John Hall, a respected physician of Stratford.) As an afterthought, he bequeathed his "second-best bed" to his wife; no one can be certain what this notorious legacy means. The testator's signatures to the will are apparently in a shaky hand. Perhaps Shakespeare was already ill. He died on April 23, 1616. No name was inscribed on his gravestone in the chancel of the parish church of Stratford-upon-Avon. Instead these lines, possibly his own, appeared:

"Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear

To dig the dust enclosed here.

Blest be the man that spares these stones,

And curst be he that moves my bones."

PLOT ANALYSIS

The desire for well-matched love and the struggle to achieve it drives the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play opens on a note of desire, as Theseus, Duke of Athens, waxes poetic about his anticipated wedding to Hippolyta. The main conflict is introduced when other lovers' troubles take center stage. The question of who the characters should love versus who they do love drives the plot from this point on. The audience may immediately understand that Hermia and Lysander belong together, as do Helena and Demetrius, but the characters' inability to pair with the appropriate partner, and the fairies' interference, complicate the conflict. Mirroring the drama among the Athenian nobility, the monarchs of the fairy kingdom also find themselves in a lovers' tiff. Hoping to teach Titania a lesson, Oberon instructs the fairy Puck to apply a charm that will make Titania and Demetrius each fall in love with the next person they see. Lysander, under the spell of the fairies, abandons Hermia for Helena. Demetrius also falls in love with Helena, and Titania falls in love with Bottom, who now has the head of a donkey. Oberon's jealousy mirrors the pettiness of the human characters, suggesting emotions like love, jealousy, and the desire for revenge are universal.

Instead of solving the human lovers' problems, fairy mischief make the lovers' problems worse, transforming friendships into rivalries. Helena and Hermia, childhood friends, become enemies, and Demetrius battles with Lysander for Helena's affections. The play quickly (and temporarily) devolves from a love story to a story of hatred and ill-will, with all the characters fighting the people they once loved. The quickness with which characters fall in love with each other, and the ease with which they dissolve friendships, raises questions about the fickleness of emotional attachment. The action reaches a crisis point once all the characters have been separated from their appropriate partners, and the complications are at their limit. At this point in the play, no one is happy, except Bottom, who enjoys Titania's affections. But the rest of the characters have been made

miserable by love. Even Helena, who now is being pursued by both Lysander and Demetrius, thinks they are playing a cruel trick on her. In this way, the play explores the many ways love can bring about unhappiness as well as joy.

With the tension rising among the Athenian lovers and the night pushing toward dawn, Oberon orders Puck to reverse Lysander's enchantment and set things right among the lovers. By the dawning of a new day, the night and its discord has resolved. Lysander, free of Puck's enchantments, falls back in love with Hermia, while Demetrius remains enchanted, and in love with Helena. Helena's father agrees to accept Lysander as a match for his daughter. Both the internal and external obstacles between the lovers have been removed, and the stage is set for weddings for all couples. The ease with which the events of the night dissolve in the light of day suggest that nothing that has come before should actually be taken seriously. However, the events of the play do make us question the depth and sincerity of the lovers' devotion, especially since Demetrius only loves Helena as a result of Puck's enchantment.

Meanwhile, the Mechanicals have been preparing to perform their adaptation of the tragedy of "Pyramus and Thisbe" for the duke and his bride to be. Shakespeare weaves this plot thread throughout the entire play, so that the bumbling attempt of these unrefined commoners to rehearse a high tragedy unfolds against the backdrop of the play's tangle of erotic confusion. This melding of tragedy and comedy reinforces the sense that none of the action should be taken seriously, and that matters of the heart are ultimately of little consequence. By having the comical Mechanicals stand in for tragic lovers, Shakespeare pokes fun at the tragic genre, including his own Romeo and Juliet. We also understand that just as the Mechanicals' play is ridiculous nonsense, all the action we are watching onstage is little more than a dream-like fantasy. The play closes with Puck reassuring the audience, "Think you have but slumbered here / While these visions did appear. / And this weak and idle theme / No more yielding but a dream". (V.i.)

PLOT OVERVIEW

The play commences with Theseus, duke of Athens, is preparing for his marriage to Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, with a four-day festival of pomp and entertainment. He commissions his Master of the Revels, Philostrate, to find suitable amusements for the occasion. Egeus, an Athenian nobleman, marches into Theseus's court with his daughter, Hermia, and two young men, Demetrius and Lysander. Egeus wishes Hermia to marry Demetrius (who loves Hermia), but Hermia is in love with Lysander and refuses to comply. Egeus asks for the full penalty of law to fall on Hermia's head if she flouts her father's will. Theseus gives Hermia until his wedding to consider her options, warning her that disobeying her father's wishes could result in her being sent to a convent or even executed. Nonetheless, Hermia and Lysander plan to escape Athens the following night and marry in the house of Lysander's aunt, some seven leagues distant from the city. They make their intentions known to Hermia's friend Helena, who was once engaged to Demetrius and still loves him even though he jilted her after meeting Hermia. Hoping to regain his love, Helena tells Demetrius of the elopement that Hermia and Lysander have planned. At the appointed time, Demetrius stalks into the woods after his intended bride and her lover; Helena follows behind him.

In these same woods are two very different groups of characters. The first is a band of fairies, including Oberon, the fairy king, and Titania, his queen, who has recently returned from India to bless the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. The second is a band of Athenian craftsmen rehearsing a play that they hope to perform for the duke and his bride. Oberon and Titania are at odds over a young Indian prince given to Titania by the prince's mother; the boy is so beautiful that Oberon wishes to make him a knight, but Titania refuses. Seeking revenge, Oberon sends his merry servant, Puck, to acquire a magical flower, the juice of which can be spread over a sleeping person's eyelids to make that person fall in love with the first thing he or she sees upon waking. Puck obtains the flower, and Oberon tells him of his plan to spread its juice on the sleeping Titania's eyelids. Having seen Demetrius act cruelly toward Helena, he orders Puck to spread some of the juice on the eyelids of the young Athenian man. Puck encounters Lysander and Hermia; thinking that Lysander is the Athenian of whom Oberon spoke, Puck afflicts him with the love potion. Lysander happens to see Helena upon awaking and falls deeply in love with her, abandoning Hermia. As the night progresses and Puck attempts to undo his mistake, both Lysander and Demetrius end up in love with Helena, who believes that they are mocking her. Hermia becomes so jealous that she tries to challenge Helena to a fight. Demetrius and Lysander nearly do fight over Helena's love, but Puck confuses them by mimicking their voices, leading them apart until they are lost separately in the forest.

When Titania wakes, the first creature she sees is Bottom, the most ridiculous of the Athenian craftsmen, whose head Puck has mockingly transformed into that of an ass. Titania passes a ludicrous interlude doting on the ass-headed weaver. Eventually, Oberon obtains the Indian boy, Puck spreads the love potion on Lysander's eyelids, and by morning all is well. Theseus and Hippolyta discover the sleeping lovers in the forest and take them back to Athens to be married—Demetrius now loves Helena, and Lysander now loves Hermia. After the group wedding, the lovers watch Bottom and his fellow craftsmen perform their play, a fumbling, hilarious version of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. When the play is completed, the lovers go to bed; the fairies briefly emerge to bless the sleeping couples with a protective charm and then disappear. Only Puck remains, to ask the audience for its forgiveness and approval and to urge it to remember the play as though it had all been a dream.

CHARACTERS

Puck

Oberon's jester, a mischievous fairy who delights in playing pranks on mortals. Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* divides its action between several groups of characters, Puck is the closest thing the play has to a protagonist. His enchanting, mischievous spirit pervades the atmosphere, and his antics are responsible for many of the complications that propel the other main plots: he mistakes the young Athenians, applying the love potion to Lysander instead of Demetrius, thereby causing chaos within the group of young lovers; he also transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass.

Oberon

The king of the fairies, Oberon is initially at odds with his wife, Titania, because she refuses to relinquish control of a young Indian prince whom he wants for a knight. Oberon's desire for revenge on Titania leads him to send Puck to obtain the love-potion flower that creates so much of the play's confusion and farce.

Titania

The beautiful queen of the fairies, Titania resists the attempts of her husband, Oberon, to make a knight of the young Indian prince that she has been given. Titania's brief, potion-induced love for Nick Bottom, whose head Puck has transformed into that of an ass, yields the play's foremost example of the contrast motif.

Lysander

A young man of Athens, in love with Hermia. Lysander's relationship with Hermia invokes the theme of love's difficulty: he cannot marry her openly because Egeus, her father, wishes her to wed Demetrius; when Lysander and Hermia run away into the forest, Lysander becomes the victim of misapplied magic and wakes up in love with Helena.

Demetrius

A young man of Athens, initially in love with Hermia and ultimately in love with Helena. Demetrius's obstinate pursuit of Hermia throws love out of balance among the quartet of Athenian youths and precludes a symmetrical two-couple arrangement.

Hermia

Egeus's daughter, a young woman of Athens. Hermia is in love with Lysander and is a childhood friend of Helena. As a result of the fairies' mischief with Oberon's love potion, both Lysander and Demetrius suddenly fall in love with Helena. Self-conscious about her short stature, Hermia suspects that Helena has wooed the men with her height. By morning, however, Puck has sorted matters out with the love potion, and Lysander's love for Hermia is restored.

Helena

A young woman of Athens, in love with Demetrius. Demetrius and Helena were once betrothed, but when Demetrius met Helena's friend Hermia, he fell in love with her and abandoned Helena. Lacking confidence in her looks, Helena thinks that Demetrius and Lysander are mocking her when the fairies' mischief causes them to fall in love with her.

Egeus

Hermia's father, who brings a complaint against his daughter to Theseus: Egeus has given Demetrius permission to marry Hermia, but Hermia, in love with Lysander, refuses to marry Demetrius. Egeus's severe insistence that Hermia either respect his wishes or be held accountable to Athenian law places him squarely outside the whimsical dream realm of the forest.

Theseus

The heroic duke of Athens, engaged to Hippolyta. Theseus represents power and order throughout the play. He appears only at the beginning and end of the story, removed from the dreamlike events of the forest.

Hippolyta

The legendary queen of the Amazons, engaged to Theseus. Like Theseus, she symbolizes order.

Nick Bottom

The overconfident weaver chosen to play Pyramus in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Bottom is full of advice and self-confidence but frequently makes silly mistakes and misuses language. His simultaneous nonchalance about the beautiful Titania's sudden love for him and unawareness of the fact that Puck has transformed his head into that of an ass mark the pinnacle of his foolish arrogance.

Peter Quince

A carpenter and the nominal leader of the craftsmen's attempt to put on a play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Quince is often shoved aside by the abundantly confident Bottom. During the craftsmen's play, Quince plays the Prologue.

Francis Flute

The bellows-mender chosen to play Thisbe in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Forced to play a young girl in love, the bearded craftsman determines to speak his lines in a high, squeaky voice.

Robin Starveling

The tailor chosen to play Thisbe's mother in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Moonshine.

Tom Snout

The tinker chosen to play Pyramus's father in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Wall, dividing the two lovers.

Snug

The joiner chosen to play the lion in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Snug worries that his roaring will frighten the ladies in the audience.

Philostrate

Theseus's Master of the Revels, responsible for organizing the entertainment for the duke's marriage celebration.

Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed

The fairies ordered by Titania to attend to Bottom after she falls in love with him.

THEMES

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Love's Difficulty

"The course of true love never did run smooth," comments Lysander, articulating one of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* most important themes—that of the difficulty of love (I.i.134). Though most of the conflict in the play stems from the troubles of romance, and though the play involves a number of romantic elements, it is not truly a love story; it distances the audience from the emotions of the characters in order to poke fun at the torments and afflictions that those in love suffer. The tone of the play is so lighthearted that the audience never doubts that things will end happily, and it is therefore free to enjoy the comedy without being caught up in the tension of an uncertain outcome.

The theme of love's difficulty is often explored through the motif of love out of balance—that is, romantic situations in which a disparity or inequality interferes with the harmony of a relationship. The prime instance of this imbalance is the asymmetrical love among the four young Athenians: Hermia loves Lysander, Lysander loves Hermia, Helena loves Demetrius, and Demetrius loves Hermia instead of Helena—a simple numeric imbalance in which two men love the same woman, leaving one woman with too many suitors and one with too few. The play has strong potential for a traditional outcome, and the plot is in many ways based on a quest for internal balance; that is, when the lovers' tangle resolves itself into symmetrical pairings, the traditional happy ending will have been achieved. Somewhat similarly, in the relationship between Titania and Oberon, an imbalance arises out of the fact that Oberon's coveting of Titania's Indian boy outweighs his love for her. Later, Titania's passion for the ass-headed Bottom represents an imbalance of appearance and nature: Titania is beautiful and graceful, while Bottom is clumsy and grotesque.

Magic

The fairies' magic, which brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play, is another element central to the fantastic atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare uses magic both to embody the almost supernatural power of love (symbolized by the love potion) and to create a surreal world. Although the misuse of magic causes chaos, as when Puck mistakenly applies the love potion to Lysander's eyelids, magic ultimately resolves the play's tensions by restoring love to balance among the quartet of Athenian youths. Additionally, the ease with which Puck uses magic to his own ends, as when he reshapes Bottom's head into that of an ass and recreates the voices of Lysander and Demetrius, stands in contrast to the laboriousness and gracelessness of the craftsmen's attempt to stage their play.

Dreams

As the title suggests, dreams are an important theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; they are linked to the bizarre, magical mishaps in the forest. Hippolyta's first words in the play evidence the prevalence of dreams ("Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time"), and various characters mention dreams throughout (I.i.7–8). The theme of dreaming recurs predominantly when characters attempt to explain bizarre events in which these characters are involved: "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what / dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream," Bottom says, unable to fathom the magical happenings that have affected him as anything but the result of slumber.

Shakespeare is also interested in the actual workings of dreams, in how events occur without explanation, time loses its normal sense of flow, and the impossible occurs as a matter of course; he seeks to recreate this environment in the play through the intervention of the fairies in the magical forest. At the end of the play, Puck extends the idea of dreams to the audience members themselves, saying that, if they have been offended by the play, they should remember it as nothing more than a dream. This sense of illusion and gauzy fragility is crucial to the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it helps render the play a fantastical experience rather than a heavy drama.

Jealousy

The theme of jealousy operates in both the human and fairy realms in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Jealousy plays out most obviously among the quartet of Athenian lovers, who find themselves in an increasingly tangled knot of misaligned desire. Helena begins the play feeling jealous of Hermia, who has managed to snag not one but two suitors. Helena loves Demetrius, who in turn feels jealous of his rival for Hermia's affections, Lysander. When misplaced fairy mischief leads Lysander into an amorous pursuit of Helena, the event drives Hermia into her own jealous rage. Jealousy also extends into the fairy realm, where it has caused a rift between the fairy king and queen. As we learn in Act II, King Oberon and Queen Titania both have eyes for their counterparts in the human realm, Theseus and Hippolyta. Titania accuses Oberon of stealing away with "the bouncing Amazon" (II.i.). Oberon accuses Titania of hypocrisy, since she also loves another: "How canst thou thus for shame, Titania, Glance at my credit with Hippolyta, / Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?" (II.i.). This jealous rift incites Oberon to command Puck to fetch the magic flower that eventually causes so much chaos and confusion for the Athenian lovers.

Mischief

In *Midsummer*, mischief is primarily associated with the forest and the fairies who reside there. Accordingly, the fairies of traditional British folklore are master mischief makers. The trickster fairy Puck (also known as Robin Goodfellow) is the play's chief creator of mischief. Puck's reputation as a troublemaker precedes him, as suggested in the first scene of Act II, where an unnamed fairy recognizes Puck and rhapsodizes about all the tricks Puck has played on unsuspecting humans. Although in the play Puck only retrieves and uses the magical flower at Oberon's request, his mistakes in implementing Oberon's plan have the most chaotic effects. Puck also makes mischief of his own accord, as when he transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. Puck is also the only character who explicitly talks about his love of mischief. When in Act III he declares that "those things do best please me / That befall prepost'rously" (III.ii.), he effectively announces a personal philosophy of mischief and an appreciation for turning things on their head.

Transformation

Many examples of emotional and physical transformation occur in *Midsummer*. These transformations contribute to the play's humorous chaos, and also make its happy ending possible. Most of the transformations

that take place in the play derive from fairy magic, specifically the magic of Puck. Perhaps the most obvious example is when Puck assists Oberon in placing a charm on Titania and two of the Athenian lovers in order to transform their affections. Instead of helping the lovers, Puck's meddling amplifies the tensions that already existed among them. Puck wreaks further havoc when he physically transforms Bottom, "translating" his head into the head of a donkey. Bottom's transformation inspires terror among Bottom's companions, who fear that his change bears the marks of a devil. Although these transformations initially stimulate conflict and fear, they ultimately help to restore order. By the end of the night, the Athenian lovers all end up in their proper pairings and are able to return safely to Athens. Likewise, after Titania awakens from her bizarre coupling with Bottom, she and Oberon are able to settle their quarrel. The many transformations therefore enable the play's happy ending.

Unreason

The many transformations that take place in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* give rise to a temporary suspension of reason. As night progresses in the forest, things cease to make sense. For example, Hermia falls asleep near Lysander but then wakes to find him gone. When she eventually finds him again, Lysander does the verbal equivalent of spitting in Hermia's face: "Could not this make thee know / The hate I bear thee made me leave thee so?" (III.ii.). Completely floored by the sudden reversal of Lysander's former love, Hermia senses a failure of reason: "You speak not as you think" (III.ii.). A more humorous version of unreason occurs when Bottom, recently crowned with the head of a donkey, finds himself nestling with Titania in her bower. Even though Bottom doesn't know about his physical transformation, he's self-aware enough to see the absurdity of the situation. When Titania professes her love for Bottom, he responds coolly: "Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that" (III.i.). By turns disturbing and amusing, these and other examples of unreason in the play function to amplify the chaos and confusion traditionally associated with fairies and the forest.

Reversal

Situations transform quickly into their opposites throughout the play. Most obviously, the charm Puck uses to transform the Athenian lovers' affections creates sudden reversals of love and hate, and these reversals result in a breakdown of reason. The sudden reversal of Lysander's affection for Hermia not only leaves his former lover stunned, but also shocks Helena, who suddenly finds herself being pursued by Lysander. All of the madcap foolery that plays out in the forest arises from Oberon's original idea to affect just one strategic reversal. In Act II, when Oberon spies on Helena chasing after Demetrius, Helena comments that her pursuit reverses the natural order of things: "Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase. / The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind

Makes speed to catch the tiger." (II.i.) According to Helena, this state of affairs creates "a scandal for my sex." Hearing Helena, Oberon promises to reverse the reversal, thereby restoring order: "Ere he do leave this grove / Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love" (II.i.).

Protagonist

As a comedy featuring an ensemble cast of characters, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lacks an obvious protagonist. The action of the play shifts between three primary groups, and each of these groups—the Athenian nobles, the fairies, and the craftsmen—plays a crucial role in the story. That said, it is possible to argue that Hermia, Helena, and Lysander represent the play's protagonists. Ultimately, the play is most concerned with securing proper love matches for these three characters, and ends with all of them happily married to the appropriate partner. Hermia, Helena, and Lysander all know what they want from the start of the play. Hermia and Lysander openly profess their love for each other, and although Demetrius doesn't return her affection, Helena feels sure of her love for Demetrius. Over the course of the play, Hermia, Lysander, and Helena must struggle against external forces undermining their affections. They fight against the patriarchal law of Athens and against the fairy mischief that besets them in the forest. By the end of their wild night in the forest, after fairy magic sets the love pairs aright and Theseus accepts the new couplings, everyone returns safely and happily to Athens.

Antagonist

Just as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lacks an obvious protagonist, it also lacks an obvious antagonist. Identifying the play's antagonist seems especially difficult, since so many characters act in antagonistic ways toward each other. However, if the play's clearest protagonists are Hermia, Helena, and Lysander, and if the play is ultimately about

making their love possible, then the clearest antagonists are those who most directly stand in the way of their love. The characters directly thwarting Hermia, Helena, and Lysander are Egeus, Theseus, and Demetrius. These three characters conspire to break the amorous bond between Hermia and Lysander and also deny Helena her heart's desire. The play opens with Egeus, angry that Hermia disobeys his command to marry Demetrius. Egeus asks Theseus to intervene, and the duke threatens Hermia with punishment in the event of her continued disobedience. Demetrius is perhaps the greatest antagonist of all, since it was his change of heart, from Helena to Hermia, that initiated all of the drama with Egeus and Theseus and caused Helena's suffering. Only after fairy magic reunites Demetrius with Helena can the crisis that opened the play be resolved. Once the happy lovers return to Athens, Theseus puts the matter to rest. Only Egeus, now powerless, still dissents.

Setting

A Midsummer Night's Dream takes place partly in the city of Athens, and partly in the forest that lies beyond the city's walls. This split between city and forest is thematically significant. The city of Athens is depicted as a place of civilization, law, and order, while the forest is a place of wildness, anarchy, and chaos. As if to underline the idea of Athens as a place of law and order, the play opens with Egeus bringing a legal dispute before Theseus. As duke of Athens, Theseus stands as the city's chief legal authority. His primary responsibility is to uphold the law, which he attempts to do when he rules that Hermia must obey her father and marry Demetrius instead of Lysander. In contrast to this display of Athenian rule of law, the forest appears decidedly unruly—which is to say, ruled by fairy mischief. The forest is a place where social norms break down, as exemplified in the increasing chaos and confusion that afflicts the Athenian lovers as well as Titania and Nick Bottom.

Even as Shakespeare sets up an opposition between city and forest, the events of the play complicate this opposition. Athens supposedly symbolizes civilization, and its system of law and order indicates a degree of rationality. Yet the grim punishment Theseus threatens in the event of Hermia's disobedience seems completely out of proportion for her crime. Her crime, after all, is simply loving Lysander—a man, it should be noted, who possesses a similar status as her father's favorite, Demetrius. Considering that from a socioeconomic perspective the two rivals are well matched, it makes rational sense that Hermia should be able to marry whichever suitor she wants. Thus, Egeus and the patriarchal law he cites can be seen as cruel, uncivilized, and irrational. A similar reversal occurs in the case of the forest. The forest is a space marked by chaos, and indeed, lots of chaotic events occur in the forest over the course of the play. Yet these events have the unexpected result of restoring proper order among the young lovers, ensuring them all a safe return to Athens. Where Athenian law and order fails, forest mischief ultimately succeeds.

MOTIFS

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Contrast

The idea of contrast is the basic building block of A Midsummer Night's Dream. The entire play is constructed around groups of opposites and doubles. Nearly every characteristic presented in the play has an opposite: Helena is tall, Hermia is short; Puck plays pranks, Bottom is the victim of pranks; Titania is beautiful, Bottom is grotesque. Further, the three main groups of characters (who are developed from sources as varied as Greek mythology, English folklore, and classical literature) are designed to contrast powerfully with one another: the fairies are graceful and magical, while the craftsmen are clumsy and earthy; the craftsmen are merry, while the lovers are overly serious. Contrast serves as the defining visual characteristic of A Midsummer Night's Dream, with the play's most indelible image being that of the beautiful, delicate Titania weaving flowers into the hair of the ass-headed Bottom. It seems impossible to imagine two figures less compatible with each other. The juxtaposition of extraordinary differences is the most important characteristic of the play's surreal atmosphere and is thus perhaps the play's central motif; there is no scene in which extraordinary contrast is not present.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Theseus and Hippolyta

Theseus and Hippolyta bookend A Midsummer Night's Dream, appearing in the daylight at both the beginning and the end of the play's main action. They disappear, however, for the duration of the action, leaving in the

middle of Act I, scene i and not reappearing until Act IV, as the sun is coming up to end the magical night in the forest. Shakespeare uses Theseus and Hippolyta, the ruler of Athens and his warrior bride, to represent order and stability, to contrast with the uncertainty, instability, and darkness of most of the play. Whereas an important element of the dream realm is that one is not in control of one's environment, Theseus and Hippolyta are always entirely in control of theirs. Their reappearance in the daylight of Act IV to hear Theseus's hounds signifies the end of the dream state of the previous night and a return to rationality.

The Love Potion

The love potion is made from the juice of a flower that was struck with one of Cupid's misfired arrows; it is used by the fairies to wreak romantic havoc throughout Acts II, III, and IV. Because the meddling fairies are careless with the love potion, the situation of the young Athenian lovers becomes increasingly chaotic and confusing (Demetrius and Lysander are magically compelled to transfer their love from Hermia to Helena), and Titania is hilariously humiliated (she is magically compelled to fall deeply in love with the ass-headed Bottom). The love potion thus becomes a symbol of the unreasoning, fickle, erratic, and undeniably powerful nature of love, which can lead to inexplicable and bizarre behavior and cannot be resisted.

The Craftsmen's Play

The play-within-a-play that takes up most of Act V, scene i is used to represent, in condensed form, many of the important ideas and themes of the main plot. Because the craftsmen are such bumbling actors, their performance satirizes the melodramatic Athenian lovers and gives the play a purely joyful, comedic ending. Pyramus and Thisbe face parental disapproval in the play-within-a-play, just as Hermia and Lysander do; the theme of romantic confusion enhanced by the darkness of night is rehashed, as Pyramus mistakenly believes that Thisbe has been killed by the lion, just as the Athenian lovers experience intense misery because of the mix-ups caused by the fairies' meddling. The craftsmen's play is, therefore, a kind of symbol for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself: a story involving powerful emotions that is made hilarious by its comical presentation.

Genre

Comedy

In telling the story of several sets of lovers who must overcome obstacles and misunderstandings before they are finally united in marriage, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an example of Shakespearean comedy. The play's central couples, Hermia and Lysander and Helena and Demetrius, begin the play facing two classic obstacles of Shakespearean comedy: parental disapproval and misdirected love. Hermia's father forbids her to marry Lysander, insisting that she marry Demetrius instead. According to Athenian law, Hermia faces death or exile if she disobeys her father. Meanwhile, Helena loves Demetrius, but his love is currently directed at Hermia. These initial obstacles become confused and compounded when the couples enter the forest. The fairy Puck's mistaken enchantments result first in Lysander loving Helena, and then in both men loving Helena, a reversal of the play's opening. But by the next morning, the confusion has been resolved. Lysander's enchantment has been removed while Demetrius's enchantment remains, and the couples are for the first time happily balanced. The couples' final barrier is overcome when Theseus overrules Hermia's father's wishes, and the play ends as all Shakespearean comedies do: with a wedding.

Like other Shakespearean comedies, *Midsummer* focuses on the characters' situations rather than their emotions. For example, in the play's first scene, rather than dwelling in despair because they are forbidden to be together, Hermia and Lysander focus on a solution and make a secret plan to escape. Later, the fairy king Oberon witnesses Helena pledging her devotion to Demetrius and immediately decides to intervene when Demetrius harshly rejects her. Both the lovers' decision to go into the forest and the fairies' decision to intercede in the lovers' lives create situations that confuse and trouble the lovers. However, as audience members we are never seriously worried that the outcome will be anything but happy because the play's fantastical situations and overwrought language distance us from the lovers' pain. Secure in our knowledge that the magical mistakes will eventually be repaired and that order will be restored, we can enjoy watching the drama unfold.

Style

The style of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is droll and exuberant. The play features ample wordplay, underscoring the nonsensical mischief of the plot. Take the scene where Lysander and Hermia walk through the forest, preparing to rest for the night. The couple improvises on the multiple meanings of the word "lie": to sleep, to have sex, and to speak an untruth. Hermia jokes with Lysander about protecting her virtue: "Lie further off yet, do not lie so near" (II.ii.)." Lysander responds by clarifying and further complicating the word's meaning,

noting that once they are married, “Then by your side no bed-room me deny, / For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie” (II.ii.). The fact that the first syllable in Lysander’s name rhymes with “lie” only serves to heighten the humorous effect of the lovers’ wordplay. Similarly, in Act III, scene I, Bottom says “I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; / to fright me, if they could.” Bottom is using the word “ass” figuratively, as a synonym for fool. But the word literally applies as well, since Bottom’s head has been transformed into that of a donkey, or ass. The ample use of wordplay gives the play a sense of clever silliness, and maintains the comic mood even when the action is troubled. The audience may be so busy deciphering the many possible interpretations of the characters’ speech, we don’t get upset by the predicaments they find themselves in.

Shakespeare also uses poetic language to create melodramatic moments that both reinforce and mock the play’s central theme of romantic love. Oberon speaks some of the play’s most poetic passages when instructing Puck to use the love potion on Titania. Describing the flowers that blanket the bank where Titania sleeps, Oberon says, “Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine, / With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine” (II.i.). The irony here is that Oberon reveals his tender feelings for his queen even as he plans to manipulate and humiliate her. Oberon’s other manipulations lead to some of the play’s most overwrought language, as the enchanted Lysander and Demetrius profess their love for Helena. Lysander vows that he would “run through fire” for her sake (II.ii.), and that Hermia, his former object of affection, now brings “deepest loathing” to his stomach (II.ii.). The lovers’ desperate passion creates comedy, as the audience knows their feelings come from a false source, but the hyperbolic language also raises the question of whether such fickle feelings as love can, indeed, be true. *Prose Vs. Verse*

Like Shakespeare’s other plays, the language of *Midsummer* consists of both verse and prose. Also like Shakespeare’s other plays, the division between verse and prose in *Midsummer* follows class lines, with the lower-class commoners demonstrating less refinement in their language. Thus the Athenian nobles and the fairies typically speak in verse, whereas the Mechanicals typically speak in prose. Shakespeare frequently uses the contrast between these modes of speaking for humor, as when Titania declares her love for the donkey-headed Bottom in sumptuous verse, only to be answered in Bottom’s common speech. The only instance where this class division between verse and prose gets reversed occurs during the performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” where the Mechanicals speak in verse and the nobles comment on the play in prose. Here again, Shakespeare uses the contrast for comedic effect, emphasizing just how absurd the results are when commoners attempt to adopt a nobler register.

Shakespeare also uses different types of verse to create contrast between the human and fairy nobility. Whereas the human nobles tend to speak in iambic pentameter, the fairies tend to speak in slightly shorter lines of iambic tetrameter. These shorter lines have a rhythm more closely associated with ballads and other song forms, and Shakespeare links the singsong quality of the meter to the fairies’ carefree, even mischievous nature. One particularly powerful example of how Shakespeare uses differences in meter to meaningful effect comes near the end of Act III, when Puck removes Lysander’s spell. Puck begins by speaking in very short, rhyming lines: “When thou wak’st, / Thou tak’st / True delight / In the sight” (III.ii.). As he continues, however, his lines get longer, ending with a line of unrhymed prose: “The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well” (III.ii.). Of all the play’s characters, Puck most represents the shape-shifting magical world of the forest, and his progression from tight, rhymed verse to long, unrhymed prose signifies the end of fantasy and the return of the mundane.

Tone

A *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is primarily a humorous play, but it also presents a greater variety of tone than may at first appear. The opening scene, for instance, begins with a conflict that has very serious stakes. When Theseus forces Hermia to choose between an unwanted marriage with Demetrius, and either life as a nun or death if she rejects that marriage, the audience may wonder if they’re watching a tragedy rather than a comedy. Hermia isn’t the only character faced with a difficult love situation. Lysander risks losing his true love, Hermia. So does Helena, who longs for Demetrius. The strife extends to the fairy realm as well, where a jealous rift has opened between Oberon and Titania. But by the conclusion of Act V, all of the lovers have settled on their matches, the amorous discord has resolved into marriage, and Oberon closes the play with a magical blessing for the well-matched lovers. Whereas the play begins with a serious tone, it ends on a romantic, reassuring tone.

Though the play does flirt with seriousness, romance, and enchantment, the overriding tone of *Midsummer* is humorous, even satiric. Shakespeare threads humor throughout the play, and particularly in the scenes

featuring Bottom and the other Mechanicals as they rehearse their adaptation of “Pyramus and Thisbe.” Aside from being amusingly incompetent thespians, Bottom and company lack the formal eloquence of the Athenian nobles and the fairies, often mispronouncing and even misusing words. The comic relief of the Mechanicals, which Shakespeare first introduces in Act I, scene ii, amplifies into full-on farce in Acts II through IV, when fairy mischief creates much chaos in a very short amount of time. The farce of the mixed-up lovers functions to alleviate the emotional gravity that characterized the play’s opening, and the amplification of confusion leads to a satisfying and romantic resolution in the final act. In the end, the variation in tone lends *Midsummer* a greater degree of emotional complexity than audiences might expect from a comedy.

Point of View

Although *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* opens with Theseus and Hippolyta, Shakespeare does not focus the action of the play solely, or even primarily, from the point of view of the Athenian rulers. Instead, the point of view alternates between three storylines: the Mechanicals preparing to put on a play, the fairies making mischief, and the lovers quarrelling, with Theseus and Hippolyta returning at the end. Throughout the play, the point of view shifts from scene to scene, so we get equal insight into the motivations of all the characters. The audience alone understands the action from every side. For example, we know that Puck has enchanted Bottom and replaced his head with a donkey’s head. The other Mechanicals, however, don’t know about the enchantment, so react with fear when they see Bottom. And Bottom himself doesn’t know he now looks like a donkey, so is puzzled when his friends run away from him. This device, where the audience knows more than the characters, is called dramatic irony. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare often employs dramatic irony, so that the audience understands the action better than any of the characters.

Shakespeare shares the point of view equally among all the characters, so that all characters appear equally sympathetic to us. Almost all of the characters suffer as a result of fairy enchantments in one way or another. At the same time, because one character’s point of view is not privileged over any other, the audience doesn’t identify with any one character. The action remains distanced, and the audience never becomes deeply emotionally invested in the characters’ fate. The distancing effect enables us to remain amused by the action and laugh, even when the characters themselves are deeply distraught. By comparison, in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (which the play-within-the-play in *Midsummer* alludes to), the point of view privileges Romeo and Juliet’s experience. The audience comes to care deeply about these characters, and feels devastated when bad things happen to them. By moving the point of view rapidly between a large cast of characters, Shakespeare keeps *Midsummer* rooted firmly in the comic genre, and prevents us from caring too deeply about any of the characters or taking the action too seriously.

Key Summary

Title: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Author: William Shakespeare

Type of Work: Play

Genres: Comedy; fantasy; romance; farce

Language: English

Time and Place Written: London, 1594 /1595

Date of First Publication: 1600

Climax: In the strictest sense, there is no real climax, as the conflicts of the play are all resolved swiftly by magical means in Act IV; the moment of greatest tension is probably the quarrel between the lovers in Act III, scene ii. **Protagonist:** Because there are three main groups of characters, there is no single protagonist in the play; however, Puck is generally considered the most important character.

Antagonist: None; the play’s tensions are mostly the result of circumstances, accidents, and mistakes.

Settings (Time) Combines elements of Ancient Greece with elements of Renaissance England

Settings (Place) Athens and the forest outside its walls **Point of View:** Varies from scene to scene

Falling Action: Act V, scene i, which centers on the craftsmen’s play

Tense: Present

Foreshadowing: Comments made in Act I, scene i about the difficulties that lovers face

Tones: Romantic; comedic; fantastic; satirical; dreamlike; joyful; farcical

Symbols: Theseus and Hippolyta represent order, stability, and wakefulness; Theseus's hounds represent the coming of morning; Oberon's love potion represents the power and instability of love.

Themes: The difficulties of love; magic; the nature of dreams; the relationships between fantasy and reality and between environment and experience

Motifs: Love out of balance; contrast (juxtaposed opposites, such as beautiful and ugly, short and tall, clumsy and graceful, ethereal and earthy)

SCENE BY SCENE SUMMARY OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Act One, Scene One

Summary

The course of true love never did run smooth. . . .

At his palace, Theseus, duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, his fiancée, discuss their wedding, to be held in four days, under the new moon. Impatient for the event and in a celebratory mood, Theseus orders Philostrate, his Master of the Revels, to “stir up the Athenian youth to merriments” and devise entertainments with which the couple might pass the time until their wedding (I.i.12). Philostrate takes his leave, and Theseus promises Hippolyta that though he wooed her with his sword (Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, presumably met Theseus in combat), he will wed her “with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling”—with a grand celebration to begin at once and last until the wedding (I.i.19).

Egeus, a citizen of Athens, strides into the room, followed by his daughter Hermia and the Athenian youths Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus has come to see Theseus with a complaint against his daughter: although Egeus has promised her in marriage to Demetrius, who loves her, Lysander has won Hermia's heart, and Hermia refuses to obey her father and marry Demetrius. Egeus demands that the law punish Hermia if she fails to comply with his demands. Theseus speaks to Hermia sharply, telling her to expect to be sent to a nunnery or put to death. Lysander interrupts, accusing Demetrius of being fickle in love, saying that he was once engaged to Hermia's friend Helena but abandoned her after he met Hermia. Theseus admits that he has heard this story, and he takes Egeus and Demetrius aside to discuss it. Before they go, he orders Hermia to take the time remaining before his marriage to Hippolyta to make up her mind. Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, and Demetrius depart, leaving Hermia alone with Lysander.

Hermia and Lysander discuss the trials that must be faced by those who are in love: “The course of true love never did run smooth,” Lysander says (I.i.134). He proposes a plan: he has an aunt, wealthy and childless, who lives seven leagues from Athens and who dotes on Lysander like a son. At her house, Hermia and Lysander can be married—and, because the manor is outside of Athens, they would be free from Athenian law. Hermia is overjoyed, and they agree to travel to the house the following night.

Helena, Hermia's friend whom Demetrius jilted, enters the room, lovesick and deeply melancholy because Demetrius no longer loves her. Hermia and Lysander confide their plan to her and wish her luck with Demetrius. They depart to prepare for the following night's journey. Helena remarks to herself that she envies them their happiness. She thinks up a plan: if she tells Demetrius of the elopement that Lysander and Hermia are planning, he will be bound to follow them to the woods to try to stop them; if she then follows him into the woods, she might have a chance to win back his love.

Analysis

From the outset, Shakespeare subtly portrays the lovers as a group out of balance, a motif that creates tension throughout the play. For the sake of symmetry, the audience wants the four lovers to form two couples; instead, both men love Hermia, leaving Helena out of the equation. The women are thus in nonparallel situations, adding to the sense of structural imbalance. By establishing the fact that Demetrius once loved Helena, Shakespeare suggests the possibility of a harmonious resolution to this love tangle: if Demetrius could only be made to love Helena again, then all would be well. By the end of the play, the fairies' intervention effects just such an outcome, and all does become well, though it is worth noting that the restoration of Demetrius's love for Helena is the result of magic rather than a natural reawakening of his feelings.

The genre of comedy surrounding the Athenian lovers is farce, in which the humor stems from exaggerated characters trying to find their way out of ludicrous situations. Shakespeare portrays the lovers as overly serious, as each is deeply and earnestly preoccupied with his or her own feelings: Helena is anxious about her looks,

reacting awkwardly when Lysander calls her “fair”; Hermia later becomes self-conscious about her short stature; Demetrius is willing to see Hermia executed to prevent her from marrying another man; and Lysander seems to have cast himself as the hero of a great love story in his own mind (III.ii.188, III.ii.247). Hermia is stubborn and quarrelsome, while Helena lacks self-confidence and believes that other people mock her. The airy world of the fairies and the absurd predicaments in which the lovers find themselves once in the forest make light of the lovers’ grave concerns.

Act One, Scene Two Summary

In another part of Athens, far from Theseus’s palace, a group of common laborers meets at the house of Peter Quince to rehearse a play that the men hope to perform for the grand celebration preceding the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Quince, a carpenter, tries to conduct the meeting, but the talkative weaver Nick Bottom continually interrupts him with advice and direction. Quince tells the group what play they are to perform: *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, which tells the story of two lovers, separated by their parents’ feud, who speak to each other at night through a hole in a wall. In the play, a lion surprises Thisbe one night and tatters her mantle before she escapes. When Pyramus finds the shredded garment, he assumes that the lion has killed Thisbe; stricken with grief, he commits suicide. When Thisbe finds Pyramus’s bloody corpse, she too commits suicide. Quince assigns their parts: Bottom is to play Pyramus; Francis Flute, Thisbe; Robin Starveling, Thisbe’s mother; Tom Snout, Pyramus’s father; Quince himself, Thisbe’s father; and Snug, the lion.

As Quince doles out the parts, Bottom often interrupts, announcing that he should be the one to play the assigned part. He says that his ability to speak in a woman’s voice would make him a wonderful Thisbe and that his ability to roar would make him a wonderful lion. Quince eventually convinces him that Pyramus is the part for him, by virtue of the fact that Pyramus is supposed to be very handsome. Snug worries that he will be unable to learn the lion’s part, but Quince reassures him that it will be very easy to learn, since the lion speaks no words and only growls and roars. This worries the craftsmen, who reason that if the lion frightens any of the noble ladies in the audience, they will all be executed; since they are only common laborers, they do not want to risk upsetting powerful people. Bottom says that he could roar as sweetly as a nightingale so as not to frighten anyone, but Quince again convinces him that he can only play Pyramus. The group disperses, agreeing to meet in the woods the following night to rehearse their play.

Analysis

The most important motif in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and one of the most important literary techniques Shakespeare uses throughout the play, is that of contrast. The three main groups of characters are all vastly different from one another, and the styles, moods, and structures of their respective subplots also differ. It is by incorporating these contrasting realms into a single story that Shakespeare creates the play’s dreamlike atmosphere. Almost diametrically opposite the beautiful, serious, and love-struck young nobles are the clumsy, ridiculous, and deeply confused craftsmen, around whom many of the play’s most comical scenes are centered. Where the young lovers are graceful and well spoken—almost comically well suited to their roles as melodramatically passionate youths—the craftsmen often fumble their words and could not be less well suited for acting. This disjunction reveals itself as it becomes readily apparent that the craftsmen have no idea how to put on a dramatic production: their speeches are full of impossible ideas and mistakes (Bottom, for example, claims that he will roar “as gently / as any sucking dove”); their concerns about their parts are absurd (Flute does not want to play Thisbe because he is growing a beard); and their extended discussion about whether they will be executed if the lion’s roaring frightens the ladies further evidences the fact that their primary concern is with themselves, not their art (II.i.67–68).

The fact that the workmen have chosen to perform the Pyramus and Thisbe story, a Babylonian myth familiar to Shakespeare’s audiences from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, only heightens the comedy. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is highly dramatic, with suicides and tragically wasted love (themes that Shakespeare takes up in *Romeo and Juliet* as well). Badly suited to their task and inexperienced, although endlessly well meaning, the craftsmen are sympathetic figures even when the audience laughs at them—a fact made explicit in Act V, when Theseus makes fun of their play even as he honors their effort. The contrast between the serious nature of the play and the bumbling foolishness of the craftsmen makes the endeavor all the more ridiculous. Further, the actors’

botched telling of the youthful love between Pyramus and Thisbe implicitly mocks the melodramatic love tangle of Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander.

Act Two, Scene One

Summary

In the forest, two fairies, one a servant of Titania, the other a servant of Oberon, meet by chance in a glade. Oberon's servant tells Titania's to be sure to keep Titania out of Oberon's sight, for the two are very angry with each other. Titania, he says, has taken a little Indian prince as her attendant, and the boy is so beautiful that Oberon wishes to make him his knight. Titania, however, refuses to give the boy up.

Titania's servant is delighted to recognize Oberon's servant as Robin Goodfellow, better known as Puck, a mischievous sprite notorious for his pranks and jests. Puck admits his identity and describes some of the tricks he plays on mortals.

The two are interrupted when Oberon enters from one side of the glade, followed by a train of attendants. At the same moment, Titania enters from the other side of the glade, followed by her own train. The two fairy royals confront one another, each questioning the other's motive for coming so near to Athens just before the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. Titania accuses Oberon of loving Hippolyta and of thus wishing to bless the marriage; Oberon accuses Titania of loving Theseus. The conversation turns to the little Indian boy, whom Oberon asks Titania to give him. But Titania responds that the boy's mother was a devotee of hers before she died; in honor of his mother's memory, Titania will hold the boy near to her. She invites Oberon to go with her to dance in a fairy round and see her nightly revels, but Oberon declines, saying that they will be at odds until she gives him the boy.

Titania storms away, and Oberon vows to take revenge on her before the night is out. He sends Puck to seek a white-and-purple flower called love-in-idleness, which was once hit with one of Cupid's arrows. He says that the flower's juice, if rubbed on a sleeper's eyelids, will cause the sleeper to fall in love with the first living thing he or she sees upon waking. Oberon announces that he will use this juice on Titania, hoping that she will fall in love with some ridiculous creature; he will then refuse to lift the juice's effect until she yields the Indian prince to him.

Analysis

Act II serves two main functions: it introduces the fairies and their realm, and it initiates the romantic confusion that will eventually help restore the balance of love. The fairies, whom Shakespeare bases heavily on characters familiar from English folklore, are among the most memorable and delightful characters in the play. They speak in lilting rhymes infused with gorgeous poetic imagery. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play dominated by the presence of doubles, and the fairies are designed to contrast heavily with the young lovers and the craftsmen. Whereas the lovers are earnest and serious, Puck and the other pixies are merry and full of laughter; whereas the craftsmen are bumbling, earthy, and engage in methodical labor, the fairies are delicate, airy, and indulge in effortless magic and enchantment.

The conflict between Oberon and Titania imports into the fairy realm the motif of love being out of balance. As with the Athenian lovers, the eventual resolution of the tension between the two occurs only by means of magic. Though the craftsmen do not experience romantic confusion about one another, Bottom becomes involved in an accidental romance with Titania in Act III, and in Act V two craftsmen portray the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, who commit suicide after misinterpreting events.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was probably performed before Queen Elizabeth, and Shakespeare managed to make a flattering reference to his monarch in Act II, scene i. When Oberon introduces the idea of the love potion to Puck, he says that he once saw Cupid fire an arrow that missed its mark: That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,

Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed.

A certain aim he took

At a fair vestal thronèd by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.

But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft

Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passèd on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free
(II.i.155–164).

Queen Elizabeth never married and was celebrated in her time as a woman of chastity, a virgin queen whose concerns were above the flesh. Here Shakespeare alludes to that reputation by describing Cupid firing an arrow “at a fair vestal thronèd by the west”—Queen Elizabeth—whom the heat of passion cannot affect because the arrow is cooled “in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon.” Shakespeare celebrates how Elizabeth put affairs of state before her personal life and lived “in maiden meditation, fancy-free.” He nestles a patriotic aside in an evocative description, couching praise for the ruler on whose good favor he depended in dexterous poetic language. (Audiences in Shakespeare’s day would most likely have recognized this imaginative passage’s reference to their monarch.)

Act Two, Scene Two

Summary

As Puck flies off to seek the flower, Demetrius and Helena pass through the glade. Oberon makes himself invisible so that he can watch and hear them. Demetrius harangues Helena, saying that he does not love her, does not want to see her, and wishes that she would stop following him immediately. He curses Lysander and Hermia, whom he is pursuing, hoping to prevent their marriage and slay Lysander. Helena repeatedly declares her adoration for, and loyalty to, Demetrius, who repeatedly insults her. They exit the grove, with Helena following closely behind Demetrius, and Oberon materializes. He declares that before the night is out, Demetrius will be the one chasing Helena.

Puck appears, carrying the flower whose juice will serve as the love potion. Oberon takes the flower and says that he knows of a fragrant stream bank surrounded with flowers where Titania often sleeps. Before hurrying away to anoint Titania’s eyelids with the flower’s juice, Oberon orders Puck to look for an Athenian youth being pursued by a lady and to put some of the juice on the disdainful youth’s eyelids, so that when he wakes he will fall in love with the lady. He informs Puck that he will know the youth by his Athenian garb. Puck agrees to carry out his master’s wishes.

After her dancing and revelry, Titania falls asleep by the stream bank. Oberon creeps up on her and squeezes the flower’s juice onto her eyelids, chanting a spell, so that Titania will fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking. Oberon departs, and Lysander and Hermia wander into the glade. Lysander admits that he has forgotten the way to his aunt’s house and says that they should sleep in the forest until morning, when they can find their way by daylight. Lysander wishes to sleep close to Hermia, but she insists that they sleep apart, to respect custom and propriety. At some distance from each other, they fall asleep.

Puck enters, complaining that he has looked everywhere but cannot find an Athenian youth and pursuing lady. He is relieved when he finally happens upon the sleeping forms of Lysander and Hermia, assuming that they are the Athenians of whom Oberon spoke. Noticing that the two are sleeping apart, Puck surmises that the youth refused to let Hermia come closer to him. Calling him a “churl,” Puck spreads the potion on Lysander’s eyelids, and he departs.

Simultaneously, Helena pursues Demetrius through the glade. He insults her again and insists that she no longer follow him. She complains that she is afraid of the dark, but he nonetheless storms off without her. Saying that she is out of breath, Helena remains behind, bemoaning her unrequited love. She sees the sleeping Lysander and wakes him up. The potion takes effect, and Lysander falls deeply in love with Helena. He begins to praise her beauty and to declare his undying passion for her. Disbelieving, Helena reminds him that he loves Hermia; he declares that Hermia is nothing to him. Helena believes that Lysander is making fun of her, and she grows angry. She leaves in a huff, and Lysander follows after her. Hermia soon wakes and is shocked to find that Lysander is gone. She stumbles into the woods to find him.

Analysis

Act II, scene ii introduces the plot device of the love potion, which Shakespeare uses to explore the comic possibilities inherent in the motif of love out of balance. Oberon’s meddling in the affairs of humans further disrupts the love equilibrium, and the love potion symbolizes the fact that the lovers themselves will not reason out their dilemmas; rather, an outside force—magic—will resolve the love tangle.

The ease with which characters' affections change in the play, so that Lysander is madly in love with Hermia at one point and with Helena at another, has troubled some readers, who feel that Shakespeare profanes the idea of true love by treating it as inconstant and subject to outside manipulation. It is important to remember, however, that while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains elements of romance, it is not a true love story like *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's aim is not to comment on the nature of true love but rather to mock gently the melodramatic afflictions and confusions that love induces. Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Lysander are meant not to be romantic archetypes but rather sympathetic figures thrown into the confusing circumstances of a romantic farce.

Like much farce, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relies heavily on misunderstanding and mistaken identity to create its humorous entanglements. Oberon's unawareness of the presence of a second Athenian couple—Lysander and Hermia—in the forest enables Puck's mistaken application of the flower's juice. This confusion underscores the crucial role of circumstance in the play: it is not people who are responsible for what happens but rather fate. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, oppositely, Shakespeare forces his characters to make crucial decisions that affect their lives.

Much of the comic tension in this scene (and throughout the rest of the play, as the confusion wrought by the love potion only increases) stems from the fact that the solution to the love tangle seems so simple to the reader/audience: if Demetrius could simply be made to love Hermia, then the lovers could pair off symmetrically, and love would be restored to a point of balance. Shakespeare teases the audience by dangling the magic flower as a simple mechanism by which this resolution could be achieved. He uses this mechanism, however, to cycle through a number of increasingly ridiculous arrangements before he allows the love story to arrive at its inevitable happy conclusion.

Act Three, Scene One

Summary

The craftsmen meet in the woods at the appointed time to rehearse their play. Since they will be performing in front of a large group of nobles (and since they have an exaggerated sense of the delicacy of noble ladies), Bottom declares that certain elements of the play must be changed. He fears that Pyramus's suicide and the lion's roaring will frighten the ladies and lead to the actors' executions. The other men share Bottom's concern, and they decide to write a prologue explaining that the lion is not really a lion nor the sword really a sword and assuring the ladies that no one will really die. They decide also that, to clarify the fact that the story takes place at night and that Pyramus and Thisbe are separated by a wall, one man must play the wall and another the moonlight by carrying a bush and a lantern.

As the craftsmen rehearse, Puck enters and marvels at the scene of the "hempen homespuns" trying to act (III.i.65). When Bottom steps aside, temporarily out of view of the other craftsmen, Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. When the ass-headed Bottom reenters the scene, the other men become terrified and run for their lives. Delighting in the mischief, Puck chases after them. Bottom, perplexed, remains behind.

In the same grove, the sleeping Titania wakes. When she sees Bottom, the flower juice on her eyelids works its magic, and she falls deeply and instantly in love with the ass-headed weaver. She insists that he remain with her, embraces him, and appoints a group of fairies—Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed—to see to his every wish. Bottom takes these events in stride, having no notion that his head has been replaced with that of an ass. He comments that his friends have acted like asses in leaving him, and he introduces himself to the fairies. Titania looks on him with undisguised love as he follows her to her forest bower.

Analysis

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is roughly such that Act I introduces the main characters and the conflict; Act II sets up the interaction among the Athenian lovers, the fairies, and the craftsmen (the lovers wander through the forest, the fairies make mischief with the love potion); and Act III develops the comical possibilities of these interactions. As Act III is the first act in which all three groups appear, the fantastic contrasts between them are at their most visible.

The craftsmen's attempt at drama is a comedy of incongruity, as the rough, unsophisticated men demonstrate their utter inability to conceive a competent theatrical production. Their proposal to let the audience know that it is night by having a character play the role of Moonshine exemplifies their straightforward, literal manner of

thinking and their lack of regard for subtlety. In their earthy and practical natures, the craftsmen stand in stark contrast to the airy and impish fairies.

The fairies' magic is one of the main components of the dreamlike atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it is integral to the plot's progression. It throws love increasingly out of balance and brings the farce into its most frenzied state. With the youths' love tangle already affected by the potion, Shakespeare creates further havoc by generating a romance across groups, as Titania falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom. Obviously, the delicate fairy queen is dramatically unsuited to the clumsy, monstrous craftsman. Shakespeare develops this romance with fantastic aplomb and heightens the comedy of the incongruity by making Bottom fully unaware of his transformed state. Rather, Bottom is so self-confident that he finds it fairly unremarkable that the beautiful fairy queen should wish desperately to become his lover. Further, his ironic reference to his colleagues as asses and his hunger for hay emphasize the ridiculousness of his lofty self-estimation.

Act Three, Scene Two

Summary

In another part of the forest, Puck tells Oberon about the predicament involving Titania and Bottom. Oberon is delighted that his plan is working so well. Hermia, having discovered Demetrius after losing Lysander, enters the clearing with Demetrius. Puck is surprised to see the woman he saw earlier with a different man from the one he enchanted. Oberon is surprised to see the man he ordered Puck to enchant with a different woman. He realizes that a mistake has been made and says that he and Puck will have to remedy it. Hermia presses Demetrius about Lysander's whereabouts, fearing that he is dead, but Demetrius does not know where Lysander has gone, and he is bitter and reproachful that Hermia would rather be with Lysander than with him. Hermia grows angrier and angrier, and Demetrius decides that it is pointless to follow her. He lies down and falls asleep, and Hermia stalks away to find Lysander.

When Hermia is gone, Oberon sends Puck to find Helena and squeezes the flower juice onto Demetrius's eyelids. Puck quickly returns, saying that Helena is close behind him. Helena enters with Lysander still pledging his undying love to her. Still believing that he is mocking her, Helena remains angry and hurt. The noise of their bickering wakes Demetrius, who sees Helena and immediately falls in love with her. Demetrius joins Lysander in declaring this love. Lysander argues that Demetrius does not really love Helena; Demetrius argues that Lysander is truly in love with Hermia. Helena believes that they are both mocking her and refuses to believe that either one loves her.

Hermia reenters, having heard Lysander from a distance. When she learns that her beloved Lysander now claims to love Helena, as does Demetrius, she is appalled and incredulous. Helena, who is likewise unable to fathom that both men could be in love with her, assumes that Hermia is involved in the joke that she believes the men are playing on her, and she chides Hermia furiously for treating their friendship so lightly. Lysander and Demetrius are ready to fight one another for Helena's love; as they lunge at one another, Hermia holds Lysander back, provoking his scorn and disgust: "I will shake thee from me like a serpent" (III.ii.262). Hermia begins to suspect that Helena has somehow acted to steal Lysander's love from her, and she surmises that, because she is short and Helena is tall, Helena must have used her height to lure Lysander. She grows furious with Helena and threatens to scratch out her eyes. Helena becomes afraid, saying that Hermia was always much quicker than she to fight. Demetrius and Lysander vow to protect Helena from Hermia, but they quickly become angry with each other and storm off into the forest to have a duel. Helena runs away from Hermia, and Hermia, reannouncing her amazement at the turn of events, departs.

Oberon dispatches Puck to prevent Lysander and Demetrius from fighting and says that they must resolve this confusion by morning. Puck flies through the forest hurling insults in the voices of both Lysander and Demetrius, confusing the would-be combatants until they are hopelessly lost.

Act Three, Scene Three

Summary

Eventually, all four of the young Athenian lovers wander back separately into the glade and fall asleep. Puck squeezes the love potion onto Lysander's eyelids, declaring that in the morning all will be well.

Analysis

The confusion in Act III continues to heighten, as the Athenian lovers and the fairies occupy the stage simultaneously, often without seeing each other. The comedy is at its silliest, and the characters are at their

most extreme: Helena and Hermia nearly come to blows as a result of their physical insecurities, and Lysander and Demetrius actually try to have a duel. The plot is at its most chaotic, and, though there is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the action is at its most intense. With the falling action of Acts IV and V, however, matters will sort themselves out quickly and order will be restored.

Like Act III, scene i, Act III, scene ii serves a mainly developmental role in the plot structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, focusing on the increasing confusion among the four Athenian lovers. Now that both men have been magically induced to switch their love from Hermia to Helena, the vanities and insecurities of both women become far more pronounced. Helena's low self-esteem prevents her from believing that either man could really be in love with her. Hermia, who is used to having both men fawn on her, has her vanity stung by the fact that they are suddenly cold and indifferent toward her. She reveals a latent insecurity about her short stature when she assumes that Helena has used her height ("her personage, her tall personage") to win Lysander's love, and her quick temper is revealed in Helena's fear that Hermia will attack her (III.ii.293). The men's exaggerated masculine aggression leads them to vow to protect Helena from the dreaded Hermia—a ridiculous state of affairs given that they are two armed men whereas Hermia is a tiny, unarmed woman. Their aggression betrays Helena, however, as the men refocus it on their competition for her love.

The potion is responsible for the confusion of the lovers' situation; thus, Shakespeare links the theme of magic to the motif of imbalanced love, which dominates the scene. Had the love potion never been brought into play, the Athenian lovers would still be tangled in their romantic mess, but they would all understand it, whereas the fairies' meddling has left both Hermia and Helena unable to comprehend the situation. Additionally, Puck's magical ventriloquism is what prevents Lysander and Demetrius from killing each other at the end of the scene. Thus, magic both brings about their mutual hostility (to this point, Lysander has not been antagonistic toward Demetrius) and resolves it.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (Act Four, Scene One)

Summary

As the Athenian lovers lie asleep in the grove, Titania enters with Bottom, still with the head of an ass, and their fairy attendants. Titania tells Bottom to lie down with his head in her lap, so that she may twine roses into his hair and kiss his "fair large ears" (IV.i.4). Bottom orders Peaseblossom to scratch his head and sends Cobweb to find him some honey. Titania asks Bottom if he is hungry, and he replies that he has a strange appetite for hay. Titania suggests that she send a fairy to fetch him nuts from a squirrel's hoard, but Bottom says that he would rather have a handful of dried peas. Yawning, he declares that he is very tired. Titania tells him to sleep in her arms, and she sends the fairies away. Gazing at Bottom's head, she cries, "O how I love thee, how I dote on thee!" and they fall asleep (IV.i.42).

Puck and Oberon enter the glade and comment on the success of Oberon's revenge. Oberon says that he saw Titania earlier in the woods and taunted her about her love for the ass-headed Bottom; he asked her for the Indian child, promising to undo the spell if she would yield him, to which she consented. Satisfied, Oberon bends over the sleeping Titania and speaks the charm to undo the love potion. Titania wakes and is amazed to find that she is sleeping with the donkeylike Bottom. Oberon calls for music and takes his queen away to dance. She says that she hears the morning lark, and they exit. Puck speaks a charm over Bottom to restore his normal head, and he follows after his master.

As dawn breaks, Theseus, his attendants, Hippolyta, and Egeus enter to hear the baying of Theseus's hounds. They are startled to find the Athenian youths sleeping in the glade. They wake them and demand their story, which the youths are only partly able to recall—to them, the previous night seems as insubstantial as a dream. All that is clear to them is that Demetrius and Helena love each other, as do Lysander and Hermia. Theseus orders them to follow him to the temple for a great wedding feast. As they leave, Bottom wakes. He says that he has had a wondrous dream and that he will have Peter Quince write a ballad of his dream to perform at the end of their play.

Analysis

Barely 300 lines long, Act IV is the shortest and most transitional of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* five acts. The first three serve respectively to introduce the characters, establish the comic situation, and develop the comedy; Act IV ends the conflict and leads to the happy ending in Act V. What is most remarkable, perhaps, is the speed with which the conflict is resolved and the farce comes to an end; despite the ubiquity of chaos in Act III, all that

is necessary to resolve matters is a bit of potion on Lysander's eyelids and Oberon's forgiveness of his wife. The climactic moment between Titania and Oberon, during which she agrees to give him the Indian boy, is not even shown onstage but is merely described.

Though Demetrius's love of Helena is a by-product of the magic potion rather than an expression of his natural feelings, love has been put into balance, allowing for a traditional marriage ending. As is often the case with Shakespeare, the dramatic situation is closely tied to the circumstances of the external environment; just as the conflict is ending and a semblance of order is restored among the characters, the sun comes up. There is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; rather, as soon as the scenario has progressed to a suitable degree of complication and hilarity, Shakespeare simply invokes the fairies' magic to dispel all conflict. As the sun comes up, the reappearance of Theseus and Hippolyta, who symbolize the power and structure of the outside world, begins to dispel the magical dream of the play.

Theseus and Hippolyta bookend the play. They are extremely important figures both at its beginning and at its end, but they disappear entirely during the main action in the magical forest. The duke and his Amazon bride are romanticized in the play, but they belong solely to the nonmagical waking world, where they remain wholly in control of their own feelings and actions. An important element of the dream realm, as the lovers come to realize upon waking in a daze, is that one is in control of neither oneself nor one's surroundings. In this way, the forest and fairies contribute to the lovers' sense of their experience as a dream, even though the action happens largely while they are awake.

Act Four, Scene Two

Summary

At Quince's house, the craftsmen sit somberly and worry about their missing friend Bottom. Having last seen him shortly before the appearance of the ass-headed monster in the forest, the craftsmen worry that he has been felled by this terrifying creature. Starveling suspects that the fairies have cast some enchantment on Bottom. Flute asks whether they will go through with the play if Bottom does not return from the woods, and Peter Quince declares that to do so would be impossible, as Bottom is the only man in Athens capable of portraying Pyramus. The sad craftsmen agree that their friend is the wittiest, most intelligent, and best person in all of Athens.

Snug enters with an alarming piece of news: Theseus has been married, along with "two or three lords and ladies" (presumably Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena), and the newlyweds are eager to see a play (IV.ii.16). Flute laments Bottom's absence, noting that Bottom would certainly have won a great deal of money from the admiring duke for his portrayal of Pyramus.

Just then, Bottom bursts triumphantly into the room and asks why everyone looks so sad. The men are overjoyed to see him, and he declares that he has an amazing story to tell them about his adventure in the forest. Quince asks to hear it, but Bottom says that there is no time: they must don their costumes and go straight to the duke's palace to perform their play. As they leave, Bottom tells them not to eat onions or garlic before the play, as they must be prepared to "utter sweet breath" (IV.ii.36).

Analysis

This brief comic scene returns the focus of the play to the subplot of the Athenian craftsmen. Structurally, Act IV, scene ii represents something of a new beginning for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the main conflict of the play has been resolved, but rather than ending with the weddings of the lovers, as is customary in an Elizabethan comedy (the weddings do not even occur onstage here), Shakespeare chooses to include an extended epilogue devoted to sheer comedy. The epilogue takes up all of Act V and centers around the craftsmen's performance of Pyramus and Thisbe for the Athenian crowd. Act IV, scene ii transfers the focus of the play from magic and unbalanced love to a play-within-a-play, in which the themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not too heavy to begin with, are recycled into a form so ridiculous and garbled that the play draws to a wholly untroubled conclusion.

Though the preceding events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been far from tragic, many of the characters have experienced unpleasant emotions, such as jealousy, lovesickness, and insecurity. Act IV, scene ii makes a basic transition from sadness to joy as Bottom's return transforms his fellow craftsmen's sorrow and confusion into delight and eagerness. It is no coincidence that Bottom's reappearance occurs almost simultaneously with the audience being told that the lovers have been married. Just as the marriages dispel the romantic angst of

the play, so does Bottom's return dispel the worry of his comrades. Similarly, the arrival in the forest of Theseus and Hippolyta, representatives of order, coincides with the Athenian lovers' waking from their chaotic, dreamlike romp of the previous night.

Act five, Scene One

Summary

At his palace, Theseus speaks with Hippolyta about the story that the Athenian youths have told them concerning the magical romantic mix-ups of the previous night. Theseus says that he does not believe the story, adding that darkness and love have a way of exciting the imagination. Hippolyta notes, however, that if their story is not true, then it is quite strange that all of the lovers managed to narrate the events in exactly the same way.

The youths enter and Theseus greets them heartily. He says that they should pass the time before bed with a performance, and he summons Egeus (or, in some editions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Philostrate) to read him a list of plays, each of which Theseus deems unacceptable. Egeus then tells him of the Pyramus and Thisbe story that the common craftsmen have prepared; warning that it is terrible in every respect, he urges Theseus not to see it. Theseus, however, says that if the craftsmen's intentions are dutiful, there will be something of merit in the play no matter how poor the performance.

The lords and ladies take their seats, and Quince enters to present a prologue, which he speaks haltingly. His strange pauses put the meaning of his words in question, so that he says, "Our true intent is. All for your delight

We are not here. That you should here repent you," though he means to communicate that "Our true intent is all for your delight. / We are not here that you should here repent you" (V.i.114–115). The other players then enter, including two characters performing the roles of Wall and Moonshine. They act out a clumsy version of the story, during which the noblemen and women joke among themselves about the actors' strange speeches and misapprehensions. Bottom, in particular, makes many perplexing statements while playing Pyramus, such as "I see a voice...I can hear my Thisbe's face" (V.i.190–191). Pyramus and Thisbe meet at, and speak across, the actor playing Wall, who holds up his fingers to indicate a chink. Snug, as the lion, enters and pours forth a speech explaining to the ladies that he is not really a lion. He roars, scaring Thisbe away, and clumsily rends her mantle. Finding the bloody mantle, Pyramus duly commits suicide. Thisbe does likewise when she finds her Pyramus dead. After the conclusion of the play, during which Bottom pretends to kill himself, with a cry of "die, die, die, die, die," Bottom asks if the audience would like an epilogue or a bergamask dance; Theseus replies that they will see the dance (V.i.295). Bottom and Flute perform the dance, and the whole group exits for bed.

Act five, Scene 2–Epilogue

Summary

Puck enters and says that, now that night has fallen, the fairies will come to the castle and that he has been "sent with broom before / To sweep the dust behind the door" (V.ii.19–20). Oberon and Titania enter and bless the palace and its occupants with a fairy song, so that the lovers will always be true to one another, their children will be beautiful, and no harm will ever visit Theseus and Hippolyta. Oberon and Titania take their leave, and Puck makes a final address to the audience. He says that if the play has offended, the audience should remember it simply as a dream. He wishes the audience members good night and asks them to give him their hands in applause if they are kind friends.

Analysis

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is somewhat compacted in that the first four acts contain all of the play's main action, with the height of conflict occurring in Act III and a happy turn of events resembling a conclusion in Act IV. Act V serves as a kind of joyful comic epilogue to the rest of the play, focusing on the craftsmen's hilariously bungling efforts to present their play and on the noble Athenians' good-natured jesting during the craftsmen's performance. The heady tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe becomes comical in the hands of the craftsmen. The bearded Flute's portrayal of the maiden Thisbe as well as the melodramatic ("Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall") and nonsensical ("Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams") language of the play strips the performance of any seriousness or profound meaning (V.i.174, V.i.261).

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which comes from an ancient Babylonian legend often reworked in European mythology, would have been familiar to educated members of Shakespeare's audiences. The story likely influenced *Romeo and Juliet*, although Shakespeare also pulled elements from other versions of the *Romeo and Juliet* tale. In both stories, two young lovers from feuding families communicate under cover of darkness; both male lovers erroneously think their beloveds dead and commit suicide, and both females do likewise when they find their lovers dead.

Act five, Scene 1–Epilogue

Summary

Insofar as the fifth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has thematic significance (the main purpose of the play-within-a-play is to provide comic enjoyment), it is that the Pyramus and Thisbe story revisits the themes of romantic hardship and confusion that run through the main action of the play. Pyramus and Thisbe are kept apart by parental will, just as Lysander and Hermia were; their tragic end results from misinterpretation—Pyramus takes Thisbe's bloody mantle as proof that she is dead, which recalls, to some extent, Puck's mistaking of Lysander for Demetrius (as well as Titania's misconception of Bottom as a beautiful lover). In this way, the play-within-a-play lightheartedly satirizes the anguish that earlier plagued the Athenian lovers.

Given the title 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', it is no surprise that one of the main themes of the play is dreams, particularly as they relate to darkness and love. When morning comes, ending the magical night in the forest, the lovers begin to suspect that their experience in the woods was merely a dream. Theseus suggests as much to Hippolyta, who finds it strange that all the young lovers would have had the same dream. In the famous final speech of the play, Puck turns this idea outward, recommending that if audience members did not enjoy the play, they should assume that they have simply been dreaming throughout. This suggestion captures perfectly the delicate, insubstantial nature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: just as the fairies mended their mischief by sorting out the romantic confusion of the young lovers, Puck accounts for the whimsical nature of the play by explaining it as a manifestation of the subconscious.

CAGED BIRD

AN INTRODUCTION

Background of Poet

MAYA ANGELOU - AMERICAN POET, MEMOIRIST, AND ACTRESS

Maya Angelou, original name Marguerite Annie Johnson, (born April 4, 1928, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.—died May 28, 2014, Winston-Salem, North Carolina), American poet, memoirist, and actress whose several volumes of autobiography explore the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression.

NOTABLE WORKS: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", "Down in the Delta", "On the Pulse of Morning", "His Day Is Done."

AWARDS AND HONOURS: Presidential Medal of Freedom (2011), Grammy Award (2002), Grammy Award (1995), Grammy Award (1993).

Although born in St. Louis, Angelou spent much of her childhood in the care of her paternal grandmother in rural Stamps, Arkansas. When she was not yet eight years old, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend and told of it, after which he was murdered; the traumatic sequence of events left her almost completely mute for several years. This early life is the focus of her first autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969; TV movie 1979), which gained critical acclaim and a National Book Award nomination. Subsequent volumes of autobiography include *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013).

In 1940 Angelou moved with her mother to San Francisco and worked intermittently as a cocktail waitress, a prostitute and madam, a cook, and a dancer. It was as a dancer that she assumed her

professional name. Moving to New York City in the late 1950s, Angelou found encouragement for her literary talents at the Harlem Writers' Guild. About the same time, Angelou landed a featured role in a State Department-sponsored production of George Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess*; with this troupe she toured 22 countries in Europe and Africa. She also studied dance with Martha Graham and Pearl Primus. In 1961 she performed in Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*. That same year she was persuaded by a South African dissident to whom she was briefly married to move to Cairo, where she worked for the *Arab Observer*. She later moved to Ghana and worked on *The African Review*.

Angelou returned to California in 1966 and wrote *Black, Blues, Black* (aired 1968), a 10-part television series about the role of African culture in American life. As the writer of the movie drama *Georgia, Georgia* (1972), she became one of the first African American women to have a screenplay produced as a feature film. She also acted in such movies as *Poetic Justice* (1993) and *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995) and appeared in several television productions, including the miniseries *Roots* (1977). Angelou received a Tony Award nomination for her performance in *Look Away* (1973), despite the fact that the play closed on Broadway after only one performance. In 1998 she made her directorial debut with *Down in the Delta* (1998). The documentary *Maya Angelou and Still I Rise* (2016) depicts her life through interviews with Angelou and her intimates and admirers.

Angelou's poetry, collected in such volumes as *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971), *And Still I Rise* (1978), *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987), and *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), drew heavily on her personal history but employed the points of view of various personae. She also wrote a book of meditations, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993), and children's books that include *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me* (1994), *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1998), and the *Maya's World* series, which was published in 2004–05 and featured stories of children from various parts of the world. Angelou dispensed anecdote-laden advice to women in *Letter to My Daughter* (2008); her only biological child was male.

In 1981 Angelou, who was often referred to as "Dr. Angelou" despite her lack of a college education, became a professor of American studies at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Among numerous honours was her invitation to compose and deliver a poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," for the inauguration of U.S. Pres. Bill Clinton in 1993. She celebrated the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in the poem "A Brave and Startling Truth" (1995) and eulogized Nelson Mandela in the poem "His Day Is Done" (2013), which was commissioned by the U.S. State Department and released in the wake of the South African leader's death. In 2011 Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Biography II

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Upon her parents' divorce in 1931, she and her brother were sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother and uncle. A world away from the city life of her early years, Angelou grew up in Stamps' close-knit black neighborhood under her grandmother's strict moral and religious guidance. Nonetheless, Angelou was deeply loved by her family there, and her admiration for her hardworking grandmother—the respected owner of a general store—planted the seeds for her powerful prose about strong black women.

In 1936, Angelou was sent back to St. Louis to live with her mother. When she was 8 years old, her mother's boyfriend raped her, leading to a meager one-day jail sentence. When Angelou's uncles murdered him upon his release, her fear and guilt over naming her assailant led to nearly five years of muteness. Angelou was sent back to Arkansas once again, where she sheltered herself from the world and found comfort in reading classic literature and studying hard at school. Eventually, a loving neighbor helped her find her voice again.

In 1940, Angelou moved to San Francisco with her mother. At age 16, she became the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Around this time, she had a brief fling with a local teenaged boy. One year later, she graduated from high school and subsequently gave birth to her only child, a son named Guy. While her mother embraced her newborn grandson, Angelou had to work hard to support him. She worked intermittently as a dancer, cook, waitress, and prostitute. A brief marriage and a prominent position as a dancer in a San Francisco club inspired her professional name, Maya Angelou. In the 1950s, Angelou moved to New York City. The Harlem Writer's Guild encouraged her budding literary talent, and she performed in several theatrical productions around the world. At one point, Angelou moved to Ghana and worked as a journalist there. In 1966, she moved back to California and wrote scripts for television and film. She became one of the first black female screenwriters and directors in Hollywood. She was also a friend to both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and she worked tirelessly for the civil rights movement. Inspired by her encounters with authors and editors, she eventually decided to turn the anecdotes of her colorful life into autobiographies. In 1969, her first published autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, became a bestseller. Six subsequent autobiographies followed this early success, as well as several volumes of poetry. Her many talents earned her award nominations and wins in multiple fields, from a Pulitzer Prize nomination for poetry to five Grammy awards for her spoken-word albums. In 1981, Angelou was appointed professor of American studies at Wake Forest University, despite the fact that she had never attended college. She also received many honorary degrees from universities over the course of her life.

In 1993, Angelou was invited to read her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. In 2011, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama, and she recited a poem for Nelson Mandela in 2013 upon his passing.

Maya Angelou passed away on May 28th, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Angelou continues to be revered as a woman of many talents who—through her artistic, academic, and humanitarian endeavors—shed light on important issues such as racism, sexism, and economic oppression.

Caged Bird BY MAYA ANGELOU

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings

with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza One

A bird that is not caged takes flight in imagery that revels in the freedom of being carried away by the wind. Wind is compared to a stream and the orange rays of the sun to a body of water in which the bird dips its wings. The final line underlines the power of freedom as the bird “dares to claim the sky.”

Stanza Two

The following stanza begins a comparison of the freedom of an uncaged bird with the imprisonment of a caged bird. Imagery and word choice contribute to this comparison as the bird “stalks” his “bars of rage.” In the final lines the bird is described as having wings that are clipped and feet that are tied. This is why he sings.

Stanza Three

The singing of the caged bird is described. It is a sound infused with fear. It is a tune which can be heard across great distance. It is a song about yearning to be free.

Stanza Four

The contrast shifts back to the bird that is free. This bird yearns not of freedom, but contemplates the arrival of another strong wind and thinks about the big juicy worms which await him come the morning. The sky he calls his own.

Stanza Five

Imagery describing the caged bird takes a menacing turn toward dread. His perch is a “grave of dreams” and his song is a “nightmare scream.” The lines end with a repetition of the imagery of clipped wings, tied feet and singing.

Stanza Six: (*The final stanza is a word for word repeat of stanza three.*)

The singing of the caged bird is described. It is a sound infused with fear. It is a tune which can be heard across great distance. It is a song about yearning to be free.

POEM ANALYSIS

The name of the game in analyzing Maya Angelou’s poem “Caged Bird” is repetition. Repetition is associated with the poem both within its structural composition and from without. First the external examples. For starters, “Caged Bird” is riff on the same basic conceptual idea as Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1899 poem, “Sympathy.” Dunbar’s closing line is justifiably famous, though doubtlessly many people are not aware its origin lies with him:

“I know why the caged bird sings!”

The reason that many people may be confused about the origin is that Dunbar's line also serves as the title of Maya Angelou’s landmark 1969 autobiography. So, in essence, the repetition here is twofold: Angelou looks back to Dunbar’s poem for the title of a lengthy book as well as the title of this short poem. The repetition continues within the text. In line 10 we can find the use of repetition of sound known as alliteration with the phrase “seldom see through.” This alliterative repetition of the “S” sound leads immediately into another literary technique based on repetition. Anaphora is the term given to describe the use of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines which is exactly what occurs here:

“his bars of rage

his wings are clipped and

his feet are tied”

Anaphora will show up again in lines 24 through 26 each of which begins with the word “and.” The most obvious use of repetition within the verse is not so subtle as to need special jargon to point it out. Even someone whose experience in reading poetry is severely limited could detect the most glaring instance of how it exploits the power of repeating itself: the final (sixth) stanza of the poem repeats the third stanza word for word, line for line, punctuation for punctuation. There is absolutely no difference between these two stanzas. In a much longer poem, this particular example of repetition might not stand out so starkly but separating the two identical stanzas are just eight lines consisting of just sixty-five words. This short gap only serves to intensify the repetition of the previous stanza as the poem’s conclusion.

Which is, of course, the whole point of using literary techniques based on the repetition. Alliteration, assonance, rhyme and most assuredly the copying and pasting an entire section of text is not a choice made an author in order to be overlooked. These are choices especially intended to draw the attention of the reader. These are choices, in fact, that are designed especially for the purpose of telling the reader something along the lines of “hey, slow down, pay attention here, this really means something.” And so the question becomes, why is there so much repetition associated with this poem? What is Angelou trying to get the reader to slow down and take note of; what is the repetition pointing toward that she has deemed of vital significance?

The answer lies in that last stanza. If she merely wanted to repeat a stanza for emphasis, she could have ended where she began. Repeating the first stanza as the last stanza definitely gives a poem a confirmed sense of structural solidity. The whole beginning is the end thing, in other words. But the opening stanza is about the free bird. And the free bird is not the bird of the title. And the title is not

about being free, it is about being caged. The poem ends not just on the image of the bird being caged, but the bird singing. Which actually does bring the poem back around to where it began: Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem about knowing why the caged bird sings. It is almost as if Angelou uses repetition to suggest that the reasons why the caged bird sings in Dunbar's symbolic verse about the bondage of slavery is still relevant all these many years later. It is almost as if Angelou uses repetition to suggest that little has actually changed. It is almost as if Angelou uses repetition to say that history has kept repeating.

THEMES

Freedom is Power

The opening stanza describes in lyrical imagery the sheer elation of freedom. The uncaged bird—the free bird—sails on a current of wind and become a portrait of unfettered energy and ambition. The colors of the sky are vivid, and the wind is comparable to forces of a river sweeping downstream. But what really seals the deal is the kicker that comes at the end with the concept that such freedom to fly when and where one wants gives the bird the confidence to dare “to claim the sky.” In the closing image of that opening stanza and the similar conclusion to the fourth stanza when the uncaged bird “names the sky his own” the speaker is making a tangible connection between freedom and power. They are inextricably related; impossible to separate one from the other.

Bondage is Fear

The caged bird is imprisoned in his cage, but it goes beyond merely being locked inside. Inside that cage his wings are clipped and his feet are tied. The third stanza—and its complete repetition as the final stanza—openly asserts that the bird lives in fear as it is described as singing with a fearful trill. Obviously, the bird is terrified because it has been caged and can't understand why, but can understand the desire for freedom. What is significant here, however, is that the bird is not merely caged. One would think caging a bird behind “bars of rage” would be enough, but whomever is keeping the bird in bondage goes a step further. Behind the bars of the closed and locked cage, the owner has clipped its wings and tied its feet to provide another layer of protection against its escaping. Such actively hateful and unnecessary steps indicate that bondage inspires fear not just in the prisoner, but also in the one who has imprisoned them.

Racism

Quite naturally, the content of the poem speaks to the theme of persistent and prevalent racism in American society since the inspiration for Angelou's verse was the poem “Sympathy” by turn of the 20th century African-American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar's parents had both been slaves in Kentucky and so he was keenly aware of the conditions of racism at its least malevolent and its most malevolent. Dunbar's poem transforms the caged bird into a metaphor for slavery, bondage, the lack of freedom and the never-ending urgent dream of attaining it. Angelou feeds off the power of the poetic attack against racism in “Sympathy” to expand and explore its themes from her own perspective as a post-Civil Rights Movement writer.

Oppression and the African-American Experience

The poem describes a “caged bird”—a bird that is trapped in a “narrow cage” with limited mobility, only able to sing about the freedom it has never had and cannot attain. This caged bird is an extended metaphor for the African American community's past and on-going experience of race-based oppression in the United States in particular, and can also be read as portraying the experience of any

oppressed group. The metaphor captures the overwhelming agony and cruelty of the oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of the caged bird.

The poem uses the metaphor of the bird to capture not just the way that oppression imposes overt physical limitations on the oppressed, but also the way that those limitations emotionally and psychologically impact the oppressed. For instance, in lines 10-11 the poem states that the caged bird "can seldom see through his bars," which seems at first as if the poem is going to explain how being in the cage limits the bird's line of sight. But instead, the poem further describes the bars as being "bars of rage"—the bird is imprisoned and certainly the physical bars of the cage limit its line of sight, but the bird can "seldom see" because these conditions make the bird blind with rage. By fusing the limits imposed by the cage with the emotional impact those limits inspire, the poem makes clear that the environment and the anger can't be separated from one another. The oppression of the cage doesn't just keep the bird captive; the captivity changes the bird, and in so doing robs the bird of its very self. As an extended metaphor used to convey the pain of the oppression experienced by the African American community throughout (and before) the history of the United States, aspects of the poem can be read as directly related to that particular African American experience. For instance, the caged bird's song can be seen as an allusion to African American spirituals. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy." Additionally, Angelou's image of the "caged bird" is one borrowed from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," which states, "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me [...] / it is not a carol of joy or glee [...]" What both Dunbar and Douglass are saying is that the oppressed sing not because they are happy, but because they are unhappy. The cause of the caged bird's song explicitly mirrors Douglass and Dunbar's insights: though the song is full of the hope of freedom, the fact that the caged bird can only hope of freedom makes clear that it lacks that freedom. The song may be full of hope, but it is born from a place of deep pain, and the hope can be seen as primarily an attempt to cope with an intolerable situation.

The poem's point about the bird's song springing from sadness is critically important, because, historically, many defenders of slavery and other forms of oppression of African Americans argued that the song and dance that was a part of African American culture indicated that black people were in fact joyful and content with their situation. The idea that such music might be an expression of cultural or emotional pain was ignored (in large part because ignoring it meant that those who benefitted from such oppression could also justify the oppression as not being oppressive at all).

"Caged Bird" actively and explicitly disputes the notion that the musical expression of an oppressed group is a sign of contentment. It is instead an assertion that the opposite is true. And in making such an assertion, the poem refuses to bend to the convenient and racist interpretation of African-American song by white oppressors, and instead asserts that the anguish forced on black communities by white oppression must be acknowledged.

Where this theme appears in the poem: Lines 8-14, Lines 15-22, Lines 27-38.

Freedom vs. Captivity

The poem "Caged Bird" compares and contrasts the experience of a free bird with that of a bird held in captivity. While part of this contrast is meant to convey the injustice forced upon the captive bird, the comparison also allows the poem to explore how a free being thinks and acts, and to argue that freedom is a natural state for living beings. As an extended metaphor for the historical oppression of African Americans in the United States, the idea that freedom is a human's natural state of existence further demonstrates the cruelty and injustice of race-based oppression in the United States. The caged bird's longing for freedom also demonstrates the black community's resilience against this oppression.

The poem's first key insight about freedom pertains to what a free being is allowed to think about. Putting that more concretely: because the free bird is, well, free, it never has to think about its own freedom. Instead, the free bird spends its time living, and doing what it wants. When the free bird thinks, it is only of "another breeze" or "fat worms." Thus, for the free bird, freedom is natural, subconscious. The free bird never has to think about freedom. It simply is free. It is also worth noting the ways in which freedom gives the free bird a sense of entitlement: the speaker notes in line 7 that the free bird "dares to claim the sky," as its own, and repeats this sentiment later in line 26. Despite all the freedom the bird already has, it continues to seek more from the world—it sees its freedom as naturally implying that it should "own" the world. It is difficult not to see this insight as referring more broadly to the way that free people, such as slaveholders in the American Pre-Civil War South, saw their own freedom—and the lack of freedom of the blacks they owned—as indicating that their ownership of their slaves was how things should be. They saw their freedom, rather than a privilege or a natural right, as a signal that they should own everything else.

The caged bird, on the other hand, because it lacks freedom, spends all of its time thinking and singing about freedom. Much like breathing, freedom is experienced as something that is only thought of when it is no longer there. When one can breathe freely, there is no need to think about it—however, when one can't breathe, of course, it becomes the only thing one can think of. In this way, the poem makes clear the emotional and even intellectual exhaustion that comes from a lack of freedom, the way it creates a prison not just for a physical body but also for the mind.

The caged bird, unlike the free bird, is completely immobilized—not only is the bird held captive in a cage, but its wings are clipped and its feet tied; thus, even if the bird were to escape his cage, he would still be unable to move or fly. The total immobilization of the caged bird is likely representative of the layers of discrimination a marginalized person can face, from overt and official policies of slavery and discrimination, to racially-motivated violence, to being written out of history or culture. The caged bird, being tied and clipped, seems to represent the ways oppression not only imprisons individuals and communities, but also how it seeks to limit them in ways that can then be used to justify their imprisonment: for instance, a bird with clipped wings and bound feet couldn't possibly survive outside a cage, so the person who put it there can then justify keeping the bird in the cage to keep it safe. The imprisonment of the bird becomes self-perpetuating, and conveniently (for the one keeping the bird caged) self-justifying.

In a similar vein, the immobilization of the bird could also be read as demonstrating just how overwhelming and cruel oppression can be. A bird that is already caged does not need to also have its wings clipped or its feet tied—in this poem, the bird is subjected to all three. The poem, then, serves as a nuanced and damning portrait of all forms of racism and discrimination, and in particular of the racism and oppression perpetrated by the United States against African Americans.

Freedom as a Universal and Natural Right

Even as "Caged Bird" explores the behavior of the free and the captive, it also makes clear that the desire for freedom is an organic, universal impulse that cannot be bound or destroyed. The poem states that the caged bird sings "of things unknown / but longed for still." The speaker then clarifies: "the caged bird / sings of freedom." Because freedom is a thing "unknown" to the caged bird, the implication is that the caged bird was not taken from his natural environment, but rather was likely born in his cage and has never known anything else. The caged bird has never known freedom, but still understands what freedom is, and yearns for it. That the understanding of freedom seems to be universal suggests that freedom is the natural, biological state of living things.

Given that the caged bird in the poem is an extended metaphor for the historic struggle of the African American community under historical and ongoing racist oppression, the idea that freedom is a biological impulse argues against the inhumane cruelty of oppression. The metaphor also demonstrates the resilience of the black community. Because of the omnipresence of racism throughout United States history, African Americans—like the caged bird—have never experienced true freedom—not in the same way that those who are not forced to endure systemic oppression do. That African Americans nonetheless continue longing for this “thing unknown” illustrates that, despite the hopelessness that the metaphor of the caged bird conveys, the black community’s desire for freedom, and determination to achieve it, remains.

The repetition of the entire third stanza—which also appears, word for word, as the poem’s sixth stanza—further demonstrates the resilience of the black community. In the third stanza, the speaker tells the reader that the caged bird “sings with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still / and his tune is heard / on the distant hill” which demonstrates that, despite the hopelessness of the situation, the bird continues to sing loudly enough that he is heard from far away, inspiring others. The repetition of the stanza as the sixth and final stanza of the poem conveys that the caged bird does not simply give up, but rather will continue to sing for freedom— thus, this repetition seems to suggest that even as the African American community endures its intolerable circumstances, it will continue to yearn and work for freedom.

SYMBOLS, ALLEGORY AND MOTIFS

The Orange Sky

The opening stanza is an enthusiastic appreciation of the possibilities of freedom. The bird which is uncaged and free is ultimately described as dipping its wings in and claiming for itself the sky. When is the sky typically orange? Toward the end of the afternoon before night falls. The symbolism expressed in the wing-dipping and claiming of the sky at the time can be interpreted as the workday being over and “Miller Time” commencing. For slaves, of course, the orange sky has long since faded into the darkness of night before the work is done.

Clipped Wings and Tied Feet

The addition of actual physical obstruction to freedom for a bird already imprisoned in a cage also symbols related to the history of slavery in America. It wasn’t enough for some slaveowners that humans were legally bound to them as property nor that running away had no legal recourse. In order to ensure absolute servitude, physical impairments to any path toward freedom for a slave added as additional disincentives for flight.

“Distant hill”

The third and sixth stanzas are exactly the same. This exact repetition should alert readers to the significance of what is contained therein. What is contained therein is imagery of the caged bird singing a song of a yearning for freedom that can be heard on a “distant hill.” The symbolism here likely refers to the founding concept of the original settlers in America who arrive to escape religious persecution back home. The Puritans looked to the Sermon on the Mount delivered by Jesus to co-opt the phrase “City on a Hill” as a metaphor situating America as a new Jerusalem; a place to start fresh living according to Christian precepts which had been too corrosively corrupted by the Church throughout Europe.

Birdsong

Why does the caged bird sing? Not in terms of what he hopes to gain with the song, but the literal reasoning behind the physical act of opening his throat to whistle his song? The second and fifth stanzas provide the answer and the answer explains the symbolism. He begins singing because his wings are clipped and his feet are tied and so he has no record to do anything about his desire for freedom except give voice to his desire, a symbolic interpretation of the lack of the generation circumstances of having black skin in a system run entirely by those with white skin. When opportunities for action are limited or non-existent, the only tool left is one's voice.

"Fat Worms"

The free bird never has to worry about hunger because the supply of big fat juicy worms always exceeds the demands of the limited number of birds enjoying freedom. This symbolism shouldn't really need any further explanation, but consider freedom not just in terms of taking flight whenever one is so inspired, but as the enjoyment and expectation of certain privileges not enjoyed or expected by others.

The Cage

The cage — which is described as "narrow" — holds the bird captive, preventing it from living and moving freely. This cage comes to define the bird and strip it of its identity, indicated by the fact that the bird is referred to as the "caged bird" for the majority of the poem.

As a symbol, the cage is meant to evoke the cultural and historical oppression of the African American community and its suffering as a result of that oppression—thus, the cage could be seen as representing the literal and legal enslavement of Africans in the United States, which ended in 1865. The cage could also be a representation of the less overt, but still oppressive legal and cultural limitations (such as racial segregation, voter suppression, etc.) of imposed on African Americans following the end of slavery and into the current day.

The cage can also be seen as a representation of the emotional limitations that African Americans have self-imposed out of fear of legal or social retribution. The fact that the cage has come to define the bird's identity (thus making it a caged bird, rather than simply a bird) perhaps represents how race-based oppression reduces people to their race, rather than being fully realized human beings. In turn, this can represent how a marginalized group can come to feel defined by their oppression—how oppression not just limits those who are oppressed, but changes them against their will.

The Free and Caged Birds

The birds in "Caged Bird" can be seen as symbolizing two different racial groups. The caged bird, which has been forced to live its entire life in captivity, can be seen as representing the African American community, who suffer from race-based oppression. The cage holding the caged bird can be seen as symbolizing the bird's oppression, whether in the form of slavery, race-based segregation after the end of slavery, or the subtler but still pervasive and pernicious forms of oppression that continue to oppress African American communities today. The "bars of rage" through which the bird can't see capture the way that oppression faced by African Americans is not just physical, but also emotional and psychological. The caged bird's song recalls African American spirituals and musical traditions, which often focused on a freedom denied to those who were singing them. In all, the caged bird portrays an African American community that has been terrorized by oppression, but that nonetheless continues to yearn and work for freedom.

The free bird symbolizes the white community, which has oppressed African Americans. In particular, the way that the free bird assumes that its freedom gives it the right to "claim the sky" seems to capture the way that the white community has and often continues to see the oppression of African Americans not as a crime, but rather as a sign of white superiority.

Music

Throughout the poem, there are several mentions of the caged bird's song, which the speaker describes as being "of freedom." Along with the musical quality that is achieved through the meter and sense of rhyme throughout "Caged Bird," the caged bird's song is also a symbolic representation of African American culture, emotions, and resilience.

The song, which is described as being sung with a "fearful trill" about "things unknown, but longed for still" is likely an allusion to African American spirituals, which were sung by those enslaved in the United States prior to the Civil War. Historians consider many of these spirituals— many of which are songs that express Christians values, and the desire to be "freed from sin,"— a coded way for the enslaved to express and cope with their suffering under slavery. Thus, the mentions of the caged bird's "song" is likely a nod towards the historic suffering of the African American people under oppression, as well as a demonstration of a cultural coping method. By extension, the caged bird's "song" could be seen as a representation of profound pain.

The caged bird's song could also be interpreted more metaphorically, perhaps representing an outcry from African Americans against their oppression rather than a literal song. Where this symbol appears in the poem:

Line 14: "so he opens his throat to sing.", Lines 15-22: "The caged bird sings / with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still / and his tune is heard / on the distant hill / for the caged bird / sings of freedom.", Line 30: "so he opens his throat to sing."

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Speaker or Narrator, and Point of View

The narrator of the poem is an unnamed person and the poem has been written in third person and from omniscient point of view. The speaker has talked about the oppression of Afro-Americans.

Form and Meter

The poem has been written in free verse. There is musicality in the poem. The slant rhyme has also been used in the by the speaker.

Metaphors and Similes

The metaphors of a 'caged bird' and a 'free bird' have been used to contrast the condition of a person who is enjoying freedom, with a person who is being oppressed and is confined within the bars of slavery. The metaphor of "nightmare scream" has been used for the song of caged bird in the fourth stanza. The 'city on a hill' has been used as a metaphor for Jerusalem in the poem. The metaphor of 'fat worms' has been used for all the privileges that a free person enjoys in his life. The simile of stream has been used for the wind and the simile of water has been used for the sun rays in which the bird dips its wings.

Alliteration and Assonance

The examples of alliteration in the poem are "seldom see through", "the fat worms waiting", "his shadow shouts". The examples of assonance are "shadow shouts on", "his wings are clipped". There are repetitions of vowel sounds 'o' and 'i' respectively.

Irony

There is an irony in the contrasting conditions of both birds. Although both the characters of the poem are birds but one is enjoying all the privileges of life while the other only sings about all those things which he has never experienced, especially freedom.

Genre

Poetry (Auto-biography, Afro-American poetry).

Setting

As the speaker talks about two birds in the poem, so the setting of the poem is usually trees, sky and wind when it comes to the free bird but in case of the caged bird the setting is a cage.

Tone

Resilient, lamenting, mournful.

Protagonist and Antagonist

The caged bird is the protagonist in the poem who sings of freedom despite of his imprisonment while the cage is the antagonist which has confined the bird within itself.

Major Conflict

The major conflict in the poem is between freedom and slavery and between the condition of the caged bird and the free bird.

Climax

The climax comes in the third stanza when the caged bird sings about unknown things, which the free bird enjoys e.g. freedom.

Foreshadowing

The song of freedom foreshadows the freedom of the caged bird.

Understatement

The understatement in the poem is an urge for freedom. The narrator has understated that freedom gives us the power to possess and being caged deprive us of everything.

Allusions

In the poem, allusion to slavery, freedom, Jerusalem, Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" and slave trade have been employed.

Metonymy and Synecdoche

The caged bird represents all the Afro-Americans and all the things which have been imprisoned so it is an example of synecdoche. The distant hill is an example of metonymy because it represents Jerusalem.

Personification

Wind and sun rays have been personified in the first stanza. The narrator has also personified the bird when he/she says that the bird "sings of freedom", "opens his throat to sing" and "names the sky his own". The shadow has also been personified "his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream".

Hyperbole

There is hyperbole in the first stanza when the bird "dares to claim the sky". The hyperbole is also present in the last line of the poem, "he names the sky his own".

Onomatopoeia

"Scream" and "dip" are the examples of onomatopoeia in the poem.

CHARACTER LIST

The Free Bird

The first and fourth stanzas are devoted to an uncaged bird. Imagery is used to describe how the uncaged bird revels in its freedom to ride the current of winds like a fish swimming downstream. When the bird is not actually in flight, its thoughts are about the next burst of wind and the plentiful fat worms just waiting to be eaten.

The Caged Bird

Each of the six stanzas that is not about the free bird is dedicated to the titular imprisoned fowl. The third and sixth stanzas are exactly the same, a repetition of the imagery situated his whistled song as one mixing the terror of being caged with the optimistic hope of one day enjoying freedom. Throughout, the caged bird is portrayed as a symbol of imprisonment and bondage. His shadow is described as a "nightmare scream." His trill is depicted as a song of freedom.