

## A Brief Analysis of the Structural Devices in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Received 27 December 2023; accepted 16 February 2024  
Published online 26 April 2024

### Abstract

In this article, we have analyzed the structural devices Shakespeare has applied to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by using formalistic criticism. The structural devices the great master has used are mainly dramatic plots with the focuses on dramatic conflicts, dramatic irony and thematic concerns.

The central component of dramatic plot is its dramatic conflict. The causes of dramatic conflicts are disorder among characters. The five stages of dramatic conflicts are the same with dramatic plots. They are exposition, rising actions, climax, falling actions and conclusion. The conclusion or denouement for comedy is that a comedy tends to endorse the values of society, sometimes at the expense of individual needs or values. Dramatic irony is another useful structural device. It means the fulfillment of a plan, action or expectation in a surprising way, often the opposite of what the characters intend. Thematic concerns are plots or dramatic actions to be put together and lead to the revelation of the theme.

**Key words:** Formalistic Criticism; Structural Devices; Dramatic Plots; Dramatic Irony; Thematic Concerns

Zheng, C. (2024). A Brief Analysis of the Structural Devices in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 28(2), 27-31. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13419>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13419>

### INTRODUCTION

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is written by one of history's most vital and versatile playwrights: William

Shakespeare, around 1595. This comedy is among his shortest plays, and is generally considered one of the last of Shakespeare's "apprentice" plays: the works of a young writer just beginning to find his own voice and dramatic style, still quite dependent on classical models.

The motivation for choosing this research subject is that Shakespeare's critics in the twentieth century have served his comedies less well than his tragedies. As Danson states (1986, p.231) the reason for the bias: We know that tears are important, but we think laughter is a mark of triviality; suffering is real, but happy endings are the products of wishful thinking; wishful thinking is indulgence, while great art should be hard work. To dispel the bias, we need rediscover the comedy as a genre itself.

Having the purpose of getting a glimpse into the author's particular way of looking at the world in this play, we had better appreciate it from the formalistic point of view, for the play itself is like an "organic form" (Guerin, 2004, p.80), that we need investigate how the formal elements and its meanings correlate with each other.

When we read this drama, we will discover that there are so many interesting and effective structural devices Shakespeare has adopted to well organize this play, mainly parallel dramatic plots, varied dramatic conflicts, dramatic irony and thematic concerns. These formal elements work together to reach the total effectiveness of comedic flavor of this play, and also point to its theme. Therefore, this article will bring us closer to these elements and their functions.

The significance of the paper lies in that not only will we have a better appreciation of Shakespeare's unique writing techniques concerning structural devices, but also we can develop our own skill as readers of drama.

### 1. INTERNATIONAL STUDIES OF THIS PLAY

The studies of Shakespeare's tragedies number more than

those of his comedies. Some scholars have focused on the forms or structures of his comedies, and their studies prove to be fruitful.

Levin (1817) states that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an aristocratic lyric comedy, with nine scenic units and last act dominated by a play within a play, therefore *A Midsummer Night's Dream* challenges the very working of imagination and perception mechanisms.

More in vividness is that Daniel (1986) makes an interesting statement about the play's structure: It creates constellations, in many modes, and kaleidoscopic patterns. The ducal and the fairy courts complement each other, and the clash of love and authority is cross-related in half-a-dozen situations with the tension of a sonnet. Unity comes from the constantly felt drive towards the final celebration.

Robert G. Hunter's *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (1965) engages in the interpretive problem posed by comedies where the conventional happy ending requires an audience to forgive an erring or indeed criminal character. In some Shakespearean comic plots that action drives the character from their normal social world into a green world where liberation potentialities are explored and finally takes them back to a social world transformed now by its contact with the green world. Furthermore, Hunter (1965) historicizes Frye's plot of comedy and finds Shakespeare working in a tradition originally medieval and didactically Christian one which reflects the theological pattern of sin, repentance, and forgiveness.

In addition to the findings above, some scholars (Booth 2002; Beaty, 2002) have suggested that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare suggests the links between high-born characters and those low-born characters by structuring the main plot complemented by parallel, often contrasting second plots. This play offers at least four plots, each featuring a pair of lovers whose happiness is, or has been, threatened by their own failures to understand each other by others' opposition. The secondary plots can be divided into underplots, which are romantic or parodic versions of the main plot, and overplots, which foreground its political dimensions. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom becomes the protagonist of the underplot, Theseus and Hippolyta, and perhaps, Titania and Oberon, of the overplots. However, all the secondary plots encourage us to compare the way different people handle similar situations and thus to evaluate various choices and responses. The parallel plots serve simultaneously as a structural device, a potent means of characterization, and a way of drawing our attention to general issues and themes.

The previous international studies on the structural devices used by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be classified in different groups. Some of them emphasize the overall structure of the play and the overall structure can be further divided into kaleidoscopic patterns. Different from this group is another one which

tries to focus on the theological pattern reflected in this play: sin, repentance and forgiveness. As regards to the plots, some scholars try to create some terms, such as underplots and overplots.

To better approach the structural devices in this play, we will adopt close reading, the method used by formalistic critics, and this will carry us closer to the textual structures themselves. But one thing needs to bear in mind is that structural devices are the means for serving the themes. The following sections of the article will try to analyze the structural devices from three aspects: dramatic plots, dramatic irony and thematic concerns. A thorough understanding of dramatic conflicts will enable readers to appreciate the five stages of the plots; dramatic irony is a necessity for creating comedic atmosphere of the play. One thing worth noticing is that dramatic conflicts and dramatic irony are not merely for the sake for writing techniques, but they are closely related with thematic concerns. All the structural devices are to be interwoven in order to bring out the theme.

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## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERARY APPROACH

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Structural devices are the literary methods that concern about how to structure a certain drama. It can be divided into following aspects: dramatic plot, dramatic irony and thematic concerns.

Plot in plays usually involves a conflict and dramatic structure centrally concerning the presentation, quite literally the embodiment or fleshing out of that conflict (Beaty, 2002, p.1363). In a dramatic conflict each of the opposing forces: whether one character versus another, one group of characters versus another group, the values of an individual versus those of a group or society or nature, or one idea or ideology versus another one, at one point or another seems likely to triumph. The typical structure of a dramatic plot involves five stages in the progression of the conflict: exposition, rising actions, climax, falling actions, and conclusion. For the five structural stages that shape dramatic action, most plays have formal divisions, such as acts and scenes, and usually acts and scenes echo with the progression of the five stages of dramatic plots. Another structural device which a play can be organized and made meaningful is thematic concerns. Thematic concerns are used to hold together varieties of characters and winding plots. Besides this, dramatic irony is another useful structural device. It means the fulfillment of a plan, action, or expectation in a surprising way, often the opposite of what the characters intend.

To have a good analysis of the structural devices, we have better adopt the literary approach: formal criticism, i.e., new criticism. Formal criticism regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be

examined on its own terms. "The natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves." (Gola, 2006, p.879) To a formalist, a poem or story or a drama is not primarily a social, historical or biographical document, it is a literary work that can be understood only by reference to its intrinsic literary features, that is, those elements found in the text itself. Therefore, the formalist critic focuses on the words of the text rather than the facts about the author's life or the historical milieu in which it was written. The critic would pay special attention to the formal features of the text; the style, structure, imagery, tone and genre. These features, however, are usually not examined in isolation, because formalistic critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all of its elements work together to create the reader's total experience. A key method that formalists use to explore the intense relationship within a literary work is close reading, a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text.

The purpose of close reading is to understand how various elements in a literary text work together to shape its effects on the reader. Since formalists believe that the various stylistic and thematic elements of literary work influence each other, these critics insist that form and content cannot be meaningfully separated. The complete interdependence of form and content is what makes a text literary. When we extract a work's theme or paraphrase its meaning, we destroy the aesthetic experience of the work.

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### 3. DISCUSSION ON THE STRUCTURAL DEVICES

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The central component of dramatic plot is its dramatic conflict. From the theoretical framework, we know that the conflict develops through five stages, just as the same with dramatic plot. They are exposition, rising actions, climax, falling actions and conclusion. In a dramatic conflict, each of the opposing forces, whether one character versus another, one group of characters versus another group, the values of an individual versus those of a group or society or nature, or one idea or ideology versus another one, at one point or another seems likely to triumph.

To better understand how Shakespeare constructs the dramatic plot, especially dramatic conflicts throughout the play, we can approach them by dividing it into five stages. There are three major conflicts. The first one is the "love triangle", the second is the one between fairy king Oberon and fairy queen Titania, and the two conflicts are entangled by the fairy spirit Puck, considered as a jester to push forward the development of the conflicts.

To exemplify dramatic conflicts, we can pick up one and examine it. The conflict of "love triangle" develops through five stages. It begins with Hermia's refusal to

be married to Demetrius, the one who has been chosen by her father. Her heart really belonged to Lysander, who also shared true love with Hermia, so the couple wanted to escape from Athens. Hermia's best friend, Helena, falls in love with Demetrius, but Demetrius also has his passion for Hermia. This is the exposition of the conflicts. The rising action is that the four young men and women all come into the woods, then Puck is about to tease them. Contrary to Oberon's will that Puck should anoint Demetrius' eyes and make him fall in love with Helena, Puck anointed Lysander's eye, so both the young men have their mind set on Helena, and this makes Helena bewildered. Hermia arrives at this moment, to her disappointment, Lysander asks Demetrius to pursue Hermia, but Demetrius tells Lysander it is Helena who he has the strongest affection. The climax of this dramatic conflict centers upon the quarrels and even fighting between Lysander and Demetrius' possession of Helena's love. The conflict between them is flared up, for they even draw out their swords. Puck tells Oberon that he has caused such chaos, that to send the young couples sympathy, Oberon asks Puck to dispel the charm for them, and the conflicts reach a denouement, as the play suggests: "Jack shall have Jill; Nought Shall go ill." (3-2, pp.462-463).

The major characteristics of a comedic resolution is that comedy tends to endorse the values of the society, sometimes at the expense of individual needs or values. This can be conferred from the disentanglement of the "love triangle", that Demetrius and Helena finally become a couple, and this means that Demetrius has to sacrifice his individual need, the love for Hermia. In comedy, the resolution occurs when one or more characters take a proper social role (Beaty, 2002, p.1777).

To point out the causes of the dramatic conflicts, we can summarize them in two key words: dissension and disorder. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we see the actions of a sovereign turn the world upside down: the young rebel against the old, women chase men, old friends turn on each other. Clearly, the kinds of dissension and disorder at work in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes us laugh. The rhythm of the play turns out to be tracing the movement from disorder to order, from dissension to harmony. In the process, the play asks us to think about the nature and causes of social, political, and moral disorder of dissension within states and families.

Dramatic irony is another useful structural device. It means the fulfillment of a plan, action, or expectation in a surprising way, often the opposite of what the characters intend. In this play, the ironic flavor is added by the six craftsmen's play, namely, the most lamentable comedy about Pyramus and Thisby. The juxtaposition of "lamentable" and "comedy" created a certain effect of irony. How can a "lamentable" play become a "comedy"? The irony further develops through Bottom, one of the

six players. Before the rehearsal, Quince allocates the roles for each actor. Bottom is supposed to play the role of Pyramus, a lover who kills himself most bravely for love. Bottom likes his role. But to our surprise, he also wants to take the role of Thisby, the queen Pyramus loves. For Bottom, he has both strengths to act as a man and tenderness to behave like a woman. The irony lies in his doubled facet temperament, and it makes our readers burst into laughter. The irony about Bottom culminates in their rehearsal for the play. Something profoundly strange has happened to Bottom: his head is turned into an ass'one. At this moment, Titania, the fairy queen, whose eyes have been anointed by Puck, wakes up, and the first sight she casts upon Bottom makes her love him at once. Titania even calls her fairies to do courtesies to Bottom, which is originally done to Oberon. When Titania asks Bottom about his desirable food, he even responds like this: "Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay; good hay, sweet hay, has no fellow" (4.1. pp.22-31)

Another irony about this play is the unusual portrayal of the fairy world. In ordinary people's eyes, a fairy world is in peace and tranquility, without any trifles or disharmony. But in this play, the fairy king Oberon and the fairy queen Titania has a dispute over a little boy. The trigger of their quarrel sounds ironic, as we suppose fairy king and queen can get along very well with each other. Their results of quarrels are ironically exaggerated as to be the causes for abnormal climate changes which have resulted in great disasters for the common beings. We are told the "progeny of evils" that come of the "debate" and "dissension" between Titania and Oberon (2.1. pp.115-116). Oberon seems to be mean with Titania as he wants to play a joke on her. He asks Puck, the mischievous spirit to anoint Titania's eye and make her fall in love with any creature she sees after she wakes up. The quarrel even results in Oberon's change of mind of being in peace with the commoners. He also wants to tease the couples in the woods by disturbing their relationships.

The unfathomable dream itself is an irony. The interwoven of the earthly world and unspeakable fantasies of the characters in the play, altogether bring about the significance of the dream. But what does the dream mean to be? After waking up, Bottom suggests that: "I have a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past a wit of a man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream..." (4.2. pp.199-202). Bottom is the only human who is allowed a glimpse of this world. Bottom reaches for words to describe his "dream", and can only find, and muddle, the high biblical phrases in which St. Paul touched on his vision of God: "Swift as a shadow, short as any dream, brief as the lightning in the collied night...So quick bring things come to confusion" (1.1.144-5, 149).

Thematic concerns are plots to be pieced together and lead to the revelation of the theme. Some plots can serve as the thematic concerns. The plots can be further divided

into overplots and underplots. Overplots foreground its political dimensions, and underplots are romantic or parodic versions of the overplots. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus and Hippolyta, as well as Titania and Oberon, are the main characters of the overplots, while Bottom become the protagonist of the underplots. However, all underplots encourage us to compare the way different people handle similar situations, thus to evaluate various choices and responses. The parallel plots serve simultaneously as a structural device, an effective means of characterization and a way of drawing our attention to general issues and themes. Therefore, they can be considered as thematic concerns.

Some dramatic actions can also serve as thematic concerns. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* plunges us into a night-time world dominated by the intertwining forces of magic, love and humor, and it also continually reminds us of the dangerous aspects of the night, of the struggles that human beings endure in their pursuit of love and happiness, of the brevity and fragility of human joy and human life (Beatty, 2002, p.1612). As this play is about the theme of fantasy, the thematic concerns are to be expressed in the following actions: the fairy world, verbally ablaze with warfare and mischief, the jester Puck as the linking one between the fairy world and the earthly world, the fantastic love between Titania and Bottom, Titania as a fairy queen no more immune to love's magic or foolishness than the lowliest of mortals, the most lamentable comedy about Pyramus and Thisby.

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## CONCLUSION

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The structural devices the great master has used are mainly dramatic plot with the focus on dramatic conflicts, dramatic irony and thematic concerns. The plot is intricately designed and unusually organized so that it can really hold readers' fancy. Through the analysis of some major dramatic conflicts, we can have a clear picture of the causes of dramatic conflicts: dissension and disorder, that is, how the conflicts develop through five stages: exposition, rising actions, climax, falling actions and resolution or denouement. For the comedic denouement, we have found that comedy tends to endorse the values of society, sometimes at the expense of individual needs or values. Another important structural devices Shakespeare has employed is dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is prevalent in this play and we have just selected out a few to exemplify. It means the fulfillment of a plan, action, or expectation in a surprising way, often the opposite of what the characters intend. The thematic concerns are the overplots and underplots wrapped together to lead us to think about what is behind the dreams, the theme of this play. Some dramatic actions can also serve as thematic concerns.

The significance of this article lies in that by the literary approach of formalistic criticism, we have found

out Shakespeare is really a great comic playwright, not because he uses comic structural devices, but because he extraordinarily varies and extends their possibilities. If we go to create a comedy, we can learn from Shakespeare's devices and add something new to them.

Besides, formalistic criticism is a proper literary approach to the analysis of a drama. The delicacy of the play does not lie in its profound themes, nor complexities of characters, nor their ever-changing psychological worlds. Actually, the beauty of the play is mainly about its varied structural devices to create a certain kind of dreaming fantasy.

Though formalistic criticism can be considered as a good choice, we cannot neglect its possible limitation, in another word, formalistic critics usually put aside the social context in which the play might be produced as well as the biographic factors of the writer which might help shape this play. When we use formalistic approach, we had better combine its aesthetic functions with the meanings behind it. One thing we must bear in mind is that form and meaning are inseparable.

There is something expansive about Shakespeare's dramatic genius (Hapgood, 1986, p.273). A deeper question as regards to the limitation of this approach is that we want to know the theatrical dynamics of the plays, in other words, a play is not merely a play written on a paper scroll because a play should be staged and performed. The performance of the play can be considered as an extension to the play itself, and may evoke more questions as to how the play can be performed effectively when it is to be viewed by certain audience. Then critics want to ask about the relation of Shakespeare's comedy to his contemporary audience and to the life of his society as a whole, therefore sociological theory informed by history can be helpful. And they also want to know how the audience of our contemporary society considers this play and how the actors can make this play vividly with the assistance of modern dramatic properties.

Another question is that: while they continue to explore Shakespeare's comedies, they will also continue to explore the relation of the comedies to the histories and tragedies, because Shakespeare's plays are usually incorporation of both comic and tragic elements as Samuel

Johnson suggests that "Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but composition of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow" (Beaty, 2002, p.1613).

It is worthy of praise that Shakespeare's dramatic language is unique. For example, the status marked through language marked when the characters switch between the sue of you and thou, indicating the fluctuation in their relationships from intimacy to distance, from respect to contempt (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998, p.138). We also want to pay attention to the musical and visual qualities of Shakespeare's language. The rhymed and rhythmic variation, the unrhymed patterns, together with visual imagery consistently link various moments and ideas, serving both structural and thematic ends.

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