Resources for the function of the Play-Within-a-Play in
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

The Significance of the Play Within the Play Structure of A Midsummer Night’s Dream by William Shakespeare
[How the play-within-the-play AND the quest for love are similar]

By Nicole Smith

One of the notable characteristics of the dramatic construction and presentation of William Shakespeare’s play A Midsummer Night’s Dream is the fact that it contains two distinctly different plots within the larger framework of the main play. The author’s skillful development and juxtaposition of these simultaneously unfolding plots serves the function of reiterating some of A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s principal themes. Similarly, the utilization of this multiple plot structure also situates Shakespeare in relationship to the creative process and his own work. Furthermore, this structure allows the reader to question the very nature of creativity and of love. The play staged by the mechanicals is particularly effective in this regard. The comic, lighthearted tone of the players as they prepare for and fulfill their roles in Pyramus and Thisbe serves as a welcome contrast to the more dramatic circumstances between the young lovers and the fairies in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Even more than these other plots, the plot of the mechanicals raises a number of important questions about life, love, and creative production and performance.

The lower class laborers who comprise the unlikely dramatic troupe which will perform Pyramus and Thisbe are introduced to the reader in Act I Scene ii. Everything about these players is comical, from their most superficial characteristics to their deeply embedded personality traits which include a habit of bumbling, mispronouncing words so that the meanings of their sentences are completely and comically misconstrued, and generally playing the part of fools. As soon as the reader learns of the rag-tag actors’ names—Bottom, Flute, Snug, Snout, Starveling, and Quince— he or she becomes immediately oriented to the fact that the introduction of these characters is intended to disrupt the larger narrative of the play and if anything, provide further comic relief to the slightly more serious (although still lighthearted) main narrative. Additionally, these goofy characters also exist to raise questions about the subjects and themes in A Midsummer Night’s Dream that are most present throughout the work. For example, Nick Bottom is a weaver who, like his fellow tradesmen, has no previous acting credentials. In fact, it is not entirely clear how these men have come together or who decided that they were “worthy” of putting on a play. This issue of worthiness, or fitness, for playing certain roles, whether on the stage or in life, is a central theme and preoccupation in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Upon learning that he will be assigned to play the lead role of Pyramus, “a lover that kills himself most gallant for love” (1.2), Bottom asserts that he will be so effective in his role that he will elicit the audience members’ tears: “I will move storms” (1.2), he proclaims to his fellow actors. Flute is also comical, and, in many ways, he acts as a comic foil for Bottom, especially as Bottom ends up taking himself seriously, despite the fact that the audience is well aware of the situation. For Flute’s part, he begs not to be cast as a female character because he has “a beard coming” (1.2). Bottom will also evince a preoccupation with his beard later in the play, as he questions the other cast members how he should wear his beard so that it will be most appropriate and most convincing for his role. While these details may seem to be little more than humorous distractions, they actually serve much more profound purposes in the overall scheme of the play. In a certain sense, Shakespeare seems to be using these amateur actors as a way of opening a conversation both with himself and with the reader about the nature of the creative process. The actors are so preoccupied with the minutiae (tiny details) of their newfound dramatic craft, yet they fail to engage more important creative concerns, such as correct pronunciation and the mastery of crucial dramatic resources and techniques, including memorization, line cues, timing, and the congruence of affect with speech. Quince spends much of the troupe’s rehearsal time trying to harmonize the untutored actors so that their performance will eventually, hopefully, play out seamlessly. While it can be suggested that Shakespeare is merely offering a comical interlude to discuss the creative process, there is also the dual purpose of how these issues make the reader even more keenly aware of other themes in the play, including love and power.

In the final analysis, Shakespeare is able to provoke the reader, and perhaps even himself, to consider the similarities between the nature of the creative process and the nature of the love relationship. Both involve similar questions and processes of determination and presentation, including considerations of social class, the fitness or worthiness of a role, and the degree to which characters who are external to the immediate action exert influence over events and characters’ circumstances. This questioning is achieved through the clever construction and deployment of multiple plots that run simultaneously and ultimately unite at their conclusion. This dramatic strategy works because each of the plots tackles the subjects of love and creation from a distinct perspective. This dramatic technique is sophisticated and provokes the reader to consider old themes from a new perspective.

Ultimately, it is with definite purpose that Shakespeare included the play-within-a-play subplot and ended A Midsummer Night’s Dream with the intertwining of all four plots in the wedding celebration. Think about what you learn from
the layering of the production and your reading/watching experience compared to that of the viewers of the play-within-the-play, and consider the following questions:

1. What are the challenges of finding one’s way through love?
2. What does it take to create art?
3. What should be expected of performers and audience?
4. **How does Shakespeare use *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to reveal or illustrate problems within all of the above?**

Adapted from: http://www.articlemyriad.com/play_structure_midsummer_dream_shakespeare_1.htm

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**The Craftsmen’s Play**

The play-within-a-play that takes up most of Act V, Scene i is used to represent, in condensed form, many of the important ideas and themes of the main plot. Because the craftsmen are such bumbling actors, their performance satirizes the melodramatic Athenian lovers and gives the play a purely joyful, comedic ending. Pyramus and Thisbe face parental disapproval in the play-within-a-play, just as Hermia and Lysander do; the theme of romantic confusion enhanced by the darkness of night is rehashed, as Pyramus mistakenly believes that Thisbe has been killed by the lion, just as the Athenian lovers experience intense misery because of the mix-ups caused by the fairies’ meddling. The craftsmen’s play is, therefore, a kind of symbol for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* itself: a story involving powerful emotions that is made hilarious by its comical presentation.

Adapted from: http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/msnd/themes.html

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**Play within a play**

This dramatic device was apparently first used by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* around 1587, where it forms the spectacular resolution of the story.

William Shakespeare used this device notably in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet*. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet himself, asks some strolling players to perform the *Murder of Gonzago*. The action and characters in the play mirror some of the events from the play itself, and Hamlet the character writes additional material to emphasize this. Hamlet wishes to provoke his uncle, and sums this up by saying “the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king” (2.2). Hamlet calls this play *The Mouse Trap*.

When characters in a play a perform on stage the action of another play, often with other characters forming an “audience,” the audience in the theatre sometimes loses its privileged omniscient (all-knowing) position because it is suddenly not clear who is in the play and who is in the play within. The device, then, can also be an ironic comment on drama itself, with inversions and reversals of its basic elements: actors become authors.

Alternatively, a play might be about the **production of a play**, and include the performance of all or part of the play, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the musical *The Producers*.

Adapted from: http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Play_within_a_play