Symbolism and Imagery in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Written by: hilarios604

In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, William Shakespeare brilliantly uses the night as a motif which plays a valuable role in the play. He combines this motif with the related symbols of the play to demonstrate the power of night and its correlation with love and vision. He uses symbolism and imagery to develop the motif and makes extensive use of the night forest which, in part, helps the situation of the four young lovers, one of the main plots of the play.

It might seem strange that Shakespeare would choose a forest at night as the main setting for a comedy; the dark forest serves as the center of the play’s world, ousting Athens, a city that was regarded as the center of ancient Greek civilization. The darkness of the night is intensified in the forest; the dark is intense enough for the characters to fear being alone. Helena cries out to Demetrius not to abandon her “darkling”, or in the dark (Act II, Scene 2, 85). When Lysander abandons Hermia, she is convinced that being alone in the dark could lead her to death:

Speak, of all loves; I swoon almost with fear. No? Then I will perceive you are not nigh. Either death or you I’ll find immediately. (Act II, Scene 2, 153-155)

The night symbolizes darkness and a state of blindness. It symbolizes mischief and madness, fairies and magic. The night forest provides a setting for dangerous and daring acts such as Hermia and Lysander’s plan to escape Athens. The lovers plan to execute their plan and meet at “deep midnight” (Act I, Scene 1, 223).

The moon, which has been said all throughout the play to affect human behaviour, is the only source of light at night which allows the lovers the see each other. Shakespeare associates the moon with love. In the opening scene of the play, Theseus is anxious to get married to Hippolyta. He complains “four happy days bring in/ Another moon: but O, methinks how slow/ This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires/ Like to a step-dame” (Act 1, Scene 1, 2-5). Shakespeare also compares the moon to a bow, and Cupid, the Roman god of love, carries a bow to shoot arrows of love. “And then the moon, like to a silver bow/ New bent in heaven, shall behold the night/ Of our solemnities”(Act I, Scene 1, 223).

Shakespeare uses symbolism to strengthen the motif of night; he uses symbols associated with the night. He refers to Phoebe, or Diana, who is the Roman goddess of the moon and of transformation, especially the unseen and mysterious ones in the darkness. “Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth behold/ her silver visage in the watery glass . . .” (Act I, Scene 1, 209-213). In the play, day symbolizes light and comfort, reality and truth. The morning symbolizes a sense of renewal and a fresh beginnings. All four lovers end up wishing for daylight at the end of Act III, Scene 2: “Come, thou gentle day” (Act III, Scene 2, 418)“O weary night, O long and tedious night./ Abate thy hours, shine comforts from the east” (Act III, Scene 2, 431-432).

Physical darkness impairs or transforms vision, and by transforming the sense humans rely on most, the night forest forces new kinds of looking. Shakespeare includes the aspect of vision and its relation to darkness. The power of night transforms the gaze in that the eye’s ability is diminished, but the ear’s strength is augmented. Hermia is able to find Lysander eventually by using her hearing to its full potential:
“Dark night, that from the eye his function takes, The ear more quick of apprehension makes. Wherein it doth impair the seeing sense, It pays the hearing double recompense. Thou art not by mine eye, Lysander, found; Mine ear, I thank it, brought me to thy sound.” (Act III, Scene 2, 177-182)

Throughout the course of the night, the gaze of the mind becomes enchanted, as depicted in Lysander and Demetrius “blindly” loving Helena under the magic spell; this twists the meaning of “love is blind”. Lysander declares “Not Hermia, but Helena I love” (Act II, Scene 2, 112) and Demetrius showers Helena with words of adoration in Act III, Scene 2, Lines 137-144.

The dream, which is ultimately linked to the night, serves as an important symbol from the title of the play onwards and establishes itself as an important kind of vision. The dream and introspective vision are made possible by night and darkness; the idea of a dream plays with the same transformation of vision: a dream is only visible when the eyes are closed, when vision is inward-looking. In Act IV, Scene 1, Demetrius comments on the permeability of the barrier between night and day, and the ability of night visions to carry over into the daylight hours. “Are you sure/ That we are awake? It seems to me/ That yet we sleep, we dream” (Act IV, Scene 1). In daylight, the four lovers go on to recount their dreams together, struggling to make sense of the night through the framework of the dream. “And by the way let us recount our dreams.” (Act IV, Scene 1, 197)

Shakespeare uses imagery to emphasize the significance of the sense of sight and its relation to love; the language of love relies heavily on sight imagery. Helena claims that real love has little to do with the eyes and that the gaze of the mind gives love its true shape, but even in making this assertion Helena is forced to rely on sight imagery: “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind./ And therefore is winged Cupid blind” (Act I, Scene 1, 234-235). Helena uses sight imagery in her resolution to get Demetrius back.

Demetrius’ gaze becomes shorthand for Demetrius’ love. “But herein mean I to enrich my pain,/ To have his sight thither and back again.” (Act I, Scene 1, 250-251). Helena complains that Demetrius fell in love with Hermia upon looking into her. “Setting eyes” on someone is associated with falling in love. To look on or at someone is the most common expression for falling in love with a new person, or for spending time with the one you already love. “For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia’s eyne,/ He hailed down oaths that he was only mine” (Act I, Scene 1, 242-243). Hermia also uses sight imagery as she fortifies herself and Lysander against the ordeal of separation: “we must starve our sight/ From lovers’ food, till tomorrow deep midnight.” (Act 1, Scene 1, 222-223). Furthermore, Oberon’s love juice is appropriately applied to the eyes.

William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream presents a romantic comedy with the sense love is most associated with -the sense of sight- taken away in a motif of night. The play would seem to require the light of day rather than a setting in the darkest of all places at the darkest of all hours, but Shakespeare brilliantly combines this motif with the related symbols of the play to demonstrate the power of night and its correlation with love and vision. The reliance on different kinds of perception other than the sense of sight, as well as the power of the magic in the night forest, makes possible a happy ending for all four lovers by the end of the play. What begins in night as magic solidifies into reality with daylight. The darkness of night bequeaths peace and love among the lovers and carries this harmony into the light of day.