

CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

TEACHERS' NOTES

This study guide is aimed primarily at students of English Literature, who are studying Louis de Bernières's novel Captain Corelli's Mandolin in the second year of Advanced GCSE studies but will be useful for any students wishing to look at the way in which a novel is adapted for the screen. The guide focuses on the following areas:

From novel to screen:

Narrative adaptation

Characters

Representation of nationalities

Representation of war

Music

Language

Humour

FILM SYNOPSIS

Captain Corelli's Mandolin traces a love that begins uneasily between a conscripted officer of the occupying Italian army, Captain Antonio Corelli (Nicolas Cage), and Pelagia, a strong-willed, ambitious young Cephallonian, played by Penélope Cruz.

When Corelli and his company of men arrive on the unspoiled island, they think of their stay as a kind of Grecian holiday with the war a distant radio dispatch. At first Pelagia and the other villagers resent these uninvited guests, but ultimately, the Italians' charm and passion for life wear away the divisions of nationality and circumstance, and Pelagia comes to see Corelli for the man he is: full of love for life, for his music, and perhaps, even for her.

Inevitably, the war crashes upon the idyllic shores of Cephallonia, forever upsetting its tranquility, for the inhabitants as well as for the comfortably garrisoned Italians. The tender connection that has grown between Antonio and Pelagia is also threatened. As Captain Corelli faces the violent realities of warfare, he must confront the possibility of leaving Cephallonia and the woman he has come to love. Pelagia knows that she, too, is powerless in the face of war and must say goodbye to her lover, with no certainty that they will ever meet again.

Director John Madden ◇ **UK release 4th May 2001** ◇ **Certificate 15** ◇ **Running time 140 mins**

BEFORE SEEING THE FILM

CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN is an enormous literary success. First published in 1995 it has sold over one and a half million copies to date and has been in the 'best-selling' list for over 240 weeks.

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN, JUNE 2000



- 1 If you have read the novel, write a short synopsis of what you think the book is essentially about. Alternatively, read the synopsis which you will find on the back of the book.
- 2 Read some of the critical reviews of the book below.
- 3 Look at the poster image which you will find on the front cover of this study guide.

From the information you have so far make a list of the aspects of the story that you think will be focused on in the film. What elements do you expect to receive prominent treatment?

'A saga in the noblest traditions of the genre. Among de Bernières' skills are an archaeologist's eye for place, a historian's feel for time and place and a musician's ear for tone and tempo - ...'

JASPER REES, DAILY TELEGRAPH

'...his work encompasses cruelty, humour, love and friendship, hope and horror...The book is both very funny and profoundly moving, sometimes at the same time.'

ANDREW POST, LITERARY REVIEW

'Thoroughly exhilarating and life-enhancing...shot through with humour and humanity.'

P J KAVANAGH, THE OLDIE

'He tells one hell of a story, and he tells it straight, with only interludes of high comedy to interrupt the flow... He is very funny, with an acute and vivid sense of history, and he is capable of moving the reader to tears...It's said all's fair in love and war. Captain Corelli's Mandolin shows that, in fact, nothing is fair in either.'

GRESSIDA CONNOLLY, SPECTATOR

'An extraordinary novel...It is a love story but also a superb evocation of the idiocy of war, with an unforgettable hero, the musical captain, and his love, the local doctor's daughter.'

DAILY MIRROR

FROM THE PAGE TO SCREEN

The story I suppose is a list of ingredients. I don't just mean narrative ingredients, I mean emotional ingredients and obviously character and atmosphere and theme. Movies work through compression; they compress information; they distil information and one of the biggest decisions we had to make was whether to even reach for the kind of narrative span that the book actually encompasses.

JOHN MADDEN, DIRECTOR



Captain Corelli's Mandolin is an epic novel. At 435 pages long and spanning over fifty years of history it stands as a considerable challenge to a film maker to retain the spirit of its proportions and yet represent it in only two and a half hours screen time. When a novel is adapted for film, events in the narrative and the order in which they occur are often changed. Some reasons for this may be as follows:

- *to make the film more visually exciting*
- *to speed up the dramatic action*
- *to help the audience focus on certain characters and events rather than others*
- *because long dialogue scenes do not work well in the mainly visual medium of film*
- *because time constraints dictate a focus on scenes which are vital to character or plot development*

➤ Consider the changes which have taken place in adapting Captain Corelli's Mandolin for the screen. Why have these taken place and how do they add to the film? Use the following as starting points if you wish:

- *the build-up to war. How does this affect your expectations of the story to come?*
- *the development of Velisarios, the strongman*
- *the glory of being a soldier [see novel Chapter 6]*
- *the fact that Psipsina does not feature in the film*
- *the ending*

IMAGES OF CEPHALLONIA

The initial image of Cephallonia is given to readers of the novel through Dr Iannis's description (below) written for his 'History of Cephallonia':

(Cephallonia exhibits)...light that seems unmediated either by the air or by the stratosphere. It is completely virgin, it produces overwhelming clarity of focus, it has heroic strength and brilliance. It exposes colours in their original prelapsarian state, as though straight from the imagination of God in His youngest days, when He still believed that all was good. The dark green of the pines is unfathomably and retreatingly deep, the ocean viewed from the top of a cliff is platonic in its presentation of azure and turquoise, emerald, viridian, and lapis lazuli. . . Once the eyes have adjusted to the extreme vestal chastity of this light, the light of any other place is miserable and dank by comparison...

[pages 6/7]



- What aspects of this description are highlighted in the opening scenes of the film? What filmic techniques are used to achieve this? Consider the type of camera shots we see, how the camera moves, what lighting has been used, what sounds we hear and the speed of the editing - how quickly does the film change from shot to shot?
- How does the film use landscape to reflect the development of the themes of love and war?
- How does the settings assist the reading of the story as
 - a) a tale of war
 - b) a tale of love
 - c) a tale of a nation

CHARACTERS

When adapting an epic novel such as Captain Corelli's Mandolin for the screen it is important to focus on certain facets of the narrative and character in order to give the story coherence. As a filmmaker John Madden wanted to bring out the full dramatic potential of the characters and their relationship to each other.

The book is a kind of a triangulated love story in waiting and it struck me on reading the book that the absolutely essential thing to develop was that triangulation. It is essentially about a woman who is stranded between two men, both of whom are transformed by war. I felt very strongly that there was a feeling in the book that Mandras had become monstrous by hanging around with communists too much and that he had become a monster because his emotions became subordinated to an ideology which was neither something we could show nor particularly wanted to show in the film. We wanted to deal with two men who had complete different trajectories through the experience of war and paradoxically Mandras is enobled or redeemed by war. I suppose he finds himself, but in doing so he loses the woman he loves. Corelli, by contrast, is destroyed by war until he begins to find himself at the end and that intersection seemed dramatically interesting, provocative even.

JOHN MADDEN, DIRECTOR

He was like one of those saprophytic orchids that can create harmony and wonder even as it grows and blossoms on a pile of shit...

[page 163]

The unfortunate truth was that, Italian invader or not, he made life more various, rich and strange.

[page 207]

- What do you understand by John Madden's comment that Corelli is *...destroyed by war until he begins to find himself...?*
- Compare the ways in which Corelli is introduced in the book to the ways in which we first encounter him in the film. How far into the story does he appear in each, and what is the effect of this?
- What factors contribute to your reading of his character in the film? Focus on his physical representation by Nicolas Cage as well as dialogue, actions and commentary by other characters.
- How does the filmmaker create sympathy for Corelli as more than an occupying soldier?
- What is the significance of 'La Scala'? How is the operatic troupe represented in the film and the book?



CHARACTERS

continued

MANDRAS

In the novel, Mandras changes from a love-sick man 'when I'm with Pelagia it's as though I'm twelve again...' [page 67] to a god-like creature '...Mandras, so beautiful, luminous, and young; Mandras, as exquisite as Apollo.' [page 83] to a man driven by his beliefs: 'No man is a man until he has been a soldier...' [page 68] and yet ultimately misguided, 'Mandras joined ELAS at first because he had no choice...' [page 191] to an attempted rapist, a brute who is disowned by Drosoula, his own mother. 'This violation of women was something that he could not help, it seemed. It was some irresistible reflex...' [page 366]



- What impression do you have of Mandras in the early stages of the film?
- What changes to Mandras' character take place after each of the following episodes?
 - *he takes up arms with ELAS*
 - *he goes to Corelli to ask for assistance with arms*
 - *he brings Corelli to the home of Dr Iannis and Pelagia*
 - *he helps Corelli to the boat for his escape*
 - *he acknowledges Pelagia has been lying to him about the content of the letters*
 - *he asks Pelagia to love him again*
- What effect does this have on reading the wider conflicts the story references?

For the following three questions you may need to refer back to John Madden's introduction to character.

- Why is Mandras' character constructed differently in the film?
- In what ways is Mandras 'redeemed' by war?
- What are the different trajectories of Mandras and Corelli?
- Who are the antagonists in the film and how different are they to the view of them offered in the novel?
- What relationship does the film suggest there was between Greece and Italy after surrender?
- Mandras' cause, the liberation of Greece from the occupying forces and the cause of the Italians after surrender to fight the Germans, coincide in the film. How do you view this as an interpretation of the novel?

GUNTER WEBER

The Germans are described early in the novel as having 'Ice in the soul...' [page 9]. How is Gunter Weber's character and conscience shown in the film and how different is this to the representation of the Germans in the novel?

CHARACTERS

continued

PELAGIA

- Examine the transformation of Pelagia from book to screen. How does the film convey her sense of stubborn pride?
- How is the physical expression of the love affair between Pelagia and Corelli portrayed differently in the film and the book? Why is this?
- How is Pelagia's strength as a character developed in the film after Corelli leaves? How does the portrayal of her differ from that of the book and why?



DR IANNIS

Dr Iannis represents the neutral, philosophical and moral strength of the book. He is to be the author of the 'History of Cephallonia', a self-appointed role of documenting the spirit of the people in past and current history. He is represented variously as an adviser to others, capable of careful judgement and assured knowledge. From the opening scenes, he is able to provide literal relief to suffering. His role progresses to provide moral relief from the anguish of war, occupation and fraught love. Louis de Bernières endows Dr Iannis with the ability to see through what others cannot. When he exercises his power as father, or as doctor, or as community spokesman, he does so with the interests of others at heart.

- How is Dr Iannis' various qualities as father, doctor, Cephallonian and cultured man expressed in the film?
- How similar is the character of Iannis in the film and the novel? How do the different representations affect our perceptions of him?
- Pay close attention to the dialogue of Iannis. How many of his important speeches are reproduced in the film as dialogue? Why have these been chosen?

REPRESENTATION OF NATIONALITIES

There are three major nationalities represented in the film; the Greeks, the Italians and the Germans. Whilst the novel takes time to build up our understanding of these different races through a variety of descriptions, dialogue and different narrative voices, film uses a different set of techniques to create a more immediate impression. The elements of *mise-en-scène*, that is, costume, colour, lighting, facial expression, body language and the position of the characters within the frame, are all influential in our relationship towards the characters, as are the setting in which we first encounter them. Sound is equally as important as visual images; the music we hear, the dialogue spoken and the tone of this are important conveyors which work on an emotional level to influence our feelings towards a character.

➤ Consider the representation of these three nationalities in the film:

a) the Greeks b) the Italians c) the Germans

Use the features of filmic techniques above to analyse the way in which this has been conveyed.

➤ How do you imagine each group would view the representations of themselves? How do you imagine the British would have been represented?

➤ Examine the following scenes closely. What kind of relationship between the Greeks and the Italians is expressed in the following scenes? How is this achieved?

- *Captain Corelli leads the march of his soldiers with an order to look at the 'bella bambina'*
- *the surrender of Greece to the occupying force at the town hall*
- *the village dance at which Corelli plays the mandolin*
- *the detonation of the mine on the beach*

➤ How is the occupation represented visually within the film?

➤ How is the occupation greeted in the novel? You may find it helpful to refer to the description on page 146 and Pelagia's reaction on page 156. Does it differ from the film and in what way?

REPRESENTATION OF WAR

In the novel Louis de Bernières offers the experience of war as a blight on all nations and a destroyer of humanity. The full horror of war is expressed; he demonstrates a graphic picture of life on the front for soldiers, and is concerned to convey the emotional effects of separation and war on those left behind. Different accounts of the war are juxtaposed to show that 8,000 Greeks did defeat 14,000 Italians, but at a huge cost to humanity, dignity and civility. Francesco's death is documented closely in Chapter 19, juxtaposed with Mandras' dramatic return in Chapters 20-22. De Bernières sets up a clear opposition between love and war in the early stages of the novel; as Carlo declares his love for Francesco, so Pelagia is bolstering the spirits of Mandras with her love letters.

The stranger wore the unidentifiable and ragged remains of a shirt and trousers, and a kind of surcoat cut out of animal skins that had been tacked together with thongs of sinew. Pelagia saw, beneath the table, that in place of shoes his feet were bound with bandages that were both caked with old, congealed blood, and the bright stains of fresh. He was breathing stertorously, and the smell was inconceivably foul: it was the reek of rotting flesh, of suppurating wounds, of dung and urine, of ancient perspiration, and of fear. She looked at the hands that were clasped together in the effort to prevent their quivering, and was overcome both with fright and pity. What was she to do?

[page 128]

- Read the description (left) of Mandras's return from war and try to recall the corresponding scene from the film. How similar are the two versions and what filmic techniques have been used to replace the written description?
- The film focuses on defining conflict in terms of essential themes of love and war. How does this affect our perception of the story? What other areas of conflict can you identify in the novel?



MUSIC

How like a Woman is a Mandolin?

Music is an essential theme in Captain Corelli's Mandolin. It is, of course, a traditional accompaniment to the rituals of courtship and love and it is the means by which Corelli engages Pelagia's interest and later captures her heart. Appreciation of music is used as an important indication of character in the story and Corelli's love of music is what endears him to all. Music appears to serve as a means to recover the spirit from war and the mandolin is seen as a healing instrument in more ways than one.

Corelli names his mandolin Antonia (his other half) and extends the musical metaphor to his thoughts of Pelagia.

I see her breasts are the backs of mandolins moulded in Napoli...and I see that each buttock is the rounded pear-shaped singing mandolin...I think of Pelagia in terms of chords.

[pages 248/249]

- How does music chart the development of Corelli and Pelagia's relationship in the film and in the novel?
- How is music used as a unifying influence in the film?
- How appropriate is the musical reference in the title?
- Is this a story that is about music? What does music represent?
- Iannis notes Corelli's musical abilities as 'worthy of forgiveness'. What do you understand by this?
- How is music used to form our impression of Corelli's singing troupe 'La Scala' in the film? How does this affect our perception of them as an occupying force?
- How does the filmmaker convey a sense of joy and abandon in music?
- What greater symbolic resonance does the notion of music as a healing force have?



LANGUAGE

The story of Captain Corelli's Mandolin explores the way in which humans communicate with each other. The most direct method of communication, spoken language, takes the form of different narrative voices in the novel, through straightforward narration and through the many and varied dialogues that take place. Of course, communication also takes place on a more basic level through the less conscious use of body language and facial expression. We are also invited to consider the way in which humans communicate through shared experiences and the sometimes profound effect these can have on us. Love, war and a shared appreciation of music are some of the different forms these universal experiences take in Captain Corelli's Mandolin.

- The novel opens and introduces the gallery of characters through many narrative voices; Dr Iannis's 'History of Cephallonia'; Pelagia's letters to Mandras; Carlo Piero Guercio's account of being a soldier. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to us, as readers?
- Why do you think the film maker chose not to follow the same pattern of narration? Whose narrative viewpoint do we experience the story from in the film? How is this achieved?
- What 'language' draws Pelagia to Antonio Corelli?
- What are the differences in the 'languages' of Pelagia and Mandras? Think about the scene where the dance takes place in the main square. This is a scene with very little dialogue. What features of non-verbal communication are used to show the feelings of Corelli, Pelagia and the villagers? How does the positioning/movement of the camera and the editing (decision of sequence of shots) contribute to this?
- What different manifestations of the shared experiences of love and war are represented in the film? How does this compare to the way in which the shared experiences are realised in the novel?



HUMOUR



For a story that spans war, earthquakes and beyond it is something of a surprise to find so much humour in the telling. The film draws on that humour, making laughter from the improbable.

- Focus on the detonation of the mine scene. How does humour arise from the scene?
- Pick three other scenes that raise laughter and describe how humour was embedded in the scene.
- To what extent can humour be described as one of the other human languages? How does humour build relationships between groups on opposing sides?



SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

ALL TAKEN FROM OCR

- By a careful comparison of two passages, or episodes, from Captain Corelli's Mandolin, show how far you find that de Bernières' presentation of the Greeks is either convincing or inconsistent.
- Captain Corelli's Mandolin covers a period of fifty years of political, social and geographical upheaval. How successful do you think it is as a 'history' of this period?
- From your reading of Captain Corelli's Mandolin, how appropriate would you say the musical reference in the title is?

WEBSITES OF INTEREST

www.captain-corellis-mandolin.com

a trailer can be seen on this site

www.whatamipointpread.com

site with discussion of various readings of the novel



NB References to the novel were taken from Louis de Bernières' Captain Corelli's Mandolin, (Vintage, London, 1998)

Written by Kate Domaille and Anita Abbott
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