

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/know'n 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.

Poetry is the preferred medium for emotional or philosophical subject matter, and, accordingly, the relatively small amount of blank verse that appears in *Much Ado About Nothing* are found in passages relating to the play's romantic plots—especially that of Hero and Claudio. Shakespeare commonly uses changes in verse or meter to signal a shift in plot or atmosphere or to emphasize particular ideas or passages. Hence, one function of the unusual ratio of prose to blank verse in this play is to highlight the shift towards a romantic theme.

The atypical use of language in this play also serves to emphasize the value placed on artificial speech in the society of Messina. For example, by contrast with the honest, straightforward speech of Benedick, the blank verse of Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato seems rather ostentatious.

Figurative Language and Other Literary Devices:

Many of Shakespeare's characters incorporate figurative language into their speech. Figurative language serves many purposes, including adding imagery, variety, depth, and sometimes humor to the ideas expressed in the play. *Much Ado About Nothing* includes examples of various categories of figurative language and other literary devices. Among them are metaphor, simile, allusion, personification, oxymoron, alliteration, hyperbole, rhetorical question, pun, apostrophe, malapropism, and metonymy.

Metaphor:

A *metaphor* is a comparison in which one thing is described as another. As distinct from *similes*, metaphors do not use words such as “like” or “as” to signal that a comparison is being made. In the example that follows, from Act II, Scene I of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick uses a metaphor describing the betrayed Claudio as an injured bird.

Alas, poor hurt fowl! Now he will creep into sedges.

In another example, taken from the same scene, Benedick describes Beatrice's harsh words in metaphoric terms.

She speaks poniards [daggers], and every word stabs.

Both examples demonstrate one of the key functions of metaphor: calling on sensory experiences to bring descriptions to life. In his first metaphor, Benedick compares Claudio to a wounded bird, conjuring up a mental image that evokes pity. In the second metaphor, by contrast, Benedick appeals to the sense of touch. His words invite the audience to imagine the feeling of being stabbed repeatedly—this, according to Benedick, is what it feels like to talk to Beatrice. The effect of Benedick's metaphors, in each case, is a memorable description that appeals to the senses to reinforce its message.

Simile:

Among the most frequently used varieties of figurative language, similes, like metaphors, are comparisons. Unlike metaphors, however, similes generally use words such as “like” or “as” to explicitly denote that a comparison is being made.

The following passage, from Act II, Scene I contains an example of simile in bold.

BENEDICK: I found him here as melancholy as a lodge [rabbit] in a warren [hole].

In the above passage, Benedick describes Claudio’s mood. Using a simile, he compares Claudio to a rabbit, hiding in its hole. This use of simile is meant to create a humorous and pitiable mental image of the forlorn Claudio.

Another example of simile is spoken by Benedick in the same scene:

...I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me.

Here, Benedick adds intensity to his description of Beatrice’s harsh words by using simile. He compares her quips to gunfire from an army at target practice and likens the emotional damage wrought by her words to the physical injury inflicted by bullets. Thus, he appeals to the senses of sight and touch in this simile to bring his description to life.

Allusion:

Shakespeare makes frequent use of *allusions*: references to people, places, myths, events, etc., which are not part of the story, but which the author expects the reader to recognize. Allusions can serve a variety of functions. They are generally used to create associations, calling on the audience’s common cultural knowledge to help develop a character or event or simply supply sensory details. *Much Ado About Nothing* contains numerous references to Cupid, along with other classical and biblical allusions.

In the following example, taken from Act III, Scene I, Hero refers to the Roman god of love:

If it prove so, then loving goes by haps;
Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.

In her allusion to Cupid, Hero revises the traditional view of love. Roman myth has Cupid as an archer, who inspires love in his victims by shooting them with arrows. This myth emphasizes the apparent randomness and spontaneity of Cupid’s match-making. However, Hero suggests that sometimes love can be inspired by deliberate, premeditated traps, such as that which she and her friends have devised. The use of allusion allows Shakespeare to make this comment on love in a concise and witty manner, drawing on his audience’s common cultural knowledge.

The biblical allusion that follows, which is found in Act II, Scene I, has a similar effect.

SPEAKER:I would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed.

In this passage, Benedick forcefully expresses his unwillingness to marry Beatrice. By alluding to the biblical account of Adam and “all that he had left him before he transgressed,” Benedick stresses his aversion to marriage, effectively saying that he would not marry for the whole world. Relying on his audience’s knowledge of Christian beliefs, Shakespeare adds emphasis to this description in a colorful, thought-provoking way by using allusion.

Another instance of this device can be found in the naming of Hero—who is a figure in Greek mythology. The mythical story of Hero is tragic, ending in the death of both the lady and her lover. Shakespeare may have chosen this name to foreshadow the near-tragic events of this love story and the counterfeit death of Hero.

Personification:

Personification is a figure of speech in which an object, abstract idea, or animal is given human characteristics. This technique may be used for a variety of effects. In the example below, which comes from Act II, Scene I, Benedick describes Beatrice’s harsh words during their dance.

O, she misused me past the endurance of a block! An oak but with one green leaf on it would have answered her; my very visor began to assume life and scold with her.

In this situation, personification achieves an ironic and humorous effect, while emphasizing Benedick’s patient response to Beatrice’s outrageous cruelty. According to him, Beatrice’s words were so cruel that they would have evoked a response from a block, a tree, or a mask. Nevertheless, Benedick himself did not retaliate.

Oxymoron:

A term or phrase that is apparently self-contradictory is called an *oxymoron*. See, for example, the following passage from Act IV, Scene I:

CLAUDIO:But fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell,
Thou pure impiety and impious purity!

This excerpt from Claudio’s speech contains three instances of oxymoron, in bold. This use of oxymoron communicates the complex mixture of love and hate Claudio feels towards Hero after learning of her supposed promiscuity. By using these three oxymorons, which pair words and ideas that are inherently contradictory, Shakespeare emphasizes Claudio’s emotional turmoil.

Alliteration:

Alliteration is the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words. An example can be found in Act III, Scene II, when Claudio remarks:

...Hero and Margaret have by this played their parts with Beatrice, and then the two bears will not bite one another when they meet.

In Claudio's metaphor, he likens Beatrice and Benedick, whose names begin with the letter *B*, to bears that bite one another. This use of alliteration strengthens both the association between Beatrice and Benedick and the metaphor likening them to bears. The repetition of the beginning letter *b* also adds a touch of humor to Claudio's fanciful metaphor.

Hyperbole:

Frequently found both in literature and in common speech, *hyperbole* is exaggeration or overstatement that is intended to achieve emphasis.

An example of hyperbolic speech can be found in Act II, Scene I, when Benedick attempts to find an excuse to escape from Beatrice's presence, saying to Don Pedro:

Will your Grace command me any service to the world's end? I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on; I will fetch you a tooth-picker now from the furthest inch of Asia; bring you the length of Prester Don John's foot; fetch you a hair off the great Cham's beard; do you any embassy to the Pygmies—rather than hold three words' conference with this harpy...

Using hyperbole, Benedick expresses his extreme aversion to Beatrice in a colorful, humorous way.

Rhetorical Questions:

At times a speaker will pose a question whose answer is obvious. Such inquiries, which are usually meant to provoke thought or inspire a particular emotion, are known as *rhetorical questions*.

An example of this technique can be found in Act IV, Scene I of *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Claudio denounces Hero at the altar.

Leonato, stand I here?
Is this the prince?
Is this the prince's brother?
Is this face Hero's?
Are our eyes our own?

With this series of questions, Claudio communicates his surprise and confusion at learning of Hero's supposed infidelity. Through this line of questioning, he insists, hyperbolically, that he has been so deceived by false appearances in this matter that he has come to question everything—even his own perception.

Pun:

A *pun* is an expression that utilizes two distinctly different meanings of the same word or phrase to achieve emphasis or humor. The use of puns is a common element of Elizabethan comedy, appearing often in witty banter. Below is an example of a pun from *Much Ado About Nothing*.

DOGBERRY: ...The most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, is to let him show himself what he is, and steal out of your company.

In this passage from Act III, Scene III, Dogberry uses the word *steal* to mean both *rob* and *sneak* for humorous effect.

Apostrophe:

The word *apostrophe* describes not only a mark of punctuation, but also a literary technique in which a speaker addresses something or someone who is unable to respond within the text. The following example of apostrophe is taken from Act III, Scene I of *Much Ado About Nothing*:

HERO: O god of love! I know he doth deserve
As much as may be yielded to a man...

In this example, Hero's exclamation is addressed to the god of love—Cupid, also known as Eros. Here, Hero swears by this mythical figure to lend emphasis to her statement about Benedick. Her use of apostrophe also expresses a sense of urgent concern.

Malapropism:

Malapropism is an author's deliberate misuse of a word for humorous effect. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare makes liberal use of this device in the dialogues of Dogberry, Verges, and the watchmen; these characters repeatedly misuse words in their attempts to use elevated language.

Two examples of malapropism can be found in the following passage from Act III, Scene III:

SECOND WATCHMAN: Call up the right master constable. We have here recovered the most dangerous piece of lechery that ever was known in the commonwealth.

Here, the watchmen have *discovered* an act of *treachery*, but mistakenly report having *recovered* an act of *lechery*. The function of malapropism in *Much Ado About Nothing* is multifaceted. By his use of this device, Shakespeare adds humor to the dialogue while also establishing the character of the watchmen—a self-important, but uneducated group of men. More importantly, however, the malapropisms of the watchmen are used to develop the motif of social pretenses that can be found throughout the play.

Metonymy:

Metonymy is the use of a related item to stand for the thing being discussed. In the following example from Act V, Scene I, Leonato uses the phrase *flesh and blood* in a figurative manner, responding to his brother's attempts at consolation:

I pray thee peace. I will be **flesh and blood**;
For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods
And made a push at chance and sufferance.

In Leonato's metonymic use of the words *flesh and blood*, these elements of the human body stand as symbols of human nature. This commonly used metonymy has origins in the Bible, and its use in this passage has a two-fold function. Through it, Leonato calls on cultural tradition for verification that his response is typical of limited and imperfect human "flesh and blood." At the same time, this use of metonymy adds concrete, visceral imagery to the description of his behavior.

Epistrophe:

Epistrophe is a rhetorical device often used in persuasive speech. As exemplified in the passage below, epistrophe is the repetition of a word or words at the end of two or more successive verses, clauses, or sentences.

One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well

In this example from Act II, Scene III, Benedick is discoursing on his immunity to love. His use of epistrophe gives his speech the tone of a persuasive argument, as if Benedick is attempting to convince himself; hence, this use of epistrophe subtly underlines Benedick's uncertainty on the topic at hand.

DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS AND TECHNIQUES

Among the dramatic conventions Shakespeare employs in *Much Ado About Nothing* are:

Aside – words spoken by a character on stage that are meant to be heard by the audience, but not by the other characters. This technique is often used to give the audience insight into a character's internal reactions to the scene at hand. An instance of aside can be found in Act II, Scene III of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Here, Benedick is hiding from the other characters on stage and believes he is unseen. In a series of asides, he expresses his reactions to what the others are saying.

Conflict – In any play, the plot is driven by conflicts—both external conflicts that occur between characters and their environment and internal conflicts that take place within a character. An *external conflict* is one that takes place between a character and outside forces, including other characters. Examples of external conflict in *Much Ado About Nothing* include the “merry war” between Beatrice and Benedick in the beginning of the play and Don John’s antagonism towards the other characters. The play contains examples of internal conflict as well, such as Benedick’s inner distress over Beatrice’s harsh words and Don John’s feelings of rejection.

Dramatic Irony – occurs when the audience is aware of something that characters do not know. Like many Elizabethan comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing* abounds with examples of dramatic irony that lend both conflict and humor to the plot. For example, while Don Pedro and Claudio are deceived by Don John’s attempt to defame Hero, the audience is always aware of her innocence. Likewise, in a lighter, more humorous instance of dramatic irony, Beatrice and Benedick are tricked into falling in love with one another through devices that are known to the audience.

Situational Irony – occurs when a situation has results contrary to those expected. For example, Beatrice and Benedick insult one another in the beginning of the play, but by the play’s end, they have fallen in love.

Soliloquy – a speech delivered by a character while alone on stage. Often, soliloquies provide insights into a character’s thoughts, emotions, and motives for action. An example from *Much Ado About Nothing* appears in Act II, Scene III, when Benedick is left alone in Leonato’s garden, before the others arrive. In his soliloquy, Benedick ruminates on love and marriage and the chances of his falling in love. Thus, Shakespeare’s use of soliloquy allows Benedick to express his true feelings in a way that leaves no doubt as to the sincerity of his claims.

Subplot – a secondary plot that runs alongside the main action of the play. The subplot in *Much Ado About Nothing* consists of the romance between Beatrice and Benedick.

ELIZABETHAN COMEDY

Much Ado About Nothing is an Elizabethan comedy—a genre named for Queen Elizabeth I, the ruling monarch during much of Shakespeare’s career. In this play, which critics sometimes call a “problem play,” Shakespeare follows most of the conventions of the Elizabethan stage, which include:

- a lighthearted tone
- mistaken identities
- multiple plot lines
- frequent use of puns
- a clever “fool” or servant
- a conflict between propriety and debauchery
- young lovers who overcome obstacles to their relationship
- a happy ending that includes marriages and, often, reconciliations and reunions

Much Ado About Nothing contains each of these elements in one form or another, and is, therefore, a fitting model by which to study the genre. The play approaches some of these conventions in subtle ways; for example, while it lacks an actual jester, Shakespeare overtly suggests a reading of Benedick as the prince's fool through Beatrice's remarks in Act II, Scene I.

However, the more serious departure from Elizabethan conventions—the “problem” critics note in this “problem play”—is the morbidly serious turn of events that progress from the denunciation of Hero. The plot makes a feint at tragedy, as characters like Claudio and Leonato react to Don John's deception with cruelty, exposing a sinister aspect of their own respective natures and of their culture. In the end, the characters are reconciled, with the realization that the conflict was actually “much ado about nothing,” and the comedy remains true to form with its obligatory happy ending. Nevertheless, the serious tone of the play and the unresolved problems raised are not typical of the comedic genre in Elizabethan theater.

MAJOR THEMES

Social conventions are often at odds with authentic communication:

One of the most prominent themes in *Much Ado About Nothing* is the idea that society values artifice over sincerity. In the superficial society of Messina, social conventions are often followed at the cost of genuine communication.

The value placed on artificial speech and manners is especially evident in the dialogues of Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio. These characters tend to use convoluted language and follow empty social conventions. Beginning in Act I, Scene I with the exchange of social niceties between Leonato and Don Pedro, characters often express themselves with little or no sincerity. Don Pedro approaches Leonato with the ironic statement,

Good Signior Leonato, you are come to meet your
trouble: the fashion of the world is to avoid
cost, and you encounter it.

While it foreshadows the onset of Leonato's troubles, the Prince's line is not intended as a literal statement. It is an empty gesture of humility on the part of one who doubtless believes quite the opposite.

In another example of convoluted speech from the same act, Claudio explains his feelings for Hero in a poetic, long-winded manner that evokes the following response from Don Pedro:

Thou wilt be like a lover presently
And tire the hearer with a book of words.
...thou shalt have her. Was't not to this end
That thou began'st to twist so fine a story?

In keeping with their concern with social mores and public perception, the characters who most often follow such conventions are also those who most commonly speak in poetry—namely Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato. It is worth noting that they are also the ones to react with incredible haste and severity to the allegations against Hero.

Conversely, the more plainspoken Beatrice and Benedick see past the allegations against Hero and remain faithful to her. Likewise, both characters speak almost exclusively in prose and express themselves honestly, often at the cost of decorum. The association between straightforward speech and sincerity is underlined by Benedick as he finds himself unable to express his feelings for Beatrice in verse.

I mean in singing; but in loving, Leander the good swimmer, Troilus the first employer of panders, and a whole bookful of these quondam carpet-mangers, whose names yet run smoothly in the even road of a blank verse, why, they were never so truly turned over and over as my poor self in love.

People are more concerned with appearances than reality:

From the play's opening act, it is clear that the people of Messina are preoccupied with reputations and public opinion. This is evident not only in the characters' contrived manner of speaking, but also in the subjects of their conversations. As early as Act I, Scene I, the public reputation of each of the play's major characters is brought to light. The two chapters that follow both hinge on the spread of gossip, further developing the idea of Messina's preoccupation with reputations and public opinion. In keeping with this theme, the characters don masks on two separate occasions in the play, and at other times wear masks of a figurative sort. For example, Beatrice and Benedick mask their feelings for one another, while Don John masks his hatred of the other characters.

In fact, the major conflicts in both the plot and the subplot of *Much Ado About Nothing* are concerned with the repairing of injured reputations. Hero must overcome her new reputation as a harlot, while Beatrice and Benedick must overcome their reputation as enemies, indifferent to one another and to love.

MOTIFS

- A. Artificial vs. Natural Speech
- B. Deceptions/Illusions
- C. Gossip and False Reports
- D. Reputations/Public Opinions
- E. Treachery
- F. Sexual Scandal
- G. Verbal Communication

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SOURCES

In this play, as with many others, Shakespeare borrows much of the plot from existing stories. In this case, no individual source seems to have supplied the entire plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*. However, components of the play are likened to Orlando Furioso and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, among other possible sources, and the character of Benedick is thought to be a depiction of the ideal courtier of Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*.

Much Ado About Nothing is also associated with other plays within Shakespeare's oeuvre; Beatrice is compared to Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Don John and Hero presage the villain-heroine couple, Iago and Desdemona in Shakespeare's later work, *Othello*.

THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE AND SHAKESPEARE'S AUDIENCE

The theater was an integral part of life in Elizabethan England, and Shakespeare's plays were particularly popular. His company performed not only in the royal court, but also in various London theaters, which accommodated a broad range of social classes.

In 1599, Shakespeare designed and co-founded the Globe Theatre, an innovative arena whose octagonal shape created exceptional sound quality. The Globe seated up to 3,000 spectators, with different classes accommodated in their respective regions of the theater. The cheapest tickets were sold for standing room directly in front of the stage, and the occupants of this region of the theater, the poorest in attendance, were called "groundlings." Even for these tickets, theatergoers paid one penny each—roughly a day's wage. Hence, Shakespeare's plays appear to have held a strong, universal appeal among all classes in Elizabethan London.