Much Ado About Nothing—Notes and Study Guide

William Shakespeare was born in the town of Stratford, England in ___________. Born during the reign of Queen _____________________________. Shakespeare wrote most of his works during what is known as the ___________________________ of English history. As well as exemplifying the ___________________________ conventions of the era, Much Ado About Nothing also reflects the elements of Elizabethan _____________________________.

One important element of Shakespeare’s culture to note in interpreting Much Ado About Nothing is the emphasis on _____________________________. Throughout the play, this motif appears repeatedly in comments on the “______________” or supposed wantonness of female characters and in jokes about ______________________--the husbands of unfaithful wives. This anxiety about female chastity is the main source of conflict in the play, leading to its dramatic _____________________________.

The extreme anxiety over female chastity and __________________________ in Elizabethan England was grounded, in part, in the system of ___________________________ in Elizabethan England. According to the law of ___________________________, 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 _________________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 __________________________ were of particular concern to ___________________________, under these circumstances.

Figurative Language:

1. _________________: Ex: “She speaks poniards [daggers], and every word stabs.”

___________________________________________________ _______________________________________

2. _________________: Ex: “…I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me.”

___________________________________________________ _______________________________________

3. _________________: Ex: “If it prove so, then loving goes by haps; some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.”

___________________________________________________ _______________________________________

4. _________________: Ex: “An oak but with one green leaf on it would have answered her…”

___________________________________________________ _______________________________________

5. _________________: Ex: “Farewell, thou pure impiety and impious purity!”

___________________________________________________ _______________________________________ 

6. _________________: Ex: “…with Beatrice, and then the two bears will not bite one another when they meet.”

___________________________________________________ _______________________________________
7. _________________: Ex: “Will your Grace command me any service to the world’s end?”

8. __________________________: Ex: “Leonato, stand I here? Is this the prince? Is this the prince’s brother?”

9. _________________: Ex: “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.”

10. ________________: Ex: “O God of Love! I know he doth deserve as much as may be yielded to a man…”

11. ________________: Ex: “We have here recovered the most dangerous piece of lechery that ever was known…”

12. ________________: Ex: “I pray thee, peace. I will be flesh and blood.”

13. ________________: Ex: “One woman is fair, yet I am well; another wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well.”

Dramatic Conventions:

1. Aside--

2. Internal and External Conflict--

3. Dramatic Irony--

4. Situational Irony--

5. Soliloquy--
Elements of the Elizabethan Comedy:

- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________
- ____________________________________________________________

Major Themes:

- SOCIAL CONVENTIONS VS. AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION
- APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

Motifs: (recurring subject, theme, or idea)

1. __________________________________  5. __________________________
2. __________________________________  6. __________________________
3. __________________________________  7. __________________________
4. __________________________________

STUDY GUIDE:

ACT ONE:

Scene one:
1. The motif of artificial speech and behavior is found throughout the play. How is this evident in the opening scene?
2. What information does this scene provide regarding Beatrice and Benedick’s feelings for one another?
3. What specific qualities does Claudio appear to find desirable in Hero?
4. This scene introduces the motif of reputation. Identify which characters’ reputations are discussed in this scene and how each character is characterized.
5. Explain the Prince’s first words to Leonato. What motif is underlined by this passage, and what might Don Pedro’s statement foreshadow?
6. What do we learn about Don John in this scene?

Scene two:
1. This scene contains the first of many false reports found in the play. What misleading news does Antonio share with Leonato?
2. What does the audience learn about the spread of information in the society of Messina based on this scene?
3. How does Leonato respond to Antonio’s news, and what does this demonstrate about Leonato’s character?
4. Dramatic Irony is frequently an element in Shakespearean comedies. Identify an instance of this literary device that appears in this scene and the effect it produces on the tone of the play.
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Scene three:
1. What does Don John communicate in the following lines? What form of **figurative language** does he use, and to what effect?
   
   “I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace; and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any.”

2. Don John uses animal **imagery** to describe his situation. To what specific animal does Don John compare himself? What feelings does this use of **figurative language** convey?

3. Describe the **shift in tone** from one scene to the next thus far in the play, and tell how each shift is accomplished.

4. In what way does Don John’s behavior in this scene conflict with his statement in act one, scene one?

ACT TWO:

Scene one:
1. This scene opens with a discussion of Don John’s reputation. What do we learn regarding public opinion of his character in this scene that was hinted at by Leonato in act one, scene one?

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

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

4. How are the related **motifs** of artifice (tricky craftiness) 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.” Up to this point in the play, to what degree does Benedick fulfill the role of the Elizabethan fool?

Scene two:
1. Which character or characters does Don John particularly want to thwart?

2. Explain the figurative treatment of medicine and sickness in this scene and its effect.

3. What does Borachio’s last statement to Don John mean? What might it **foreshadow**? What does it say about Borachio’s character?

4. What possible outcomes does Borachio predict for this scheme?

Scene three:
1. What **imagery** does Benedick use to describe the change in Claudio? What effect does it convey?

2. What effect does Benedick’s opening **soliloquy** achieve on both his and Claudio’s development as characters?

3. What **rhetorical device** does Benedick use to describe his feelings regarding women, and what is the effect of this persuasive technique?

4. What does Benedick’s closing **soliloquy** reveal about his private feelings regarding women and marriage?

5. How does Balthasar’s song characterize men? Is this characterization borne out by the actions of the male characters, up to this point in the play?

ACT THREE:

Scene one:
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?

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**.

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?

Scene two:
1. Identify the **figurative device** Don Pedro uses in the following passage and its effect.

   He hath a heart as sound as a bell and his
   Tongue is the clapper, for what his heart thinks his
   Tongue speaks.

2. During their dance in act two, scene one, Beatrice tells Benedick that he is known in society as the “Prince’s fool.” Does this scene support Beatrice’s accusation? Why or why not?

3. Identify the **alliteration** in Don John’s closing lines and describe its effect.
Scene three:
1. This scene contains several examples of words being used incorrectly. Identify the literary device exemplified in Dogberry’s speech and its effect.
2. Despite his verbal incompetence, Dogberry does manage to produce a pun. Identify and explain Dogberry’s intentional play on words.
3. What is ironic about Dogberry’s instructions to the watchman?

Scene four:
1. Hero responds to Ursula’s praise of her dress with, “God give me joy to wear it! For my heart is exceeding heavy.” What is the function of this statement?
2. Explain the dramatic irony of the situation in this scene, and its effect on the tone of this scene.
3. According to Margaret, how has Benedick “become a man”?

Scene five:
1. In what way does Dogberry unintentionally insult Leonato? What does he think he is saying? Identify what figurative language is being used and tell what effect it has on the tone of the scene and the development of Dogberry as a character.
2. Explain the situational irony in Dogberry’s statements about Verges.
3. Why are Dogberry and Verges unable to deliver their message, and how is this related to the theme of superficial civilities and artificial speech?

ACT FOUR:

Scene one:
1. Explain Claudio’s allusion to Dian and Venus in this act. What is he trying to communicate with this allusion?
2. What conventions of Elizabethan comedy appear to be overturned in this scene?
3. The idea of male inconsistency is an important motif in this play. Explain any instances of this motif that appear in this scene.
4. Up to this point in the play, what role has the comedic convention of mistaken identities played in the plot structure of the play?

Scene two:
1. In what ways does Dogberry express a preoccupation with this public image?

ACT FIVE:

Scene one:
1. Describe Claudio’s attitude towards Leonato in the beginning of this scene.
2. Based on the evidence presented in this scene, does Borachio appear to be a static or dynamic character? Is his repentance sincere? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
3. Upon learning of Hero’s innocence, how does Claudio respond? What degree of responsibility does he claim for Hero’s death?

Scene two:
1. What does Benedick say about his ability with artificial forms of speech, and how does this reflect on the theme of artifice versus authenticity?

Scene three:
1. In the first two lines of the “solemn hymn” sung at Hero’s mock funeral, who is addressed in line one? Who is discussed in line 2?
   
   Line 1: Pardon, goddess of the night,
   Line 2: Those that slew thy virgin knight;

2. At what time of day does this scene take place? What is the symbolic value of this aspect of the scene’s setting?

Scene four:
1. What conventions of the Elizabethan comedy are fulfilled in this scene?
2. How does Shakespeare resolve the problem of Don John?