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Recommended Levels Years 10-12

THE PLOT

Returning from war, Count Claudio successfully woos Leonato's daughter, Hero, with some masked assistance from his friend, Don Pedro. On a darker side, Don Pedro's brother, Don John almost convinces Claudio that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself but then persuades him that Hero has been unfaithful on the eve of their wedding. Claudio denounces Hero in the church and her friend's pretend she is dead. Don John's evil plot is eventually exposed by the verbose Dogberry, leader of the security watch team. In the meantime, the highly articulate Benedict has been sparring verbally with Hero's equally articulate cousin, Beatrice. Tricked by the good-natured scheming of Don Pedro, Beatrice and Benedict finally recognise and admit their mutual love and in the classic comedy denouement, wickedness is discovered, wrongs are righted and true love triumphs

ISSUES AND THEMES

Love, grief and trust
Jealousy, hatred and revenge
Arrogance and respect
Words and the expression of feelings
Language and communication
Language as a basis for comedy and tragedy

STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE

Opening with the return of young soldiers as 'The Magnificent Seven', Branagh's translation of the play from a port in Sicily to a village in Tuscany captures the lighthearted nature of the comedy while removing potential overtones of Othello in Cyprus. Set in 'some timeless past', the film requires constant textual reference to establish the truncation of key scenes and the interpretation of both scenes and characters. Twin brothers of different race present a graphic motivation for jealousy and hatred while the cleanliness of the setting and its inhabitants allows a lighter tone. Camera angles and lighting permit a credibility often lacking in the masked ball courting sequences while the garden and chapel settings provide equal credibility for the conversations overheard by Benedict and Beatrice and for the 'death' of Hero.

RELATED RESOURCES

Director Study: *Hamlet* [scenes with Ophelia], *Henry V* [the English lesson and the courtship scene]

Contextual Study: *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*

STUDENT ACTIVITIES *Much Ado About Nothing* dir. Kenneth Branagh

1. Shakespeare set the original play in Messina, a port town in Sicily. Working in small groups, consider why Branagh has changed the setting and suggest what effect this must have on our reading of the play as he translates it onto the screen.
2. The text version of Act I.i is rather different from Branagh's film translation. Considering the different demands of stage and screen, discuss whether Branagh's changes add to our understanding of the characters and their relationship with each other. Use your reading journal to list the subtleties that seem to be lost in translation. Write a note in which you record whether you feel that the losses outweigh the gains achieved through textual omission and modification? Discuss your findings in the whole group.
3. The young soldiers return from war in a very similar scene to that used in the film 'The Magnificent Seven' which was a translation of a Russian novel by Leo Tolstoy. Find a videotape of the Tolstoy translation and compare the two openings. Work in pairs to list any other scenes or sequences in the film that remind you of other films. Discuss how this 'intertextuality' between films and with literature helps the audience to understand new films in terms of those they already know. Share and compare your findings with at least one other pair in your whole group.
4. The wordplay between Beatrice and Benedict suggests they dislike each other. Suggest why they continue their verbal jousting when it is not how they feel for each other. Develop a brief dialogue to be acted out before your group in which two people who are attracted to each other try to conceal their feelings.
5. Don John and Don Pedro are half brothers. Working as a whole group, consider Branagh's casting of the two roles. What does it suggest about his understanding of the social structure of the Mediterranean region at the time of the play? Does the casting create a credible plot line or does it stereotype all non-Caucasian people into negative roles?
6. Compare the text of the play for scenes II.iii and III.i with Branagh's treatment in the film. Suggest why he has chosen to combine the two scenes and discuss the effectiveness of his action.
7. View the sequence that shows the masked party. Use your reading journal to record your feelings about the use of masks to conceal identity. Working in small groups discuss the credibility of the characters as they fail to recognise their friends.
8. The 'death' of Hero allows Dogberry's watch to play out their part in the drama revealing Don John's wickedness. What other plot problems are resolved while the main storyline is placed on 'hold'? Discuss the effectiveness of Hero's faked death as a device for separating and solving comic and tragic elements before the denouement to the romantic plot is finally achieved.
9. While wars and wickedness are usually set in dark, stormy, untidy surroundings, this play is set in sunshine and light. How is Don John's role in the play accentuated by this setting? Is Branagh's use of shadow, darkness and colour sufficient to separate the main plots while maintaining the comedy in the play.
10. Dogberry, Verges and the watch provide the most obvious comic elements in the play but their presence almost creates a tragedy. Write a set of notes suggesting how you would interpret the antics of Dogberry and his team to highlight their comedy role without diminishing their dramatic importance in revealing Don John's plot.
11. Write an essay in which you consider whether slapstick comedy has any place in a play of sophisticated words. Make specific reference to events from *Much Ado about Nothing* but include examples from other literary and film sources you are familiar with.
12. 'There is sometimes a very fine line between tragedy and comedy'. Imagine that Claudio, grief-struck over the death of Hero, runs away and commits suicide when he discovers the Don John plot. Compare this with the *Romeo and Juliet* plot. Discuss the basic differences that make Claudio's suicide an unacceptable resolution to the play.