

Jennifer Wagner

## **ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL**

By William Shakespeare

### **Plot Summary**

Helena the orphaned daughter of a famous physician lives as the ward of the Countess of Rousillon. She is in love with the Countess's son, Bertram, who now lives in the court of the King of France. Helena is beautiful and intelligent, but, she has no hope of marrying Bertram. She lives in a rigid society which forbids lower "castes" to marry nobility. When Helena gets word that the King of France is ill, she goes to Paris and, using a cure that she learned from her father, manages to restore the King to health. As thanks, the King allows Helena to choose a husband; she chooses Bertram. Bertram is forced to marry Helena; however, he does not love her. He makes it clear that he is angered by Helena's actions and shortly after the marriage; he informs her that he will be leaving France to fight in the army of the Duke of Florence. Helena returns home to the Countess where she receives a letter from Bertram in which the Count states that he will never be her "true" husband unless she can get his family ring and become pregnant with his child. Helena secretly follows her husband and his rascally friend Parolles to Italy where she manages to accomplish the two impossible tasks with the help of a widow and the widow's virgin daughter, Diana. During the classic "bed-trick", Bertram is fooled into believing that he has made love to Diana, but in reality Helena has smuggled herself into the bed. Helena remains in hiding and has messages sent to the camp declaring that she is dead. By the end of the play, Helena surprises the Parisian court by returning and relaying what has transpired between Bertram, Diana and herself. She has accomplished both of the tasks, she is pregnant and also has Bertram's ring. Bertram comes around, Helena has her man, and "All's well that ends well."

### **Themes and Issues**

- Love- between husband and wife is complex. Tension between fairy-tale romantic love and sceptical reality. Cynical view of sexual love.
- Marriage & Arranged marriages
- Virginitv- Associated with magical power
- Hierarchical/ classist society.
- Honour, intellect, resourcefulness.
- Gender depictions
- Decay and old-age / Nostalgia for the past.
- Corruption. Language as an empty/lying substitute for deeds.
- Women and power.
- Reality- manipulation by Shakespeare, modern media.

### **Language and Structure**

- Dark/ satirical/ ironic comedy vs. light, "fluffy" comedy.
- The play's changing verse structure as it connects to the unravelling of the plot.
- The BBC Film version of *All's Well That Ends Well* and the changed interpretation.
- Relating themes in Shakespeare to today's society.
- Media representation of reality and Shakespeare's manipulations of reality.
- Music as a tool for altering/ manipulating mood in film & TV
- Characterization through polarization in Shakespeare's melodramas

### **Resources**

- [www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/allswell/analysis.html](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/allswell/analysis.html)
- [www.jetlink.net/~massij/wssq/allswell.htm](http://www.jetlink.net/~massij/wssq/allswell.htm)

- Evans, Blakemore, G. ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1974)
- Pacific Cinematheque Film study guide: *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet* (1998)
- Pacific Cinematheque: *The History of Film Study Guide Series* (1998)
- Fifty Nifty Ideas for Teaching Shakespeare (BCTELA Fall Conference, Oct 25, 2002)

### Extended Resources

- Play: *All's Well That Ends Well* by Shakespeare
- Shakespeare's source for the play is based on the Italian story of Giletta of Narbona told as the ninth story of the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It is assumed that Shakespeare read the English translation in William Painter's collection entitled: *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566-67, 1575)
- Film: BBC version of *All's Well That Ends Well* (1980), *Mrs. Brown* (starring Judi Dench), *Shakespeare in Love*
- T.V.: Clips from various sitcoms

### Student Activities

1. Working in small groups, choose a character from *All's Well That Ends Well* and decide what you think your character's answering machine greeting would sound like. Consider background sounds, tone of voice, content of message, and formalities. In addition to vocally performing this message, your group will be expected to explain why you chose to present your character this way. Use the characters dialogue, actions, thoughts, and interactions with other characters to help you create your message.
2. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena proves she is a woman of great courage, worth and determination in a myriad of different ways. In the play, there are frequent references to the fact that Helena shares a name with a notorious woman—Helen of Troy. Analyze Helena from different perspectives. For example, Helena tricks Bertram into consummating their marriage in the classic "bed-trick." Comment on this scene from a current feminist point of view? How does the reader's gender and culture affect the way we see Helena?
3. Show select clips from the film *Mrs. Brown* and compare how Queen Victoria treats her servant, John Brown, with the way the King of France treats Helena. Both monarchs break the rules that preserve the power of the nobility. Why are so many people of higher rank still on Helena's side? Can Bertram's resentment of Helen be excused in any way? How different is Victorian or Elizabethan society from today's?
4. Choose one of Helena's speeches or soliloquies and imagine she is appearing on a platform as a speaker supporting women's rights. Her speech could be adapted as a rousing feminist presentation. Other students can supply lines for questions or comments from hecklers. (Videotape the speeches and play back to the students)
5. Helena is presented as strong and capable in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Think of media representations of gender and list five stereotypes our culture assigns to men and five stereotypes assigned to women. Discuss whether these ideas are a reasonable reflection of the men and women you know in your lives. If they are not, describe how the men and women you know differ from these stereotypes.
6. Write a journal or diary entry for one of the characters in the play in which your character reveals how they are feeling. Be specific in writing about your situation and explain why you feel the way you do.
7. Find a speech made by one of the characters and reduce it to just one word or phrase for each sentence or line. Students will deliver their abbreviated version to the rest of the class. The class will discuss the received meaning of the speech.
8. Choose a soliloquy from the play and deliver it to a psychiatrist or friend who responds with questions or ideas in an effective way to reveal character.
9. Show clips from select comedy sitcoms that are known to be "light" (*I Love Lucy*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Friends*, etc.) Contrast these clips with bits from satirical, dark, ironic type of comedy (*Woody Allen*). What distinguishes the two forms? What

category does *All's Well That Ends Well* fall under and why? Why do you think *All's Well That Ends Well* was termed a "problem play?" Students will be asked to write a comic/short story that is either "sitcom" funny or darkly humorous.

10. Often Shakespeare's plays pit an older generation *against* a younger generation. How would you characterize the generations and their relationships within this play's world? Write a short essay answering this question.
11. Students will write sentences beginning with "What I want most is...." for various characters at the end of scenes or acts.
12. Using Tom Stoppard's 15 Minute *Hamlet* or *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (the play) as examples, have students write their own 15minute version of *All's Well That Ends Well*. Divide students into groups of five and each group is responsible for reducing one act to three minutes. Only words from the script can be used.
13. Create a soundtrack for *All's Well That Ends Well*. In small groups, present the soundtrack to the class and explain why your group chose the particular pieces of music.
14. What do you think about the title of the play and Helena's repeated reassurances that: *All's Well That Ends Well*? Is it reasonable? Write a short story to show Helena and Bertram's life 5 years after the close of the play.
15. Compare the narrative structure of the play and a typical Hollywood movie's structure. Create a chart that incorporates the three elements found in most Hollywood movies. These include: a Hook, Climax and Closure. Use this chart when watching the BBC version of the film: *All's Well That Ends Well* to see if the play follows this structure.

Ex:

Concepts	Where did these elements occur in the film?	The success or failure of the Film's hook, climax and closure
Hook	Ex: In <i>Star Wars</i> , the hook occurs in the opening sequence as Princess Leia's ship is being fired upon.	
Climax	In <i>Star Wars</i> this occurs during the final battle sequence to destroy the Death Star	
Closure	Closure occurs shortly after the climax.	

16. Write a newspaper report describing what has happened at the end of *All's Well That Ends Well*. The readers will want an exciting read. Your editor wants an accurate, truthful account. You have thirty minutes to produce your copy.
17. Write a comic or short-story which focuses on the relationship between Parolles and Lafew. How are they alike and why are they initially drawn to each other in the world of the court? Why does Lafew get angry with Parolles in Act 2? What is the ultimate fate of Parolles?
18. Design a royal seal or coat of arms for the play.
19. Discuss ways that *All's Well that Ends Well* like a classic fairy-tale? (Ex: the King's blind promise to grant Helen's unknown wish if only she will solve his problem, the miracle cure, the riddle and the impossible quest). How are the characters polarized? Use the conventions to create your own fairy-tale.