

Sleep and dreams as central themes in a midsummer night's dream



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A Midsummer Night's Dream is widely regarded as Shakespeare's master play in the genre of comedy. Centered on the classical plot of the quarrel between pairs of lovers solved by the supernatural intervention, this play presents a typically Renaissance understanding of the interrelationship between the human and the natural world, the latter embodied by capricious fairies.

The two worlds are both close and apart, being separated by the veil of dreams. Accordingly, the themes of sleep and dreams perform an important function in A Midsummer Night's Dream which can be put down to bridging the gap between an ordered world of mortals with their social conventions, and the chaotic realm of fairies, with their wild and passionate existence. Such transition of the established boundaries leads the characters to the verge of the feelings and deeds conventionally frowned upon, which attests to the potentially subversive symbolism of a dream in A Midsummer Night's Dream (Greenfield).

The theme of the dream is invariably connected to the notion of transformation, or transfiguration. Under the influence of magical flower, the characters of the play are forced to undergo the changes both physical and spiritual, which unearth their hidden qualities or features. For instance, Bottom's transformation into an ass-headed monster, which he is ultimately unable to understand may be construed as an external expression of his internal, concealed "asshood" (Greenfield 332). Similarly, Titania's transformation from the arrogant and irreproachable queen of the fairy court into an insatiable and hysterical lover, enraptured by Bottom's very sight, may point at her hidden anxieties and desires that were simply revealed, not

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crafted from the scratch, by the influence of Puck's magical juice. These changes in Titania's character are obviously caused by Oberon's desire for revenge, but they are simultaneously characteristic of her repressed urges that were opened by the magical flower's intervention.

In a similar way, mortal lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suffer and undergo dramatic changes of character under the spell of a magical sleep. Lysander, who has just been enamored by Hermia, awakens and finds himself in a zealous love to Helen, whom he addresses as "transparent" and assures of his "reasonable" love (Shakespeare 2. 2. 765). Lysander is drawn to despise Hermia, his erstwhile beloved, and seeks the battle with Demetrius, whom he accuses of molesting Helena. However, when Puck dispels his magic, Lysander is no longer able to remember his fit of love to Helen, describing his state of mind for the duration of the play as "half sleep, half waking" (Shakespeare 4. 1. 1705).

Demetrius and Hermia strained relationship is likewise affected by the sleep magic. While pursuing Hermia relentlessly in the beginning of the play, Demetrius is bewildered by the discovery that his former affection "melted as the snow", being now no more than "the remembrance of an idle gaud" (Shakespeare 4. 1. 1725-6). The changes in the characters' mutual attitudes are directly connected with the magical sleep they have fallen prey to under Puck's sorcery; nevertheless, Shakespeare's description of their vicissitudes of fate is not entirely dependent on the notion of fairy magic's omnipotence. The mortal characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are endowed with their own features and notions of love and happiness; these emotions are just re-directed by the impact of dream magic.

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The notion of dreaming as such serves as the play's leading motive. Both Bottom and the lovers' couples wonder at the limits of reality around them, with Demetrius questioning "that [they] are awake" and Bottom trying to remember his "dream" that [had] no bottom" (Shakespeare 4. 1. 1754, 1778). Their bewilderment reflects unease and suspicion of the Renaissance Europeans at the thought of forces of dream and sleep, the ironically referenced unease in Puck's concluding promise to "restore amends" that hints at ambiguous attitude to the "shadows" of the night in the Shakespearean literary canon (5. 1. 2290).