

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Much Ado About Nothing

by William Shakespeare

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Item No. 302944

Much Ado About Nothing

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. trace the development of the main plot and subplot.
2. analyze the following characters and their relationships with other characters:
 - Antonio
 - Beatrice
 - Benedick
 - Borachio
 - Claudio
 - Dogberry
 - Don John
 - Don Pedro
 - Friar Francis
 - Hero
 - Leonato
 - Margaret
3. identify the conventions of Elizabethan comedy, as illustrated in *Much Ado About Nothing*.
4. analyze Shakespeare's use of language, including:
 - blank verse and prose
 - devices such as metaphor, allusion, apostrophe, metonymy, etc.
 - dramatic conventions such as soliloquy, aside, subplot, etc.
5. trace the following themes in the play:
 - Social conventions are often at odds with authentic communication.
 - People are often more concerned with appearances than with reality.
6. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
8. offer a close reading of *Much Ado About Nothing* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text.

Lecture Notes

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES

William Shakespeare was born in the town of Stratford-Upon-Avon, England in 1564. Born during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare wrote most of his works during what is known as the *Elizabethan Era* of English history. As well as exemplifying the comedic conventions of the era, *Much Ado About Nothing* also reflects elements of Elizabethan culture.

One important element of Shakespeare's culture to note in interpreting *Much Ado About Nothing* is the emphasis on female chastity. Throughout the play, this motif appears repeatedly in comments on the "virtue" or supposed wantonness of female characters and in jokes about *cuckolds*—the husbands of unfaithful wives. This anxiety about female chastity is the main source of conflict in the play, leading to its dramatic climax in the public shaming of Hero at her wedding.

The vitriol leveled against an unchaste bride may surprise modern audiences; suspicions about Hero's virginity earn her such appellations as "rotten orange" and "common stale" from her betrothed, while her own father publicly wishes her dead. However, the extreme anxiety over female chastity and fidelity in Elizabethan England was grounded, in part, in the system of property inheritance in Elizabethan England. According to the law of *primogeniture*, the first-born male offspring must be the sole inheritor of his father's wealth and title. Thus, along with the natural concern for being hurt emotionally by a cheating spouse, males in Elizabethan England also feared the prospect of leaving all their earthly goods to the offspring of another man. Hence, spousal chastity and fidelity were of particular concern to men, under these circumstances.

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF LANGUAGE

Blank Verse:

In most of his plays, the predominant rhythmic and metric pattern Shakespeare uses is *blank verse*—unrhymed iambic pentameter. The following lines, taken from a speech by Leonato in Act IV, Scene I, exemplify Shakespeare's use of blank verse:

Why ev/er wast / thou love/ly in / my eyes?
 Why had / I not / with char/i-ta/ble hand
 Took up / a be/ggar's iss/ue at / my gates,
 Who smir/ched thus / and mired / with in/famy,
 I might / have said, / 'No part / of it / is mine;
 This shame / derives / itself / from un/known loins?'

In most of Shakespeare's plays, blank verse is the common speech of noble and important characters, and prose is generally reserved for those of base nature or inferior rank. *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, is an exception to the usual pattern, being written predominately in prose.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does the play's title relate to its content and themes?
2. *Much Ado About Nothing* is far more serious in tone and content than traditional Elizabethan comedies. Analyze the effect of Shakespeare's combination of comedy and near-tragedy in this play, using specific examples from the text to explain why the author may have chosen to mix the two.
3. Discuss the commentary *Much Ado About Nothing* makes on the importance of reputation, identifying the various perspectives on the subject espoused by the different characters.
4. Compare and contrast Hero and Beatrice. What characteristics, behaviors, and/or situations do the two have in common? In what ways do they differ?
5. Compare and contrast Claudio and Benedick. What characteristics, behaviors, and/or situations do the two have in common? In what ways do they differ?
6. At one time, *Much Ado About Nothing* was performed under the title *Beatrice and Benedick*, which placed the subplot of their eccentric romance at the foreground of the play. How might the use of this alternate title affect the audience's experience and interpretation of the play? Why might Shakespeare have used this title at one time, and why might it have changed?
7. Shakespeare is known for his thoughtful, deliberate naming of characters. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, characters with meaningful names include Beatrice—whose name denotes “one who blesses,” and Benedick—whose name means “one who is blessed.” [Webster's Dictionary defines *blessing* as approval or encouragement, expressed through acts or words, or “a thing conducive to happiness or welfare.”] Explore the possible significance of these name choices, using evidence from the text.

Much Ado About Nothing

Act I, Scene I

1. The motif of artificial speech and behavior is found throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*. How is this motif evident in the opening scene of the play?

2. What information does this scene provide regarding Beatrice and Benedick's feelings for one another?

3. What is unusual about the language of this scene, considering that this is a Shakespearean play? How does the language change from the beginning of the scene to the end, and what change in theme is marked by this shift in language?

4. What specific qualities does Claudio appear to find desirable in Hero?

Act II, Scene I

1. This scene opens with a discussion of Don John's reputation. What do we learn regarding public opinion of this character, in Act II, Scene I that was hinted at by Leonato in Act I, Scene I? Does Don John perhaps have a reason to be unpleasant?

2. Compare and contrast Beatrice and Hero, based on the information presented thus far in the play.

3. Discuss the content and effect of Beatrice's allusion to the Biblical account of creation.

4. How are the related motifs of artifice and deception present in this scene?

5. This play, unlike most Elizabethan comedies, does not contain a character who is a professional fool or jester. Nonetheless, Beatrice identifies Benedick as the Prince's fool, and the idea is later emphasized in Benedick's incredulous retelling of the insult. Up to this point in the play, to what degree does Benedick fulfill the role of the Elizabethan fool?

Act III, Scene I

1. In Hero's description of the honeysuckles, which character in the play does she seem unwittingly to describe? What do we learn about this character from Hero's description?

...honeysuckles, ripen'd by the sun,
Forbid the sun to enter, like favourites,
Made proud by princes, that advance their pride
Against that power that bred it

2. In this scene, Beatrice is compared to several animals, including fish and birds. What effect do these comparisons produce on the characterization of Beatrice?

3. This scene is written entirely in verse, rather than prose. Describe how this change in language might relate to a change in tone or theme.

4. How does the garden setting of this scene match with its tone and theme?

5. How does this scene address the related motifs of gossip, false reports, and reputation?

Act IV, Scene II

1. In what way does Dogberry express a preoccupation with his public image?

Act V, Scene I

1. How does Claudio seem to feel about his part in Hero's "death," prior to Borachio's confession? Does the story have the desired effect on his heart, as described by Friar Francis, in Act IV, Scene I? ("When he shall hear she died upon his words... then shall he mourn, / If ever love had interest in his liver, / And wish he had not so accused her, / No, though he thought his accusation true.")

2. Describe Claudio's attitude towards Leonato, in the beginning of the scene.

3. Don Pedro and Claudio explain away Benedick's behavior as being merely a product of his love for Beatrice. Is this assessment correct, or is Benedick sincerely upset with Don Pedro and Claudio?

4. Based on the evidence presented in the scene, does Borachio appear to be a static or a dynamic character? Is his repentance sincere? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

5. Upon learning of Hero's innocence, how does Claudio respond? What degree of responsibility does he claim for Hero's "death"?
