THEMATIC CONCERNS –
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM

LOVE

The course of true love never did run smooth
- Lysander (Act 1, Scene 1)

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
Therefore is winged cupid painted blind.
- Helena (Act 1, Scene 1)

Love in its many forms is the most important theme in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The romantic encounters and subsequent confusions are the cause of the conflict in the play. The tone of the play is so lighthearted that the audience never doubts that things will end happily, and is therefore free to enjoy the comedy without being caught up in the tension of an uncertain outcome.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the difficulty or imbalance of love 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 – two men love the same woman, leaving one woman without a man. This human love circle is matched with the tryst in magical fairyland between Oberon and Titania, with Bottom an accidental pawn in Oberon’s magical whim. This play heads for a traditional outcome, with each pair of lovers correctly reunited and all misgivings forgiven.

The plot revolves around a balance in love reflected with contrasts and resolutions in nature, dreams and appearances. It resolves to a stable outcome, with each pair of lovers correctly reunited and all misgivings forgiven, but the sense of confusion still lingers. Helena still sees Demetrius as “a jewel, mine own and not mine own” (Act 4, Scene 1). Did the magic flower help Demetrius see the truth? But if so, what about what it did to Titania? The play asks us all to stop and think about how well we understand why, who and how we love. Love certainly appears to be presented as a kind of madness, but if there is one certainty about human beings it is that they will do the maddest of things for love.

MAGIC, ILLUSION, DECEPTION, TRICKERY

Fetch me that flow’r, the herb I showed thee once.
The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees.
- Oberon (Act 2, Scene 1)

Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When everything seems double.
- Hermia (Act 4, Scene 1)

The fairies’ magic brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play, and is central to the fantastic atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare uses magic both to embody the almost supernatural power of love (symbolised by the love potion) and to create a surreal world. Misused, the magic causes chaos, but it ultimately resolves the play’s tensions by restoring love to balance among the four 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 laborious and graceless attempts by the craftsmen to stage their play.

Fairies in Shakespeare’s England were above all thought of as tricksters, and Robin Goodfellow (Puck) as chief among them. Tricks create confusion, and so do doubles, which Shakespeare was obsessed with. And yet confusion is very often the only path to deeper understanding of who we really are. So are the fairies friends or foes?
DREAMS

*I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was*
- Bottom (Act 4, Scene 1)

Dreams are an essential theme in the play as they are linked to the world of the fairies and the magical mishaps that occur. In Act 4, Scene 1, Demetrius on waking says, “Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream.” As the lovers and the mechanicals are affected by the fairies and their pranks, it is in sleep that the characters experience strange and hilarious things that only we as the audience see. As these characters awake and try and discover what has happened, they are confounded, “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 to expound this dream,” Bottom says.

Hippolyta’s first words in the play are also evidence of the pervasiveness of dreams (“Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time”), and various characters mention dreams throughout (Act 1, Scene 1). Shakespeare is also interested in the actual workings of dreams and how 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, imagining they have simply been asleep.

MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

*The human mortals want their winter here;*
*No night is now with hymn or carol blest;*
*Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,*
*Pale in her anger, washes all the air,*
*That rheumatic diseases do abound.*
*And thorough this distemperature we see*
*The seasons alter*
- Titania (Act 2, Scene 1)

One of the most constant thematic explorations in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is that of the civilized world of Athens vs. the natural (and supernatural) world of the forest and its fairy inhabitants. Sometimes the Athenians are part of the natural world and complemented by it, as the story often speaks of fertility during the midsummer festival, or that crops that respond to seasonal change. Then in contrast there is a sense of alienation due to the characters separation from nature and the strength of their ties to an urban existence. Part of the play’s chaos occurs when the Athenians step foot into the magical world of Oberon and Titania’s forest, with its own chaos and upheaval. Both the Athenian lovers and the Mechanicals seek escape from their urban lives. The lovers attempt to flee the structured rules and dominance of Athens and its rulers and the Mechanicals set out to find a place for rehearsal in a creatively liberating space, free from the distractions of city life. The natural world in the play is an escape for the characters, but an ultimate reminder of the comfort each of them prefer as the ultimately return to their Athenian world.
**LIMINAL SPACE**

*Half sleep, half waking: but as yet, I swear, I cannot truly say how I came here.*  
- Lysander (Act 4, Scene 1)

*Ay me, for pity! what a dream was here! Lysander, look how I do quake with fear: Methought a serpent eat my heart away, And you sat smiling at his cruel pray.*  
- Hermia (Act 2, Scene 2)

Liminal literally means ‘threshold’. It is the space between, the area of transition from one thing to another. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the Athenians have left the orderly world of the city for an unruly space ungoverned by any familiar laws. This play takes people out of the built, structured world where the rules are obvious, and into a no-man’s-land. Court/forest, day/night, waking/sleeping, love/abuse – most of the characters spend the play unsure of what space they are occupying between these various kinds of opposite states.

Hermia has a dream that she is being attacked by a snake. This is the only time in the play that someone has an actual, real dream, and yet characters are constantly plagued with the suspicion that they are dreaming. Hermia’s dream tells her something very real about what is happening around her; the dream is true, the waking is illusion. Hippolyta’s first words in the play are also evidence of the pervasiveness of dreams (“Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time”), and various characters mention dreams throughout (Act 1, Scene 1). Shakespeare is also interested in the actual workings of dreams and how time loses its normal sense of flow so that the impossible occurs. 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 simply think of it as a dream, and that they have been asleep.

In Act 4, Scene 1, Demetrius on waking says, “Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream.” As the lovers and the mechanicals are affected by the fairies and their pranks, the characters cling to the idea of sleep to account for the strange and hilarious things they experienced, but it is an inadequate explanation. Sleep is actually only the transitional space that gets them from the world of magic back to the reality they know. As these characters awake and try and discover what has happened, they are confounded: “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 to expound this dream,” Bottom says. “My Oberon! What visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamour’d of an ass,” says Titania. But Bottom’s dream and Titania’s vision were true, as far as we, the audience could see. Theatres, of course, are the ultimate liminal spaces, neither reality nor pure illusion.