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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

A Midsummer Night's Dream

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Rebecca Grudzina



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General Introduction to the Work

Cast of Characters

Athenian Lovers

Theseus – mythological Duke of Athens, betrothed to Hippolyta

Hippolyta – mythological Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to Theseus

Egeus – Athenian nobleman, father to Hermia, has selected Demetrius as Hermia's husband

Hermia – a young noblewoman of Athens, daughter to Egeus, childhood friend to Helena, in love with Lysander

Lysander – a young nobleman of Athens, in love with Hermia

Demetrius – a young nobleman of Athens, “betrothed” (by Egeus' consent) to Hermia, formerly betrothed to Helena

Helena – a young noblewoman of Athens, formerly betrothed to—and desperately in love with—Demetrius

The Fairy Court

Oberon – King of the Fairies, feuding with Titania

Titania – Queen of the Fairies, feuding with Oberon

Puck (aka Robin Goodfellow) – Oberon's jester and chief assistant

Peaseblossom

Cobweb – fairies in Titania's retinue, most likely played by young children

Moth

Mustardseed

Marxist Theory Applied to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was progressing toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression existed in the political subconscious of a society—social hierarchies are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining the Uses and Abuses of Power

1. Have students (individually, in pairs, or in small groups) reread Act I, Scene I: Egeus' initial suit against Hermia and Theseus' initial response, and then answer the following questions:
 - What is the law of Athens regarding a father's right to choose his daughter's husband?
 - Who is bound by this law?
 - What might be some *legitimate* justifications of the law?
 - What are some of the obvious *flaws* in the law?
 - What rationale does Egeus offer for his preference of Demetrius to Lysander?
 - What rationale does Lysander offer for his appeal?
 - What reason does Theseus offer for siding with Egeus?
2. Next have students reread Act IV, Scene I, from the time the four lovers awake, and answer the following questions:
 - Why does Theseus now override the law of Athens when earlier he would not?
 - What is significant about the fact that Egeus still wishes to enforce his will?
3. Next have students read Act II, Scene I, from Puck's initial entrance until Demetrius and Helena's entrance, and answer the following questions:
 - What is most likely the source of Oberon's authority? Birth or law?
 - What is the cause of Oberon's wrath?
 - How does Titania react to Oberon's wrath?
 - Would you consider Oberon's anger to be reasonable or unreasonable?
 - Would you consider Oberon's plan to win in his feud with Titania just or unjust?
4. Next have students read Act IV, Scene I, from Oberon's observation of Titania and Bottom until the fairies exit. Then ask the following question:
 - On what is Oberon and Titania's reconciliation based?

Mythological/Archetypal Theory Applied to A Midsummer Night's Dream



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories-when studied comparatively-are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Titania as Earth Mother

1. Copy and distribute the Earth Mother Archetype fact sheet and review it with the full class.
2. Divide the class into small groups and have them examine the scenes in which Titania appears, especially:
 - her explanation of the consequences of her feud with Oberon (Act II, Scene I)
 - her explanation of why she has the Indian boy (especially her relationship with the boy's mother) (Act II, Scene I)
 - her exchanges with her retinue (Act III, Scene I; Act IV, Scene I)
 - her exchanges with Bottom. (Act III, Scene I; Act IV, Scene I)
3. Have each group discuss whether the play yields enough evidence to support the interpretation of Titania as Archetypal Earth Mother.
4. Reconvene the class and discuss.

NOTE: It is not important to lead the class to a single "right" interpretation, nor do the small groups or the full class need to come to consensus. Rather, it is important only for students to discuss both interpretations and consider the evidence to support either.

Psychological Theory Applied to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Oedipal Influences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

1. Lead the entire class through this brief examination by discussing the following questions:
 - Who is Hermia's father?
 - Who is Hermia's *mother*?
 - Who is Helena's father?
 - Who is Helena's *mother*?
 - What is significant about the fact that we know nothing of these young women's mothers?
 - In what ways is Theseus a father figure in the play?
 - In what ways is Oberon a father figure in the play?
 - Do we find examples of motherhood in any of the characters? Who? How important is "motherhood" to this character? How do you know?
 - What can we infer about the playwright and his society from the parent/daughter relationships and the views of motherhood presented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?