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English 5500

Teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Discussion of Various Interpretations of Themes

Shakespeare has been at the center of the high school English curriculum in the United States since the advent of the McGuffey Readers in the mid-nineteenth century to the revision of the canon at the end of the twentieth (Crowl xiii). When the National Curriculum in English first came into existence in 1990, Shakespeare was the only author compulsorily prescribed for study by all the nation's children (Blocksidge 2). This enforced remedy has reflected nationwide on English curricula at all grade levels more than two decades, and as of today, The National Curriculum in English requires all students to have some experience of the works of Shakespeare in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Grade. Shakespeare has not only been effective on the content of English curricula, but also has shown its impact on standardized assessment. Gibson asserts that the majority of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students will soon be tested on one of the three Shakespeare plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *Julius Caesar* in the writing section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (140). Among those, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has shone out because of its adaptability and cohesiveness with secondary school English curricula. According to the Cooperative Testing Division of Educational Testing Service survey, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is among the seven most popular Shakespeare plays with secondary school teachers (Black 21).

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the three Shakespeare plays to be studied in schools as part of the English National Curriculum. It is also one of the best loved and most performed of Shakespeare's plays (Griffiths 1). It is a delightful play to teach since its characters

and themes appeal to students: “mismatched and quarrelsome lovers, foolish stooges, powerful spirits, and magical transformations” (O’Brien 38). It is especially suitable for introducing students to Shakespeare because of the fairies, music, comical mistakings of the lovers, and the incomparable farce of Pyramus and Thisbe (Kehler 4).

When we think of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as such a delightful and appropriate play for students, it is impossible not to think of the opportunities teachers can provide students while teaching *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. They can teach students not to be imprisoned in a single point of view by introducing and discussing the interesting events, themes, and characters and their various interpretations throughout the years. Shakespeare’s works have this potential quality as they offer many opportunities for interpretation in terms of their characters, stories, and themes. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has attracted a lot of attention not only from scholars but also from any people who want to criticize the play. Many various interpretations of characters and themes have emerged since the play began to be analyzed critically. These various interpretations have shaped the way *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is taught. The role of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has become more important in English curriculum because these various interpretations have opened new pedagogical opportunities for teaching Shakespeare in general, and for teaching the *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in specific. This paper will analyze some of the most prominent interpretations of the themes, love and dream in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in connection to what they reveal about teaching of the play.

The themes, ‘love’ and ‘dream’ in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have been critically analyzed for many years although critical attention followed by critical interpretations began decades after the plays were originally written. For example, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was written in the sixteenth century, and critical attention to the play was given at the end of the

seventeenth century. Critical attention to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been followed by critical interpretations which emerged in the early eighteenth century focusing on the imaginative creation of the fairies.

Various themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been at the focus of the critics throughout centuries. Eighteenth century scholars made critics on drama, nineteenth-century critics on character, twentieth-century writers on language and theme, and recently on political issues (Kehler 3). In the eighteenth century conventional praises of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* 'wild, irregular genius' and fairy world went along with "neo-classic criticism of its anachronisms and a growing appreciation of the play's character to the plot" (Kennedy 15). Critical responses began to occur in the Romantic period, and various other interpretations took place in the nineteenth century. One of the significant criticism was made by August Wilhelm Schlegel, a German translator, in early nineteenth century. He focused on unity in the multiple plot lines, noted that the ass head literalizes Bottom's true nature, identified the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe as a burlesque of the adventures of the Athenian lovers, and considered the entire play as a source of delight (Kehler 7). It was not until mid-1970s that feminist criticism began to appear. Since then, feminist interpretations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have focused on Oberon's motives as paternal and that it was time for the changling child to leave his surrogate mother and enter a man's world. The play was also seen as ending with the sundering of female friendships, but with heterosexuality unstable and homoeroticism suggested (Kehler 45).

In relation to the various interpretations of the play throughout the years, there has been agreements as well as disagreements among the scholars. For instance, while Clarke in 1863 argued that the four lovers with their love-crosses and perplexities are the chief agents in the play, with Puck producing a significant movement in the machinery, and Theseus and Hippolyta

as splendid frames to the picture (49), Brooke in 1971 counterargued to him by suggesting that fairies are the main agents that set the play with Theseus restoring harmony (25). All these interpretations and different perspectives have affected and enhanced the way Shakespeare is taught in schools. The following section of the paper summarizes the themes, love and dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by emphasizing the critics on each theme and how teaching each theme enhances the teaching and understanding of Shakespeare.

## **Themes**

### **Love**

The dominant theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love. The play begins with a representation of the harmony between Theseus and Hippolyta, a love that has reconciled the two former enemies after he conquered her in battle (McMahon 21). The kind of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be best explained through Lysander's words "The course of true love never did run smooth" (1. 1. 134) explaining the misadventures of six pairs of lovers (Theseus-Hippolyta, Hermia-Demetrius, Helena-Lysander, Titania-Oberon, Thisbe-Pyramus, Titania- ass-headed Bottom). Love is the central theme in the play; however, it is not represented as smooth as we expect. Instead, difficulty of romance is highlighted with troubles of romance.

Love produces many negative consequences throughout the play. Egeus's love for his daughter is such that he's willing to see her put to death if she does not accept to marry Lysander. Love is out of balance in the relationships among the four Athenians: Hermia loves Lysander, Lysander loves Hermia, Helena loves Demetrius, Demetrius loves Hermia. The love potion put on young Athenians carelessly only makes their love affair more chaotic and confusing.

Besides the complex love relationship among young Athenians, there are a couple of more love stories, none of which runs smooth. Titania, the Queen of the fairies, and Oberon, the King of the fairies fight with each other in order to take a magical Indian child in their care. When Titania refuses to give the child to Oberon, he places a spell on her to wake up and fall in love with the first creature she sees. Interestingly, the first thing she sees is ass-headed Bottom, so she falls in love with it. Oberon's love for Titania produces his extreme jealousy over the changling child. After Oberon takes the child, he fixes that awkward relationship, too.

In addition, the workers of the Athens perform a play within play, in which it talks about the love relationship of Pyramus and Thisbe whose parents don't let them marry, so they escape into the forest and commit suicide because each thinks the other has been killed by a lion. Even though the story is similar to the love story of Hermia and Lysander, the former ends in tragedy while the other ends in happiness.

Although the three aforementioned love stories are different from each other, they all depict the difficulty of love. Shakespeare presents the difficulty of love as love out of balance, which has been interpreted in many different ways by various scholars over the years. Malone in 1790 saw the love relationship among the young Athenians, Hermia, Demetrius, Helena, and Lysander as childish solitudes and said they are shadows of each other (32). Neilson in 1870 viewed the tangled love affair of the four lovers occurring frequently in romantic fiction as a framework for fantasy and humor (qtd. in Hudson 125). Boas in 1927 resembled the lovers in the play to be more shadowy than the 'shadows' of the fairy king and queen (46). In a different perspective, Mizener in 1969 claimed the characterization of the four lovers to be faint in that Lysander and Demetrius are characters that seem hard to distinguish from one another while Helena and Hermia are slightly distinct (165). Bloom in 1996 saw love as a revelation to each of

the sexes that it is but a fragment of another, which, "by combined truth and illusion, seems at first concentrated in a person of the opposite sex" (91). McMahon in 2001 thought that the young lovers are more interesting as a group than as individuals and that their characters are very similar in that they are like all young lovers who fall in and out of love quickly and express their emotions extremely (24). Black in 2004 considered the use of love potion to make the lovers fall in and out of love with one another to remind us that real love is somewhat magical (87).

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents love from various perspectives and complexities that any high school student might encounter in their lives. Shakespeare artfully fictionalizes love in the play and helps audiences to feel and think about love in different ways repeatedly. Difficulty of love between two real lovers (Hermia and Lysander), complexity of love between Demetrius and Helena, harshness of love between father and daughter (Hermia and Egeus), love ending in marriage between previous enemies (Theseus and Hippolita), rival love in fairy world (Titania and Oberon), and incomprehensible love between a fairy (Titania) and transformed Bottom are all examples of love that appears in the play in different ways. There are three different advantages of such an enhanced love web from educational perspective: authenticity, criticism, and interest. Authentic learning experiences are sought in educational settings. Any high school student can experience one or more forms of these love in their lives. Thus, students can internalize their experiences and find many similarities once they read, watch, or act the play. Engagement with real life issues also helps learners to gain better understanding of Shakespeare and his plays and supports their motivation and enthusiasm. Second, when learners find more about themselves in the play, they possibly start in-depth discussions in which they share and exchange ideas and experiences about the play or real life experiences in terms of love. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides various opportunities to learners to criticize different

forms of love, and these critics and discussions possibly enhance and deepen learners' understanding of the play. Love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has the potential to help learners to authenticate the content which is enriched through various discussions and to facilitate motivation and interest of learners in English literature.

### **Dream**

Another prominent theme in the play is dream. Shakespeare consciously creates the play as dreamlike. Dreams represent the world that brings together the fantasy and reality (Brooke 70). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* describes a nighttime dream experience that its characters cannot absorb and comprehend by simple reason and common sense (Nostbakken 97). Characters fall asleep and wake having dreamed, having magic so that they are in a dreamlike state, or thinking that they have dreamed (McMahon 22). That Shakespeare created a dreamlike play on purpose is clear in Puck's last speech to the audience:

If we shadows have offended,

Think but this and all is mended:

That you have but slumbered here

While these visions did appear.

And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding than a dream . (5.1.440-45)

Various interpretations reveal many insights into the theme, dream, throughout the play. Kennedy in 1999 argued that the quality of the play appeared most in the dreams (42). In his

book, "An Introduction to the Reading of Shakespeare", Boas expresses the dream in the play thoroughly:

In the dream, we are not gravely concerned with the fate of the two pairs of lovers. What enthralls us is the contact, and the contrast, between the Warwickshire country bumpkins- so called Athenian craftsmen, Bottom and his companions, really are- and the exquisite fairy world ruled by Oberon and Titania, a world for which the folk-lore of the time furnished many a hint, but to which Shakespeare's art has given so marvelous a consistency and verisimilitude. (19)

Mizener in 1969 explained that although all plays can be considered to be dreams, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is more dreamlike than other plays in that it includes incongruities- "mixtures of the possible and impossible, of the reasonable and irrational-that reminds us some dreams" (159). He further argued that dreams in the play tell us that man's imagination may be more practical and human than his reason (160). In a different perspective, Bloom in 1996 saw dream in the play as a name for the world out of which man emerges into conscious life, the world of the unconscious as we have a habit of calling it today. Different from other scholars, Gervinus, one of the most prominent of German critics does not view play as a dream but an ethical construct, an allegorical depiction of the errors of sensual love which here correspond to dream (qtd. in Kehler 9).

From an educational perspective, dreams and imagination are also essential for better learning outcomes. Our thoughts are independent in dreams, and falling in love with a fairy is perfectly acceptable in dreams. It helps learners to understand that their imagination is endless by emphasizing how imaginative Shakespeare is and to understand that what they can create for literature is endless. It is not surprising that critics on dream polarized under two opposite groups



since it is not clear whether the whole play is a dream. The ambiguity on dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is also a great opportunity for teaching Shakespeare and English literature. The dream in the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides some opportunities to the learners in terms of authenticity and fiction. Everyone dreams about interesting people or events and sometimes feels as if it were real. There are many instances that people wake up crying in the real life because of something they cry in the dream. This is just one perspective of how the play might help learners to authenticate the content of the play and engage more deeply in it. On the other hand, if someone evaluates the whole play as a dream then this situation creates new opportunities for endless discussions and critics in terms of teaching and learning Shakespeare's imagination in English literature.

### **Conclusion**

The teaching of Shakespeare has been influenced by the critical debates, especially of the 1980s. Blocksidge explains the impact of critical interpretations on the teaching of Shakespeare in his book, *Shakespeare in Education*:

These have also affected the way in which Shakespeare is taught in schools, particularly to older pupils. The 1980s provided a number of new perspectives on Shakespeare, as both a literary and educational phenomenon. The rather belated arrival of critical theory in Britain caused shockwaves throughout university English departments, as explicitly post-structuralist, Marxist, feminist and – perhaps most significantly for Shakespeare- new historicist and cultural materialist readings of his works were published. A good deal of Shakespeare criticism in the 1980s was not only radical in method, but, politically, explicitly oppositional at a time when the Conservative government was taking a hostile stance towards universities, and by extension, to intellectuals generally. (11)

These and other critical interpretations reveal many implications about the teaching of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. First of all, while all the characters were played by men in the earlier productions of the play, more mixture of girls and boys have been effective after multiculturalism. In today's classrooms, girls and boys can even act different genders based on the circumstances (e.g. there might not be enough girls or boys) or preferences (e.g. teacher might want to create a discussion atmosphere on the impact of acting different genders in the play). In terms of multicultural education, it is very significant to create a discussion atmosphere where students can discuss the racial, ethnic, and gender-related problems they face in their lives. Research shows that students grow when coursework helps students comprehend racial, ethnic, and gender-related problems they see (Sleeter, 2013). I think teachers can easily extend the discussion by referring to the gender issues in Shakespeare's time, in his plays, and more specifically in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Authenticity is one of the key elements of educational practices and success. Teachers should constantly seek new opportunities to incorporate learning experiences in students' real life settings. Teachers should be pathfinders, facilitating students' attempts to make connections between themselves and a Shakespeare play (Warner 147). The themes 'love' and 'dream' are among the most prominent themes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that majority of the high school students can make connections to their lives or imaginative worlds. The 'love' theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the dominant theme dealing with the love affairs of six pair of lovers. All the love stories are complex love relationships, which produce many negative consequences throughout the play. Therefore, many critical interpretations have been made regarding the love affairs in the play. The love affairs, of especially young Athenian lovers, was found as either childish, interesting as a group rather than individuals, faint characterizations, or

representatives of fantasy and humor by the critics. Another prominent theme in the play is the 'dream' theme. Characters in the play feel themselves in the dream from time to time either because they really dream (four lovers) or because of the love potion fairies puts on them (Puck's love potion on the four lovers and Oberon's spell on Titania) or because of the tricks Puck makes to the characters (Puck puts an ass head to Bottom's head). Even at the end of the play, Puck makes a speech that makes the audience think that the whole play might be a dream. These different dream scenes throughout the play have attracted the attention of many critics. They viewed dream in the play either as mixture of possible and impossible, of the reasonable and irrational, a way to emerge into conscious life, and even as a depiction of the errors of sensual love. These various interpretations of the themes 'love' and 'dream' impact the way English teachers interpret and teach the play. While teaching the play, they either give significance to young lovers as the main characters or treat them as faint characters depending on which critic they read. They either emphasize the dreams as a world of fantasy or ignore the significance of the dreams throughout the play and don't teach it at all again by depending on which critic they read. Enriched discussions about the themes of "play" and "dream" not only enhance the act of play, but also discussion/critique of the play in classroom settings, and might affect students' psychosocial factors of learning such as motivation, satisfaction and attitudes towards English literature.

Teachers can improve students' attitudes towards Shakespeare through appropriate pedagogy. There is much variation in teacher's techniques to teach Shakespeare. Some teachers begin by reading the whole play before working on each scene in detail, others like working on a scene at a time, or telling the story at the start and sketching the plot and characters, or using a video of the play as a start (Gibson 145). As it can be realized, there is no one way to teach

Shakespeare. Shakespeare's works offer many opportunities for interpretation in terms of their characters, stories, and themes. Therefore, teachers can easily make connections between students and the play because the play presents love and dream from various perspectives that any high school student might encounter in their lives. Although there are variations in the techniques teachers use to teach Shakespeare, what they teach is influenced by the different interpretations of the play that they read and are influenced by. It is significant for teachers to read and reflect on the interpretations or critics that will be most beneficial to the students.

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