Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Much Ado About Nothing

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Plot

- Don Pedro and his soldiers, including Claudio and Benedick, return from war to Leonato's house in Messina. Claudio falls in love with Leonato's daughter, Hero, and they plan to marry.
- Beatrice (Leonato's niece) and Benedick keep up a 'merry war' of insults. Their friends trick them into falling in love: each overhears that the other secretly loves them.
- Don John, Don Pedro's villainous brother, plots against Claudio. Borachio meets Margaret at Hero's window, and Claudio, watching, believes it is Hero being unfaithful.
- At the wedding, Claudio publicly shames Hero, and she faints. The Friar suggests pretending she has died. Beatrice asks Benedick to prove his love by killing Claudio.
- Dogberry and the Watch uncover Don John's plot. Claudio, full of remorse, agrees to marry Leonato's 'niece', who turns out to be Hero. Benedick and Beatrice also marry, and Don John is captured.

Themes

- Love and marriage, **deception** (both harmful and kind), **honour** and reputation, gender roles, and appearance and reality.

Context

- Written around 1598–99, it is a **comedy**: it ends in marriages and happiness, although it comes close to tragedy.
- A woman's **honour** depended on her **chastity**, and a man's **honour** could depend on his wife's reputation. Daughters were expected to obey their fathers.

- The title plays on 'nothing' and 'noting' (overhearing and observing), which drives the plot.

Key quotations

- 'A merry war' (Leonato, about Beatrice and Benedick). 'Lady Disdain' (Benedick, to Beatrice).
- 'I am a plain-dealing villain' (Don John). 'Give not this rotten orange to your friend' (Claudio, about Hero).
- 'O that I were a man!' and 'Kill Claudio' (Beatrice).

How to get top marks

- Remember it's a **comedy** with a dark centre. Hero's public shaming shows how much depended on a woman's reputation.
- Compare Beatrice's sharp wit with Hero's silence, and say how Shakespeare presents their positions as women.
- Write about **deception**: almost every plot here depends on someone overhearing something.

Key terms

Comedy	A play with a happy ending, usually in marriage.
Deception	Tricking someone into believing something false.
Gulling	Tricking someone, as Beatrice and Benedick are tricked.
Honour	A person's good name and reputation.
Chastity	Having no sexual relationships outside marriage.
Malapropism	Using the wrong word by mistake, as Dogberry does.
Patriarchal	Controlled by men.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is Much Ado About Nothing set?
2. What does Leonato call the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick?
3. How are Beatrice and Benedick tricked into loving each other?
4. Who plots to ruin Claudio and Hero's wedding?
5. How is Claudio tricked into thinking Hero is unfaithful?
6. What does Claudio call Hero at the wedding?
7. What is the Friar's plan after the wedding?
8. Who uncovers Don John's plot?

Your notes

Answers

1. Messina
2. A merry war
3. Each overhears friends saying the other is in love with them
4. Don John
5. He sees Borachio at Hero's window with Margaret, whom he mistakes for Hero
6. A rotten orange
7. To pretend that Hero has died
8. Dogberry and the Watch

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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