

William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

PLOT

The Prince of Aragon returning with his soldiers from a battle in which they were victorious, passes through Messina, where the governor Leonato holds court. Claudio, Messina, Leonato, who is the father of Hero and uncle of Beatrice. Claudio thinks he falls in love with Hero, and courts her. The plans for marriage between the two are ruined by the evil scheming of Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate brother who has a chip on his shoulder and grievances against Don Pedro and Claudio. Claudio believes the lie that Hero is unchaste and jilts her at the altar, and Leonato her father disowns her.

Meanwhile, in the famous and much lighter subplot, Beatrice and one of Don Pedro's men, Benedick, have a relationship that is best characterized as a constant battle of wits, in which they are forever trading barbs and hilarious insults, claiming to hate one another. This goes on until they are both deceived into believing the other is in love with them, at which point they both begin to fall in love. Comic relief is also provided by two local constables, Dogberry and Verges, who stumble upon the evil plot of Don John and his subordinate Borachio.

At this point, Beatrice, Benedick and Friar Francis, who all believe in Hero's innocence, have convinced Leonato of his daughter's innocence too, and they decide to fake her death to bring about remorse in Claudio.

When Dogberry and Verges expose Don John's evil plot, Claudio indeed repents and grieves for his lost bride. In the end, of course, Hero and Claudio are united with one another, as are Beatrice and Benedick, and it would appear that "all's well that ends well."

THEMES AND ISSUES

- Deception: can be innocent: Don Pedro woos Hero for Claudio; can bring about evil: Don John's deception of Claudio; can be used to bring about good: Hero's faked death. Beatrice and Benedick are each deceived into believing the other is in love with them. Deception is merely a means to an end and is not evil or good in and of itself. Underscored by the motif of the masquerade
- Truth vs. falsehood: all is not what it seems
- Women's rights and "wrongs" – women as property that can be sullied
- Construction of womanhood and virtue: contrast between Hero as paragon of chastity and beauty in Claudio's eyes, and Beatrice as apparent "man-hater" or "shrew" who is "tamed" by love. (Gender typing).
- The nature of love: can be claimed to be felt so deeply (Claudio) but can seem to evaporate in a moment (when Claudio believes Hero to be unchaste). Benedick and Beatrice can claim to hate each other and then through means of a ruse, fall in love so easily. The "game of love": a man and a woman attracted to one another constantly try to determine each other's interest or faithfulness through outward signs and actions..
- Society and customs – culturally accepted realities of male-female relations thrown into focus by Hero's apparent adultery. Role of the church in constructing these realities.

LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

Puns, innuendo, and bawdy talk.

A five-act comedy

EXTENDED RESOURCES

Film: Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993)

Peter Moss's *Much Ado About Nothing* (Canada, 1987, made for TV version)

Stuart Burge's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1984, BBC version)

Donald McWhinnie's *Much Ado About Nothing* (UK, USA 1978, TV version)

Much Ado About Nothing (USA, 1974) (TV) dir. A.J. Antoon Joseph Papp production

[<http://us.imdb.com/Title?0071870>]

Alan Cooke and Franco Zeffirelli's *Much Ado About Nothing* (UK, 1967, TV)

George More O'Ferall's *Much Ado About Nothing* (UK, 1937)

Adaptations in popular novels and romances: *Friday's Child*; by Georgette Heyer; *Dear Lady Disdain*; by Paula Marshall, Martin, Michelle. *The Hampshire Hoyden*, by Michelle Martin. The use of Shakespeare in Harlequin romances is examined by Laurie Osborne in her essay "**Romancing the Bard**"

(available online at:<http://www.colby.edu/personal/l/leosborn/POPSHAK/>)

Music:

Berlioz, Hector. *Béatrice et Bénédicte*; libretto in French and Spanish, discography.

French only [<http://www.intac.com/~rfrone/operas/libretti/beatrice.htm>] (May 2002)

Operas: for details see: [<http://members.it.tripod.de/amelia/>] (in Italian):

1896 A. Doppler; 1899 Puget

songs: *Sigh no more*, Act II scene iii.: William Arms Fisher (1861-1948) op 5 no. 5, 1897; Roger Quilter (1877-1953), op. 30 no. 4. Virgil Thomson (1896-1989), *Five Shakespeare Songs* no. 3; Peter Warlock (Philip Arnold Heseltine) (1894-1930);

[<http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/s/shakespeare/sigh.no.more.html>]

Handel, George. HWV 22811: *I like the am'rous youth that's free*

[<http://www.intr.net/bleissa/handel/201to300.html#HWV228.11>]

Paintings: Marcus Stone's *Claudio, Deceived by Don John, Accuses Hero*, c. 1861.

Robert Smirke's *The Examination of Conrade and Borachio*

References to play in titles of other literature: see

<http://www.barbarapaul.com/shake/muchado.html>

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Evaluated (E)/not evaluated (NE)

Formal(F) /informal (IF)

Individual (I)/Pairs (P)/Small group (SG) /Full class (FC)

Listening (L) Speaking (S) Reading (R) Writing (W)

NE IF SG L R	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> is full of puns and other wordplay. Brainstorm to come up with puns that you use or have come across in pop culture. If you can't think of any, take a look at the book <i>Get Thee to a Punnery</i> (Richard Lederer). Having looked at contemporary wordplay, examine a section of the play in which Benedick and Beatrice trade barbs, and analyse why the jokes, slang, and puns they use are funny. . [adapted from "Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado About Nothing" (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html)]
E IF P L, W, S	One of the main themes of the play concerns the "game of love" or "the battle of the sexes" – the nature of attraction between man and woman, the role of marriage in society, gender roles, romance, standards of acceptable behavior, and competition. Discuss your opinions on each of these matters, and make a short presentation to the class. . [adapted from "Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado About Nothing" (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html)]
E F P L, S, W	Customs pertaining to courtship and marriage of men and women differ among cultures. Do a mini-research project or conduct interviews within the school or community asking people from several different cultures about their customs. Following the research, answer in writing these questions: What are some common customs across cultures? What differences exist? Why are customs an important part of courtship and marriage? . [adapted from "Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado About Nothing" (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-3712.html)]

	plans/lesson-3712.html)]
E F SG R, S, L, W	Research where the idea of romantic love originated. What might have been the purpose of this chivalric treatment of women? Are there still remnants of courtly love literature in popular romances or in contemporary love songs? Are there still remnants of courtly love or chivalry in actual relationships? Compile your conclusions into written form. . [adapted from "Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado About Nothing" (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html)]
NE I FC S, L	Brainstorm the titles of songs dealing with love and romance. After the titles have been shared, consider: What types of love are sung about (i.e. young love, married love, unfulfilled love, unfaithful love, jealous love, lust masquerading as love)? What do these different kinds of love say about human nature? . [adapted from "Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado About Nothing" (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html)]
NE IF FC, I S, L, W	We will look at the way Hero is treated for her apparent infidelity. Then we will discuss as a class the concept of a "double standard." After our discussion, write three paragraphs answering the following questions: To what extent is there still a double standard in terms of men and women's behavior? What are some gender-specific behaviors? Why does this difference between the behaviors acceptable from men and those acceptable from women exist? Do you think it's simply due to the difference between men and women, or is it a double standard (ie. unfair)? . [adapted from "Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado About Nothing" (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html)]
E, IF, I R, W	How do you feel about the way Claudio treats Hero? Do you think that Hero should agree to marry him after her treated her so badly and didn't even trust her? Write a letter to Hero either congratulating her on her renewed marriage vows to Claudio and giving her some advice for how to stay happy in her marriage, or dissuading her from marrying Claudio based on his treatment of her.
E IF I R,W	Benedick and Beatrice claim to hate each other. By the end of the play, thanks to the matchmaking tricks of their friends, they are declaring their love for one another. How did this happen? Were they in love all along, but too proud to admit it, so that once each was sure that the other felt the same, they could confess their true feelings? Or did the tricks of their friends really manage to convert their hatred into love that fast? Propose your theory in writing, using evidence from the text.
NE IF SG R, L, S	This play presents two different images of womanhood in the characters of Hero and Beatrice. The two cousins get along very well, but are very different in personality. Discuss which woman is the better role model for young women. Which woman is more successful in the play? Which woman would have a better chance of succeeding in today's world? Give reasons and present to class.
NE IF P S, L	If you were to cast this play in modern times, what jobs would you give the main characters? Would the soldiers still be soldiers? Would Beatrice and Hero have jobs? Think about what profession would best express and enhance the original character Shakespeare created. Discuss.
NE IF P, I S, L, W	Balthazar's song in Act 2: Scene 3 addresses "ladies," stating that "men were deceivers ever." Don Pedro, a man, comments that it is a good song, and he doesn't seem to object to this idea of his sex as deceitful. What is your opinion – are men deceivers and have they always been so? If yes, what evidence of this can you offer? If no, what counter-argument can you provide? How does your gender affect your opinion? Discuss and then write a short personal response.

E IF SG R, W, S, L	How would you produce a film of this play set in modern times? Choose the music you'd use, the costumes, and the location. Make notes of your ideas and present to the class.
E F SG,FC R, W, S, L	Translate a part of a scene of this play into modern Canadian English, and present it to the class. Members of your group can play actual characters or can be props (the wind, a letter, a horse).
NE IF P, FC R, S, L	The opening scene in Baz Luhrmann's modern adaptation of Romeo and Juliet has the boys from each of the warring families meet at a gas station where they threaten and shoot at one another from their fancy cars. How would you set the opening scene if you were to make a modern version of <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> ? Where would it be set? Present your ideas to the class.
NE F FC, SG W, L, S	Choose to be members of one of the following fictional groups – some of which are deliberately historically anomalous: writers from the local tabloid of Messina, representatives of a women's rights group, upstanding and traditional members of Messina's gentry, local church officials. The teacher will play Leonato, who as governor of Messina is giving a press conference immediately after Claudio has shamed Hero at the altar. At this point, Leonato still believes Hero is guilty. Come up with a few questions you'd like to ask him after he has made an official statement. After the press conference, compose a piece of writing expressing what you learnt at the press conference and your perspective on the situation. You should choose an appropriate form for the writing (editorial in the tabloid, press release, personal letter to a friend, official statement) and consider who your audience would be. You will share the writing with the rest of the class [adapted from an activity suggested by Dr. Jude Collins].
NE F FC, SG W, L, S	Imagine that Shakespeare has come back to life and is about to give a press conference. You must choose to be members of one of the following groups: high school English students, English teachers, parents, a women's rights group, an actor's union. Come up with questions you'd like to ask the Bard, who will be played by the teacher. You may have one general question and one question about <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> . After the press conference, you will write a short statement to be delivered to the public and/or to Shakespeare himself, stating your revised or confirmed position on his work [adapted from an activity suggested by Dr. Jude Collins]
E IF P R, W, S, L	Write a three-minute sequel to the play, using modern English. Decide which part of the story you'd like to pick up on and tell: Beatrice and Benedick? Dogberry and Verges? Claudio and Hero? Don John and Borachio? Then perform the sequel for the class.
E F I R, W	Choose one character from the play and enter his/her persona by writing a diary entry from his/her perspective. Write the entry as if it were written between two scenes in the play. Include how the character is feeling at that moment in the play.
P, F, E, R,	When Hero is falsely accused of infidelity by Claudio and Don Pedro, Friar Francis comes up with a plan in response, which involves faking Hero's death in order to "change slander

W	to remorse.” If you were to make a modern adaptation of this play, to make it suit our times, how would you have Hero and her allies respond to the way Claudio shames her at the altar? If you were allowed to change this part of the play entirely, what kind of a twist would you give the plot? Come up with a possible version.
E IF SG R, W, S, L	Directors often make changes in a play to express a particular point of view, interpretation of character, or illustration of theme. Show how a very small change, like tone of voice, addition of a prop, or background music can change the meaning of a scene completely. To do this, choose one part of a scene lasting about thirty seconds to a minute, and present it three different ways, making each way different through the use of tone of voice, a prop, or music. [adapted from “Teachervision Lesson Plans: Much Ado about Nothing” (http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html)]