

Much Ado About Nothing – A Comedy by William Shakespeare

PLOT

Don Pedro, the prince Arragon, Benedick, a young lord of Padua, and the rest of the men of Messina returned home from a war. Benedick is quite the wit and bickers with Beatrice. She parallels Benedick in every way except in gender, and the two love to hate each other. Claudio, prince of Florence, Benedick's best man, falls in love with Beatrice's cousin, Hero but is too shy to woo her himself. Don Pedro offers to woo her for him and asks Hero's father Leonato, governor of Messina, for his daughter's hand in marriage. Leonato agrees because he thinks Claudio is a fine catch. Don John decides to mar the marriage plot by informing Claudio that Don Pedro is trying to woo Hero for himself. When Don Pedro is confronted he insists he is wooing Hero for his friend and that Hero has consented to marry Claudio. Meanwhile, Don Pedro feels that Benedick and Beatrice would make the perfect couple. He devises a scheme to get them together. Benedick and Beatrice are informed that each loves the other.

Out raged by the failure of his first attempt for revenge, Don John devises another plot to accuse Hero of adultery. When Claudio hears his future wife is impure, he disgraces her in front of the people of Messina. Horrified, Hero faints. To save her name and dignity she pretends to have died from shock until the truth is exposed, a plot devised by the Friar. When the truth is exposed, Claudio feels guilty and Leonato explains that the only way he will forgive Claudio is if he clears Hero's name at her funeral and hangs a plague in her honor. He is also to marry a 'cousin' that looks exactly like Hero. Claudio agrees even though his heart is still with Hero. At the church, the supposed cousin is in fact Hero and together, along with Benedick and Beatrice, they all live happily ever after.

THEMES AND ISSUES

- Social grace and maintaining it
- Deception as a means to an end
- Importance of honor
- Gossip
- Love and the institution of marriage
- Friendship and loyalty
- The battle of the sexes

LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

- Visual imagery
- Nothing and Noting
- Prose versus Iambic pentameter. High society versus peasants

- Poetical devices such as metaphor and hyperbole
- Soliloquies and humor
- Song

EXTENDED RESOURCES

- Film: Much Ado About Nothing (Kenneth Branagh), The Cutting Edge, 10 Things I hate about You
- Children's Literature: Piggy Book (Anthony Browne)
- Adult literature: The Courtier (Baldassare Castiglione), Canterbury Tales- The Knight's Tale and The Wife of Bath's Tale (Chaucer)
- Plays: Top Girls (Carole Churchill), The Way of the World (William Congreve)

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. In pairs, create a back-story for the two main characters Beatrice and Benedick and present it as a scene.
2. In three to four paragraphs, explain how you would direct this play. Where would your interpretation of the play take place? Who would be your actors be? What would be your main theme? Provide reasons for your answers.
3. In a small group, create a tableau that illustrates the opening of the play?
4. In small groups, discuss the role of women in Shakespeare's society, using evidence from the play. Are there any similarities or differences in our society today? Consider these questions related to your own culture? Record your answers on a large sheet of paper and present to the class.
5. In pairs, create a character sketch and map out the relationships of all the characters in the play. Be sure to illustrate how characters are related or connected.
6. Writing exercise: If you could rename this play what would your title be and why?
7. In small groups, choose a scene of your choice and translate it into your own words. Then memorize and present your scene as a performance.
8. Individually, or in small groups, choose a specific speech, for example Balthazar's song (II.iii) and prepare a dramatic reading of it. Consider tone and pace.
9. Beatrice and Benedick tend to bicker a lot in front of their family and friends who tend to be silent bystanders. Imagine you are one of the bystanders and comment on what you think is happening between these two people.
10. Comment on the situation between Hero and Claudio, when he has just accused her of committing adultery.
11. In small groups, create a sales pitch for Much Ado About Nothing and prepare a poster to support this pitch to present to the class.
12. Individually, create a coat of arms or a crest for the play. Choose a couple of lines that are significant to you and provide an illustration to help symbolize the meaning.
13. In small groups create a storyboard for the play.
14. In small groups, choose one of the scenarios below and create a role drama or improvised scene to present.

- a) Your best friend has accused you of something you did not do and has embarrassed you by accusing you in front of all your friends during lunch, in the halls.
- b) You have a crush on a girl/boy and want to let her/him know how you feel but you have way too much pride to tell them so.
15. Individually, choose your favorite character and create a collage using images from magazines, that expresses who that character is
16. Individually, design and draw your set for the play.
17. In small groups, choose characters to put in the 'hot seat' and invite them to be on the Jerry Springer before the whole class.
18. Write a story about either Claudio and Hero's life together or Benedick and Beatrice's life together 10 years after their marriage.
19. Throughout the play, Hero's mother is never mentioned. Create a story to explain what you think might have happened to her.
20. In small groups, choose a scene and translate it into your own words. Present your scene to the class.
21. Although *Much Ado About Nothing* is a comedy, it could easily have ended up being a tragedy because of all the mishaps and everyone tending to everyone else's business. Suggest how and where in this play, a wrong turn could have happened resulting in a tragedy.

WORKS CITED

Workshop package: Ideas for Teaching Shakespeare. Prepared by Ken Watson

BCTELA Fall Conference: Fifty Nifty Ideas for Teaching Shakespeare. Presented by Sheri Field

O'Brien, Peggy. Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. USA: WSP, 1993.