Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Plot

- In Athens, Duke Theseus is about to marry Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Egeus demands that his daughter Hermia marry Demetrius, but she loves Lysander. By Athenian law she must obey, become a nun or die. Helena loves Demetrius, who has rejected her.
- Hermia and Lysander run away into the wood, followed by Demetrius and Helena. In the wood, the fairy king Oberon and queen Titania are quarrelling over an Indian boy.
- Oberon tells Puck to use the juice of a magic flower, which makes a sleeper love the first creature they see. Puck mixes up the Athenians, so both men end up loving Helena. Oberon uses it on Titania, who falls in love with Bottom, a weaver whom Puck has given a donkey's head.
- Bottom and the other workmen (the "**mechanicals**") are rehearsing a play, Pyramus and Thisbe, for the Duke's wedding. Oberon puts everything right: Titania is freed, Lysander loves Hermia again, and Demetrius stays in love with Helena. Theseus overrules Egeus, the three couples marry, and the **mechanicals** perform their comically bad play.

Characters

- Theseus: the ruler who stands for order and reason. Egeus: the controlling father.
- Hermia and Helena: friends who fall out when the magic goes wrong. Lysander and Demetrius: rivals whose love changes at the touch of the flower.
- Oberon and Titania: the fairy rulers whose quarrel upsets nature. Puck: mischievous, and the cause of much of the confusion.
- Bottom: confident and comic, he wants to play every part, and is calm even when Titania adores him.

Themes and context

- Love: changeable and irrational. Lysander says that "the course of true love never did run smooth".
- Dreams, magic and imagination; order and disorder (the city against the wood); power, especially fathers' power over daughters; and theatre itself.
- Shakespeare wrote it in the mid-1590s. Elizabethan audiences believed in fairies and spirits, and daughters were expected to obey their fathers.

Form and language

- A **comedy**: confusion and mistaken identity end in marriages. It has four linked plots: the court, the lovers, the fairies and the **mechanicals**.
- Nobles and lovers mostly speak **blank verse**, the fairies often speak in rhyme, and the **mechanicals** speak prose. The **play within a play**, Pyramus and Thisbe, mocks bad acting and tragic love.
- Puck's **epilogue** asks the audience to treat the whole play as a dream.

Key terms

Comedy	A play with confusion and misunderstandings that ends happily, often with marriages.
Play within a play	A play performed by characters inside another play.
Blank verse	Unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter.
Epilogue	A speech at the end of a play, spoken to the audience.
Mechanicals	The Athenian workmen who rehearse and perform Pyramus and Thisbe.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who does Egeus want Hermia to marry?
2. Who does Hermia love?
3. What are Oberon and Titania quarrelling about?
4. What does the juice of the magic flower do?
5. Whose head is turned into a donkey's?
6. Who falls in love with Bottom?
7. What play do the mechanicals perform?
8. Who overrules Egeus at the end?

Answers

1. Demetrius
2. Lysander
3. An Indian boy

Your notes

4. Makes a sleeper love the first creature they see
5. Bottom's
6. Titania
7. Pyramus and Thisbe
8. Theseus

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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