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# The Depiction of the Nature and Forms of Love in A Midsummer Night's Dream

## The Unruly Child That is Love

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the concept of love and relationships are certainly at the forefront of the play. However, if one delves a bit further into the story, elements such as violence, death, and pain, which all strongly contrast with love, exist in the lives of the characters as well as love. Through the use of aggressive language and the persistent underlying theme of violence in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare suggests that experiences that should be happy, such as love, will always be intertwined with some pain as a result of the loss of control that love brings about. Shakespeare entertains this theme, along with the inclusion of violent metaphors, to highlight the unruly, uncontrollable nature of love, and the things people will do to in an attempt to gain a sense of control over it. It becomes increasingly apparent over time however, that love cannot ever be controlled; yet it is in the nature of humans to continuously try to do so.

The ideas of pain and suffering are present within the very first scene of the play during a conversation regarding love and marriage, immediately setting up the underlying connection between the two. Pain felt by the characters can be both emotional and physical pain, and can stem from a variety of things. The discussion between Theseus, Egeus, and Hermia regarding her relationship is one such source of emotional pain. Hermia begs, "I would my father looked but with my eyes", and not only see her love for Lysander, but also the pain her father is putting her through by forcing her into a decision that is not hers (I.i.56). Shakespeare utilizing the phrase "with my eyes" specifically highlights how desperately Hermia wishes her father could see the pain she is in at the thought of not being with her love. Almost immediately the play is implying that love and relationships are inherently painful in nature, and love cannot exist without feelings of pain and suffering. With this initial conflict also comes the idea of control. Egeus is desperately seeking to exert his control over his daughter, yet the love she feels for Lysander is prohibiting her father from gaining it.

While Hermia and Lysander continue to discuss their complex relationship, the idea of an individual having no control when it comes to love really comes to light. Lysander comes to the conclusion that, "If there were a sympathy in choice, war, death, or sickness did lay siege to it" (I.i.141-2). Lysander realizes that even if Hermia and himself were to end up together, that some external force out of their control would eventually end the relationship. Shakespeare includes this statement to truly emphasize the nature of love in this play. Regardless of the strength of

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ones relationship, or how compatible two personalities may be, there will always be external forces, such as disapproving parents, or simply unfortunate timing that will inevitably affect the relationship, and Hermia and Lysander are no different. Hermia even claims that, “it is a customary cross, as due to love as thoughts, and dreams, and sighs, wishes, and tears, poor Fancy’s followers” (I.i.153-5). The couple understands that not only will universal things such as death or sickness at some point separate the two, but also that these difficult obstacles are as much a natural part of love as dreams and tears. The emotion of love causes people to relinquish all control that they believe they have and leave things to fate, which can sometimes be a painful thing to do. As the play and the lovers’ relationships continue to progress and become more complex, this concept of the wild nature of love, pain, and loss of control continues to be a present theme. Helena in particular faces a great struggle throughout the play, of wanting to desperately be loved but having that reciprocation completely out of her control. Helena herself notes the unruly and sporadic nature of love, stating that the mind of love lacks, “any judgment taste...and therefore is Love said to be a child” (I.i.236-8). Shakespeare comparing the concept of love to a child personifies love as an individual who does not listen, has no reasoning behind his actions, and simply does as he pleases. Helena and Demetrius’s dynamic greatly emphasizes this theme throughout the play. She is filled with desperation to have some sort of control and a sense of order in the relationship, that she begs Demetrius for any sort of attention that he is willing to give. She pleads with him, “The more you beat me, I will fawn on you. Use me but as your spaniel – spurn me, strike me, neglect me, lose me” (II.i.204-6). Being in love has made her spiral out of control, unable to sort out anything for herself, that she sees being the victim of violence as the only way to regain some order for herself. She comes to the realization that “The more I love, the more he hateth me” (I.i.199). Despite being rejected a multitude of times, she still is trying to control his emotions, even though Demetrius has shown no signs of changing in the imminent future. This love for her is extremely painful; the difficult part being that nearly every aspect of it is completely out of her control. Shakespeare highlights this concept in her unique relationship with Demetrius in particular to reinforce the idea that no matter how much an individual may love another, love is wild and uncontrollable, and simply loving a person is not always enough for it to work out.

With the innate nature of love being as uncontrollable as it is, the characters in the play are desperate to regain any sense of control. Through the violent language present throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare implies that one such way to gain back some sense of order is through violence. Violence could lead a character to believe they are in control in the sense that it is a conscious choice one makes to act out violently. Regardless of their external circumstances, one always has the option to decide whether or not to act out in such a way. Most often in this play, these references to violence are meant in the metaphorical sense, yet they still carry a significant amount of weight when spoken by the characters. These violent statements often come at the hands of an extremely emotional conversation, and are used to convey just how strongly the character feels. One such instance of this is present during the

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conversation between Demetrius and Hermia, regarding her love for Lysander and therefore her rejection of Demetrius. Clearly emotionally distraught, Demetrius speaks to her, saying “So should the murdered look, and so should I, pierced through the heart with your stern cruelty” (III.ii.58-9). By Hermia rejecting him, Demetrius feels as though she figuratively stabbed him in the heart. Her unrequited love filled him with such strong emotion that he compared his pain to something so violent and physical. While it is true Demetrius would be dead had Hermia truly stabbed his heart, Shakespeare implies that at least there would be a sense of an end to the chaos Demetrius feels.

Yet another reference of violence as a means to an end, and also a way to regain a sense of control in one’s love life, comes when Hermia questions whether or not her love Lysander is dead. She furiously questions Demetrius as to Lysander’s whereabouts, and mentions that “If thou hast slain Lysander in his sleep, being o’er shoes in blood, plunge in the deep and kill me too” (III.ii.47-9). Hermia would be so distraught if Lysander was truly gone, that she would much rather be dead than live without him. This scene strongly reinforces the idea that external forces such as death and sickness will inevitably act on love, and in this case if Lysander was actually dead, it was far out of Hermia’s control. Death is inevitable in love, and will at some point touch everyone, including the strongest of loves and relationships. Hermia hypothetically mentions that she would rather be dead if her lover was, once again to regain some sense of control. If she were dead, as death is final, she would no longer have to live and suffer in the world without Lysander. Death is not a pleasant end, but it is an end nonetheless. Shakespeare including violence, even in the metaphorical sense, is intended to convey the strong desire for a sense of control while feeling such a powerful and unruly emotion such as love. The implication of violence present throughout this play is what the characters use as a solution to the chaotic situation that they find themselves in, all as a result of being in love.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, while it certainly may appear as though Shakespeare is suggesting that violence is the main way to gain a sense of control, there are a multitude of ways an individual could attempt to control their situation. Hermia and Lysander attempt to do so by plotting to run away, thinking that that may help their predicament. Conversely, Hermia’s father is also trying to gain a sense of control, by threatening his own daughter with death if she chooses not to obey him. Both Hermia and Lysander, along with Hermia’s father and essentially each of the remaining characters, were trying to gain some control back in their lives, and each of them was able to go about doing so in a different way. If one looks below the surface of the predominant theme of violence, these other methods become clear.

Violence and love, while seemingly opposite concepts, closely interact throughout Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with the intention being to place a great deal of emphasis on the innate nature of love. Love itself is innately chaotic, and often times unruly and truly out of anyone’s control, no matter how hard one may attempt to rein it in. It truly is

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impossible for anyone to control love, as the characters seem to find out as the play progresses. By underlying love with such contrasting violent language and imagery, Shakespeare is able to convey the intense power of the emotion of love, and the loss of control that almost always comes with it. While love on the surface may seem happy, pure, and untouchable, if one delves deeper there are many more chaotic layers to uncover.

Works Cited Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *The Norton Shakespeare*: Greenblatt, Stephen, editor. New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1997.

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