

Much Ado about Nothing Study Guide

Much Ado about Nothing by William Shakespeare

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Plot Summary

Much Ado About Nothing begins with the return of soldiers from abroad: Don Pedro, accompanied by Claudio and Benedick, return triumphant to the home of Leonato, an Italian nobleman. Claudio immediately falls in love with Leonato's daughter, Hero, while Benedick verbally spars with Leonato's niece, Beatrice (though this is just a form of flirting). After a masked ball, Claudio and Hero decide to get married. Impatient for the festivities to begin, the group decides to align Beatrice and Benedick by allowing them to overcome their pride and admit their love for one another. The scheme works. However, another scheme, perpetrated by Don Pedro's illegitimate brother (Don John) and his cronies, makes Claudio believe that Hero has been unfaithful to him. He spurns her on their wedding day, humiliating her and her family. However, Don John's cronies confess to their misdeed, and Claudio, led to believe that Hero has died of shame, agrees to marry Leonato's other "niece," who is really Hero in disguise. At the wedding, Hero is unmasked as her true, virtuous self, and the two sets of lovers are prepared to be happily married.



Act 1

Summary

In Act One, the first scene depicts Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick returning from the war. Leonato, an Italian aristocrat, awaits them with his daughter, Hero, and his niece, Beatrice. Beatrice has a romantic history with Benedick. When they meet up, much verbal sparring takes place as they tease each other. Meanwhile, Claudio, seeing Hero for the first time, falls in love with her gentle nature and beauty. After Leonato's party departs, Claudio despairs of seducing Hero, but Don Pedro offers to help him by taking Claudio's place at the upcoming masked ball. In effect, this is seducing Hero for Claudio. However, a twist comes in the second scene when Antonio talks to his brother Leonato, warning him that one of his servants overheard the conversation between Claudio and Don Pedro. But, the servant had misunderstood; the same is true for Antonio, The servant and Antonio think that Don Pedro himself has designs on Hero. Leonato decides to prepare his daughter for this news. Finally, in the third scene, Don John - the bad-natured brother of Don Pedro - arrives, talking with his man Conrade. Don John complains about his own ill-temper, but Conrade warns him to behave himself, as he is only recently back in his brother's favor. Then, however, another of Don John's men, Borachio, arrives with news of the courtship, and the group decide to amuse themselves by confusing the lovers and making mischief.

Analysis

The first scene acts as an important introduction to the main characters and themes of the play. It establishes the rapport between Beatrice and Benedick, who are both strong-willed and seem at odds with one another, while also introducing the "foil" couple of Hero and Claudio, who are much less verbal and more withdrawn (so much so, in fact, that Claudio is glad for Don Pedro to do his wooing for him!) It also establishes the social hierarchies that will come into their full power later in the play. As the highest ranking, Don Pedro is the most powerful, then Leonato, and, finally, the soldiers below him. The women, of course, are lowest of all.

Finally, the first scene establishes the importance of language in the play. The numerous puns, plays-on-words, clever insults, and professions of love are all examples of language as power. This power will both tear lovers apart and draw them together before the end of the play.

Scenes Two and Three compare the different kinds of deception that the play examines. In the first case, of Antonio's man misunderstanding Don Pedro's offer, the deception is an unwilling one, and offered in the spirit of protection; on the other hand, Don John's deception is one that he is deliberately shaping to make trouble. The consequences of both kinds of deception play out in the following scenes.



Discussion Question 1

What are the similarities between Beatrice and Benedict in Act One, Scene One? How do their similarities make them incompatible?

Discussion Question 2

Compare Don Pedro to his brother, Don John. What is the difference between them?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Leonato important to the action of this Act?

Vocabulary

accordant, feats, bestowed, victual, valiant, betwixt, disdain, pernicious, forsworn, tyrant, methinks, allegiance, obstinate, heretic, temporize, flout, sufferance, mortifying, muzzle, enfranchised



Act 5

Summary

Act Five begins with Leonato fuming, wanting to challenge Claudio to a duel and kill him, though the older man may not be fit for it. Don Pedro, as well, believes that Claudio is full of villainy; finally, Benedick arrives, also angry with his old friend and wanting to challenge him to a fight. However, Dogberry arrives, and is finally able to explain the plot that drove everybody apart. In penance, Leonato tells Claudio that (according to the Friar's plan), he will have to make public amends, mourn his daughter, and then marry another niece of his, who resembles Hero.

Beatrice and Benedick then meet in the garden, and reaffirm that they have feelings for one another. They are then summoned away. Claudio reads an elegy before what he thinks is Hero's grave, and claims that he will do so each year. He then goes in front of the Friar to be married to the woman of Leonato's choice; he agrees that he will do so, sight unseen, and is enormously delighted when the bride unveils herself as Hero. Beatrice and Benedick then start to debate whether they should really get married themselves, thinking maybe they are just better off as friends; however, Claudio and Hero produce badly-written love notes that Beatrice and Benedick have written, and Benedick finally takes action by kissing Beatrice. The two couples are married.

Analysis

In this act, lines of allegiance are changed and re-established so that the proper social hierarchy can be maintained - and so that the characters can have their happy endings. The way that Leonato reacts to his daughter's supposed infidelity is telling. He is furious, and he treats her as though she has taken something away from him. Later, once her innocence has been established and Claudio must do penance publicly for his refutation of Hero, Leonato requires that he do so in a way that treats his daughter almost like property Claudio has damaged. First, Claudio must confess his fault, and then he must "buy" another bride (who is, actually, Hero). The public aspect of this exchange is important to note, as it shows that marriage between individuals was considered, at its core, to be a social matter and important to the construction of society.

Though language has been highly prized as a virtue throughout the play, readers should note that it is only through Beatrice and Benedick's ill-written letters that their love can finally become evident, demonstrating that, though words and wordplay may be impressive, it can be easily manipulated. The play implies that the written word is where the truth lies.

Discussion Question 1

How many revelations are made in Act Five? Of what nature, and to what end?



Discussion Question 2

What is responsible for Borachio's confession?

Discussion Question 3

How does Claudio come to justice, finally? Or does he?

Vocabulary

arrant, lewd, beseech, plaintiff, epitaph, enjoin, belies, incensed, hypocrite, earnest, braggart, scabbard, expedient, ominous, slanderous, slew, drowsy, enigmatic.



Act 2

Summary

Act Two opens immediately before the masked ball, as Hero and Beatrice discuss the perfect man in front of Leonato. Beatrice has not been happy with what she's seen of men, and she proclaims that she will never marry. During the ball itself, she ends up dancing with Benedick. At first, she seems to suspect that her dance partner is he, but then she appears to believe his protests that he is not. She then goes on to berate Benedick and his sense of humor (as well as his self-conception) to her partner - who is, of course, Benedick! Meanwhile, Don Pedro and Hero dance, Hero thinking that he is Claudio. She is wooed by his language. At the end of the ball, Don John talks to Claudio, claiming that he heard Don Pedro professing love to Hero on his own behalf. Claudio, upset by this, talks to his friend Benedick; nevertheless, he is resigned to Don Pedro's claim on Hero. Benedick then speaks to Don Pedro, who clears the air, by clarifying that he was indeed acting on Claudio's behalf. He is also letting Beatrice know that she had wounded Benedick, who was her real dance partner. He offers to marry Beatrice himself, but she claims that he is too fancy for her. When Beatrice leaves, Claudio, Leonato, Don Pedro, and Hero all make plans to unite Beatrice and Benedick.

In Scene Two, Borachio and Don John scheme to ruin the pending marriage between Claudio and Hero. They come up with a plan in which they will go to Don Pedro and Claudio and claim that Hero has had relations with Borachio and that they can prove it. They will then "prove" it by having the men witness a scene in which a serving maid named Margaret, who is dressed as Hero, is seduced by Borachio.

In Scene Three, Benedick wonders if he is even capable of falling in love. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato spot him. Knowing that he can see them, they converse about how sad it is that Beatrice is so in love with Benedick and that he is too proud to marry her. They pretend to worry that it will break her heart. When they leave, Benedick is shocked, and he decides to marry Beatrice, supposedly so that people do not think him too proud. Beatrice then comes to call Benedick to dinner, and he is kind to her for the first time in their relationship. Of course, she immediately distrusts him.

Analysis

The Masked Ball in Act Two is, in a way, the perfect microcosm of the play. Here, each character has a goal, and - obscured from the view of normal society - attempts to achieve it. Yet, everyone is hidden, and people are not who they seem to be. Note, as well, that the deception of the characters is more or less helping them achieve their ends (with the exception of Beatrice and Benedick, who are driven farther apart) until Don John's meddling later on.



This act again highlights the importance of words, which have a double power. They can wound, as in Benedick's case, or seduce, as in Hero's. However, those without the proper words, like Claudio, are at the mercy of others. The ease of misunderstanding highlighted by the masked ball is also underscored by the double meanings of many expressions used within the play. With the multiple layers of deceit, as well as the power of language, the play at this point can especially be seen as a commentary on the theater itself.

Finally, in this ever-changing landscape, readers (and viewers) should note how easily characters are convinced of one thing or another. Little more than a rumor is enough to dissuade Claudio from pursuing Hero, while Beatrice's barbs for Benedick (and his for her) are the only element really keeping them apart.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the masked ball?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Claudio feel he must step back when he believes Don Pedro wishes to marry Hero?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Don Pedro's proposal to Beatrice? Does he mean it, or is it sarcastic?

Vocabulary

tartly, disposition, shrewd, cuckold, valiant, wayward, fantastical, thatched, disdainful, amorous, usurer, sedges, transgression, beseech, troth, rites, interim



Act 3

Summary

Act Three, the longest in *Much Ado About Nothing*, begins with the female version of the trick the men played on Benedick. Ursula and Hero walk within earshot of Beatrice, without talking to her, but speaking of Benedick's love for her. Upon hearing of this supposed adoration, Beatrice decides to change her mind about Benedick and to give him another chance.

Scene Two opens with Claudio's recount of Benedick's change of heart to Don Pedro. Don Pedro says that he will stay for the wedding, but no longer, and that he will not take Claudio back into battle with him. However, at this point, Don John comes in and spreads the rumor that he had conceived with Borachio. The rumor is that Hero is being unfaithful to Claudio. Neither Claudio nor Don Pedro believe him, but Don John tells them to come see that evening as Hero makes love to Borachio.

In Scene Three, Dogberry and Verges, local law enforcement, provide comic relief with their discussion of how policemen ought to do their duties. They basically conclude that they should do whatever is easiest and disturbs people the least. However, their discussion is interrupted when Borachio and Conrade pass by, inadvertently revealing the deception planned for that night to rip Claudio and Hero apart.

In Scene Four, Hero dresses for her wedding with her cousin Beatrice and their pleasant women servants. In Scene Five, knowing that the wedding is about to be ruined, Dogberry and Verges try to tell Leonato what they've overheard, but they are so verbose and incomprehensible that he sends them away without hearing what they have to say.

Analysis

Act Three opens with a scene to balance what just took place among the men. Here, the women conspire for good, to try and unite Beatrice and Benedick, by letting Beatrice overhear a similarly fabricated story. This balance represents a kind of social order; just as the men have their plans, so, too, do the women. This symmetry, or balance, is also highlighted by the fact that Ursula, one of Hero's serving maids, helps her perpetrate this kind of deception for Beatrice. At the same time, Margaret, the other serving maid, has conspired against her mistress.

Don John shows more of his true colors in Scene Two, upsetting the delicate balance that the couples are about to achieve by concocting his own plan. His motivations come into play at this point. The viewer may question why he cares so much about upsetting everybody else's lives. On one hand, he is a self-proclaimed crank; but, more importantly for Shakespeare, he is illegitimate. Therefore, while he can enjoy the same society that his legitimate brother, Don Pedro, runs, he cannot really be a part of it, for



he is prohibited from marrying into it by social custom (nobody would want to marry an illegitimate son in those days).

After the darkness of Don John's musings and plans, Scene Three provides much-needed comic relief with the bumbling law enforcement officers, Dogberry and Verges. Note that in this play that uses language so carefully, even the characters' names are slightly ridiculous. The comic and tragic come into contact with one another in Scene Three, putting the protagonists' marriage (and thus comedic happy ending) at stake.

Scene Four, in which Hero dresses for her wedding, is all the more poignant for the fact that the viewer knows there are plots working against her. Scene Five even more frustrating because Leonato refuses to listen to the officers' report on the plot.

Discussion Question 1

How does the scene in which Ursula and Hero conspire on Beatrice's behalf compare to the previous scene, in which the men conspire for Benedick?

Discussion Question 2

What are Don Pedro's plans for after the wedding? How are these significant?

Discussion Question 3

How is law enforcement characterized in Act Three? How might this foreshadow coming events?

Vocabulary

dost, warrant, attires, slanders, inwardly, commendable, foul, haggard, couverture, angling, disparage, wooed, ensuing, impediment, doublet, truant, vouchsafe, merciful, defiles, meddle



Act 4

Summary

In the church in Act Four, Scene One, everyone has prepared for the nuptials. Even Claudio, convinced now of Hero's unfaithfulness, has come to humiliate her in public. The ceremony begins, and everything goes smoothly until it is Claudio's turn to say his own vows. Instead of saying them, however, he denounces Hero as a whore in front of the church, claiming that she is no virgin and untrue to him, and therefore a liar and a commodity no man would want. Hero protests this and faints. Her father, Leonato, is horrified - but more at the prospect that his daughter has behaved so improperly than at her welfare or her potential innocence. Claudio storms out of the church while Beatrice comes to her cousin's aid. She says that although she has slept in the same room as Hero for the past year, she did not last night. The friar, however, comes up with a plan. He proposes that Leonato proclaim that Hero has died, and that - in his grief - Claudio may see her true innocence and repent. If he does not, Hero can be secreted off to a convent. Leonato agrees to this plan. Later in the scene, Beatrice confronts Benedick about his friend's behavior. She tells him that if he does not challenge Claudio to a duel, she wants nothing to do with him.

In Scene Two, Dogberry questions Borachio and Conrade and gets them to confess to their actions and the plans that have driven the lovers apart. However, they confess at the prison. At this point in the play, none of the major players know of the duplicitous plot.

Analysis

Act Four provides the very public climax to all of the plotting and planning that has taken place behind closed doors. Everything has to come out in the open. This includes the accusations against Hero and the proof of Hero's ultimate innocence. The plan to restore her reputation is being undertaken in private. Similarly, Beatrice finally challenges Benedick to back up his words with action and to challenge his best friend to a duel. Of course, he balks at this; though later, he will do as Beatrice has demanded, showing that his loyalty ultimately lies with her.

Act Four, at its heart, shows loyalties questioned and shaken. However, they are on the road to being re-established. Resolution will not take place until Act Five, when the seeds planted in Act Four come to fruition.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Claudio's "rotten orange" metaphor?



Discussion Question 2

Why is Leonato so moved by Claudio's accusations?

Discussion Question 3

Compare the Friar's intervention to the Priest's in Romeo and Juliet. What are their respective roles?

Vocabulary

inward, impediment, conjoined, interjections, unconstrained, semblance, wanton, nuptial, yester night, inwardness, twine, wronged, malefactors, knaves,



Characters

Beatrice

One of Shakespeare's most outspoken heroines, Beatrice has her own ideas about her life and where it is headed. Unlike Hero, who wishes to please her father (Leonato) and become part of society, Beatrice rarely interacts with or even mentions her own father, Antonio. She professes that she may never get married. Shakespeare implies that she may have had an earlier romance with Benedick, who spurned her. That would certainly account for the sarcasm with which she attacks him. However, Beatrice is not a "shrew" like Katherine (Kate) in *The Taming of the Shrew*. She is not unpleasant to anybody but Benedick, and she has many social graces. Moreover, she does not hate men, but she simply struggles to imagine herself in a happy marriage. As the play progresses, Beatrice becomes progressively softer, particularly after she learns of Benedick's "feelings" for her. Nevertheless, she is not a wilting flower and does make demands of her lover. Notably, she wants him to challenge his friend Claudio to a duel after Claudio has mistreated her cousin. Finally, however, she submits to Benedick in the end, as he quiets her with a kiss, and the two are married.

Hero

Hero is a foil to Beatrice, though an important character in her own right. She is sweeter than Beatrice and eager to please. In the play, she is most defined by her love for Claudio and for her general pleasantness. Benedick has no interest in her, as he proclaims to Claudio. She is, indeed, a "softer" kind of heroine than Beatrice. Nevertheless, the cousins show great affection for each other and demonstrate strong female bonds (an aspect often absent from Shakespeare's plays) as she conspires to get Beatrice married, or even simply when the cousins prepare for dinners, balls, and weddings together.

Benedick

Benedick is a soldier who has fought with Don Pedro and returned to Messina. He knew Beatrice before, and the play implies that he jilted her at one point. He cannot imagine a woman who would please him forever, especially one of the simpler variety. At the beginning of the play, he inhabits an entirely masculine sphere, the army. The play progresses, and his comrade prepares to get married. As Benedick learns that Beatrice has feelings for him, he begins to reconsider his life. By the time that he acts on Beatrice's wish that he challenge Claudio to a duel, he has crossed from the masculine band-of-brothers to become a member of traditional society -- one who will fight for the woman he loves and for values that he considers to be proper and true. Along with Beatrice, Benedick is the character who develops the most throughout the play. Both he and Beatrice nearly lapse into their former selves in the ultimate scene, when they claim



they can just be friends. Their social group will not let them and use their own words (in the form of letters) to prove who they have really become.

Claudio

A soldier who has recently proven himself in battle, Claudio is also Hero's paramour - though an inconstant one. He is weaker willed than Benedick and willing to concede the woman he loves to Don Pedro when he believes the prince desires her. Later, his beliefs about her fidelity are changed so quickly that he goes from love to hate in the course of a single scene. However, in the end, he repents publicly and is rewarded with his bride. Claudio as a character can be seen to represent society's whims, beliefs, and mercurial nature. Nevertheless, the ultimate view that Shakespeare provides is a positive one.

Leonato

Hero's father and Beatrice's uncle; a wealthy nobleman of Messina, concerned with the marriages of his daughter and his niece.

Don Pedro

A visiting prince and soldier; the highest-ranking character in the play.

Don John

Don Pedro's illegitimate (and bitter) brother.

Antonio

A nobleman who is Leonato's brother and Beatrice's father.

Balthasar

A musician and member of the court.

Friar Francis

The church official who proposes a plan to help restore Hero's reputation. He believes in her innocence from the first, notably because of her shocked reaction to the accusations Claudio makes against her.



Borachio

One of Don John's main companions, Borachio (meaning "drunk" in Italian) is the character with whom Hero is supposedly having an affair. He helps Don John plan and execute his schemes; however, he later gives him up to the constable. Thus, he is shown as inconsistent and unsteady.

Conrade

A companion of Don John, who helps construct the plans to disrupt the lovers' idyll.

Margaret

Hero's serving maid, who plots against her by agreeing to take part in the plot with Borachio to discredit her mistress.

Ursula

A maid to Hero and Beatrice; a true and loyal servant.

Dogberry

The constable of Messina; a man who often tries to use big words but confuses them, indicating a potential desire to rise in the social hierarchy but possessing an inherent inability to do so.

Verges

Dogberry's companion/colleague.



Symbols and Symbolism

Battle

At the beginning of the play, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick have all returned from fighting a successful battle, in which they have had very few casualties. Claudio has distinguished himself through his service on the field.

Masks

The characters literally carry masks at the ball, through which they can hide their faces. They also carry metaphorical masks with them throughout the play, as they hide their true motivations, desires, and actions from the others.

Wit

Wit is akin to currency in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Characters such as Benedick are valued for their quick thinking, their word-play, and their double entendres. However, wit can also be used against characters, as when Beatrice throws barbs at an anonymous Benedick.

Music

The songs in the play describe both what is and isn't occurring. For example, a song treats the subject of infidelity, but it encourages wives to be lenient of their unfaithful husbands (when in the play, of course, it is the fiancée accused of being unfaithful to her future husband). This inverse, double meaning underscores other aspects of the play's "doubling."

Hiding

Characters are often hiding, or in disguise, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Benedick and Beatrice hide and overhear that the other is in love with them, while Margaret "hides" as Hero to "prove" her disloyalty. In numerous other metaphorical ways, characters hide their love and hate throughout the play.

Doubling

From the couple of couples (Beatrice and Benedick/Hero and Claudio) to the double entendres used in the language, *Much Ado About Nothing* often uses doubling as a



symbol. For example, Don Pedro may be seen as the positive double to his brother, Don John's, darker side.

Nobility

In the society depicted, social hierarchy is key. The members of the nobility (Don Pedro especially, but also Leonato) are often present as the mediators of trouble -- though they sometimes inadvertently encourage it themselves.

Fidelity

When Hero is "shown" to have been unfaithful, she is suspected of giving up her only value which is her fidelity to her future husband. This fidelity/virginity was a woman's exclusive power in a rigid hierarchical structure.

Social Institutions

Two social institutions, the church and the law, are depicted in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Only together do they help provide resolution for the conflict. The Friar's plan for Hero would not have been nearly as successful without Dogberry's elicitation of the confessions.

Writings

In a play so much about the spoken word, it is ironic that the conflict between Beatrice and Benedick is finally resolved through the production of their own, badly-written testaments of love for one another.



Settings

Messina

The Italian city of Messina, in Italy, is the larger world in which the action of the play takes place. In Sicily, the city is remote enough to give Shakespeare's audience a sense of the exotic, and character names such as "Leonato" reinforce this aspect of the foreign (however, some names, such as "Don John" have been partially Anglicized). Messina is important as a town in that it provides the larger social institutions that eventually aid the protagonists in resolving their problems. The constable, however clumsy he may be, gets a confession from Borachio. The Friar provides the plan that allows Hero to maintain her honor and even marry the man she wants. Specific action takes place in very few locations within Messina, limited to a single street, Leonato's estate, a church, and a prison.

Leonato's House

Leonato's estate establishes his position in the social hierarchy. When the prince returns from battle, it is to Leonato's home that he goes. The house is evidently large enough to house his various servants and soldiers. Moreover, the fact that the action centers around Leonato's estate highlights his centrality to the plot and reinforces Beatrice and Hero from the very beginning as the heroines, for they are the unmarried women who inhabit this estate. Therefore, when a party of bachelors arrives, Shakespeare has already set up a scenario in which the audience expects some sort of action and perhaps even hijinks.

Leonato's Orchard

Leonato's orchard provides the perfect location for characters to talk in private, but it is also an excellent place for characters to hide, as Benedick does, overhearing Beatrice's supposed feelings for him. It is the visual representation of the rumors and confused gossip that have been circulating. The rumors have hidden the truth, just as the orchard can hide characters and lead them to believe things that are not necessarily true. In this sense, the orchard and the plotting of characters (both good and evil) throughout the play end up holding similar roles.

Church

The church is the location of the play's climax, where Hero is publicly repudiated by Claudio. It is important in that it is a venerable, public, social institution, thus making her shaming even more tragic.

Prison

Although, like the church, the prison is a public institution, it is used in *Much Ado About Nothing* almost as a foil to the church. While the church is a place where humiliating (false) rumors are publicly declared, the prison is a place where true confessions are privately revealed. In a sense, each institution plays the role traditionally expected of the other, another example of Shakespeare's reversals and doublings within *Much Ado About Nothing*.



Themes and Motifs

Language

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare creates a world entirely of language and shows the dangers and beauties of this world. In the beginning, the verbal sparring between Beatrice and Benedick is the most evident sign of the value of facility with language, and metaphors are used in abundance (often involving animals, further highlighting the importance of language as an element of the most "evolved" species of man). Claudio, indeed, laments that he is not able to woo Hero with his own words, and Don Pedro must take on the task for him. However, though a quick wit and comeback is prized in this society, it is also a weapon that can be used against the protagonists. Don John (one of the most taciturn characters of the play, who speaks very simply in comparison with the other characters) creates sets of rumors -- carried by words -- designed to upend the lovers' happiness. Both the rift he tries to cause between Claudio and Don Pedro, as well as that between Claudio and Hero, are due to rumors that he has created and spread. Finally, though, the mixed usage of language takes a turn for the positive at the end of the play, as Claudio makes a public speech (overcoming his hesitancy about his own verbal skills) in praise of Hero. Beatrice and Benedict are bound together, each having heard a rumor that the other is in love. Like any tool, language is shown to have the capacity for both good and evil, depending on who is using it -- and to what ends.

Hierarchy

The social hierarchy affects every character within the play, for better or for worse. The character most visibly affected by the social order, however, is Don John. His brother is a prince and possesses power and wealth; however, Don John is illegitimate, meaning that he cannot possess either. It also means, in a play very much about love and coupling, that he is unlikely to ever find a wife. It is for these reasons that Don John sets about trying to destroy the social order through whatever means he has. In this case, he works through his web of servants and the rumors they can spread. In fact, if Don John were to succeed in destroying the social hierarchy by preventing Claudio's marriage to Hero, or by turning the soldier against his brother the prince, the play might well be classified as a tragedy. However, because the protagonists are able to overcome Don John's ploys to upset their society, the play ends in marriage and, thus, ends as a comedy.

Deception

Though "deception" has a negative connotation, it is used in *Much Ado About Nothing* for both good and evil purposes. Often, this has to do with language, as described above; however, deception also arises in the play through misleading situations and



groupings of characters. It is, after all, Margaret dressed in Hero's clothing that leads Claudio to believe that she has been unfaithful. However, it is also deception that initially unites Beatrice and Benedick, as their friends trick them into admitting their feelings for each other (notably, they may have been deceiving themselves - or, at least, trying to deceive others - when proclaiming that they would never be married earlier in the play). Thus, deception emerges as a means to various ends - if a dangerous one, of which the characters must be wary.

Masks

Characters are both literally and metaphorically masked throughout the play, in that they are often hidden, or hiding something about themselves from others. The literal maskings include the masked ball, early in the play, Margaret's costuming herself as Hero to deceive Claudio, and Hero's disguise as Leonato's niece, just before she marries Claudio. However, though these disguises come into the play sporadically, they are ever-present in metaphorical terms, as each character has something to hide about him or herself. Beatrice and Benedick are hiding their feelings for each other (or transforming them) through sarcasm; Don John hides his nefarious plans; Don Pedro may or may not be in love with Beatrice. The play's narrative is, in a large sense, about the "unmasking" aspect of the characters, as they lay themselves bare and make themselves vulnerable, finally showing themselves for who they are.

Styles

Point of View

As a play, *Much Ado About Nothing* has the advantage of being able to provide numerous points of view within the omniscient, overall viewer experience. The viewer is privy not only to gossip, but also to the people overhearing the gossip. In this sense, unlike in a novel, the viewer has more information than any character in the play. Moreover, monologues and soliloquies help to reinforce the viewer's depth of understanding of individual characters. For example, after the masked ball scene, Benedick repeats many of Beatrice's insults over to himself, showing how deep her verbal spars have actually cut him. Similarly, when Beatrice overhears the staged conversation between Ursula and Hero in which they lament Beatrice's not returning Benedick's love, she then speaks in an aside to herself, mulling over her own motivations. In this sense, the play is both interior and exterior, and provides a view of individual characters and their motivations, as well as a larger segment of society at large.

Language and Meaning

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, language is both meaning and meaningless. The characters all create a world out of language. It is through language, for example, that we see Beatrice's and Benedick's relationship develop from lightly antagonistic to playful to romantic. Dexterity with words is also a valued trait, as characters speak in eloquent, descriptive, and often metaphoric sentences. On the other hand, much of the gossip or rumors in the play have no basis. In fact, they are meaningless because they have no truth in the real world. However, they take on their own meaning and, as in the case of Claudio and Hero, have the power to separate. In the case of Benedick and Beatrice, rumors have the power to unite.

Readers should also note that *Much Ado About Nothing* does not use any of the rhyme schemes that Shakespeare uses in his other works for any extended length of time. Though the language is beautiful and important, it is also prose, rather than written in any particular poetic meter or rhyme scheme.

Structure

Much Ado About Nothing presents a classic scenario of goal, conflict, and resolution. This basic narrative structure is made more complex by the numerous characters in the play. However, because many of them have the same goal (marriage, or the happy marriage of others to maintain the social order), it is easy enough to understand. The conflict comes in the form of Don John, who has a conflicting goal of creating chaos and social discontent. In the end, the resolution comes when the majority of the characters'

desires overcome Don John's more negative ones with the help of social institutions, such as law enforcement and the church.

Looked at from a slightly different perspective, we can see that Act One establishes the characters and their desires. Act Two provides rising action and the seeds of conflict. The conflict comes to a head in Act Three, when Don John makes his accusations. The consequences of this conflict are dramatically played out in Act Four, while Act Five provides resolution.



Quotes

How much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!
-- Leonato (Act One paragraph Scene One)

Importance: In this quote, the genre of the play (comedy) is established by the happy events it refers to. It also foreshadows coming events, for Leonato will have the opportunity to both weep and joy in the coming scenes.

As the event stamps them: but they have a good cover; they show well outward. The prince and Count Claudio, walking in a thick-peached alley in mine orchard, were thus much overheard by a man of mine: the prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter and meant to acknowledge it this night in a dance: and if he found her accordant, he meant to take the present time by the top and instantly break with you of it.
-- Antonio (Act One paragraph Scene Two)

Importance: In this quote, Antonio explains the situation as he believes it is unfolding to his brother Leonato. The confusion that he expresses, as well as the element of rumor contained within ("overheard by a man of mine") indicate the complexity and he-said-she-said aspects of the story to come.

I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause and smile at no man's jests, eat when I have stomach and wait for no man's leisure, sleep when I am drowsy and tend on no man's business, laugh when I am merry and claw no man in his humour.
-- Don John (Act One paragraph Scene Three)

Importance: Though little motivation for Don John's actions are given throughout the play, this brief excerpt of dialogue demonstrates his overall mood and attitude toward those around him. He feels extremely visible ("I cannot hide what I am") although most of the characters throughout the play ignore him. They only acknowledge him when they have cause to resent him for the havoc he wreaks upon their plans.

Why, he is the prince's jester: a very dull fool; only his gift is in devising impossible slanders: none but libertines delight in him; and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villany; for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet: I would he had boarded me.
-- Beatrice (Act Two paragraph Scene One)

Importance: In this quote, which takes place at the masked ball, Beatrice is unwittingly addressing Benedick and explaining her annoyance with him. She criticizes him harshly, and he must listen to it, unable to reveal himself. There is also plenty of characteristic wordplay in this exchange, such as fleet/boarded.

Be you constant in the accusation, and my cunning shall not shame me.
-- Borachio (Act Two paragraph Scene Two)



Importance: This wraps up the conversation between Borachio and Don John, in which they plot to accuse Hero of being unfaithful. Here, Borachio is highlighting the importance of "sticking to the story"; if Don John does so, Borachio claims, his own skills will allow him to pull off the rest of the plan unimpeded.

Hero thinks surely she will die; for she says she will die, if he loves her not, and she will die, ere she makes her love known, and she will die, if he woos her, rather than she will bate one breath of her accustomed crossness.

-- Claudio (Act Two paragraph Scene Three)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the multiple levels of deception, invention, and rumor involved in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Here, Claudio is talking with Leonato and Don Pedro, well aware that Benedick is listening to them from a hidden location. Claudio is trying to surreptitiously convince Benedick of Beatrice's love (supposedly by repeating something that Hero quoted to him) and, thus, finally unite the two lovers.

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true? Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much? Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu! No glory lives behind the back of such. And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee, Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand: If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee To bind our loves up in a holy band; For others say thou dost deserve, and I Believe it better than reportingly.

-- Beatrice (Act Three paragraph Scene One)

Importance: This is Beatrice's reaction to the rumors that Benedick loves her. In its own way, it is the counter-balance of the previous scene, in which Benedick decides to court Beatrice. Viewers may note that, though both characters have stated they will not marry at all, they both agree to marry one another rather quickly - Beatrice, in fact, agrees more quickly than Benedick.

I came hither to tell you; and, circumstances shortened, for she has been too long a talking of, the lady is disloyal.

-- Don John (Act Three paragraph Scene Two)

Importance: In this quote, Don John introduces the main conflict of the play which is the claim that Hero has been disloyal to Claudio with Borachio. Note the brevity of his words in a play (and a society) that values beautiful language.

Thou shouldst rather ask if it were possible any villany should be so rich; for when rich villains have need of poor ones, poor ones may make what price they will.

-- Borachio (Act Three paragraph Scene Three)

Importance: In this quote, Borachio explains his motivations for taking part in the plot against Claudio and Hero. Here, it is money (a thousand ducats). Readers should also note a subtext of class tension in his words, which once again highlight the social hierarchy present in the play.



Enough, I am engaged; I will challenge him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account. As you hear of me, so think of me. Go, comfort your cousin: I must say she is dead: and so, farewell.
-- Benedick (Act Four paragraph Scene One)

Importance: Here, Benedick has agreed to Beatrice's plans for restoring Hero's honor, as per the Friar's instructions. It is important because his loyalties, here, have shifted from Claudio to Beatrice, showing the growing depth of his love. In addition, he is offering to prove his love with deeds, rather than just the words which he has so mastered throughout the play.

O villain! thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this.
-- Dogberry (Act Five paragraph Scene Two)

Importance: Not only does this quote show the depth of betrayal Dogberry sees in Don John's plot, but it also demonstrates his bumbling use of words. By "everlasting redemption," he actually means something akin to "everlasting damnation," but has gotten his religious terms mixed up.

I have drunk poison whiles he utter'd it.
-- Claudio (Act Five paragraph Scene One)

Importance: This quote is Claudio's reaction, highly metaphorical, to Don John's accusations against Hero; proof of the harmful effects words can have and how, in this play, they can literally be used as weapons.