

2013 Study Guide for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research fairies in English folklore. How were fairies perceived in Shakespeare's day? What were the distinctions between "good" fairies and "bad" fairies? What is a changeling? These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changeling>
<http://mdsmrnytdrm.blogspot.com/2009/05/elizabethan-englands-fairies.html>
2. Research the traditional stories about Puck, The Green Man and Robin Goodfellow in English folklore. These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.boldoutlaw.com/puckrobin/puckages.html>
http://www.pantheon.org/articles/g/green_man.html
3. Research the mythological figure, Cupid. In what ways is he similar to Puck? In what ways is he different? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Cupid.html>
<http://www.wisegeek.com/who-is-cupid.htm>
4. In English folk tradition, what are the festivals of Midsummer also known as Summer Solstice and May Day? When did they take place? What pagan rituals were associated with them? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/customs/year/may.htm>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midsummer>
<http://libcom.org/library/a-history-of-mayday>
5. Shakespeare often takes his characters out of the city and into the forest. What are the significant differences between these two settings? How might people behave differently in the city and in the forest? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-green-world.htm>

6. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes references to gods and characters from Greek mythology. Research the god Apollo, paying special attention to his association with the day and the quality of cool reason. Research the god Dionysus and his association with the night, irrationality and madness. These and other websites provide information:

<http://dionysia.org/greek/dionysos/thompson/dionysos.html>

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/apollo.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo>

7. Referring again to Greek mythology, research Theseus. The Amazons. Hippolyta. These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/theseus.html>

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/amazons.html>

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hippolyta.html>

8. Research the inclement weather of 1594–1596 in Elizabethan England and read Titania's speech from Act II, scene i, lines 81–117. What are the similarities between the weather in 1594–96 and the weather that Titania describes? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/almanac/arc2011/alm11jun.htm>

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2909905?uid=3739856&uid=4579940077&uid=2&uid=3&uid=3739256&uid=60&sid=21102131916507>

9. One of the plots in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows a group of “mechanicals” rehearsing and performing a play called, “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe.” Read Act III, scene i, in which the workmen solve the problems presented by the technical demands of their play. What do their solutions tell us about theatre production in Shakespeare's time?

10. Shakespeare took the plot for the play within a play of “Pyramus and Thisbe” from an earlier version of the story written by Ovid. Read the original story that Shakespeare used as his source material. These and other websites provide information:

http://www.online-mythology.com/pyramus_thisbe/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramus_and_Thisbe

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on the festivals of Midsummer's Eve and May Day. How are the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* influenced by these celebrations and their rituals?
2. Nature is one of the most important elements of the play. How is it incorporated in Shakespeare's language? What is the relationship of each character to Nature? How does Nature influence people's actions? Whose actions influence Nature? How is nature incorporated into the scenic and costume designs?
3. Define the three parallel worlds of the play. How does Shakespeare use language to describe and define each? What are the similarities between the three worlds? The differences? Which characters are confined to a single world? Which characters move between worlds? How does the 2013 OSF production use scenery, costumes, lighting and sound/music to define each?
4. A traditional belief of the Elizabethans was "As above, so below." That is, events at a higher (social and/or spiritual) level filter through all the levels below it. What are the chaos and discord at the play's highest level (the supernatural kingdom of the fairies)? How is it expressed through the rest of the levels, including the natural world? How is harmony restored to all levels?
5. Refer to your research about Apollo and Dionysus. What is the difference between the events of the play that occur during the day and those that occur during the night? Which characters best represent the Apollonian quality of cool reason, and how? Who best represents the Dionysian quality of irrationality, and how?

6. Refer to your research about Theseus and Hippolyta. What episode in their stories does the play incorporate? What qualities of the mythological Theseus does Shakespeare's Theseus embody? What Amazonian qualities are present in Shakespeare's Hippolyta? What are the conflicts between Theseus and Hippolyta? How are they resolved? How does OSF's production incorporate elements of the characters' mythological characteristics while setting the story in a different time period?
7. All four women in the play are subject to the will of men. What does each want? Which man is thwarting her and how? What options are available to her? What is her status? How much power does she have? In each case, who is obliged to yield, and how is the yielding brought about?
8. How does Shakespeare use the character of Puck to tie together the stories of Oberon and Titania, the lovers, and the mechanicals?
9. A major theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love and its power over people in love. What actions are the characters compelled to take because of love? Where are the characters in the beginning of the play in terms of love, how do they change as the action progresses and where do they end up?
10. Describe the properties of the love potion. What does Shakespeare seem to be saying about the power of love through this symbol?
11. Lysander says, "The course of true love never did run smooth." Find examples in the play that support this statement. How does Shakespeare highlight the difficulties of love?
12. In the play, what is the relationship of love and friendship? When is friendship subordinated to love?
13. Compare the relationships of Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania, Helena and Demetrius, and Hermia and Lysander. What are their similarities? Their differences? Which couples have a chance for lasting happiness? What does Shakespeare reveal about the nature of love by comparing these relationships?

14. Find examples of contrasts and opposites: in characters, language, society, rank, stature, natural versus supernatural, nature versus civilization, love versus hate, etc. What does Shakespeare achieve by placing so much emphasis on antithesis?
15. List the contrasting characteristics of Titania and Bottom. What does Shakespeare accomplish by pairing them romantically?
16. What verbal devices are used to create an atmosphere of magic? What technical effects created magic in the production? Why is magic important to the world of the play?
17. What is the significance of the play's title? Whose "dream" is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Find references to sleeping or dreaming in the text. What parts of the play have a dreamlike quality? Which characters have trouble distinguishing between imagination and reality? Why?
18. The word "moon" is used 28 times and the word "moonlight" six times in the text. Find the passages where these words occur. Why are references to the moon appropriate? What does the moon symbolize? How does Shakespeare use language to create an atmosphere of night and magic?
19. One of the most common occurrences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is transformation. List the instances in the play of transformation. Who and what are the agents of transformation? Which transformations progress from a good condition to a worse? From lesser to greater? Which characters go through the entire play without changing? How does the symbolism of the moon support the theme of transformation?
20. Refer to your research about fairies. What is their relationship to darkness? What are their qualities and powers, according to Oberon? According to Puck? When are they frightening? When are they benign?
21. Oberon is called "King of Shadows." The actors are referred to as "shadows." How do the supernatural and the craft of acting seem to be related in the play?

22. Compare and contrast Hermia and Helena. Shakespeare gives them very different physical attributes, but how do they differ emotionally? What are their opinions of love and friendship? What effects do they have on those around them, and how does that change through the course of the play? Then compare Lysander and Demetrius in the same way.
23. Refer to your research about Shakespeare's source material for the mechanicals' performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe." What language devices does Shakespeare use to turn the tragic story into a comedy? What devices do the actors use to make it funny (even if not intentionally)?
24. Scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the same year he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. Compare these two plays. What are the similarities? The differences? What is the potential for a tragic ending for the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? How is a tragic ending avoided? What is the potential for a happy ending for the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*? What prevents a happy ending for these lovers? Compare the story of "Pyramus and Thisbe" to *Romeo and Juliet*. How are these two stories similar? Different?
25. If you are seeing *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *My Fair Lady* or *The Taming of the Shrew*, compare the daughters in the plays with Hermia. How is each daughter valued and by whom? How much power does each daughter have? Which daughters find power by defying the societal expectations of their role as women? Which by conforming? How much choice does each have about whom she will marry?
26. If you are seeing *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *My Fair Lady* or *The Taming of the Shrew*, compare the relationship between love and marriage in the plays with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. On what factors do the fathers decide who will marry their daughters? How much influence do the daughters' wishes have? What attributes other than love do the fathers value?
27. If you are seeing *The Heart of Robin Hood*, compare the character of Puck to the character of the Green Man. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? How does each define the world of the forests in their respective plays?

28. If you are seeing more than one play on the outdoor stage: What is the symbolism of the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Heart of Robin Hood*, and/or *Cymbeline*? What are the similarities of the three forests? Which characters are similar? What do the characters learn when they leave the court and venture into the wilderness?

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