Much Ado About Nothing Concept Analysis

By Lindsay Smith

Appropriate Audience

Much Ado About Nothing could be used in 9th grade when students are first introduced to Shakespeare rather than the typical story of Romeo and Juliet. The play is a comedy and very humorous. If students are properly prepared, not only could they understand the text but also thoroughly enjoy this play. However, this play is wordy and perhaps would be better digested by more experienced readers. Juniors or seniors in high school would most likely have the skills necessary to decode the text and handle the mature themes presented therein.

Organizational Patterns

Much Ado About Nothing is divided like most typical Renaissance plays into scenes and acts. There are five acts and anywhere from three to five scenes per act. Through this text students will become familiar with the heuristics of a play. Act and scene are part of the literary terms students need to learn in their high school experience.

Issues related to this Study of Literature

Loyalty vs. Honor-Loyalties are repeatedly called into question in this play. Claudio is always loyal to the Prince and professes to always be loyal to Hero. However, when Hero’s honor is called into question, Claudio’s loyalty runs short.

Fidelity-Faithfulness is crucial to a successful relationship. Hero’s reputation is almost destroyed because of her lack of fidelity to her fiancé is questioned. However, Claudio was not completely faithful to his love either. Both Claudio and Hero learn that fidelity to each other is essential in maintaining true love.

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Manipulation of perception- The title of the play has the connotation of much ado about noting. Characters note what other characters say and do and trust what they see and hear. Ironically, many of their conclusions are inaccurate or incomplete. This play calls into question “How do you know what you think you know?” Much of the information the characters receive in the play is contrived to appear a certain way by other characters. Don Pedro and Claudio think they know that Hero is unfaithful. Beatrice and Benedick are led to “know” that the other is passionately in love with them. While one example has devastating consequences and the other more jovial, this contrived information leads the reader to question how can one be certain about truth. What happens when we rely upon the information of others?

Depth of “real” love vs. “ideal” love-who has the better relationship? Much Ado about Nothing is about relationships. Hero and Caludio or Beatrice and Benedick? Hero and Claudio appear to have the ideal relationship while Beatrice and Benedick bicker away. However, when love is finally tested, Benedick proves more loyal to his love than Claudio.

Setting

This play takes place in Messina, Italy. However, the actual time period of the play varies depending on the interpretation. Shakespeare’s plays offer a great opportunity to teach students how setting affects the themes and the interpretation of text. Teachers can introduce the play in a variety of different settings and then help students observe and understand the influence that the setting has on overall meaning.

Point of View

The heuristics of this play do not give the reader/audience a narrator or tell the story from any other distinct perspective. However, students can come to understand that Shakespeare’s plays indirectly are products of the perception /interpretation of the director.

Literary Terms

Act- a subdivision of a play or opera or ballet


Personification- representing an abstract quality or idea as a person or creature. Act 3. Sc 3. Borrachio “What a deformed thief this fashion is.”

Scene- a subdivision of an act of a play

Setting- The place and time when a story occurs

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Theme-A unifying idea that is a recurrent element in literary or artistic work. Several themes are listed above.

Other literary terms that could be taught with this play or in a Shakespeare unit: Alliteration, Assonance, Iambic Pentameter, Irony, Soliloquy, Sonnet, Symbol, Understatement

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is perhaps the greatest obstacle for students in understanding a Shakespeare play. *Much Ado About Nothing* is quite possibly Shakespeare’s wordiest plays. Often the meaning behind the metaphors, puns, and even the words Shakespeare uses, escape a modern audience. There is no way to cover all the vocabulary used in the play. Because most students are novices to Shakespeare, I would recommend using a text that has detailed annotations like Folger Shakespeare Library to help students decode the text. Comprehension of the text is essential before students can delve deeper and search for meaning. Shakespeare invented over 1700 of the words common to English today. This website offers a list of words Shakespeare created that should be familiar to students. This list could be used as the vocabulary focus for the unit. [http://shakespeare.about.com/library/weekly/aa042400a.htm](http://shakespeare.about.com/library/weekly/aa042400a.htm) Students may also enjoy using Shakespeare’s creative word choice to create insults.

Background Knowledge

Most students are not familiar with Shakespeare, his history, or his writing style. Many students come to the text with preconceived notions that Shakespeare is difficult and advanced. The unfamiliarity with his writing style or vocabulary could easily scare students away. Students need a thorough understanding of Shakespeare. They need to understand issues of the time period such as male/female roles relevant to the play. They need to become familiar with the heuristics of a play and how a play is read. They need to understand a little about Shakespeare himself. They need to understand a little about the Renaissance Age.

Implications for Students of Diversity

Shakespeare is a dead white English playwright. On the scale of diversity Shakespeare doesn’t rate too high. Shakespeare is also extremely difficult for second language learners. However, teachers can help students recognize the universality of Shakespeare’s themes and storylines. Similar stories can be found throughout various cultures. There is a folk story in Brazil where the main character is saved from losing an arm because the contract agreed upon didn’t allow the creditor to take any blood with the flesh. The same idea is presented in the play Two Gentleman of Verona. *Westside story* and *10 things I hate about you* both take Shakespearian plots and give them a more modern (and even a cultural) twist. Students can look for Shakespearean stories in other cultural settings.

Gender issues

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This play is centered on the differences in gender. Male and female roles were extremely different in Shakespeare’s day and age than they are now. Students need to recognize this cultural difference. In this play Hero is poorly treated by both her lover and her father. Shakespeare seems to understand the ridiculousness of oppressive men as he makes both of them pay for their misdeeds.

**The Central/Enduring question**

You could argue that there are about a million central themes in every Shakespeare play. This is a relationship centered play where Shakespeare explores the transformation individuals must undergo in order to form intimate connections with each other. In this play I want to focus on the question “What is essential to a successful relationship?”

**Research/Project Issues**

- Shakespeare plays are often set in other locations or time periods by directors to portray a certain idea or intensify certain themes. Divide students into groups and have them select a scene. Students must then choose a different setting to reenact the scene. They will be encouraged to think about how the setting affects the meaning and amplifies the themes of the play.

- When Shakespeare’s plays were published, occasionally lines were printed without reference to who spoke it. Scholars today often try to make educated conclusions about Shakespeare’s original intention with these dangling lines. Changing the speaker often changes the meaning of the line and can even change themes in the play. The speakers of the line in act 5 sc 4 “Peace, I will stop your mouth” is unknown. Discuss with students the various possibilities of who could say the line. Then have students write a “Who said it?” persuasive paper. Have students defend their personal conclusion on who Shakespeare intended to say the line and how it affects the overall meaning of the play.

- Have students watch the Kenneth Branagh movie and notice the scenes and lines that were cut. Have students find scenes or lines that were omitted that they think are not only relevant but important to the overall purpose of the play. Have them write a short paper defending the need for the scene/lines.

- Have students re-write an important scene of the play in modern English. They can preserve some of the original text but they must use a recognizable vocabulary. If they want to be creative they can re-write it Ebonics or some other language style.

**Information/Functional texts**

- *Simply Shakespeare* by Toby Widdicombe

- *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* by Russ McDonald

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- internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/stage/stagesubj.htm
- www.shakespeares-globe.org/virtualtour/stage/
- www.william-shakespeare.info/elizabethan-theaters.htm
- www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-theatre.htm