

Understand Shakespeare Series: Shakespearean Comedy

The Study of Shakespeare's Tragedies

This video is an excellent complement to the study of Shakespeare's comedies.

This program concentrates on two of Shakespeare's comedies: *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Tempest*. The students should read either or both of them before watching this program.

Almost immediately they will be struck by both the richness and the strangeness of Shakespeare's language, but tell them not to linger over words they don't understand; it is more important to get the basic idea of what is "going on" in each of the scenes.

As they read, they should decide two things about each scene: first, what are the characters in conflict about, and two, whose side are they on and why? Their answers to these questions may change after they finish reading; after all, most of the great questions raised by Shakespeare have no final or "right" answers.

When they have finished their first reading, they will already have started to form opinions about the issues involved. At that point, they should watch this program.

Questions to ask before viewing

1. Name some modern comedies. Have each student enumerate what he or she finds funny about them. (Answers will vary.)
2. Is it possible to mix comedy and drama in the same story? Does it work? (The students will probably name a variety of movies or books. Have them explain why they did or didn't like the mixing of comedy and drama.)

Questions to ask after viewing

1. Where does the word "comedy" come from? (The Greek word *kommos*, meaning "festival or celebration," and the Greek word *oidos*, meaning "song.")
2. What political purpose can comedies serve? (Often Shakespearean comedies allowed performers a gentler way to criticizing government or society in general.)
3. What is the most important and obvious comic convention in both plays? (Marriage.)
4. In *Much Ado*, how does this comic convention propel the action of the play? (Claudio's jealousy threatens his marriage to Hero; Beatrice and Benedick's war of wits displays their suitability for each other in marriage.)
5. Name examples of "mistakes" or "complications" from each play that add to the plot lines. (Claudio's mistaken perception of Hero's intentions or Benedick's impression

that Beatrice loves him in *Much Ado*; Prospero's use of Ariel to confuse other characters on the island in *The Tempest*.)

6. Why are some kinds of Shakespearean wordplay lost on a modern audience? (Often, references to what were then "current events" or common stories are lost, such as a reference to "widow Dido" in *The Tempest*, or sometimes there is a play on Latin derivatives.)
7. Name a character in *Much Ado* that inadvertently make social satire with his unique "tangletalk." (Dogberry.)
8. What is most striking and unique about Shakespeare's comedies? (Though they are indeed "comedies," they contain many dark sides and often conclude in an unsettling or unsatisfying way.)

Additional Activity

Suggest that the students treat the plays like movies and have them write a "movie review" of either one of the plays for presentation in class. What kind of audiences (teens, adult, etc.) would find the play most appealing? How involved does the audience get with the characters? Does the play drag on at times? Have the students give the play a rating, e.g., "four out of five stars," "two thumbs up," etc. and allow them to debate each other's opinions, much like a "Siskel and Ebert" show.

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Length

- 33 Minutes

Subject areas

- Literature and Drama Appreciation

Audience Levels

- Senior High-Adult

Catalog number

- 2537

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AIMS
Discussion Guide

Understanding Shakespeare Series: Shakespearean Comedy

Objectives

When students have finished this course of study in Shakespearean Comedy, they should be able to:

- Recognize some classic conventions of comedy;
- Offer some views on the way marriage can be used in the comic plot to disrupt or bring about resolution;
- Express awareness of how language affects Shakespearean comedy, particularly wordplay;
- Understand the Shakespearean comedy has a more serious, dark side.

