

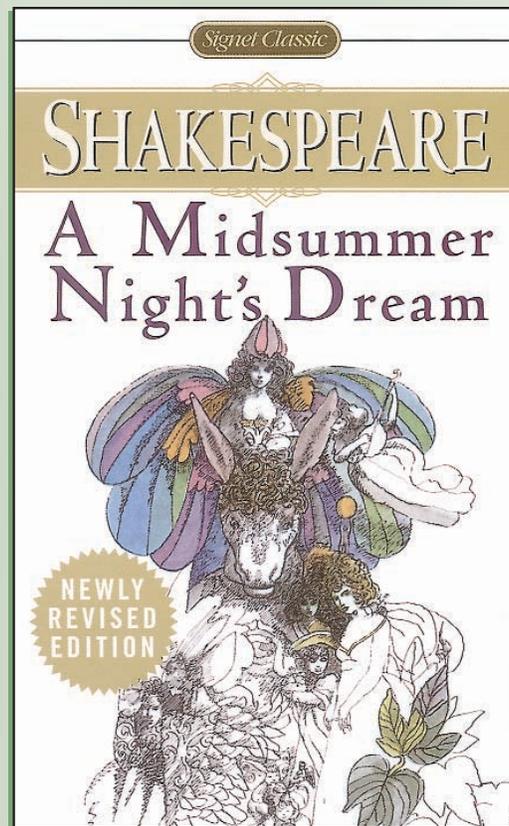
Signet Classic

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSIC EDITION OF

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

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S E R I E S E D I T O R S :

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INTRODUCTION

A Midsummer Night's Dream is especially appropriate for senior high students because its major theme is love—a subject on the minds of most teenagers much of the time. There is plenty of comedy to entice those who are not interested in love, and although there are fairies, they are not like Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*. Even the most reluctant student should have fun with the Pyramus and Thisby production by the artisans.

Another theme is friendship. Friends and what they think and say are extremely important to adolescents. Most will have had some experience of two friends liking the same person of the opposite sex and the difficulties that situation brings about. Is friendship stronger than love? Certainly that question is one explored in this play and done that is worthy of discussing as is what it means to be loyal to friends.

Illusion versus reality is another theme students should enjoy looking into. Teenagers are well aware things are not always as they seem, and this is especially true in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where almost nothing is what it seems to be. Then too there is the parent-child conflict over who the child can be in love with—not at all an uncommon situation for many young people. Hermia's rebellion against her father ends happily, but Thisby's rebellion ends in death. However, the farcical nature of the play within the play as presented by the artisans keeps this from being tragic, as in *Romeo and Juliet*.

This teacher's guide is organized in the following manner: a brief overview followed by teaching ideas to be used before, during, and after reading the play. These ideas are meant to help students understand the play as well as explore issues confronted in the play that have importance in the students' lives.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I, SCENE I

Theseus and Hippolyta discuss their wedding which is to take place in four days. Theseus sends Philostrate to round up entertainers to while away the time. Egeus brings his daughter Hermia and her two suitors, Lysander and Demetrius, to Theseus to settle an argument. Hermia wants to marry Lysander. Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius. Theseus gives Hermia three choices—marry Demetrius, enter a nunnery, or be put to death for disobedience. Hermia has until the day of Theseus's wedding to come to a decision. Lysander and Hermia plan to meet in the woods the next night and elope. Helena, who loves Demetrius and is the lovers' friend, decides she will tell Demetrius of their plans so she can be with him while he looks for Hermia and Lysander.

ACT I, SCENE II

Six artisans meet to discuss what sort of entertainment they will prepare for Theseus's wedding. They decide to do a play about Pyramus and Thisby. Parts are assigned.

ACT II, SCENE I

A fairy meets Puck in the woods, and they discuss the quarrel between Titania (Queen of the Fairies) and Oberon (King of the Fairies) over a human child they both want. Oberon and Titania meet and talk about the upcoming wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Titania says the bad weather can be blamed on their quarrels. The human child is the son of one of her devoted followers who died at childbirth. She refuses to turn him over to Oberon. Oberon sends Puck to find a special flower whose juice, when placed on the eyelids, causes that individual to fall in love with the next living creature seen. He plans to put it on Titania's eyelids to shame her into giving up the boy. Helena and Demetrius come hunting for Hermia. Despite Demetrius's insults and threats, Helena says she will follow him wherever he goes. Oberon tells Puck to put some of the juice on Demetrius's eyes so he will fall in love with Helena when he awakens.

ACT II, SCENE II

Titania tells the fairies to sing her to sleep. Oberon places some of the juice on her eyelids and hopes she sees something vile when she wakes up. Lysander and Hermia are tired and lost and decide to sleep awhile. Puck mistakenly puts the juice on Lysander's eyes. When Helena finds Lysander she awakens him. He, of course, falls in love with her instantly. Helena thinks he is making fun of her and runs away. He follows. Hermia awakens, can't find Lysander, and goes looking for him.

ACT III, SCENE I

The six artisans come to the woods to practice for their play. Puck watches for a while and then puts an ass's head on Bottom and chases the others about the woods. Bottom begins to sing to prove he isn't afraid; Titania awakens and, with the magic juice on her eyelids, falls in love with Bottom disguised as an ass. She sends her fairies to find special things for Bottom to eat. Bottom is not the least bit surprised and loves the attention.

ACT III, SCENE II

Puck tells a pleased Oberon of his trick on Bottom and of Titania's infatuation. However, when Hermia and Demetrius enter quarreling, Oberon realizes Puck has made a mistake. Puck goes to find Lysander and Helena while Oberon puts the magic juice on Demetrius's eyelids. Helena is still sure that Lysander is making fun of her. Demetrius awakens and immediately loves Helena. When he and Lysander quarrel over her, they go off to fight a duel for her. Puck leads the two young men about the forest and when they eventually fall asleep, he puts an antidote on Lysander's eyes.

ACT IV, SCENE I

Bottom orders the fairies about before falling asleep in Titania's arms. Oberon tells Puck that Titania had given the boy to him. Ashamed of himself, he decides to release her from her spell and awakens her. Titania thinks she has had a bad dream. She and Oberon reconcile. Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, and the others enter planning to celebrate the May morning with a hunt. They find the four young people, awaken them, and listen to explanations. Theseus decides both couples should marry on his and Hippolyta's wedding day. The four lovers follow the rest back to the castle talking about their unusual dreams. Bottom awakens, wonders where the other players are, and decides to write a song about his dreams.

ACT IV, SCENE II

The other five artisans have despaired of Bottom's return and fear the play cannot be presented. Bottom returns and urges all to get ready for the play because the Duke and his bride and the two other couples await their entertainment.

ACT V, SCENE I

Theseus and Hippolyta can't believe the stories the four young people tell. Theseus asks Philostrate what entertainment he has found to while away the time before bed. When given a list of possibilities, he chooses the play of Pyramus and Thisby in its "tragical mirth." Philostrate says it is awful and not worth watching but Theseus insists. The players present a truly funny version of the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby. The three pairs of lovers make comments throughout the play with the play, both to the actors and to each other and note the silliness of the two tragic lovers. The play over, the three couples go off to bed leaving the house to the fairies, led by Oberon and Titania, who sing and dance and bless the couples, their possible offspring, and every room in the castle. In his closing speech, Puck asks the audience to forgive any offense caused by the play believing it was all just a dream.

TEACHING A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

BEFORE READING THE PLAY

Before asking students to read the play, the story of Theseus should be told to them. The instructor can either read a version to them, such as the one found in Switzer and Costa's *Greek Myths: Gods, Heroes, and Monsters* or tell a shortened version. Make sure to include the fight with the Amazons and the kidnapping of Hippolyta. It would be a good idea also to read the myth concerning Pyramus and Thisby so that students will understand the reference when they get to the play within the play.

THEMES

Students can be prepared further for the play through discussions of the major themes: love, friendship, and illusion versus reality. Discussion, either in small groups or with the whole class, is an effective activity. The following can be discussed:

Love

- Ask students to list as many different kinds of love as they can think of—parent for child, person for pet, etc. Group these kinds of love in as many ways as possible such as by age, importance, etc.
- Divide the class into an even number of groups. One half of the groups will devise arguments in favor of love for and duty to parent taking precedence over all other loves and duties. The other half of the groups will devise arguments against. Pair up groups to debate using their lists.

Friendship

- Ask students to consider what friendship means. Have them list the attributes of a good friend. After reading the play, a discussion of how well these attributes fit the four young lovers and the artisans would be profitable.

Illusion Vs. Reality

- Have students consider the following questions: To what extent can one believe one's own eyes? What is the nature of reality? In what ways is illusion important? What part does imagination play in romance? Why do we need illusions in our lives?

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS THEATER

If students are not familiar with Shakespeare's life and career or with the structure of the Shakespearean stage, it would be helpful to read and discuss "Shakespeare: Prefatory Remarks."

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

1. After reading the "Introduction," students may want to research Elizabethan celebration activities for Midsummer Nights, June 23rd, and how these might then relate to what happens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
2. Read Enid Welsford's essay from *The Court Masque*, pp. 143-154. In an oral report to the class, explain in your own words as much as possible the genre of court masque and how *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fits this genre.
3. Research the world of Athens. What would the lives of Athenians such as those in the play have been like?
4. Research how Elizabethans viewed fairies. Was this part of the plot more consistent with the Athenian world or the Elizabethan world?
5. Discuss how Shakespeare combines his world with the period in which the play is set. See the Suggested References for suggested sources.
6. Research and discuss how Elizabethans viewed marriage. Who made decisions about whom young women of means were to marry? If students have read *Romeo and Juliet*, discuss similarities of this aspect of the plots.

WHILE READING THE PLAY

1. Keep track of the four plots (the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta; the mixed-up love affairs of Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena; the preparation and performance of the play by the Athenian tradesmen; and the quarrel between Oberon and Titania) as they emerge in the play. Note where the plots meet and overlap.
 2. Using Clemen's comments about Puck as the play's interpreter, look for examples to use later in writing an essay based on those observations.
 3. Make note of each time the word "dream" is used in the play and how it is used. For example, Hippolyta in her first speech says, "Four nights will quickly dream away the time," (I, i) in reference to time passing until her wedding with Theseus. Lysander says, "...short as any dream," (I, i) in explaining to Hermia how quickly their hopes for a life with each other are dashed.
 4. Make note of each time the word "moon" is used in the play and how it is used. For examples, Theseus mentions moon in I, i, in reference to the stages of the moon. He says the old moon lingers and is impatient for the new moon to come so he can get married. Hippolyta says the new moon will soon behold their marriage ceremony (I, i).
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5. Clemen says the main theme of the play is the transitoriness and inconstancy of love. As you read, find examples to support his statement.
6. Note how the language of the artisans (Bottom, etc.) differs from that of the court (Theseus and Hippolyta), of the lovers (Hermia, etc.), and of the fairies (Oberon, etc.). What is achieved by this variety? Compare Theseus's first lines Hippolyta, "Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour/Draws on apace..." (I, i) to Lysander's first speech to Hermia, "How now, my love! Why is your cheek so pale? (I, i). Oberon's greeting to Titania, "Tarry, rash wanton: am not I thy lord?" (II, i) in sharp contrast to the other two examples. Be sure to note the mistakes in vocabulary the mechanicals make, whether the actors are speaking in poetry or prose, and what difference that makes. Reread pp. xxxiii-xxxv for other ideas on language.

DETAILED STUDY QUESTIONS

The following questions can be used in a variety of ways: as formal study guides, class discussion starters, or review for a test. Since the action in the play is somewhat confusing, these questions will also help to keep the action straight.

ACT I, SCENE I

1. How is Hippolyta's reasoning concerning how quickly the next four days will pass different from that of Theseus? Note how Shakespeare portrays the patience and calmness of Hippolyta in contrast to the impatience and need for action of Theseus.
2. Why has Egeus brought his daughter and her two suitors to Theseus? What does Egeus expect him to do?
3. What was the proper role for women/daughters in Athenian society according to Egeus and Theseus?
4. What is Theseus's ruling concerning Hermia?
5. How does Lysander's comment about Demetrius's previous love affair with Helena complicate things?
6. What do Lysander and Hermia plan to do about this seemingly impossible situation?
7. Why do they tell Helena what they plan to do?
8. Even though Helena loves Demetrius and is Hermia's best friend, why does she decide to tell Demetrius of Hermia and Lysander's plans?

ACT I, SCENE II

1. Why does Nick Bottom want to play all the parts?
2. How do you suppose the threat of being handed if they scare the ladies will affect the artisans' interpretation of the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby?
3. In what way is this scene funny? Why do you suppose Shakespeare included this scene?
4. Where are the actors to meet the following night? Who else is meeting in these same woods at the same time?

ACT II, SCENE I

1. What does the reader find out about the current relationship between Oberon, King of the Fairies, and Titania, Queen of the Fairies, from Puck and the first fairy?
 2. How have Oberon and Titania been involved in the past with Theseus and Hippolyta, and why have they come to Athens?
 3. What effect has their quarrel had on nature, on the seasons, on humans?
 4. Why won't Titania give up the changeling to Oberon?
 5. What does Oberon send Puck to find?
 6. What are Oberon's plans for Titania?
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7. How does Helena react to Demetrius's verbal abuse?
8. What is her response to his threats of physical abuse?
9. In what way is Helena's behavior inappropriate for Athenian women?
10. What does Oberon tell Puck to do about Demetrius and Helena?

ACT II, SCENE II

1. Why does Oberon want Titania to wake and fall in love with some vile thing?
2. Why does Hermia insist Lysander sleep a little ways from her?
3. Why does Puck anoint Lysander's eyes?
4. How does Helena react to Lysander's sudden love for her when he awakens?
5. How is Hermia's dream a reflection of reality?

ACT III, SCENE I

1. How are the actors going to keep from scaring the ladies when Pyramus kills himself or when the lion roars?
2. How are the actors going to manage the setting/scenery such as the moonlight and the wall?
3. Why do the rest of the actors run off when Bottom reappears?
4. What does Puck plan to do when he follows after the other actors?
5. How does Bottom react to Titania and the other fairies?
6. Bottom says, "...reason and love keep little company together nowadays." Why is this such an apt statement at this point in the play?

ACT III, SCENE II

1. What does Hermia accuse Demetrius of doing?
 2. How are Puck and Oberon going to correct Puck's earlier mistake?
 3. Why is Helena upset when Demetrius says he loves her? Isn't this what she had wanted all along?
 4. Of what does Helena accuse Hermia?
 5. How close had Hermia and Helena been in the past?
 6. How does Lysander treat Hermia? Why can't she believe what he says?
 7. Of what does Hermia accuse Helena?
 8. Why is Helena afraid of Hermia?
 9. What are Lysander and Demetrius going off to do?
 10. What does Oberon tell Puck to do about the two young men?
 11. What is Oberon going to do about Titania?
 12. Why doesn't Oberon fear the coming of day?
 13. How well does Puck's trickery work?
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ACT IV, SCENE I

1. How has Bottom adjusted to the attention of Titania and her fairies?
2. What is Oberon's reaction to Titania's infatuation with Bottom?
3. What sort of explanation will Oberon make to Titania's question about what happened to her? Do you think he will tell her the truth?
4. Why are Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, and the others out in the woods so early in the morning?
5. What is Theseus's first explanation of why the young people are asleep in the woods?
6. What explanation does Demetrius make? Why does he compare his love for Hermia to an illness?
7. What is Theseus's decision concerning the four young people?
8. Why can't the young people be sure whether they are awake or dreaming?
9. Bottom believes he too has had a dream. How is he going to use that dream to entertain the Duke?

ACT IV, SCENE II

1. What opinion do the other artisans now have of Bottom since they think he is lost?
2. What do they most regret losing by not being able to perform the play?
3. Why must the artisans hurry to the Duke's palace?

ACT V

1. Why does Theseus dismiss the stories of the four young people?
2. Why does Theseus choose to see the play about Pyramus and Thisby rather than the other entertainments?
3. Why does Philostrate try to keep Theseus from seeing the play? What does he say is wrong with it?
4. What does Theseus mean by the lines, "For never anything can be amiss, when simpleness and duty tender it"?
5. What is accomplished by having the Prologue tell the whole story that the actors are then going to enact?
6. How does Shakespeare use the comments from the audience to enhance the humor of the play that they are watching?
7. What is Hippolyta's reaction to the play?
8. In what way is Thisby's final speech humorous?
9. What does Oberon tell the fairies to do?
10. What is the purpose of Puck's final speech?

AFTER READING THE PLAY**QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER UNDERSTANDING****Plot**

1. Create a diagram or flow chart of the four pairs of lovers—Theseus/Hippolyta, Oberon/Titania, Lysander/Hermia, and Demetrius/Helena—and explain how it changes throughout the play to the final pairings. For example, in Act I, scene i, Helena loves Demetrius who loves Hermia who loves Lysander who loves Hermia.

Hermia → Demetrius → Hermia ↔ Lysander

2. There are at least four story lines in this play. As a follow-up to Activity #1 under While Reading the Play, write a short essay on the uses of plot.

3. How does Puck's interference affect what happens in the play?
4. As a follow-up to Activity #5 under While Reading the Play, write an essay on Puck as the play's interpreter.
5. What is the importance of the forest as the scene of action for most of the play?
6. The play begins and ends in Athens. From information gained from Activity #3 under Introduction to the Play, why is Athens an appropriate place for the play to end?
7. How does Oberon's interference in the affairs of man further complicate matters?
8. How does Shakespeare use the night, the woods, and the fairies to move the plot forward? If students have read other Shakespearean plays, they can discuss other elements of setting Shakespeare uses to develop his plots. They might discuss why setting is so important to plot.
9. What is the overall effect of placing the scenes with the artisans where they are in the play? How is the plot affected?

Characterization

1. From Hippolyta's speeches make a list of what the reader finds out about her. For example, from her first speech we find out she is not as anxious for time to pass as Theseus is. Write a character sketch of Hippolyta using that list.
2. How is Helena to blame for the confusion in the woods?
3. Compare and contrast Hermia and Helena: Hippolyta and Titania.
4. Compare and contrast Lysander and Demetrius; Theseus and Oberon.
5. Rewrite the argument between Hermia and Helena in Act III, scene ii, lines 191-344, using modern language.
6. Which of the four women is more like a modern-day woman? In what ways is each of them modern?
7. Why are the artisans willing to perform for the Duke?
8. How does Theseus prove himself to be a wise leader?
9. How does Oberon prove himself to be a wise king?
10. Make a list of Puck's activities. Write a character sketch of Puck using that list.
11. How does Bottom react to the fairies? What does this reflect about his character?
12. Explain Demetrius's return to Helena. Was it only because of Oberon's antidote?

Themes

1. As a follow-up to Activity #5 under While Reading the Play, write an essay to support Clemen's assertion that the main theme of the play is the transitoriness and inconstancy of love.
2. What kind of marriage do Oberon and Titania have? What will the married life of Theseus and Hippolyta be like?
3. How does the play about Pyramus and Thisby serve as a model for love?
4. Compare and contrast the difficulties of Hermia and Lysander with those of Pyramus and Thisby.
5. What is the importance of dreams in this play? How do they affect the outcome?
6. What part does friendship play? Is loyalty of importance? How? As a follow-up to Activity #3 in Before Reading the Play, write an essay on friendship as it is exhibited in the play.

ADDITIONAL FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES AND WRITING TOPICS

1. As a follow-up to Activity #3 under While Reading the Play, write an essay on the ways the words "dream is sued."
 2. As a follow-up to Activity # under While Reading the Play, write an essay on the ways the word "moon" is used.
 3. Divide the class into pairs or groups of four or five students. Let each group choose a scene (or portion) to present to the
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class. Students may choose to rewrite their scenes or present them as they are. The following scenes can be used effectively:

- I, i, 20-126 (Egeus, Theseus, Hermia, etc.)
 - I, i, 127-178 (Lysander and Hermia)
 - I, ii, all (Bottom, etc., casting the play)
 - II, i, 60-146 (Oberon and Titania)
 - II, i, 188-244 (Demetrius and Helena)
 - III, i, 125-202 (Titania and Bottom)
 - II, ii 177-344 (Hermia, Lysander, Helena, Demetrius)
 - IV, i, 107-202 (Theseus, lovers, etc.)
 - V, i, 108-372 (Pyramus and Thisby)
4. Let students choose a partner and cast the play from acquaintances, politicians, rock stars, movie stars, etc., giving reasons for their choices and devising a setting for the play such as an outdoor concert, etc.
 5. Choose a scene from the play to rewrite from a women's lib point of view.
 6. Design a display model of the settings for the play, both for Athens and the woods.
 7. Design costumes for the play in some specific time period other than Elizabethan, such as the roaring twenties, the 1950s, the 1990s, etc.
 8. Explain how Lysander's statement. "The course of true love never did run smooth" (I, i, 134) fits each of the four pairs of lovers.
 9. Helena says, "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind. And Therefore is winged Cupid painted blind." (I, I, 234-235) How does this statement apply to the four pairs of lovers? To Pyramus and Thisby?
 10. How does Bottom's line, "reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (III, I, 144-145) fits his relationship with Titania? How might it apply to any of the other lovers—Theseus and Hippolyta, for instance?
 11. Puck's statement, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (III, ii, 115), applies not only to the mortals in the woods, but also to the fairies. Explain.
 12. Encourage students to read at least two of the eight commentaries then choose one to write an essay on or present as an oral report to the class. These reports could be done in small group presentations.
 13. Several film versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are available, including the 1935 version directed by Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle starring Mickey Rooney as Puck; Peter Hall's 1968 film; and Elijah Moshinsky's 1981 BBC film. See one or more film versions of the play, and compare the films to the play.

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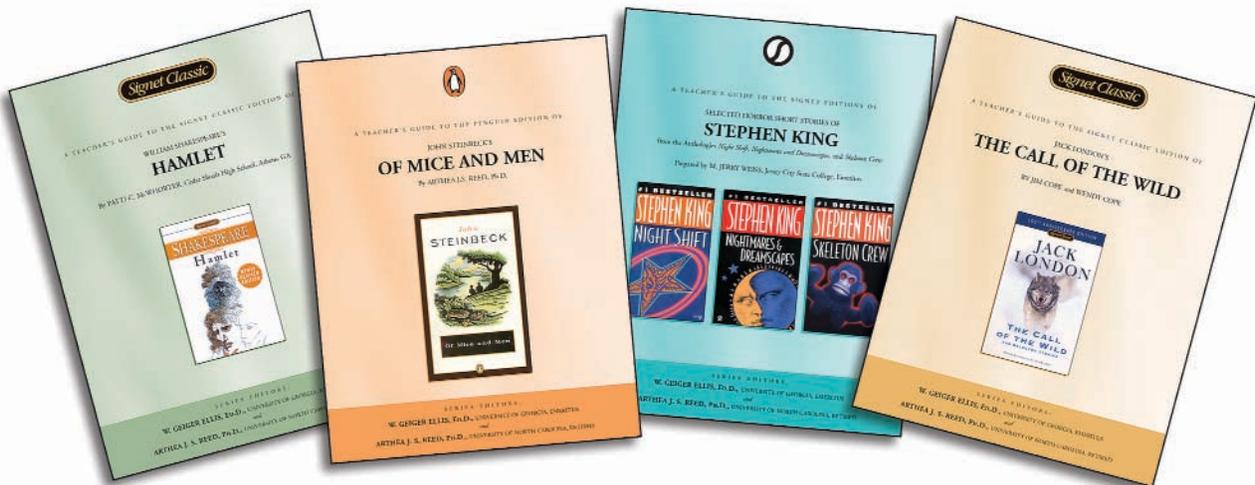
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