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Ecocriticism in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Ecocriticism in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream

Minnesota and Washington state take environmental conservation seriously, as out-of-state tourists visit lakes, forests, parks, and mountains in a cyclical summer pilgrimage. There is a reason why Minnesota champions itself, “the land of 10,000 lakes”. Preserving the natural habitat is critical for monetary profits, as parents and children are encouraged to swim in the lakes, jump off floating docks located close to the beaches, built sandcastles by lake shores, and hike up the shaded terrain of state parks. Regardless of what conservative, build-at-all-costs entrepreneurs would say, creating a billboard next to the highway or developing a strip-mall because Whole Foods promises to occupy a corner store does not necessarily mean the natural environment *should* be developed. Preserving the planet is important because it is the only one we have, and if humans systematically destroy the planet (ozone depletion, global warming, rising water levels and ocean temperatures, the creation of sink-holes through the inadvertent release of natural gas), there is no re-start screen.

Whether he was consciously aware of his campaign to highlight a natural preservation of the environment or how the environment interacts with its human inhabitants, William Shakespeare wrote a number of eco-critical plays. Ecocritical plays are plays exploring the relationships between the natural and artificial (human-created) worlds. The natural world as untamable to an ‘unnatural’ and civilized culture is pertinent to “Midsummer” because at the end of the play, one of four Athenian youths is left under nature’s controlling thumb. Lysander and Hermia have their happily-ever-after, and the

reader could infer a positive outcome for Helena as she ‘gets’ the boy she goes into the forest for. However, Demetrius’ fate serves as a quintessential example of the Indian/South American belief humans are subject to nature where, “the most powerful forces of life are beyond human control” (Samovar 214). To the reader he earns one or both of two outcomes: either sympathy and/or empathy because he is left in a (presumably permanent) drug-induced state of euphoria over a woman he does not love, or the reader is indifferent or happy to leave him in his condition (he abandons Helena – whom he already made love to - after seeing Hermia). Regardless of opinion, what is not disputed is the influence of the forest and the faeries over the Athenians.

According to the Environmental Humanities Center, “environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts... if we wish to understand our contemporary attitude toward the environment, its literary history is an excellent place to start” (Environmental Humanities Center). A Midsummer Night’s Dream demonstrates a scenario common to Shakespeare’s plays where characters escape to the natural world (woods, forests, islands, or rural locales): humans desire to control nature, but rarely can the artificial control the natural. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, it is the faeries (agents of the natural world) who puppeteer the humans (Lysander and Hermia, Hippolyta and Theseus, and especially Demetrius and Helena). In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, nature *can* control humans and society, regardless of what Missouri (with its build-at-all-costs mantra) and other developers would say.