



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 103
COURSE NAME: SHAKESPEAREAN
DRAMA

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND
ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS
ENGLISH-BLOCK II**



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MAEGD 103: SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

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BLOCK II

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MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

UNIT 7: ELIZABETHAN COMEDY

UNIT 8: READING A *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

UNIT 9: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

MODULE IV: SHAKESPEARE: *HAMLET*

UNIT 10: ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

UNIT 11: READING *HAMLET*

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MEG103-British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

MEG 103 block II: British Drama I: Beginnings to Restoration is divided into three Blocks. Block II is a continuation of the course. In Block II we have included two plays written by William Shakespeare, one Comedy and the other being one of the greatest tragedies of all time, *Hamlet*.

Module III will acquaint you with one of the most popular romantic comedies of William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Module is divided into three units. **Unit 7** will give you an overview of the trends of comedy written during the Elizabethan period with a special emphasis on the Shakespearean comedy. **Unit 8** will discuss in details *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that was published in 1595-96, one of the finest romantic comedies of Shakespeare. In this unit we shall present a detailed summary of the text and its major themes so that you may prepare yourself for the next unit where a critical and analytical interpretation the drama will be discussed. In **Unit 9** we will learn how to see a text from different points of view. We shall discuss *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in terms of postcolonial reading, feminist perspectives and so on. Character analysis and the question of identity are few other aspects that find place in this unit.

Module IV will familiarise you with *Hamlet*, one of the most well-known tragedies written by Shakespeare. In the beginning we need to have a good understanding of the period which produced the play. In this module we shall also discuss how the dramatic tradition evolved in England and how much Shakespeare was influenced by it. **Unit 10** which is on Elizabethan Tragedy will give you an overview of the salient features of the genre of tragedy that became very popular during this period. **Unit 11** will discuss the text in details and will familiarize you with the plot and the action of the play. **Unit 12** will analyse various aspects of the play like theme, characterization, Hamlet's soliloquies. The soliloquies help us understand the crisis that the protagonist goes through.

We hope after reading the plays you will have a comprehensive knowledge of Shakespeare and his dramatic genius. Best efforts have been made to include all the necessary information to support your study of the plays.

MODULE III: SHAKESPEARE: *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

UNIT 7: ELIZABETHAN COMEDY

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.0 Introduction

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Life and Works of Shakespeare

7.3 Elizabethan Comedy

 7.3.1 Shakespearian Comedy and Trends of Elizabethan
 comedy

7.4 Summing Up

7.5 Assessment Questions

7.0 INTRODUCTION

The reign of Queen Elizabeth is considered to be one of the most peaceful and prolific period in England. Not only in socio-political progress, but also in literature the age excelled all its previous ages. This intellectual and artistic impulse affected the people of England at a moment when the country was undergoing a rapid and, on the whole, a peaceful expansion.

You have already come to know how poetry found varied expression in the hands of sonneteers and other lyrical poets. But the age of Elizabeth found its fullest and most lasting expression in the domain of drama. The age is not only the age of greatest tragedies of Marlowe and Shakespeare, but also an excelling time for comedies. The tradition of the interlude developed by John Heywood and his successors, that embraced the style of Latin classic comedy, eventually producing the great Elizabethan

comedy, which reached its highest perfection in the hands of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

In Unit 4 of Block I we have elaborately discussed various features of Elizabethan drama along with the major works in the field of both tragedy and comedy. This unit will help you to get an overview of the conventional style followed by the Elizabethan comic playwrights, which we shall try to see through Shakespeare's use of plot and characters.

7.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to the plays of one of foremost dramatists in the world irrespective of language and time, William Shakespeare. We will be reading and subsequently analysing one of his popular comedies and after reading this unit you should be able to have:

- an understanding of the life and works of William Shakespeare
- an understanding of the Elizabethan comedy with special reference to Shakespearean comedies.

7.2 THE LIFE AND WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

Celebrated as the national poet of England and fondly nicknamed as the Bard of Avon, William Shakespeare is almost universally acknowledged as the greatest dramatist in the English language. He was born in Stratford upon Avon, Warwickshire on 26th of April, 1564. Shakespeare wrote during the reigns of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-1625).

The world in which Shakespeare lived was one ushering in changes, moving out of the medieval society, and also having

unique social, cultural, and political traits which are reflected in his works. His work demonstrates the complexities of the world he was writing in: laying bare the contradictions and the decline of earlier modes of thought and organisation while revealing the tensions in the new and the developing period.

Shakespeare was born to John and Mary Shakespeare. His father, John Shakespeare, was the owner of property in Stratford and was a prosperous glove maker, wood dealer, and tanner. He held public offices such as that of alderman and bailiff. In 1576, financial difficulties struck John Shakespeare and he had to mortgage his wife's inheritance. His financial distress was so acute that records state of him stopping church attendance "for feare of process for debtte." Shakespeare's mother was Mary Arden, who belonged to a prosperous family. The Shakespeares had eight children, and William Shakespeare was the eldest of the four boys.

It is speculated that Shakespeare would have studied at a junior school at Stratford initially and later to The King's New School. The focus at grammar school was primarily on Latin, be it written or spoken. Shakespeare's plays and poetry reflect ideas from Ovid's tales, plays of Terence and Plautus, and Roman history, classical writings he must have studied in school.

Due to the financial difficulties at home, Shakespeare could not have finished his schooling at the grammar school or acquire an education in a University. Shakespeare's lack of education in a University was often derided when he started writing; Robert Greene, a member of the University Wits, criticised Shakespeare in a pamphlet titled 'A Groats-worth of Witte' in 1592.

When Shakespeare was eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, and a marriage license was issued on 27th November, 1582; soon after their first daughter Susanna was born. Later, he fathered twins, a boy, Hamnet and a girl, Judith who were baptised on 2nd February, 1585. The years 1585 to 1592 are referred to as the 'lost

years' of Shakespeare as not much account of his life can be found. From 1596, the fortunes of the Shakespeare family improved significantly, as highlighted by the fact that John Shakespeare was granted a coat of arms, raising them to the level of the gentry. This is usually held to be on account of William Shakespeare's success on the London stage as part of the company of players known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

Shakespeare's dramatic career began in the early 1590s with his arrival in London. He had to have a sufficient name to be attacked by Robert Greene, a member of the University Wits. His plays were performed only by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which was a company owned by Shakespeare along with a group of players. The company soon became the leading playing company in London and was also awarded with a royal patent by King James I. This venture bought Shakespeare name and wealth. By the mid-1590s Shakespeare was already known to have written plays such as the three parts of *Henry VI*; *Titus Andronicus*; *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the latter half of the decade he wrote plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*; *Richard III* and *Richard II*; the two parts of *Henry IV*; *Henry V*; *Julius Caesar*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *The Merchant of Venice*; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; etc. The first decade of the 1600s demonstrates a certain trajectory in Shakespeare's work: from mixed genres (writing history plays, comedies, tragedies at more or less the same time) he moved into a phase where he focused on tragedies: *Hamlet*; *Othello*; *King Lear*; *Macbeth* and alongside these he wrote *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well*.

The last stage of his career was spent in writing romances: plays in which tragedies occur but end in reconciliation and forgiveness and a restoration of happiness. Such plays included *Cymbeline*; *The Winter's Tale*; *Pericles and The Tempest*. Around 1610-1611 he retired to Stratford, putting his London days behind

him, though he continued to interest himself in the theatre and to write plays (Henry VIII; The Two Noble Kinsmen and the lost Cardenio belong to this phase). In addition to the plays, Shakespeare also wrote poetry: a sonnet sequence of 154 sonnets; longer poems such as *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*; etc. His sonnets were not published until 1609.

Shakespeare died on 23rd April, 1616 at Stratford. After his death, two of his friends who worked as actors in the King's Company (formerly The Lord Chamberlain's Man), namely John Heminge and Henry Cordell collected and published thirty six of his plays under the title The Works of William Shakespeare (usually called the First Folio), and he was immortalised. The enormity of the debt owed to Heminge and Condell by the world can be understood when we realise that of these thirty six plays, eighteen had not been published previously, including notable ones such as Julius Caesar; As You Like It; Twelfth Night; Macbeth; and The Tempest. In the First Folio, there were three categories in which the plays of William Shakespeare were divided, namely comedies, histories, and tragedies. Later, a fourth category namely romance, has also been identified.

7.3 ELIZABETHAN COMEDY

Drama in 16 century England was a blending of Latin comedy traditions along with a satirical touch of contemporary London life. Although Shakespeare remains the most recognizable playwright of the Elizabethan age, there were many others whose work continues to entertain and educate students of drama to this day. This age produced some of the greatest dramatists of all time.

The comic plays of Ben Jonson, specially comedies of humour such as *Every Man in His Humour*, the comedy that made the author's reputation, were ever excelling in terms of the treatment of

characters. *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* by Robert Greene can be considered as a ground breaking play because of its multiple-plot structure. Thomas Dekker was termed as the “Dickens of English theatre” by the later critics due to his epoch making comedies like *The Shoemaker's Holiday, or The Gentle Craft. All Fools* by George Chapman; *A Trick to Catch the Old One* by Thomas Middleton, one of the era's most prolific and successful playwrights; and *Eastward Ho!*, a collaborative work by Chapman, Jonson, and John Marston are few other that any student of Elizabethan comedy must always remember. With this brief introduction to Elizabethan comedy writing, we shall shift to the expertise of the genre in the hands of Shakespeare and what typical characteristics of comedy found finest expression in his pen.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the nick name of Shakespeare given by the fellow his Age?

2. Who did reign in England when Shakespeare wrote?

3. What was the name of the theatre company where Shakespeare's early plays were performed?

4. Name few tragedies written by Shakespeare.

5. Name two of the last plays of Shakespeare.

7.3.1 *Shakespearian Comedy and Trends of Elizabethan comedy*

There are some key features of a Shakespearean comedy: a happy ending, a more light-hearted tone than his other plays, a movement to a ‘green world’ (apparent especially in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), and a tension between rationality and chaos. His comedies often take the setting as some paradise, away from the reality. A dramatic plot can be expected of a Shakespearean comedy unlike modern understanding of comedy.

LET US STOP AND THINK



The First Folio of 1623 lists the following comedies by William Shakespeare :

All’s Well that Ends Well, As You Like It, The Comedy of Errors, Love’s Labour Lost, Measure for Measure, The Merchant of Venice, The Merry Wives of Windsor, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Pericles, Prince of Tyre, The Taming of the Shrew, The Tempest, Twelfth Night, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Two Noble Kinsmen, Cymbeline.

Beginning with the early comedies such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; *The Comedy of Errors*; *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and the ever-popular *Taming of the Shrew* and progressing to the mature

comedies of the latter half of the 1590s, Shakespeare perfected the genre of the Romantic Comedy, or the Shakespearean comedy as it is often called, after its finest practitioner. Shakespeare's comedies can also be called the 'comedy of life' where the human follies are portrayed in a manner which provides both artistic and ethical pleasure. After going through the works of Shakespeare, specially the comic plays, let us now learn some salient features of Shakespearean comedies. More or less these can be seen as comic trends in general Elizabethan comedies too:

a) Young lovers struggling to overcome obstacles in love:

Beginning with thwarted young love, or a lover or lovers, who found numerous obstacles in their way (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), the action follows the protagonists until the obstacles were removed, the misunderstandings cleared up and the lovers were united. Usually, the problems in the unification of the young lovers are the elders. While parental figures are present in the background, the young lovers have to navigate their own way through the worlds they inhabit and in doing so, through the course of the play, they eventually find a happy ending, as in reconciliation of the young lovers. The obstacles that stand in their way usually involve parents who object to the proposed alliances (Hermia in *Midsummer* and her father Egeus); loved young men whose affections are engaged elsewhere (Helena in *Midsummer* and Orsino in *Twelfth Night*); misunderstandings caused by the machinations of villainous characters (Hero's marriage in *Much Ado*), etc. The sorting out these misunderstandings and overcoming these obstacles form the main substance of the plays and eventually the lovers achieve their union, either entering into wedlock or preparing to do so, with the blessings of those in authority, of those who were initially in opposition. Shakespeare's

romantic comedies often end with multiple weddings, and both the themes of love and marriage are key to his comedies.

b) Multiple plot lines interwoven together:

Shakespeare's comedies with their multitude of characters offer multiple plots to the audiences: four in *Midsummer*; at least four in *As You like It* and so on. Multiple plot lines enable the plays elevate the plots from mundane to complex, engaging the viewer. Shakespeare interspersed love stories with other tales: whether the gulling of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*; Duke Senior's story of usurpation, exile and return in *As You Like It*, which also includes Jaque's secondary plot line of melancholic misanthropy etc. Thus the Shakespearean comedies are far more than plots of simple love stories: they often speak of contemporary ideas and issues, pointed to possible outcomes to the problems of the day and yet did all of it with an almost flippant air of humour which made the irony palatable and mitigated the seriousness of the content.

c) Plots dominated by female protagonists:

In terms of characters, the romantic comedies of the later years offer us strong women characters. They are often the soul of the plot, witty and charming. Notable Shakespearean heroines are Rosalind, Viola, and Beatrice. They face difficult situations in the plot and although they are afraid and timorous, but they eventually conquer that fear and carve out a happy ending. The latter romantic comedies also frequently feature two women characters, each of whom would have her own love story, such as Hermia and Helena in *Midsummer*; Beatrice and Hero in *Much Ado*; Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It* and Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Their male counterparts are often shadowy characters, men who are not characterised strongly. The central characters in the

romantic comedies are usually the female protagonists and they often eclipse their male counterparts. In addition to these two sets of characters there are also a range of other characters, including male family members, usually of the heroine (s): fathers, uncles, brothers; a clown or jester such as Touchstone and Feste in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* respectively; stock characters such as the foolish knight (Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*), the melancholic (Jaques in *As You Like It*); an array of lower class characters, from wrestlers to old servants and shepherds and shepherdesses, etc.

d) Idyllic Sylvan Settings:

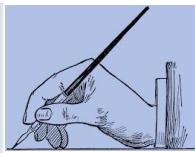
The world of the romantic comedy sometimes juxtaposed the court and the country, exchanging courtly halls and courtiers for idyllic sylvan settings which were then shown to be as dangerous and difficult to negotiate as the court was. The successful negotiation of the difficulties in country settings demonstrated the ability and mental strength of the young lovers and enabled them to return to their accustomed setting, with a new knowledge of themselves and the peopled world around them. Often enough the lovers have to learn the distinction between imaginative and romantic notions of true love and the 'real thing', as seen in the mature comedies. This process enables Shakespeare to mock conventional, idealized notions and concepts which are rooted in literature and poetry while still pointing to the possibility of a loving, even friendly relationship as the precursor to marriage.

e) Deception of characters and Stock Characters:

The plots in Shakespearean comedies often have characters who cause deception or mistake the identity of other characters which leads to humorous outcomes. The plot is driven forward due

to the events caused by mistaken identities. Cross-dressing is also a common feature with female characters dressing up as man or characters adopting general disguises. The cross-dressed heroine is a key feature in the comedies. This becomes complicated when we remember that the heroines on the Shakespearean stage were young boy actors dressed as women, so when we talk of cross-dressing we are actually referring to two acts of cross-dressing: the first in the theatre being the one wherein the boy actor dressed as a woman and the second when the woman character in the play proceeds to dress as a boy/man. The possibilities for exploring the nature of gendered identities become infinitely more complex and inviting when we think of cross-dressing in this fashion. In the last few decades considerable critical attention has focused on the sexualised aspects of cross-dressing as well as the exploration of gender and sexual roles that this enables.

A recurring character in Shakespearean comedies is the Shakespearean fool. Shakespearean fools are usually witty and clever commoners who tend to outwit characters in stations higher than them. The Shakespearean fool often quotes nuggets of wisdom in the play, an irony Shakespeare introduces to highlight the fact that a jester, a character we do not take seriously, can be the wiser one, as they speak the truth to the audience. Other stock devices used in Shakespearean comedies include some song and music (notably the songs sung by jesters such as Touchstone and Feste), and occasionally dance as well. The fools indulge in humour with no corrective and moral purpose. Laughter is triggered when the moods and values of different characters clash. Each character has his or her own weaknesses. He or she represents men and women of different classes of life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write three important characteristics of Shakespearean Comedy.

2. What is a Stock Character?

7.4 SUMMING UP

This Unit focus on Shakespeare's life and works, and discusses Shakespeare's comedies in some detail. Shakespeare has been placed against the background of his age. His life and family background will help you to understand the playwright better. His comedies have been categorized and the characteristic features of these plays have been elaborated. You will now be able to relate these features to the Shakespearean comedy prescribed in your syllabus – Midsummer Night's Dream. Now, enjoy reading the play.

7.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Attempt a brief biographical sketch of Shakespeare.

2. Which period in Shakespeare's life is called 'lost years' and why?

Does it have any impact on our appreciation of Shakespeare's plays?

2. Elaborate the major characteristic features of Shakespearean comedies.

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

UNIT 8: READING ‘A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM’

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.0 Introduction

8.1 Learning Objective

8.2 Reading the play: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

 8.2.1 Act-wise summary of the play

 8.2.2 Major Themes of the play

 8.2.3 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a Romantic Comedy

8.3 Summing Up

8.4 Assessment Questions

8.0 INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1595-96. It is usually held that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was first produced in 1595, and published in 1600 in a Quarto edition. The play is centered round the events which happen pertaining to the marriage of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta who is the former queen of the Amazons. It is strongly speculated that the play was supposed to have been first performed to grace the nuptials of a noble couple.

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

After reading this unit you will be able to learn the following aspects of the play

- the story line of the play
- act-wise summary

- characteristics of romantic comedy as seen in the play
- major themes of the romantic comedy

8.2 READING THE PLAY: ‘A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM’

8.2.1 *Act-wise summary of the play*

The play begins with Theseus, Duke of Athens bemoaning the slow passage of time, as he waits eagerly, to wed his betrothed, Hippolyta. She was the Queen of the Amazons who, after being defeated, is in her court, calmly awaiting marriage. Even as they speak of entertainments to while away the days till their wedding, Egeus, a nobleman enters. He is agitated and annoyed because his daughter, Hermia, refuses to accept his choice of a husband for her, the young man, Demetrius. Hermia, on the other hand, loves Lysander and would like to marry him. Theseus advises her to accept her father’s choice and even as she and Lysander continue to argue, Egeus demands that if she does not marry Demetrius she should be put to death as per the Athenian law. Theseus offers her a third choice, that she should join a nunnery if she does not marry Demetrius and gives her time till his wedding to fall in line with her father’s views. They disperse, leaving Lysander and Hermia to express their grievances at the state of affairs. Lysander suggests to Hermia that they elope to his aunt’s house which does not fall within the ambit of the Duke’s authority and there they can be married in peace. They reveal their plans to Hermia’s best friend, Helena, who is besotted with Demetrius, who hardly shows any signs of inclination towards Helena, as he is enamoured of Hermia, although there was a time when he was in love with Helena. She decides to inform Demetrius of Lysander and Hermia’s plans to elope. She nurtures the hope that he will be pleased with her, and

does not consider the fact that in doing so she will be betraying her friend. Even as these matters are afoot at the court, we also see a bunch of simple tradesmen deciding to put on a play for the Duke's wedding. The troupe decides to conduct the rehearsals of the play, Pyramus and Thisbe, in the same wood outside Athens where Lysander and Hermia had planned to meet.

In **Act II** we meet the fairies and learn that there is acrimony between Titania and Oberon, the rulers of the fairies, on account of a little Indian boy. This boy is the son of an Indian queen who was a devotee and a friend of Titania's. After her death in childbirth, Titania adopted the child and Oberon now wishes to have him as one of his knights, which Titania is not inclined to. Due to the squabbles between Titania and Oberon, nature has diseased and all is not well in the human world. Oberon plans to teach Titania a lesson, he conspires to magically make Titania fall in love with some other person so that she will give the little Indian boy to Oberon and he can have his wish fulfilled. Accordingly he sends Puck to fetch a flower, pierced with Cupid's arrow, the juice of which, when applied on the eyes of any being, will cause him/her to fall in love with the first person/animal he or she sees after the application. This sets the central section of the play in motion. Puck applies the flower's juice on Titania's eyes as she lies sleeping and also makes sure that when she awakes, the first thing that she sees before her is Nick Bottom, one of the players in the troupe practising their play in the woods, on whose head Puck had placed the head of an ass. Titania sees him first after waking up and falls in love with him.

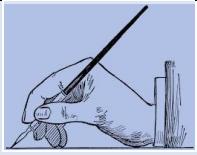
By this time Lysander and Hermia are also in the woods, but tired and lost, they decide to sleep till morning. Demetrius, who has followed them, finds himself followed by Helena whom he spurns rudely. This is seen by Oberon who takes pity on Helena and tells Puck to anoint Demetrius's eyes with the love potion.

Puck obeys, except that Oberon's description of Demetrius as wearing 'Athenian garments' confuses Puck and he anoints Lysander's eyes by mistake assuming him to be Demetrius as he was also wearing Athenian garments. Through the Act III, confusion prevails as Lysander awakens to see Helena and immediately falls violently in love with her; Demetrius who also had his eyes anointed by Puck, after being rebuked by Oberon, also falls in love with Helena. Hermia awakens to find herself unloved and there follows a scene wherein both men attempt to convince Helena that each of them loves her; Hermia complains that her erstwhile best friend has stolen her lover's affections whilst Helena herself believes that they are all playing a vile practical joke on her. Observing this, Oberon asks Puck to disentangle these tangled threads and also informs the audience that Titania, caught in her passion for the ass-headed Bottom, has given the Indian boy to Oberon. Thus, a new herbal potion is crushed onto Lysander and Titania's eyes, freeing them from the earlier spell, and restoring them to their true sight.

In **Act IV** matters are sorted out: Bottom's human head is restored to him and he rejoins his troupe of players; Oberon and Titania are reunited happily. Theseus and Hippolyta who had come to the woods for a morning's hunting find the four young lovers asleep there. Upon waking, Demetrius swears that he has no desire to marry Hermia and thus Theseus convinces Egeus to let Lysander marry Hermia whilst Demetrius will marry Helena: happy endings are ushered in as all the weddings are to take place on the same day. In the final act, the artisans, the 'rude mechanicals,' present their play to Theseus and his court, on the evening of the wedding day as they need to be entertained as they await bedtime. The play itself affords some merriment and laughter as the craftsmen make a mess of it. As it ends and the newlywed couples leave, the fairies

enter to bless the brides' beds and Puck speaks a closing speech, directly addressing the audience:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How many pairs of lovers do you find in the story?

2. Do you find any spurned lovers? If so, name him/her/them?

3. What form of supernatural presence do you find in the play?

4. What are the external forces that exert their influence on the pairs?

8.2.2 MAJOR THEMES OF THE PLAY

Let us analyse and understand the major themes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Love, Magic, and the Dream World

The theme of love is central to the play and is the most dominant theme of the play. Love is also the cause of conflicts in the play and the motivating factor for most of the characters to act. The play itself has more than one pair linked romantically. Shakespeare makes a mockery of the afflictions faced by those in love. Lysander's empathic quote, "The course of true love never did run smooth" is the ever present theme in the play.

The very first mention of love in the play is that of Theseus and Hippolyta. Theseus speaks of how he won his bride to

Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword.
And won thy love, doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph and with revelling.

Theseus's words highlight that his spearheading the defeat of the Amazons at the hands of the Greeks has led to his winning of Hippolyta's, queen of the Amazons, love. Shakespeare might have been highlighting the darker side of love in the play through humorous means. In Theseus and Hippolyta's scenario, Hippolyta does not seem to have much agency of her own since she has lost the war and she might have been forced into the marriage or it might not have been so. The ambiguity in love is apparent here. Ambiguity is underlined by the fact of Theseus' eagerness for the

wedding, so that he complains of the slow pace of time versus Hippolyta's calm acceptance of the fact that four days remain for their wedding. If the first false note in this love story is struck by this couple the second follows close behind as we are introduced to the young lovers: Lysander and Hermia, by her father Egeus, who wishes her to marry Demetrius. Now, Egeus' will override his daughter's and Theseus too supports Egeus. The punishment of disobeying her father will mean death or to join the nunnery. Love is capricious; it has blossomed between two young lovers Lysander and Hermia but has to contend with troubles due to elder authorities. Egeus' choice to be his daughter's husband is Demetrius who loves Hermia but she does not love him back. Similarly, Helena, who is Hermia's friend, loves Demetrius, and had a loving relationship with him prior to the events of the play. Demetrius, however, does not love her any more. Love is also highlighted as painfully one-sided. Lysander and Hermia, when left on their own after being served an ultimatum by Egeus and Theseus speak in stylized, romanticised ways of their love and of love in general, fitting themselves into a narrative of love which involves referencing other love stories and the dissemination of narratives of thwarted love and loss in the worlds around them. The theme of difficulty in love is highlighted through the motif of love being out of balance. The romantic relationships amongst the young characters show the inequality in relationships and the disparity in love.

The play further demonstrates a subtle destabilising of romantic notions of love. The confusion caused by the potion that Puck anoints Demetrius and Lysander with also contributes to this effect. The lovesick Helena, following Demetrius into the woods, asks to be used as a spaniel is used by him. Helena's complete submission to Demetrius, where she pays no heed to his blatant admonishing, subverts the idea of traditional love – her love

borders on obsession for Demetrius. The fact that Demetrius and Lysander can fall in and out of love with such ease, that they adore each other one moment and hold (each other) in utter contempt the next, makes us laugh. This also asks us to examine closely notions like ‘love at first sight’ and ‘love for all eternity’. Also it is impossible to forget that at the end of the play when the marriages take place Demetrius is still under the spell of the love potion anointed by Puck: is it possible that he might awaken and discover his error? Further the accounts of the extra- and pre-marital escapades of the fairy couple (Oberon and Titania) does not offer any hope for true love within the institution of marriage. In particular, the trick Oberon plays on Titania reveals the power-hungry nature of marriages. He humiliates his wife by making her infatuated with a monstrous person in order to make her to fall in line with his demands. It establishes the male dominance in the relationship. Oberon’s love for the Indian boy seems to outweigh that for his wife. The play undercuts the romantic concepts of love, love-as-leading-to-marriage, love-within-marriage, etc. If we remember the original legends of Theseus and Hippolyta, this becomes further complicated because even the blessing of the bride’s beds is seen to have failed: Theseus and Hippolyta’s son, Hippolytus is killed by his own father. Seen in this light, neither love nor marriage can be seen as ideal or idyllic. And Theseus highlights this in the final act wherein he equates the madman, the lover and the poet:

The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:

When Theseus says this, he explices by saying that love causes the lover to see “Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt” and we are convinced of the truth of that statement having just seen it

happening: Titania, queen of the fairies spends a large portion on her time on stage wholeheartedly pursuing the ass-headed Bottom; all the while speaking admiring lines about his beauty. Helena, as mentioned earlier, sees no faults in Demetrius in spite of the contempt with which he treats her and flings herself at him unrestrainedly. When Lysander switches his affections from Hermia to Helena and back again, we are asked to examine our own ideas of what love is, and how the imagination contributes to make an individual fall in love. This is further highlighted because the potion that Puck uses is applied on the eyes: love is to do with seeing. Helena says

Things base and vile, folding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:

The transformative power of love is located in the imagination of the lover, as she looks with her mind. The play asks us to study these ideas as we watch people fall in and out of love, their emotions swayed and transformed as their imagination works in heightened fashion. If one interpretation of the play destabilises the conventional notions of love, it can also be read as an ode to love where various types of love are presented to the viewer/reader. It shows us how diverse love can be. This diversity is seen in the courtship and marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, in the marital understanding and acceptance of each other in the initially-strife-ridden lives of Oberon and Titania, and in the young lovers as young people in the process of finding true love and consummating it within the bounds of marriage, thus ensuring an ordered society.

Magic is a recurring theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The entry of Oberon, Titania, and the fairies usher in the magical

elements of the play and the presence of magic leads to mistaken identities and humorous situations in the play. Magic is used by Shakespeare to differentiate the setting of the play from the real world. The adding of magic to the proceedings asks the audience to use their imagination and creates a surreal world where anything is possible. The conventional boundaries which realism imposes are hence struck down through the use of magic as a theme. The love potion which causes all the problems in the play is an embodiment of love's supernatural power. The potion, as we have seen earlier, is made from the juice of a flower struck by Cupid's arrow. This asks for the audience's imagination. This potion is applied over both Lysander and Demetrius' eyes; also on the eyes of Titania. Through the use of magic, Helena's love is provided a balance as Demetrius does fall in love with her and through magic, Oberon exacts his revenge on Titania as she is tricked to be enamoured of Bottom whose head is that of an ass. The one character which is used as an outlet of magic the most by Shakespeare is Puck. Puck administers the love potion on everyone's eyes, he transforms Nick's head to that of an ass, and he mimics Lysander and Demetrius' voice to lead them astray. The use of magic by Puck to get things done is in contrast to how the mechanicals toil hard to perform a simple play.

Alongside the role of the imagination and magic, the play also calls us to examine **dreams and dream worlds**: what constitutes reality and what can be categorised as an illusion? Hippolyta's first words in the play are:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,
four nights will quickly dream away the time

This highlights the prevalence of the dream in the play. Throughout the play, various characters will refer to dreams.

During these dreams, time seems to lose its flow and the play ends with Bottom stating that whatever happened was a mere dream. When Bottom is released from his ass's head, he speaks about the alternate reality he had just inhabited, prior to this:

I have had a dream, past the wit of man to
say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go
about to expound this dream.

(IV.i)

Bottom believes that dwelling upon the dream worlds and analysing them is to pick holes in the fabric of both dream and reality. The play appears to endorse it as if we analyse the events in the woods outside Athens then we can see that the dream world has the same underlying structure as the real world. If the court of Athens is the real world, a patriarchal world wherein young girls can be executed or packed off to nunneries for not bowing to their father's wishes then the wood outside Athens, where actions in Acts II, III and IV take place appears to be a place wherein same rules are in vogue, where the fairies rule (as opposed to Theseus and Egeus), and where husbands cause their wives to fall in love with monsters: it is an anarchic world; a carnivalesque world. It is a world which does not subscribe to the rules of the world of Athens, and yet, has many similarities to it. The subversion of certain rules takes place but the larger design is one which endorses patriarchal power: Oberon is determined to take over the little Indian boy and cannot bear to be thwarted by Titania. In pursuing his desires, he is willing to make her fall in love with an ass-headed monster. If read in this way, the dream worlds echo the real worlds.

While criticism of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* tends to focus on its romantic entanglements and the humour of the sub-plot of

‘rude mechanicals’, many critics (such as Jan Kott), especially since 1960s, have pointed to the brutality and violence as the underlying element in the play. The brutality is, significantly enough, coded into the heterosexual relationships within the play and involves patriarchal power plays against the women characters. The process also involves class based violence as the hierarchic society of the play utilises the working classes to further their own agenda.

Another key theme is transformation within the play, be it transformation of a character such as that of Nick, transformation of the mind as apparent in the changes in the pursuit of love, and the transformation in the real world where the night turns into day.

Female Friendships

Yet another significant thematic concern in the play is the bond between women and the conflict it causes with patriarchal power. We are introduced to this early on in the play when in Act I, Scene i, after Theseus and the court have left, Helena enters. Hermia addresses her as a ‘Sweet playfellow’ and both Lysander and Hermia unhesitatingly divulge their plans of eloping with her. Their conversation, in both tone and content makes it clear that Hermia and Helena are close friends, each privy to the other’s secrets. Yet, at the instant Hermia and Lysander exit the stage, Helena resolves to inform Demetrius of their proposed elopement, hoping that he will thus be grateful to her. What price is that of friendship, we may ask? And yet the text makes clear that in the face of heterosexual love and the making of romantic heterosexual bonds, mere same-sex friendship of women pales. If it does not, if it should continue to be strong then it follows that it poses a threat to patriarchy and consequently has to be dealt with summarily.

While Hermia and Helena are introduced to us as young women in love, we are also told about their friendship, one which

has been a significant feature of their lives from childhood. Helena reminds Hermia:

Is all the counsel that we two have shared,
The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent,
When we have chid the hasty-footed time
For parting us,--O, is it all forgot?
All school-days' friendship, childhood innocence?
We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
Have with our needles created both one flower,
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds,
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
But yet an union in partition;
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
So, with two seeming bodies, but one heart;
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,
Due but to one and crowned with one crest.
And will you rent our ancient love asunder,
To join with men in scorning your poor friend?

(III, ii, 198-216)

As the quotation tells us they have been inseparable, sitting on a single cushion, singing the same song, in the same key, as one, even though both are separate individuals. Ironically, that unity is remarked upon by Helena, quite forgetting that she was the one who first betrayed it, by telling Demetrius about Hermia's elopement. Her reproaches to Hermia at this point in the play because she believes that Hermia has, together with Demetrius and Lysander, planned this mockery of her, where both the young men

profess their love to her. In the face of romantic love, long embedded friendships have already faltered. But the play further destabilises and destroys that friendship, as the scene progresses to a point where both men protect Helena from Hermia, and Helena herself accuses Hermia of being “a vixen when she went to school”. The rosy hued memories of their childhood friendship are slowly corrupted by their grown up personas which value male admiration and love more than same-sex friendship.

The play does not stop with only one instance of female friendship, it gives us another, not shown on stage but recounted to us by one of the friends: Titania tells us about her friendship with an Indian woman, and the hours spent together:

His mother was a votaress of my order:
And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking the embarked traders on the flood,
When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
Following,--her womb then rich with my young squire,--
Would imitate, and sail upon the land,
To fetch me trifles, and return again,
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
And for her sake I will not part with him.

(II, i-124-137)

While we do not see that friendship onstage what we do see is the after-effects: the child being brought up by Titania turns into a

bone of contention between Titania and Oberon, so much so that their quarrel results in climate changes and misery in the human world. The child is precious to Titania on account of his mother, so much so that she ‘will not part with him’. In this story of female friendship we have women conversing and laughing together, one presenting gifts to the other and creating a world which was exclusive to them: there are or were no men in this world they lived in. Titania’s use of the phrase ‘votaress of my order’ also creates a particular effect: of a convent-like association, of nuns living together, with no men intruding. The threat this poses to men is demonstrated to us by Oberon’s anger at Titania’s refusal to part with the little Indian boy who has caused her to forsake his “bed and company”. The anger with her is so extreme that it causes him to plan her humiliation. He hopes that she will recapitulate and they can be in amity once again. Does the anger generate from Oberon’s desire to make the Indian boy his henchman and Titania thwarts that desire? Or is it because her refusal is coupled with her denial of Oberon’s marital privileges – she has ‘forsworn’ his bed and instead spends all her time with the little boy, making ‘him all her joy,’ as Puck says. Thus the relationships here are more complicated. Oberon’s anger is fuelled by her refusal to part with the ‘lovely boy’, a refusal caused by her loyalty to the boy’s dead mother. It is not a sexual jealousy of the boy that fuels Oberon’s anger because he is willing to have Titania fall in love with the ass-headed Bottom later on. Instead it is what the boy stands for and the close ties between the boy’s mother and Titania that cause Oberon to detach him from her.

If patriarchal power and privilege are threatened by the bonds between women, we are also shown that those bonds can be broken once romantic love is introduced into the mix. Lost in her love for Bottom, Titania parts with the boy, and all the memories of his mother, and their friendship, are forgotten. Once Helena and

Hermia are united with their respective lovers, they have little to say to each other. Indeed, after their awakening in Act IV, Scene i, Helena and Hermia do not address each other, nor do they have anything to say, to anyone, as they watch the Pyramus and Thisbe play put up by the ‘rude mechanicals’. Marriage and the entry into the worlds of which it partakes, remove them from the spheres which they had earlier occupied. The same is seen at the end of *As You Like It*, where the fond cousins, Celia and Rosalind, who have gone through the play joking and laughing together, have nothing to say to each other once Hymen has entered.

An inkling of this is given to us at the very beginning of the play when we see Theseus and Hippolyta speaking together: she, the queen of the Amazons, has no female companionship at the court of Theseus, she stands alone. It is only by separating her from the world of the Amazons, and that by violence (‘doing thee injuries’) that Theseus can marry Hippolyta. Her presence at Theseus’ court and her reduced stature is visible when she has nothing to say, and is just an onlooker when Egeus brings his complaints about his daughter. Similarly in the final scene of the play, we again see her rendered ineffectual as Theseus speaks with authority about the play and the players, while her words are of little or no import. By separating her from her kingdom and her sisters she is rendered into the perfect accessory to the man: a trophy wife.

8.2.3 A Midsummer Night’s Dream as a Romantic Comedy

Shakespeare’s romantic comedies entertain the viewer through its tenets of humour and love. Love is in fact, a central presence in the play, a driving force of the plot. Unlike the City Comedy or the Comedy of Humours, the other popular comedic forms of the time, the Romantic Comedy focused on love as the

main theme and the wellspring of the action. The playwright had time and space to muse upon the nature of love, philosophise about the capricious nature of humans in love, direct the audience/reader towards the distinct nature of appearance and reality and also indulge in some humorous situational and conversational comedy via witty repartee and dialogues about love, lovers and loving relationships.

Romantic Comedies had more than one plot; often it had the central plot and subplots. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the central plot was the lovers' pursuit for a happy ending where their love will triumph. The sub-plot in the play was the discord between Oberon and Titania over the pursuit of a young Indian boy, and the subplot is deftly interwoven with the central plot. The love of young characters such as Hermia and Lysander is met with obstacles, in the form of Hermia's father Egeus' will. Helena's love for Demetrius is also snubbed as the latter is smitten with Hermia. Throughout the course of the play, the young characters suffer a number of problems but eventually overcome them all leading to happy marriages. A fine balance is created by Shakespeare between yearning and expectation in his comedies. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has a play within a play, plenty of puns, and fantastical fairy magic in it.

The Rude Mechanicals in the play are humorous stock characters, especially Nick Bottom who, despite not being a court jester, is treated as the fool of the play. Puck, who is fond of pranks, has some witty dialogues. The pair of Oberon and Titania too is warring lovers in the play and exchange banters, and like the rest of the couples in the romantic comedy, they too are reconciled happily by the end of the play.

A key feature of a Shakespearean Romantic Comedy was the use of deception and mistaken identity. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, mistaken identities play a key role. Puck mistakes

Lysander for Demetrius and mistakenly applies the love potion in his eyes. Titania is deceived to love Nick Bottom who had an ass' head placed on him. The use of love potion to make Lysander fall in love mistakenly with Helena was deception. It can also be argued that Demetrius falling in love with Helena because of the love potion, which was not undone later, was also deception. The presence of multiple plots in the play is also evident as there are four plots which form the crux of the play and they are interwoven deftly by Shakespeare. The upcoming wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, the pursuit of love of the four young characters namely Lysander, Hermia, Helena, and Demetrius, the discord and reconciliation of Titania and Oberon, and that of the Bottom and his fellow bumbling simpletons preparing to perform a play – all these constitute components of Shakespearean comedies. Since love is the central idea of the plot, it is love which overcomes the problems in the play.

Separation and reunification in the play can be seen in three instances. Lysander and Hermia are separated for some time due to Lysander being deceived magically to fall in love with Helena. Titania and Oberon are separated over a quarrel for an Indian boy. Another instance is that of Helena being separated from Demetrius, as it is suggested in the play that Demetrius used to love Helena before falling for Hermia. In all three instances of separation, reunification also happens within the play.

The romantic comedies of Shakespeare have clever servants whose actions will often play the role of a catalyst in the progress of the plot. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the role of the clever servant was that of Puck. Puck was ordered by Oberon to administer the juices of the love potion to Demetrius but he mistakes Lysander for Demetrius. Puck manages to undo his mistake eventually. Puck also leads the Demetrius and Lysander, who were at each other's throats, astray so that they do not end up

grievously injuring each other. Puck's lines in the play highlight his wittiness and his cleverness. At the end of the play, Puck urges the audience to consider the events of the play as mere fanciful dreams. His character is treated as the narrator to end the play. Following is a quote from Puck, reiterating that the events of the play were mere fancy and the real life has to be focused on. The fantasy life has had happy endings but there may be darkness in real life –

Now the hungry lion roars,
And the wolf behowls the moon,
Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,
All with weary task fordone.

Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.

Now it is the time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite
In the church-way paths to glide.

And we fairies, that do run
By the triple Hecate's team
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream,
Now are frolic.

(II, i-369-385)

It has been mentioned above that Shakespeare's romantic comedies often have a plethora of puns and other rhetorical devices. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not an exception. Here are a few examples of wordplay by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

a) Quince refers to the play they will be performing, of that of Pyramus and Thisbe, as the ‘most lamentable comedy’. Lamentable comedy is an oxymoron.

b) An example of a pun in the play is in Act 3, Scene 1. Here, Nick Bottom, a member of the mechanicals states that, “I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; to fright me, if they could”, now the pun here is the word *ass* since Bottom’s head was transformed into that of a donkey.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What does the term ‘rude mechanicals’ mean? What role do they play in the comedy?

2. Give some more examples of ‘oxymoron’ and ‘pun’ from the texts.

8.3 SUMMING UP

In this unit we have examined *A Midsummer's Night Dream* closely. In order to understand the story and plot of the play, we have summarized the play plot-wise, indicating in the process how the plot develops. Then the basic features of the play are taken one by one. It has been shown how love in its different manifestations is evident in the play. It has also been underlined that the presence of patriarchal features is very much marked in it. Patterns of female relationships also emerge in this romantic comedy, but in the ultimate analysis they subscribe to the patriarchal demands. Magic plays its role in establishing the patriarchal power. You will certainly appreciate these aspects while reading the text.

8.4 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the main features of Shakespearean comedy or romantic comedy.
2. What role does magic play in the plot? Is the happy ending of the play magically engineered?
3. How many plot lines can you see in the play: briefly delineate them and their inter-connected nature?
4. Discuss the theme of love in the play pointing out how Shakespeare shows us multiple love stories but also directs us to the illusory nature of love.
5. The centrality of female friendships to women's lives is demonstrated even as we are also shown their time-bound nature. Discuss and explicate.
6. Write short notes on the following:
 - a) The interchangeable nature of the young lovers
 - b) Bottom's central role in the play

c) The fairies' worlds as different from and yet similar to human worlds.

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS



The box contains eight horizontal dashed lines, each spanning the width of the box, intended for students to write down key points.

UNIT 9: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Learning Objectives
- 9.2 Symbolism in the Play
- 9.3 Character Analysis
 - 9.3.1 The “Rude Mechanicals”
 - 9.3.2 Green world in the play
- 9.4 Indian Boys and Postcolonial Readings
 - 9.4.1 Feminist reading of the play
 - 9.4.2 Identity in the play
- 9.5 Structure/Plot
- 9.6 Summing Up
- 9.7 Assessment Questions
- 9.8 Further Readings

9.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall take up some critical aspects related to A Midsummer Night's Dream. We have seen in the earlier unit that the play raises several critical issues like those related to subversion of gendered social structure or close relationship between women characters. Discussion of these issues will be carried forward with further critical insight. We shall also read the text from postcolonial points of view. In addition to these, there will be conventional reading practices like analysis of plot and character.

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit will attempt to familiarize the learners with

- the plot and structure of the play
- characters in the play
- introduce some new perspectives for interpreting the play

9.2 SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY

A Midsummer's Night's Dream creates an illusion between appearance and reality. What one sees may not be what one desires. Shakespeare thus creates a tension between the two levels – the visual ('eyes') and the desired ('mind'). Through machinations of magic an illusion is created between these two. In this environment of a make-belief world Shakespeare introduces several symbols to create some dramatic effect.

Love potion acts as an important symbol in the play. The potion is the object which creates mass confusion in the play. The love potion itself is infused with magical properties. It is a symbol of chaos and the powerful yet erratic nature of love.

The rose flower symbolises female virginity and sexuality in the play. The following lines spoken to Hermia by Theseus highlights this point:

But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd
Than that which withering on the virgin thorn
Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness

(I,i-76-78)

The moon is another significant symbol in the play. Since, in those times, the plays of Shakespeare had to be performed during the day

time, the symbolic importance of moon was to let the audience have an idea of the lack of light. In moonlight, it is easy to be confused and this confusion forms the crux of the play. The moon creates a romantic aura but at the same time also symbolises the passage of time.

Theseus and Hippolyta represent order in the play. They appear at the very first act and re-appear towards the end. They serve no purpose during the larger action of the play. Unlike the young couples who had to struggle for their love to succeed, Theseus and Hippolyta's marriage was fixed at the beginning and underwent no change. Hence, they are seen as the symbol of stability in contrast to the chaos that happens in the play.

The play within the play, that of Pyramus and Thisbe, performed by the 'mechanicals' is symbolic of the events of the central play. It has a sorrowful theme but it is made humorous by the incompetence of the 'mechanicals.' Similarly, the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leads to humour in what is otherwise a powerful pursuit of love.

9.3 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The characters within the play can be divided along many lines: gender is of course the obvious one but in addition we can divide them into human and fairy; the older and the younger; the aristocracy and the lower classes and so on.

Theseus and Hippolyta carries mythic overtones: myths elevate them to immense stature. Here we, however, see them in their more domestic arrangements. In addition, when we examine the characters we are also conscious of the pasts they have come through, full of deceit, treachery and violence. They are also conscious of their disastrous futures, where their marriage fails and

their son, Hippolytus, is killed because his father believes his new wife rather than his son's word. If we approach the play with this rudimentary knowledge of its mythological background, then the romantic comedy is seen to be only a facade: the ardent love that Theseus professes for Hippolyta in Act I, scene i will wane soon enough, other liaisons will take its place and the blessings of the fairies on the brides' beds, mentioned in the final scene is not potent enough to thwart human agency and its desires. The mingled worlds of myth, fantasy and reality all exist simultaneously within the text, in the characters who are knowledgeable about other pasts: thus the fairy king and queen, when squabbling in Act II, scene I, mention the various relationships they have had and have assisted, which include dalliances with Theseus and Hippolyta too.

In contrast to the Duke of Athens and his betrothed, the four young lovers inhabit the here and now, their pasts are limited and we know nothing of their possible futures, making it possible to believe that they might well live 'happily ever after'. However, the playwright also performs a sleight of hand trick in creating the four lovers as they are, and appear, interchangeable. The women with their similar-sounding names are obviously so and the men, dressed in similar Athenian fashions, are mistaken by Puck, as he does not know their names. While Demetrius and Lysander have very different names, the similarities between them, as between Hermia and Helena, are not so much about appearance and name as about their attitudes: love and the desire for loving and being loved is paramount. There is also the glorification of love that is apparent in their conversation, whether it is Lysander and Hermia in Act I, scene i, speaking of 'the course of true love' which 'never did run smooth' or Helena at the end of the same scene assuring the listeners that love possesses transformative powers: "Things base and vile, folding no quantity,/Love can transpose to form and

dignity" (I.i). Even Demetrius who can only speak in images of being slain by love or being 'wood within this wood' (II.i) when he cannot catch a glimpse of Hermia: all the young lovers are seen to inhabit a romantic haze, an unrealistic, imaginative world wherein love is all-powerful, and it is all that concerns them. It is also significant that none of the young people are tethered to anything other than the object of their love: they are unrealistic in that they are presented as free-floating, cut off, or in the process of being cut off, from peer groups and families and in a space-time continuum wherein only the lover, the beloved, and love exists.

If these are two sets of humans, then there is the third: the 'hempen homespuns' (III.i), the 'rude mechanicals' or the 'crew of patches' (III.ii) as Puck variously speaks of them. In sharp counterpoint to the others about whom we know nothing other than that they have access to the Duke of Athens, here are individuals of whose occupations we know about, we know that they hope to please the Duke so that they can gain a pension from him, etc. The materiality of their lives is matched only by their determination to transcend that temporarily by the use of their imagination. Thus the play they plan to put up before the Duke on his wedding day is one which they initially attempt to render imaginatively but as their rehearsals progress and they plan the details, the imaginative aspect decreases and is instead replaced by a literality which makes them spell out every detail (I.ii and III.i). Indeed, at the final performance, we see the play descend into chaos as the players confuse their lines, give unnecessary details, and demonstrate that even as they perform an imaginative exercise, they do not see their audience as capable of recognizing imaginative initiative: they literalise and materialise everything leading to a hilarious performance but also showing how their lives are rooted in material circumstances. In addition to their materiality, the players

are also significant for their theatrical endeavours which we shall discuss in the next section.

Among the players Bottom of course stands apart: at the initial rehearsals he is seen as the most confident of them all. He possesses a great assurance in his abilities; he is able to think about possible consequences and suggest possible solutions to problems as they arise and most importantly he is certain of himself. These qualities make it easy for him to accept his transformation from the weaver, Nick Bottom, to the lover of the fairy queen, Titania. His easy acceptance of this transformation and the calm with which he conducts himself suggest that transformation is something that endears him: not just to Titania but also to critics as stringent as Harold Bloom. The latter sees in Bottom one of the best characters created by Shakespeare, thoroughly human and yet possessing a breadth of charity and acceptance that makes him more than just an ass-headed monster. Reading Bottom's interactions with Titania as well as her fairies makes us realise that here is an individual who is calm and accommodating even when faced with strange fantasy creatures and when Titania orders the fairies to obey his every wish he asks for nothing much: that one should scratch an itch on his head, another fetch him some hay, etc. He is matter-of-fact, neither greedy nor grasping, aware that 'reason and love keep little company together nowadays' (III.i), conscious that he is neither wise nor beautiful (as he tells Titania when she calls him both), he cares for the fairies and their tiny size: Bottom is of course mocked and laughed at due to Puck's doings but he also manages to overcome that disadvantage and present himself as someone with dignity and charm, capable of truth and clear in his vision. Once rid of his ass's head when he returns to the world of the humans, he compares his interlude with the fairies to a dream, one which cannot be expounded or explained but was indeed a 'rare vision' (IV.i).

The fairies, as we first meet them, seem fractious and petty, their intrigues and quarrels causing trouble in the human world, witness the long speech wherein Titania lists the ill-effects of the ongoing quarrel with Oberon:

The human mortals want their winter here;
No night is now with hymn or carol blest:
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound:
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Far in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set: the spring, the summer,
The chidling autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which:
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original.

(II.i,101-117)

An interesting view is presented here: that dissent and discord among the fairies is causing blight upon the earth: parents, as Titania claims, are destroying the world of their children. If viewed in this manner then the worlds of the fairies and mortals are not really separate: actions performed in one reverberate in the other and cause disasters to strike. When read in this context, we then have to re-evaluate the relationships among the fairies and those between fairies and mortals: do the relationships in the fairy

world echo those in the human world? Or do they stand apart from? Titania appears strong and rebellious, determined to privilege her same-sex friendships and the loyalties they engender above her relationship with Oberon. Oberon does not appear to indulge in jealousy vis-à-vis his wife's affections. Both these are rendered more complex in the course of the play. So do the power politics of gender play out in the fairy world in a similar fashion to the human world?

Titania's initial protestations regarding her bond with her Indian friend fade once she is enthralled by the ass-headed Bottom, so much so that without a murmur she hands over the little Indian boy to Oberon. While Oberon causes Titania to fall in love with Bottom, it is also clear that in doing so his primary desire is to have his own way. Once his objective is achieved he is prompt to make her fall out of love with Bottom and she is as prompt to once again be reconciled to Oberon. While not indulging the jealousies common to mortals, Oberon does persist in practicing some forms of patriarchal control and power. And their eventual reconciliation is disquieting as Titania, strong and irrepressible at the beginning is submissive and docile at the end. Oberon and Titania's interest in human affairs is also explained by the line 'we are their parents.' Oberon takes an active interest in Helena's and Demetrius's acrimonious relationship. The confusion which causes Puck endless amusement are sorted out at Oberon's behest and the play ends with their blessing of the brides beds. We might well understand fairies to be actively, and benignly interested and participatory in the doings of humans, particularly of those such as Hippolyta and Theseus as seen earlier. If their moral attitudes are slightly questionable then the overall structure of their society still remains recognisably human.

Puck is widely considered by critics as the most significant character in the play. He sets numerous events of the play in

motion due to his mischievousness and mistakes. He is mischievous and fun loving. He is different from the fairies as his character highlights the cleverness in the characters of servants in Shakespeare's comedies. He does not have the beauty of the fairies but has the wit and at the end serves as the narrator to end the play.

9.3.1 *The "Rude Mechanicals"*

An element that has received sustained attention in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the subplot of the players and the play that they produce for Theseus' wedding, a play within a play. Placed alongside the 'play within the play' in *Hamlet* and the players therein, the two provide a comprehensive overview of the art of play production during Shakespeare's time. If the subplot in *Midsummer Night* provides us an extended picture of how amateur playing companies functioned then the players in *Hamlet* help us to see the conditions of the drama and professional players in Shakespeare's time.

The players who gather in Quince's house in Act I, scene ii of the play are drawn from a variety of professions: the characters include a carpenter, a joiner, a tinker, a tailor, a weaver, etc. Their coming together to think of an entertainment for the Duke's wedding night gestures towards two traditions of early English drama. The fact of a variety of occupations reminds us of the guilds that were earlier integral to the production of mystery plays in medieval England. We have learnt about that in an earlier unit. The ship-builders and seamen's guilds would enact the Noah's Ark section while the goldsmiths' guild would be responsible for the coming of the wise men to the nativity of the Christ child. But the co-operative effort being launched by the tradesmen in the play is also significant because it reminds us of the convention of putting on plays for special occasions at noblemen's houses, so that the players would then be adequately rewarded for their efforts. Indeed

we are reminded of this in Act IV, scene ii when Flute mourns the missing Bottom saying that ‘Thus hath he lost sixpence a day during his life. He could not have scraped sixpence a day’. The tradition is one that is part of the unverified background to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as well: it is traditionally believed to have been performed for a wedding at a nobleman’s home, with Queen Elizabeth herself in the audience!

If we read the scenes (I.ii; III.i; IV.ii and V.i) in which the tradesmen prepare and present their play we discover many of the conventions of Shakespearean drama: the fact that there is only one script for the play; that changes are made to that script as the players talk among themselves and discuss their drama; that one actor plays more than one role; the scarcity of props and their innovative uses; the necessity to keep their wellborn audience amused and not to frighten the ladies with too realistic a depiction of either lions or bloodshed: all these and more are gestured at in the scenes where Quince and company prepare their play.

When Quince announces the play he speaks of “The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby”: we recognise then that genre conventions in Shakespeare’s time were not fixed and unalterable: tragedy and comedy co-existed, in the same play. The custom of young boys playing the roles of women is mentioned when Flute protests that he would rather not play Thisby as he has “a beard coming” (I.ii). After the parts have been given out the players are told that they will meet in the woods to rehearse the play as if they were to meet in the city they will be “dogged with company, and our devices known”: a reference to the fact that rivals often tried to discover the plans and plays of playing companies and would gladly take their play scripts, if they could. When the “hempen homespuns” meet in the woods in Act III Scene i we see them sorting out technical hitches: how they are to present a lion, moonlight, a wall, etc. Also their worry is that they

might frighten the ladies in the audience by presenting swords, lions, etc. Their solution to this is ingenious: they will write a prologue which will make it clear to the audience that this is all make believe and thus all will be well. While the language and imagination, or lack thereof, of the players is humorous, this scene points to two features of the drama of the times: the possibility of adding prologues and other speeches and lines to a prepared play and also the fear of offending/distressing the audience. The latter is indeed such a strong fear that in attempting to alleviate that the “rude mechanicals” dilute their entire play, providing explanations to all the characters and actions as seen in Act V, Scene i.

The actual play as it is presented in Act V, Scene i is interrupted at every opportunity by the audience. Theseus, Hippolyta, Demetrius and Lysander comment upon their actions and words, mocking them and their efforts. While the presentation of the play itself is a laughable enterprise, the combination of the audience’s reactions and the sincerely persevering actors is indicative of the role of imagination for the members of the audience watching a play in Shakespeare’s times. With limited props, amateur players, and all other limitations which playing companies were susceptible to, the audience needed to be receptive to their presentation, something which Theseus and Hippolyta speak of when they say:

HIPPOLYTA

This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.

THESEUS

The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

HIPPOLYTA

It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.

THESEUS

If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men.

(V.i,209-214)

The main plot of the lovers and fairies and the subplot of the “rude mechanicals” are connected by Bottom. The subplot and main plot also come together in the final scene of the play. There all the characters of the play are found together. The subplot of the tradesmen’s drama is also useful as a counterpoint to the love stories of the main plot. The love story of Pyramus and Thisby is rendered laughable rather than tragic by Quince, Bottom and company and it also allows us to think about the fact that the love stories of the main plot are in some senses equally laughable.

9.3.2 *Green world in the play*

Northop Frye, in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* states that, “the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from ‘reality’, but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate.”

Often in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, the action moves to an alternative world different from the normal world presented in the beginning. This alternative world is often used to resolve the conflicts in the normal world. The theme of the green world is used as a contrast to the world of man, which is considered civilised and rational, whilst the natural world is considered harsher.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, majority of the action of the play takes place in the woods where the fairies are. In fact, the involvement of the fairies furthers the action, cause confusion, and also lead to a happy conclusion. The woods in the play are akin to a dream-like world of the characters, a green world. The duality of Shakespeare’s vision is apparent in the play. It shifts between night and day, between the rationality in the city of Athens and the chaos in the woods. The movement from a normal world to the green

world and then back again to the normal world as a conclusion is rhythmic. The disorder in the plot is represented in the green world. It is significant that in the play, the magic happens in the woods, and not in Athens. Puck engages his magic in the woods, the humorous events due to confusion also happens in the woods; the chaos and disorder is reserved for the woods which is the green world. The play starts at Athens, and moves to the green world. In the process it carries the problems of the real world to the sylvan space, namely problems in the characters' love role, such as imbalance, e.g. in the love relations between Hermia, Demetrius, Lysander, and Hermia. When the characters finally return from the woods, everything is resolved and a happy ending is found. The characters mention the event in the woods as being a fantastic dream. Hence, the chaos happened in the green world and was also settled there, eventually the plot moving towards the stability in Athens. Therein lies the contrast.

9.4 INDIAN BOYS AND POSTCOLONIAL READINGS

We first hear of the little Indian boy when we watch Puck speaking to one of Titania's fairies in Act II, Scene i. While speaking of the discord between Titania and Oberon, Puck introduces us to the cause:

For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
Because that she as her attendant hath
A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;
She never had so sweet a changeling;

(II.i,20-24)

Later during the on-stage quarrel between Titania and Oberon, we are told by Titania about the origin of the 'lovely boy':

His mother was a votaress of my order:
And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking the embarked traders on the flood,
When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
Following,--her womb then rich with my young squire,--
Would imitate, and sail upon the land,
To fetch me trifles, and return again,
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
And for her sake I will not part with him.

(II.i,124-137)

By the end of the play the little Indian boy has changed hands: Titania has given him up and Oberon now has him as his knight or henchman, and peace is restored between the two.

Several features of interest can be seen in this presentation of an Indian boy. One, there are two stories in circulation in the play itself about his origins. Titania speaks of him as her friend and votaress' son and it is because of the bond between her and the child's mother that she wishes to "rear up her boy" and "not part with him". While Titania's story is about inheritances via women, Puck's version does not mention mothers at all. Instead we are told that the child was "stolen from an Indian king". If gendered versions of the same story are one aspect of the child's origin, critics reading postcolonially have found it worthwhile to focus on the "Indian king" and the "spiced Indian air", the "Indian" being common to the stories told by both Puck and Titania.

India as a land of spices and riches is already familiar during this period to the English, and Shakespeare's use of the Indian boy as a cause for strife and contention between the fairy king and queen points us to the future: India as a land of riches and one which will provide "trifles" and "merchandise" to "traders". Titania's speech regarding her friend is fascinating precisely because it helps us to see the West relating to the East in terms of wealth, riches, trade and merchant activity. The Indian boy's mother and Titania spent hours together on the "yellow sands" and yet it is apparent that the Indian woman is not equal to Titania: she is firstly, a "votaress" of Titania's order and as they spend time together she would "sail upon the land, / To fetch me trifles, and return again, / As from a voyage, rich with merchandise." The image created by Titania about the Indian woman is also related to the earlier mention that they watched together the "embarked traders on the flood". The two images intersect because even as the ships sail on the seas, the Indian woman sails on the land; the ships are said to be "big-bellied with the wanton wind" while the Indian woman's "womb is then rich with my young squire". By conflating the woman and the trading ships, several ideas are fused: the Indian boy is transformed into merchandise; the woman herself is a trader; Titania becomes the recipient of the riches of the East if Titania's version of his origins is accepted. On the other hand, Puck's brief description of the child as "stolen from an Indian king" makes the child's presence among the fairies even more problematic. If that story is credited then the boy is transformed into stolen goods: Indians, even if they are kings are unable to retain control over their family members, and the fairies, if seen as representative of the West, become little better than thieves.

Viewed via gender and race, as we have just done, the Indian boy poses a problem in the text: he has little agency, his life is determined for him by Titania and Oberon, not himself. His

parents, one dead, the other in India, are likewise denied any rights over him. While his life is not unpleasant (Titania makes much of him, “makes him all her joy” and Oberon “would have the child knight of his train”) we are also being told about the impossibility of the ‘native’ races for self-determinism. They can be, and will be, fought over, their choices will have no validity and while the West might fight over them, they will be claimed by one party or the other, not left to their own devices. Shakespeare appears almost prophetic in his imagining of the futures as they relate to wealth, trade, and the colonies.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is the Indian Boy in the Play? Give two interpretation of his presence in the text from postcolonial point of view.

9.4.1 *Feminist reading of the play*

William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* highlights gender roles during that time, and despite the humour in

the play, a feminist reading of the play will highlight that the plot had its fair share of outright misogyny.

Criticism of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* tends to focus on its romantic entanglements and the humour of the 'rude mechanicals' sub-plot, although, many critics (such as Jan Kott), especially since 1960s have pointed to the brutality and violence that is an underlying element in the play. The brutality is, significantly enough, coded into the heterosexual relationships within the play and involves patriarchal power plays against the women characters. The process also involves class-based violence as the hierarchic society of the play utilizes the working classes to further their own agenda.

The play begins with the memory of violence, Theseus reminds Hippolyta that he won her with the sword, in a battlefield, doing her injury, and that one reference is enough to direct our attention to the fact that Hippolyta can well be a prisoner of war, brought back to Athens and forced into marriage with her conqueror. The mingling of romantic affection and violence is also underlined for us by Helena's request to Demetrius to "use" her as his spaniel, to "spurn" and "strike" her. Demetrius in turn hints at the ease with which violence could be visited on her in the forest, and is surprised that she trusts her "virginity" to him. Violence against women is something that no woman in the play is exempt from: even the "imperial votaress" is marked and shot at by Cupid and it is her good fortune that she passes on, unharmed. Oberon and Titania, where he is willing to thrust her into a sexual liaison with someone bestial for the sole purpose of humiliating her and making her give up the little Indian boy. While most productions play the Titania-Bottom entanglement as a ridiculous and humorous episode (and are reinforced in this interpretation by the miniaturisation of the fairies and the dearly-held belief that the play is one suitable for children) there have been productions that

have shown the sexual violence, bestiality and brutalisation that Titania is subjected to, by her own husband and in the pursuit of his own desires. In the process, he is also violent against the lower classes as Puck transforms Bottom into an ass-headed monster with never a thought as to what the effect might be on him.

The violence of the play is overtly misogynistic in nature, in the service of heterosexual goals, and one that makes clear that this is a world which is both classist and sexist. Theseus tells Hermia the following lines:

‘What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid.
To you, your father should be as a god,
One that composed your beauties, yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it.’

(I.i,46-51)

Theseus hence reproaches Hermia’s decision to go against her father’s will. He states that the will of Hermia’s father is supreme and it is justified for him to punish her as per law if she denies his wishes. There is striking lack of agency for the female characters in the play. In fact, Titania, who is a magical fairy queen, is the only one who is seen to be actively exercising an agency when she takes the Indian boy as her own from Oberon, her husband. She chooses to defy him. The rest of the female characters have no agency of their own and their agencies are dependent on the male characters. Hermia is left at the mercy of her father’s will. She is treated as a trophy to be won by Demetrius whilst Lysander puts her on the pedestal of love. Helena is absolutely meek and is willing to sacrifice her friendship with Hermia, fight her, for the acceptance of a male suitor. Even Titania is cowed down in the end by Oberon. Her defiant personality seems to have waned after the

incident of her falling for the ass headed Bottom. The male dominance of Oberon is established again. The play highlights male dominance repeatedly. Female characters do not exercise independent choices and even if they do, like Helena following others alone to the woods, these choices rest heavily on the male characters.

The play reflects the patriarchal society of that time where the power structures were absolutely dominated by men. Men's follies are ignored but women's are actively pointed out. No one respects Hermia's personal choice in love. Demetrius considers it perfectly acceptable to force his choice on Hermia and her father is willing to go through with it. He has taken the chastity of Helena but has left her, and he is not criticised for it. He criticises Helena with impunity as to why she fails to behave in a ladylike manner. Women are repeatedly shown to be following the whims of men in the play.

Marred with violence against one sex and misogyny, a grim picture can be unearthed out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

9.4.2 *Identity in the play*

The play highlights the loss of identity. Shakespeare blurs the identity distinction between reality and fantasy in the play. In the movement from the real world to the green world, the audience is prepared to accept the fantastical element in the play. The central problem of the plot arises due to the breakdown of the identities of the characters. Individual identities are fragile and when lost, the chaos within the play prevails. The biggest crisis of identity loss in the play occurs when Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius when Oberon describes Demetrius as wearing Athenian robes whilst Lysander is wearing the same as well. Through Puck's point of view, Lysander and Demetrius are indeed easy to be confused;

both are young Athenian men wearing Athenian robes roaming in the woods. This negates their unique individual identities and in the eyes of Puck, both lose their personal identities. This loss causes the greatest chaos in the play.

Bottom lost his identity as a ‘mechanical’ when the ass head was placed on his head. His individual identity was blurred. When the rude mechanicals perform the play of Pyramus and Thisbe, they are eager to accept the new identities in that play. They exhibit a desire to let go of their own identity and embrace a new one.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention one or two possibilities of reading the play with feminist view point.

9.5 STRUCTURE/PLOT

The play gives us four plot strands: the first, almost a framing device, is the wedding of Theseus, Duke of Athens to Hippolyta who is the Queen of the conquered Amazons. This strand begins the play and we are shown the impatience of Theseus and the restraint demonstrated by Hippolyta. As the play winds up, we

return to this world, this event, as the marriage has just taken place and the newlyweds eagerly wait for bedtime. Along with this strand we are introduced to the young lovers, Lysander and Hermia who wish to get married but encounter the opposition of Egeus, Hermia's father, who wants her to marry Demetrius who is besotted by her but is clearly fickle: he had professed love to Helena, Hermia's friend who is still madly in love with him but whom he spurns with cruelty at every given opportunity. Egeus calls upon Theseus to back his claims regarding his rights to determine his daughter's future. Given this obstacle, the young lovers flee into the woods outside Athens. Acts two, three and four take place in the woods, where with the help of the fairies the human lovers manage to sort themselves out. Returning to Athens in Act five we see the three couples after their marriage, being entertained by the play put up by the "rude mechanicals", which is yet one more strand of the plot.

The artisans who hope to make their fortunes by putting up a play for the Duke on his wedding night form a third strand: one rooted in practical realities, with the hope of bettering their fortunes. It is also Shakespeare's sustained send-up of the art of theatre itself, in the hands of amateurs. It connects to the final strand of the plot: the fairies and their squabbles. The quarrel between Oberon and Titania over the little Indian boy powers much of the action of the three central acts. Oberon orders Puck to engineer events, linking the stories of the young lovers and also the artisans via Bottom, whose transformation into the ass-headed lover of Titania is the cause for merriment but it eventually leads to the restoration of amity. The final act demonstrates a restored world, one wherein there is happiness for all the lovers, a restoration of the marriage of Oberon and Titania and the artisans stage their performance to some applause and understanding. As

the play ends the fairies enter to bless the bride beds of the newlyweds and all is well.

Four plot lines, all weaving together, form a complex pattern. It tells us different stories, which finally come together to give us a harmonious whole. Shakespeare demonstrates the art of constructing a tightly plotted play here, with effortless ease. The light touch may obscure the intricacies of the plot. All fall into place almost of their own volition. This happens despite the difficult knots in the play. One may ask several questions: how does the smooth ending take place when Hermia is threatened with execution if she does not accept her father's choice, when Helena follows Demetrius into the woods asking to be used like his spaniel, when Titania is humiliated by her husband and made to fall in love with an ass, or when Bottom is transformed (translated) into an ass? The complications are many, some truly terrible, yet the end wraps them all up and delivers to us a happy, successful conclusion where accord and balance prevail.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the basic plot structure in the play?

HOW does it WORK?

9.6 SUMMING UP

A Midsummer Night's Dream remains one of the most taught of Shakespeare's plays. While it is possible to examine the text for issues of race and gender, it is also possible to read it as being about love, the role of the imagination, fancy, appearances and reality. Whichever approach we might adopt, the play remains rewarding, offering up insights and ideas that remain contemporary.



9.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What are the conventions of Shakespearean drama that are presented to us via the “rude mechanicals” and their play?
2. The representation of the Indian boy helps us to think about the nature of the relationship between the East and the West. Explicate.
3. Explain the presence of violence in the plot against women.
4. Highlight an instance of the loss of identity in the play.
5. How does Shakespeare use the ‘Green World’ in the play to highlight rationality and chaos?



9 .8 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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USEFUL WEB SOURCES

- For the full text online:
<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/full.html>
- Watch Hermia being told by the Duke that she cannot marry Lysander at
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRoIxwGsBR0>
- Information on productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be found here
<http://shakespeare.emory.edu/playdisplay.cfm?playid=20>
- This site gives you links to paintings depicting characters and situations from the play
http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/MidsummerPaintings.html

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

UNIT 10: ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.0 Introduction

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Understanding Tragedy

 10.2.1 Revenge Tragedy

 10.2.2 Elizabethan Tragedy

 10.2.3 Shakespearean Tragedy

10.3 Summing up

10.4 Assessment Questions

10.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, dear learners, we shall try to familiarise you with *Hamlet*, one of the most well-known texts of Shakespeare. But before doing that we need to have a good understanding of the period which produced the play. We should also know how the dramatic traditions evolved in England and how much Shakespeare was influenced by it. Shakespeare appropriated materials from different sources and transformed them into unique works of art. *Hamlet* is one such work of art. Let us get ourselves acquainted with the background of the play during the course of this module.

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This material has been designed to enable you:

- to trace the growth of Elizabethan tragedy
- to study *Hamlet* as a definitive example of a revenge tragedy written during the Elizabethan period
- to discuss the character of Hamlet

- to evaluate Shakespeare's use of language, and study the symbols and images in the play.
- to understand how *Hamlet* reflects the political, moral and religious concerns of the period.

10.2 UNDERSTANDING TRAGEDY

The Greek philosopher Aristotle identified the conventions of a classical tragedy in his *Poetics*. For him, a tragedy is the story of the fall of a noble, powerful, rich and strong protagonist. The fall of such a protagonist affects not only the people around him but the whole country. The main cause for the downfall of the protagonist is due to some error of judgement (*hamartia*) and the end or purpose of tragedy is to provide some form of moral or philosophical education to the audience. The Greek dramatists, notably Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were the first writers of tragedy. The plays of the Roman writer Seneca (who imitated the Greek writers) were studied in Elizabethan schools and the early Elizabethan dramatists were highly influenced by him. Seneca was known as the author of ten tragedies. In his plays Seneca retained the pattern of the Greek drama but made considerable changes in it. Religious elements, awe and terror, and the sense of Fate or Will were some dominant themes in Greek drama. But in Seneca's plays, personal revenge is the main motive for action. The ghost was a definite member of the 'dramatis personae' which added to the element of horror in the plays. Seneca became a major influence on the English tragedy in the sixteenth century and by 1581 all the 'ten tragedies' had been translated. Tragedy of *Gorbuduc* also known as *Tragedy of Ferrex and Porrex* is an early example of English tragic drama.

10.2.1 *Revenge Tragedy*

The term “revenge tragedy” was coined by A.H Thorndike to describe a group of plays which followed the Senecan model of revenge for murder. The genre of “revenge tragedy” has been explored from different perspectives. Bowers in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* proposes a model of revenge plays based on Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*. The conventions of such a tragedy include revenge as a fundamental motive, murder, ghosts, multiple deaths, madness and the dramatic device of a play-within-a-play. The spectacle thrilled the audience more than the plot and kept them glued to their seats.

10.2.2 *Elizabethan tragedy*

Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe are the two central pre-Shakespearean figures in this genre. Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* is one of the first plays to use many of the Senecan motives. The central motive is the revenge of Hieronimo, the marshal of Spain, for the murder of his son Horatio. For Christopher Marlowe tragedy does not consist merely in the fall of a great man, what is more important for him is the weakness or strength in the character which leads to the fall. Shakespeare expanded upon the pattern of Senecan tragedies and was greatly influenced by Kyd and Marlowe. Shakespeare’s tragedies seek to explore, and provide insight into, the human mind, human behaviour, and human relationships. The plays also raise crucial questions about the nature of history, power, politics and gender.

10.2.3 *Shakespeare’s tragedies*

Shakespeare’s first great tragic play is *Romeo and Juliet* (1591-95), followed by *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Hamlet* (1601), *Othello* (1603), *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1606) , *Antony and Cleopatra*

(1607), *Timon of Athens* (1608), *Coriolanus* (1609). While studying a Shakespearean play we need to note that he did not adhere to the strict generic boundaries. Thus a Shakespearean tragedy contains elements/moments of comedy as the Porter scene in *Macbeth* or the Grave-diggers scene in *Hamlet* demonstrates. Similarly, a comedy includes ‘tragic’ moments such as the death of Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. It can be said that comedy and tragedy fascinatingly overlap in Shakespeare’s plays. Most of the tragedies centre around a strong protagonist who is endowed with outstanding gifts but at the same time also has some weakness or corruption. However, a strong protagonist, usually a male, intense suffering and study of evil, unhappy ending, and a higher percentage of blank verse are some of the differences between a tragedy and a comedy. Moreover though the tragic heroes are politically powerful, a tragedy emphasises more on the private person, the moral, ethical and emotional dimension of the hero. A tragic hero is therefore a highly individualized and complex personality who is unable to cope with the circumstances around him. Each of the tragic heroes in Shakespeare dramatises a unique conflict which accounts for the tragic circumstances in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Who did first introduced the concept of tragedy?
What is the name of the book where it was first mentioned?

2. Name two revenge tragedies.

3. Name two tragedy playwrights other than Shakespeare from his time.

4. What is the basic story of Spanish Tragedy?

10.3 SUMMING UP

In this unit we have tried to look at how tragedy originated in ancient Europe and how the English playwrights, including Shakespeare, appropriated some motifs (like revenge motif) from the Greek and Roman playwrights. This unit has also provided you information about some pre-Shakespearean playwrights and, most importantly, about Shakespeare himself. As you know, we are going to discuss Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the next unit and hence the discussion here will help you appreciate the play properly.



10.4 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Mention some of the classical Greek and Roman playwrights and write short notes on them.
2. What is a 'revenge tragedy'? Assess Seneca as a playwright whose revenge tragedies had a great impact on English playwrights.

3. Identify English playwrights who were influenced by Seneca and briefly show the elements of Senecan revenge tragedy prominent in their plays.
4. Comment on whether Shakespeare transformed the ‘revenge elements’ in his tragedies and how.

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

UNIT 11: READING ‘HAMLET’

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.0 Introduction

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Sources

11.3 Critical analysis of the play

11.4 Summing Up

11.5 Assessment Question

11.0 INTRODUCTION

Hamlet, the first of Shakespeare’s tragedies, was written in 1600. It was printed in the first quarter of the 17th century in three versions. The first edition was published in a quarto in 1603, and was called *The Tragical Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. The second quarto or “good” quarto, was published in 1604. A third version of the play appeared in the first folio (1623) of Shakespeare’s plays. *Hamlet* relates the story of the young prince of Denmark who comes home to attend his father’s funeral. He is shocked to see that his mother is already married. Later the ghost of his father informs him that he was murdered and urges him to avenge the murder. The play follows the tradition of a revenge tragedy, but is different in the sense that it also raises numerous questions about death, nature of man, appearance and reality and so on.

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section we will discuss:

- the play *Hamlet*, its source and background
- the plot of the play through a critical appreciation
- the characters, dominant themes, imagery as we find them in the play.

11.2 SOURCES

It is generally accepted that the immediate source of *Hamlet* was a play called *Ur Hamlet* attributed to Thomas Kyd ,which is now lost. This play was a tragedy and was also performed on the London stage. However, we first hear of Hamlet's story in the *Historia Danica* written by Saxo Grammatis , a Danish historian, who tells the tale of the rise and fall of the rulers of Denmark. The story of Hamlet, or Amlethus as he was called, is found is found in the third and fourth books of Saxo's *Historia*. A second account of Hamlet's story is contained in volume 5 of *Histories Tragiques* (1567) by Francois de Belleforest, who translated Saxo's story into French. In 1608, an English translation of Belleforest was published and it was called *The Historie of Hamblet*. Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1600, long before the English translation of Belleforest was published.

11.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

ACT I SCENE I

The scene opens in the royal castle at Elsinore. The focus of the scene is the ghost whose appearance mystifies Horatio, Marcellus

and Bernardo. Bernardo notes that the spectre is dressed in armour and seems to look like the late king of Denmark; but when Horatio questions the ghost, it disappears, leaving the men astonished. The appearance of the ghost is ominous and raises a number of questions. In Elizabethan times ghosts were usually thought of as unsettled souls, or demons, Satan's messenger. Horatio likens it to the ominous events in ancient Rome before the murder of Julius Ceasar. Denmark, as Horatio informs us, faces the threat of a military by Fortinbras, the young nephew of the King of Norway. The scene ends with Horatio resolving to inform Hamlet about the ghost.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Melancholy, demonology, the nature of man, and death were subjects of prime interest to the people during the late Renaissance period. Shakespeare in this play raises each of these issues. How would the Elizabethan audience react to the appearance of the ghost? Why does Shakespeare open the play with the appearance of a ghost? Jot down the points that come to your mind.

SCENE II

In this scene we are introduced to King Claudius who informs the court of his marriage to Gertrude, the Queen. He immediately takes charge of the state of affairs in Denmark but Hamlet is still in mourning clothes and looks downcast. Claudius is critical of Hamlet's continued mourning which he says is unnatural. Gertrude also reveals her maternal feelings towards Hamlet and urges him to cease his mournful ways. The royal couple also urge Hamlet to stay in Denmark and not return to his studies in Wittenberg, to which Hamlet agrees. After they depart we encounter Hamlet, who in his first soliloquy speaks out his mind. He is sick of life and longs for

death. We learn that the cause of his deep grief is not his father's death or the loss of the crown but the moral shock of his mother's true nature, who within a month married a man quite unlike his father. He condemns all women and concludes, "Frailty thy name is women". At this moment of utter disturbance and weakness, Horatio reveals to him the mysterious appearance of the armoured ghost. Hamlet suspects "foul play" and immediately leaps into action.

SCENE III

In this scene we are introduced to the family of Polonius, more importantly his daughter Ophelia. We learn of the growing relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet. Laeretes, her brother, cautions Ophelia not to take Hamlet's attentions seriously. Polonius also echoes the same advice to Ophelia. At the end of the scene Ophelia's promises to obey her father and be cautious of Hamlet.

SCENE IV

In this short scene Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus are on the castle rampart at midnight waiting for the ghost to appear. In the background they hear the noise of revelry in the court. Hamlet voices his criticism and comments how one single flaw in a man's character can bring about his downfall. The ghost suddenly appears and Hamlet follows it off-stage.

LET US STOP AND THINK

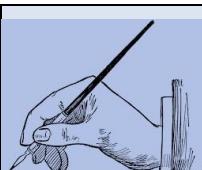


Elizabethans believed that human behaviour is determined by four bodily humours -- blood, phlegm, red bile, and black bile. Accordingly, a person could be sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, or melancholic. Intellectual types like Hamlet were thought to be susceptible to melancholy.

SCENE V

Hamlet encounters his father's spirit and also learns the true story of his father's death. The ghost urges Hamlet to avenge his murder, "a murder most foul" (27). However, Hamlet would not contrive against his mother and "Leave her to heaven" (86). The ghost departs and Hamlet in a soliloquy swears to avenge his father's murder saying "Thy commandment alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain"(102-3). At the end of the scene Hamlet informs Horatio that he would put on an 'antique disposition.' While, on the one hand, he vows to avenge his father's death, on the other, he mutters: "O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right" (87-88). This gives an insight into Hamlet's troubled mind and also his conduct later in the play.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. From the two soliloquies of Hamlet what impression you form of his character? Jot down the points.

2. What advice did Polonius' give to Ophelia and Laeretes?

4. What impression do you form of the status of women in Elizabethan times?

SCENE I

We return to the house of Polonius who instructs his messenger to make inquiries of Laertes in Paris. Ophelia enters in a distressed state and reports to her father that Hamlet appeared in her room in a dishevelled manner. As decided earlier, Hamlet is here feigning madness; but Polonius thinks that Ophelia's cold behaviour is the cause of Hamlet's ailment and decides to report the same to the King. We need to note Polonius' conduct here and how henceforth he would use his daughter to gain political mileage.

SCENE II

In this scene Hamlet continues to establish his insane behaviour. We meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two friends of Hamlet who have been summoned by the King to find out the cause of Hamlet's bizarre behaviour. Polonius, however, continues to insist that the cause of Hamlet's lunacy is unrequited love. As a proof he brings Hamlet's letters and also plans to 'let loose' his daughter and mark the encounter between her and Hamlet from behind the arras. By agreeing to the plot of her father, Ophelia betrays Hamlet. But she is a dutiful daughter who is in love with the Prince and wants to help him. In this scene we also meet the players, whose rendition of a passionate speech about the fall of Troy, sets Hamlet into a soliloquy. Hamlet denounces himself for his inaction and cowardice. Unlike the players, he cannot speak openly about the murder of his

father, neither has he gathered the conviction to pursue revenge. He opines that while the players could express such impassioned grief in a drama, he is unable to act even in a situation of real grief. He also plans to stage a play with a theme resembling the murder of his father and examine the king's response to it. This would confirm the ghost's story and "catch the conscience of the king" (562). Since ghosts were usually considered as demons, Hamlet's act of verifying the ghost's story is a practical step. He is cautious and judgemental.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Shakespeare here takes us into the world of theatre. Later, Hamlet advises the actors to speak clearly and loudly and, not to overact but be as natural as possible in their performance.

ACT III ,SCENE I

Rozencratz and Guilderstern report to the king that they could not trace the reason for Hamlet's distractions. Polonius informs the King of the performance Hamlet is planning. Along with Polonius, Claudius proceeds to observe the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet, in a soliloquy "To be, or not to be," ponders on the crisis he is facing. As in the first soliloquy Hamlet here is seen contemplating suicide, which appears as an easy solution to all life's conflicts. While at the end of ACT II Hamlet seemed determined to expose Claudius' duplicity, here he reverts to the procrastinating prince saying, "conscience makes cowards of us all" (83). We may perhaps attribute this as typical of his melancholic personality. He is caught in a monumental conflict and continues to struggle for a satisfactory solution. In his subsequent encounter with Ophelia he

rails at womanhood and even denies that he ever loved her. His behaviour shatters Ophelia and the King concludes that it is not love but “something in his soul/ over which his melancholy sits brood” (160/61). Apprehending some danger he decides to send Hamlet to England.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Hamlet with his doubt, moral dilemmas, despair, and desire for revenge represents the Renaissance man in search in search of his own self. Questions concerning the nature of man were of central concern during the Renaissance period. The numerous questions that Hamlet raises make him the prototype of the Renaissance Man. How far do you agree?

SCENE II

According to Hamlet’s plan, the play is staged so that he can confirm what the ghost of his father has conveyed to him. Hamlet instructs the players on how to deliver the lines of the Murder of Gonzago. He also discusses the techniques of acting. When the players enact the scene in which Lucianus pours poison in Gonzago’s ears, Claudius is alarmed and rushes off. Hamlet is now doubly sure and decides to take the “ghost’s words for a thousand pounds” (262). Polonius informs him that the Queen wants to meet him. When all depart Hamlet speaks out his mind. He is evidently bent on taking revenge. He observes that he could “do such bitter business as the day/Would quake to look on” (354-55). As he proceeds to meet his mother he decides to “speak daggers to her, but use[s] none” (359). In this scene, as the play is being enacted, we also find Hamlet engaged in some bawdy repartee with Ophelia.

Like the other men, Hamlet also uses Ophelia as he desires. He has very little respect for her feelings towards him.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does the play-within-the-play mirror the dominant theme of Hamlet?

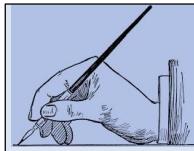
SCENE III

As Hamlet goes to meet his mother he comes upon Claudius who is at prayer. Though Hamlet gets the opportunity to kill his Uncle and avenge his father's death, he resists doing so because killing him at prayer would send him to heaven. Hamlet's sensitive and meditative mindset results in his inability to act even at the opportune moment. In this scene Polonius also informs Claudius of his plan to hide behind the arras and eavesdrop the conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude.

SCENE IV

In this scene, known as the closet scene, Hamlet meets his mother with the motive that she may "see her in most part" (19). In a fit of anger he kills Polonius who is behind the arras. Polonius' habit of spying ultimately brings about his own death. He chides Gertrude and draws contrasting portraits, one of King Hamlet and the other of Claudius. He accuses her of incest and derides her behaviour in strong sexual language. Throughout the scene Gertrude is passive and appears innocent of Claudius' plans. Hamlet's words fill her

with remorse. Suddenly the ghost appears and reminds Hamlet's of his "almost blunted purpose" (112). As Hamlet converses with the ghost, Gertrude thinks her son has completely lost his mind. Hamlet leaves for England revealing to Gertrude that he is "but mad in craft" (192).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. From the 'closet scene' what impression do you form of Gertrude's character?

ACT IV , SCENE I

Gertrude informs Claudius of Polonius' murder. Claudius realizes that in fact Polonius was the target of Hamlet's vengeance. He firmly decides to send Hamlet away to England.

SCENE II

Hamlet refuses to tell Rosencratz and Guilderster where he has hidden Polonius' body. He goes to meet the King as directed.

SCENE III

Claudius informs Hamlet that he has to leave for England. In a short soliloquy Claudius reveals his plan to put Hamlet to death in England. He demonstrates a great deal of patience with Hamlet who mocks him throughout the scene. Hamlet's preoccupation with death

also draws our attention. He points out in graphic language that death is the great equalizer of men.

SCENE IV

Hamlet meets Prince Fortinbras, a man of decisive action. In the name of honour Fortinbras has raised an army of “landless resolute” to invade Poland. In a soliloquy Hamlet compares his own indecision with Fortinbras’ positive action against the Poles. He questions why he has lapsed into such lassitude: “whether it be/Beastial oblivion, or some craven scruple / of thinking too precisely on th’ event”(39-41). A characteristic inability to act is highlighted in this soliloquy. Nevertheless he vows: “from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (65-66). Fortinbras’ example pushes him into action. He would no more dawdle, moralize or feign madness.

SCENE V

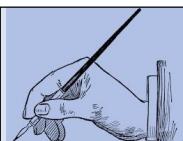
After a long time we meet Ophelia, who has become mentally deranged. She sings several verses of ballads which thematically alternate between her father’s death and the love she was denied. We see Ophelia as an innocent victim of an overbearing father, a brother and a brutal lover. Laeretes, who has returned from France, is furious and wants to know the whereabouts of his father. The sight of Ophelia upsets him all the more and he vows to avenge his father’s death and uphold the honour of the family.

SCENE VI

In this short scene Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet, and we learn how Hamlet has managed to elude Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and is back in Denmark.

SCENE VII

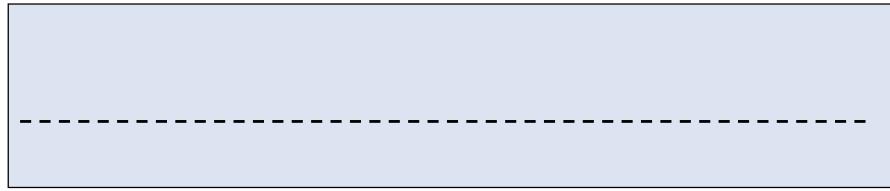
Claudius tells Laeretes the truth of his father's death and his inability to punish Hamlet because he is popular among the people. Claudius takes advantage of Laertes's anger and hatches a plot to murder Hamlet. He arranges a fencing match between Hamlet and Laeretes and says that Laertes can seize this opportunity to avenge his father's death. He also permits Laeretes to use a pointed sword, dipped in poison. In case hamlet survives the duel, Claudius says that he would give him a cup of poisoned wine which would surely bring about his death. Laertes here can be seen as a foil to Hamlet. While Hamlet has procrastinated his father's revenge, Laeretes immediately jumps into action. However, unlike Hamlet, Laeretes has no moral scruples, because he chooses to use a sharpened and poisoned foil in his duel with Hamlet. Getrude enters and informs Laertes of Ophelia's death.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Examine Fortinbras and Laeretes as foils to Hamlet.

2. What does Scene V reveal on Ophelia's predicament?



ACT V, SCENE I

In this scene two grave diggers discuss Ophelia's death, while they dig her grave. Hamlet, who enters with Horatio, is shocked to hear the insensitive remarks of the grave-digger. A sense of death pervades the play. Hamlet, who quite early in the play broods on death, is fascinated by the skulls the gravediggers unearth. The scene is dominated by quibbles and speculations on death. The grave diggers' song in this scene echoes earlier songs of Ophelia's in that it talks about love and death, youth and old age. With the arrival of Ophelia's funeral procession the mood changes. Both Hamlet and Laeretes leap into Ophelia's grave to prove their love for her. It is ironical that neither of them cared for her feelings when she was alive.

LET US STOP AND THINK



The comic scenes in Shakespeare's tragedies have evoked mixed responses. Some critics attribute these scenes to some other dramatist. But a closer examination reveals that the comic scenes are integral to the plot. Like the Porter Scene in Macbeth, the Grave digger scene in Hamlet reminds us of death and its inevitability. Despite the comic overtones we cannot miss the serious implications of the words of the grave diggers.

Scene II

This last scene begins with Hamlet narrating to Horatio what transpired in his voyage to England and how he managed to escape. He says that he stole Claudius' letter from Rozencratz and Guilderstern and replaced it with a forged letter sealed by his father's signet, ordering the immediate execution of Guilderstern and Rozencrantz. Osiric, a courtier, enters and announces the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Before the fencing match begins Hamlet apologises to Laeretes. In the ensuing fight Laeretes wounds Hamlet and in the scuffle they exchange the rapiers, and Hamlet wounds Laeretes with the poisoned rapier. The Queen drinks from the poisoned cup and the dying Laeretes blames it all on the King. Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and pours the poisoned wine down his throat thus executing his long anticipated revenge. The story which began with the death of the King, ends with multiple deaths, typical of a Shakespearean tragedy. The dying Hamlet names Fortinbras as the new King of Denmark.

11.4 SUMMING UP

This unit traces the source of *Hamlet*, the Shakespearean tragedy, and makes an act-wise and scene-wise analysis of the text. This will help you get an idea of the story elements and locate important junctures in the development of the plot. You will realise how the turns and twists in the plot draw the protagonist of the play inevitably to a tragic end. Once you are equipped with the basic background of the play, you will be able to appreciate the intricate issues that the text raises. The issues will be discussed in the next unit.



11.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTION

1. Write a short note on the sources of *Hamlet*.
2. How does the play open? How do the characters respond to the appearance of the ghost?
3. What does the ghost reveal to Hamlet? What was the impact of the revelation on Hamlet?
4. Explain the interactions between Hamlet and Ophelia? How does Hamlet judge her mother?
5. How many soliloquies of Hamlet do you come across? Analyse any one of them.
6. What steps does the King take to neutralise Hamlet? Analyse how these are tackled by Hamlet.
7. Critically examine the grave-digger's scene. What light does it throw on Hamlet's character?
8. Comment on the ending of the play.

UNIT 12: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.0 Introduction

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Theme of the Play

 12.2.1 Theme of Delay

 12.2.2 Theme of Madness

 12.2.3 Theme of Death

 12.2.4 Hamlet as a Revenge Tragedy

 12.2.5 Theme of appearance and Reality

12.3 The Soliloquies of Hamlet

12.4 Play within the Play

12.5 Characters

12.6 Summing Up

12.7 Assessment Questions

12.0 INTRODUCTION

Hamlet has been subjected to multifarious opinions and attitudes. The elusive nature of the play has always sustained critical attention. Hamlet is a play in which reflections on Renaissance world, art, philosophy, morality mingle with issues of death, madness and revenge. Critics have focussed on various issues in the play including that of Hamlet's delay. In this unit you will be acquainted with the opinions of a few critics on different issues in the play. Maynard Mack discusses three aspects of the play: appearance and reality which is seen in the first part of the play, the

concept of mortality, and the element of mysteriousness which is evoked by the uncertainties in the play.

12.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to learn:

- the critical reception of the play Hamlet.
- the dominant themes of the play
- the role of different characters.

12.2 THEME OF THE PLAY

12.2.1 *Theme of Delay*

For Hamlet's delay in taking revenge, various reasons have been cited. Ernest Jones asserts that Hamlet is afflicted with Oedipus complex, which is the prime cause of his delay/procrastination. Hamlet's preoccupation with moral integrity is seen as a major cause behind the delay in exacting revenge. Lily B. Campbell contends that Hamlet's grief becomes excessive because his passion is not moderated by reason. This intense grief is the reason for his failure to carry out revenge. Hamlet's introspective nature has been cited as a prime cause of delay by many critics. The soliloquies of Hamlet reveal his mind, and we see that he is conscious of his inaction and derides himself for the same. In his mind he decides to act but is unable to do so, and is physically inactive. Robert R. Reed, Jr says that not only internal meditations but external obstacles, like Hamlet's misgivings about the ghost and Claudius at prayer also prevent him from taking revenge. Hamlet's aversion to the deed, his doubts about the ghosts, his desire to kill Claudius when engaged in some wicked

deed, and Hamlet's cowardice and neglect of duty are some of the motives for delay as identified by E.E. Stoll. We may also consider the fact that 'delay' is a dramatic necessity in the play. Without delay there would be no Hamlet – the play as well as the character. Here the soliloquies of Hamlet become a point for consideration.

12.2.2 *Theme of Madness*

Madness can be seen in the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet decides to put on an antic disposition so that he is able to judge better and find out the truth behind the various incidents surrounding him. The antic disposition acts as a shield and protects him from his enemies, it also serves as an outlet and allows Hamlet to express his sorrow and disgust. Hamlet's behaviour creates anxiety in other characters especially Claudius who never believes that Hamlet is mad. Hamlet is melancholic, and emotionally unstable but not insane. In his essay "Hamlet and his Problems" T.S. Eliot traces the cause of Hamlet's problems to the lack of an "object correlative" in the play. The theme of madness is also seen in Ophelia. Ophelia becomes insane after her father's death.

12.2.3 *Theme of Death*

The theme/subject of death in the play has also been a prime focus. The play begins with the news of death of King Hamlet and throughout the play many more deaths occur. The theme of death figures prominently in the grave digger's scene (Act V Sc. 1). As two clowns prepare Ophelia's grave, Hamlet enters and speculates on the equality of death which obliterates all distinctions between individuals. Hamlet's thoughts and reflection on death was a prominent theme in Renaissance times. At the beginning of the play we learn about the death of King Hamlet; Ophelia, Polonius, Rozencrantz and Guildernstern die in the course of the play. At the end Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes meet their end .

12.2.4 *Hamlet as a Revenge Tragedy*

Hamlet is also a Revenge Tragedy which includes devices such as ghost, madness – real or feigned, suicide, murders, intrigue, poison, etc. In fact, it can be said that Shakespeare critiques this genre in Hamlet's inability to take revenge. Unlike in a typical Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, in Hamlet the action is directed inwards as the focus shifts to the mind of Hamlet and his conflict and irresolution. While Hamlet delays revenge, Laertes jumps into action the moment he hears of Polonius' death. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes does not wait for any evidence, neither does he have any scruples: "Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!" He agrees to Claudius' plans to execute his revenge. Laertes is a conventional revenge hero whose actions and statements are straightforward. The contrast between Hamlet and Laertes is very evident here. While Hamlet so far has not been able to accomplish his revenge, Laertes is determined to do the same. Hamlet's eloquence and deliberations on why he cannot execute revenge make him an unconventional revenge hero. It may also be noted that while Hamlet is seeking revenge for the wrong done to his father, he is also a murderer of Polonius. He is the avenger as well as a murderer. Thus, the theme of duality in the play comes to the fore.

12.2.5 *Theme of appearance and reality*

This clash between good and evil, appearance and reality, is a part of the moral universe of the play. It figures most prominently in the contrast between the characters of King Hamlet (compared to Hyperion) and his brother Claudius (compared to a satyr): "So excellent a King, that was to this / Hyperion to a Satyr". The moral universe of the play is disrupted by the killing of the King and Hamlet is assigned the task to restore goodness and order in the 'rotten state of Denmark'.

12.3 THE SOLILOQUIES OF HAMLET

Hamlet speaks seven soliloquies in the play. They have been the centre of attention for critics and readers alike. It is widely assumed that Hamlet's soliloquies tell us something about his state of mind and his feelings. This also makes Hamlet a modern hero whose mind, thoughts and consciousness are equally important. The soliloquies serve various functions in the play, it helps in the exposition of the plot, it also provides insights into commonplace topics like life and death. However, the soliloquies of Hamlet are not very personal, they do not give us much indication about his plans for executing revenge, his insanity, his feelings for his mother, his relationship with Ophelia and so on. Though the soliloquies are reflective in tone, they are not always intimate and personal. Therefore, a reading of his soliloquies gives us a sense of his intelligence and frustration, but it does not give us much access into Hamlet's mind. It is difficult to trace Hamlet's thought by a reading of the soliloquies as he ruminates on diverse issues and topics in each of these.

12.4 PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY

The play within the play brings up the issue of theatre and the theme of acting in the play. The theatre introduces the theme of appearance and reality, an issue which obsesses Hamlet throughout the play. In the play all the major characters and practise deception. Hamlet puts on an antic disposition so that he can see through the appearances and find out the truth. In the play within the play he seeks to find out the truth of the Ghost's words, establish Claudius's guilt and also the involvement of Gertrude, if any, in the same.

12.5 CHARACTERS

Hamlet

The character of Hamlet has been a subject of much scholarly debates. He is an individual given more to philosophising than to direct action. His preoccupation with the essence of man and his position in the universe make him the representative of a Renaissance Man. At the same time, his dilemma “to be or not to be” is an expression of the eternal conflict within every individual. Hamlet is torn apart not by conflicting emotions in the task of executing revenge but in his relationship with his near and dear ones. Above all, Hamlet as the Prince and future King of Denmark is equally responsible for the welfare of the people.

Claudius

Claudius is the present King of Denmark. He murders Old King Hamlet and marries Gertrude. From the beginning of the play Claudius is associated with evil in the moral universe of the play. Claudius is a shrewd politician; he marries Gertrude to gain support and secure his position as the King. From the beginning he is suspicious of Hamlet’s motives and his supposed madness. He carefully uses Polonius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Rozencrantz and Guilderstern to spy on Hamlet. After the play within the play Claudius is seen in a repentant mood as he tries to confess his guilt in a soliloquy. However, he immediately becomes anxious for his safety and plans to kill Hamlet by manipulating Laertes. His death in the final scene comes as the culmination of the theme of revenge and helps restore the good in the play.

Polonius

He is the father of Laertes and Ophelia and the Lord Chamberlain in the court of Claudius. Polonius is not an evil man,

however he is self-seeking and craves to be esteemed by the king and queen; he therefore uses Ophelia to spy on Hamlet . His death is of considerable dramatic importance in the play. It reinforces the theme of revenge, as Hamlet now becomes a murderer (though he accidentally kills Polonius) on whom Laertes seeks revenge. On the other hand, Ophelia becomes mad and commits suicide. All these events reinforce the theme of revenge and bring Hamlet and Laertes in open conflict.

Laertes

From the beginning of the play Laertes is seen as a foil to Hamlet. He is the good and obedient son. In Act 1 scene 3 he advises his sister Ophelia to protect her virtue at all cost and not to take Hamlet's attention seriously . Laertes' role becomes important after the death of Polonius when he returns to Denmark to avenge his father's death. Unlike Hamlet, he does not speculate and is manipulated and duped by Claudius. He confesses his treachery to Hamlet and dies indicting the King.

Ophelia

The two women characters in the play have also drawn considerable attention. Ophelia is clearly a weak character, dependent on the three men in her life, who manipulate her in their own ways. We may consider Ophelia as a 'good' daughter who obeys the instructions of her father Polonius. She fits into the conventional role of an obedient daughter. Thus she is denied a voice and presence. She accepts Polonius' advice and agrees to maintain a distance from Hamlet. Polonius thereafter uses her to spy on Hamlet. Ophelia never questions any of her father's moves, she only accepts and obeys. She is confused by Hamlet's behaviour and rejection, and after her father's death she has no one to hold on to. This may be seen as a cause of her insanity. Even in madness

she constantly talks about the two most important men in her life – her father and Hamlet. The songs that Ophelia sings in her madness indicate her deep feelings for Polonius and Hamlet and at the same time the concern with female chastity figures as a prominent theme in the songs. Ophelia, in madness, also carries flowers of different kinds which signify emotions like love, jealousy, betrayal etc. Throughout the play Ophelia is associated with typical ‘feminine’ qualities. She is harmless, soft, fragile innocent and weak. It is significant that she dies by drowning (presumably suicide as Gertrude reports).

Gertrude

Gertrude’s character has evoked mixed responses. While some critics look at her as clear-headed and courageous, especially in the closet scene, some others see her as a weak and highly dependent character manipulated by Claudius. Gertrude is a middle-aged woman and as the widow of King Hamlet she may be seen as ‘powerful’. Thus, Claudius not only marries her for love but also to secure his position as the new King of Denmark.

Examining the character and role of Gertrude we find that she appears in only ten scenes of the play and speaks very little. She usually enters a scene with Claudius and leaves after being ordered by him. Gertrude does not have any soliloquy nor is there any other indication to read her thoughts. Her speeches (she speaks very little) and actions compel one to see her as a quiet and careful mother and wife. The ghost does not state or suggest Gertrude’s involvement in the murder. Similarly, in the closet scene she appears to be innocent of Claudius’ guilt which is also seen in her reactions to the play which Hamlet stages. It can be said that Gertrude marries Claudius in innocence and good faith. However, though not overtly corrupt, Gertrude finds herself in the role of an accessory. After the murder

of her first husband, Gertrude allows herself to be persuaded into marrying her brother-in-law who uses the marriage as a stepping stone to the crown. Instead of waiting for the absent prince Hamlet, after the hasty marriage, Claudius proclaims himself the king. The marriage deflects attention from the unnatural death of the king and acts as a cover-up for Claudius' criminal act. The marriage also legitimises the usurpation of the throne as Claudius claims to be Hamlet's father and guardian. Her foolish acceptance of things at face value reflects Gertrude's lack of prudence or wisdom. Moreover, her susceptibility to Claudius' sexual overtures shows her as a woman waiting to be exploited by those who are more intelligent. These are some of the reasons for Hamlet's disgust with her. She allows herself to actions and appears to be complicit with Claudius for mutual gain.

12.6 SUMMING UP

Thus Hamlet, as we have seen departs from the traditional revenge play. Revenge is one of the motifs here, but in the pursuit of revenge the play raises numerous questions. These questions, as we have seen were central to the Renaissance. Hamlet's tragic flaw, the prime cause of his delay in exacting revenge is his excessively brooding nature. He cannot act at the spur of the moment, but thinks and examines the event. He is unable to come to terms with the deceit, mistrust and corruption around him. He feels betrayed by his near and dear ones – his mother, uncle, Ophelia, and his friends Rozencratz and Guilderstern. In the course of examining Hamlet's delay the play raises many important issues such as death, appearance and reality, madness, love, position and role of women and so on. At the same time the subplot involving Polonius' family and Fortinbras are equally pertinent and important in our understanding of Hamlet the character as well as the play. The

tragedy begins on an ominous note with the appearance of the ghost and ends with multiple deaths. In the course of the play we are confronted with innumerable questions which show the complex nature of this text. Perhaps we can conclude with T. S Eliot's opinion that Hamlet is "the Mona Lisa of literature" (Eliot, Selected 47).



12.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Critically comment on the opening of Hamlet.
2. Discuss Hamlet as a Revenge Tragedy.
3. Write a comprehensive note on the significance of the soliloquies in Hamlet.
4. Discuss the theme of appearance versus reality in the play.
5. According to Wilson Knight, the subject of Hamlet is "death". Do you agree? Give a well-reasoned answer.
6. Discuss the role of women in the play. Do you hold them responsible for Hamlet's tragedy?
7. Write a critical note on the Grave-diggers scene (Act v scene i) in the play .
8. Discuss the symbols and imagery in the play .
9. Discuss Hamlet as a tragic hero.
10. Discuss how Hamlet's character and his problems introduce the reader to the changes that occurred during the Renaissance.

11. What is the purpose of the subplots – involving Polonius and his children and Norway and young Fortinbras – in the play. How is the story of Hamlet reflected in each of these subplots.



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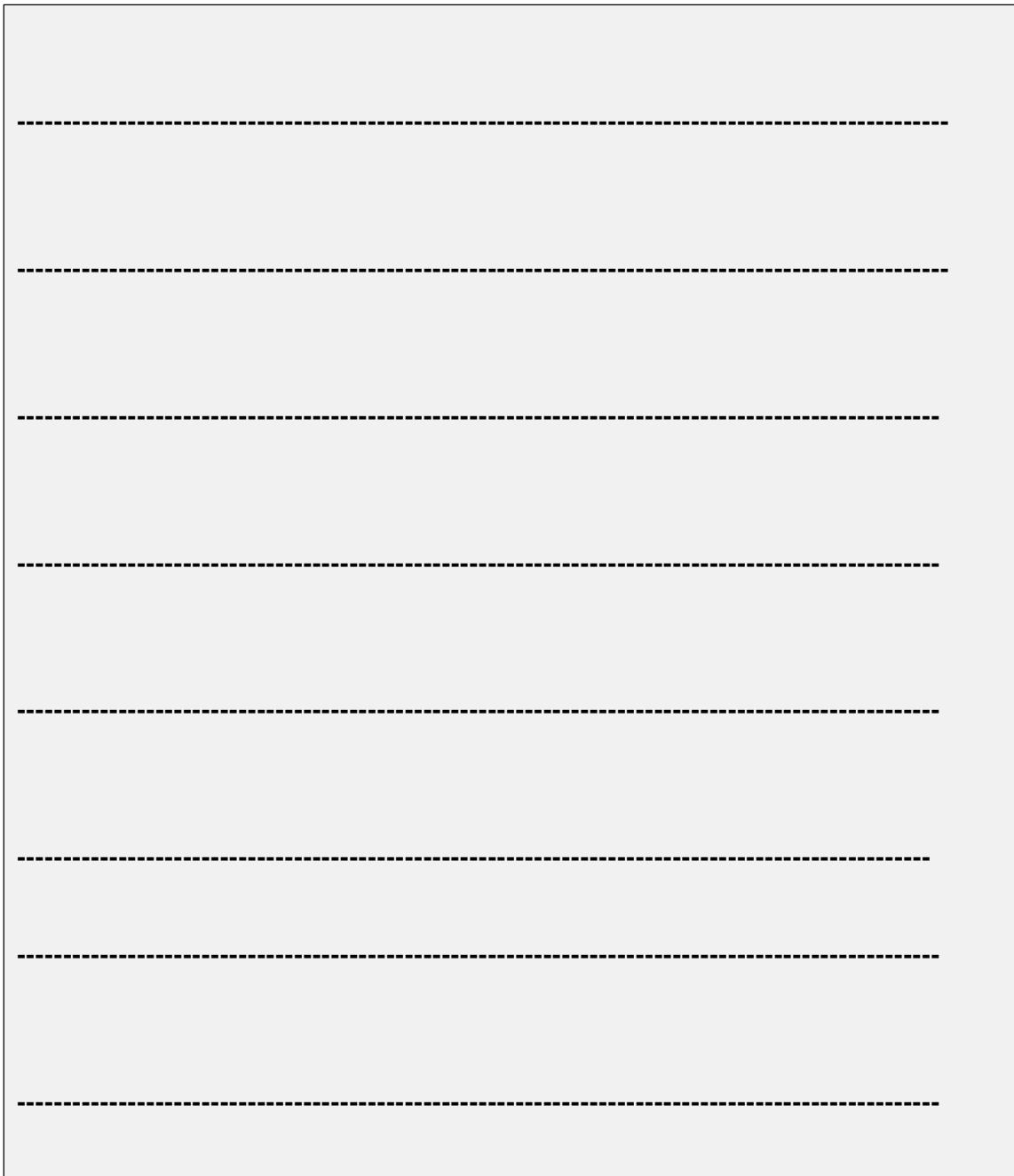
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JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS



The image shows a large, light gray rectangular box with a thin black border. Inside this box, there are seven horizontal dashed lines spaced evenly apart, intended for handwriting practice. The lines are thin and black, with a slight gap between them.



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