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Changing Character of Benedick in the Opening Scenes of the Play “ Much Ado about Nothing” Essay Sample

The play, “ Much Ado about Nothing,” is a comedy written by William Shakespeare. In the play, there are a lot of main points, but I am going to discuss the way Shakespeare develops the character of Benedick, who in the opening scenes of the play, is portrayed as an insecure, love sick soldier.

When the play begins, it becomes apparent that Lady Beatrice has feelings for Benedick, as she is asking if he is returned from the war safely. The soldiers hadn't even arrived back, when Beatrice asked the messenger, “ I pray you, is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars or no?” obviously revealing that she hopes he is safe and unhurt. But also, she cleverly camouflages her concern, by referring to Benedick as “ Signor Mountanto.” The term “ Mountanto,” is used when playing fencing, and means to use an upward sword thrust to attack your opponent. She could be using the word mountanto for many reasons, such as referring to Benedick's sharp tongue, which he uses to frequently insult her. She could also be using “ mountanto” for the imagery that it creates of the upward sword thrust, maybe being a kind of gesture with the middle finger. But one main thing that it brings to the audience's mind is that in fencing, you have to try and score quick points off each other; and that Beatrice is certainly trying to get some good first blows or insults scored, even before Benedick has arrived. The main point of Beatrice saying this is because she wants to know if Benedick is safe, but she also camouflages her concern with an insult.

A few lines later in the play, Leonato, Governor of Messina and Beatrice's uncle tells the messenger, "There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them." He speaks of Beatrice and Benedick's war of words that they have every time they meet, and he refers to both of them as using "wit," a quick intelligence, which both Beatrice and Benedick possess. They both use this wit to come up with quick come-backs for when one is insulted by the other. But Leonato is also saying this now, as Beatrice is with him, he is almost trying to tell Beatrice that everyone has noticed their "war" and know about their attraction to each other.

Beatrice gives the audience another sign that she loves Benedick when she asks Leonato, "Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother." Here she is again trying to find out information about Benedick, but also referring to his shallowness and fickleness, as every month he has a new best friend. She is insulting him again, but here she is also being slightly critical.

Later in the play, Benedick arrives in Messina, returning from the war, and immediately shows everyone what his character is like by saying to Beatrice, "It is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted: and I would I find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none." His comments suggest he is self-centred and egotistical by assuming that every woman loves him. In some ways you could say that he was inflating his already huge conceited head. But also, this comment has a double meaning, as he is also almost asking Beatrice why she doesn't love him, but he then blames his own "hard heart," as he is not interested in love. Benedick likes to project <https://assignbuster.com/changing-character-of-benedick-in-the-opening-scenes-of-the-play-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

an image of being strong and independent, but his comments create the impression of a self centred man; he will not admit there is anything wrong with him, so it must be Beatrice's fault.

Benedick then later on describes himself as a " professed tyrant" meaning that he is admitting to himself that he is a misogynist. A misogynist is someone who sees men as being more superior to women; he proudly confesses this, trying to show everyone that he does not love any woman. He has convinced himself that he doesn't need women, because they are inferior to him. This refers back to the Elizabethan patriarchal attitudes, where in Elizabethan England, the men of the time, were treated as superior to women, who were inferior. Benedick reflects this attitude, as he as already admitted to being a misogynist, and he is always saying how he doesn't need women, " I will die a bachelor," and how he thinks they are inferior to him, " I am a professed tyrant." Another thing that happened in the patriarchal society was that men were brought up to believe women were weaker and only men were given education. This is almost exactly how Benedick feels, as he comments once or twice within the play, on how " frail" women are. Also he has another fear about women that happened in Elizabethan times, it is a joke made by men on other men called " cuckoldry" where something would grow above a mans head, but he could not see it, whereas everyone else could see he was being cheated on. Benedick is insecure, and is scared that Beatrice could cheat on him and he could be joked about.

Benedick accidentally reveals that he loves Beatrice to Claudio, by

disagreeing with Claudio's opinion of Hero's beauty. Claudio says of Hero
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that she is the “sweetest lady that [he] ever looked on.” Benedick responds by saying that he can see perfectly well, without spectacles, and sees no such woman. He can see without the aid of glasses that she is not the sweetest lady that anyone has ever looked on. He is implying here that Beatrice is sweeter than Hero but he camouflages his love for Beatrice by saying that he will never fall in love with a woman. Perhaps Claudio is unrealistic in his love, for he does seem to think Hero is a goddess, but the problem with this attitude is that as soon as she does anything wrong, she will not seem like a goddess, and he will not love her anymore.

Benedick’s attitudes are hypocritical is obsessed with Beatrice but he is covering up his love for her; he seems to be afraid of commitment. Also in this conversation with Claudio, Benedick admits to Claudio that he thinks Beatrice is better looking than Hero by telling him that, “if she were not possessed with fury, exceeds [Hero] as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December.” Here he is revealing that he finds Beatrice more attractive, like the first of May (spring) is than the last of December (winter).

In the same conversation, Benedick describes marriage as a “yoke.” A yoke is a heavy collar which animals are made to wear when working. He is implying here that marriage is a huge burden around a man’s neck, and that once married, a man cannot do the same things he could do if he were not married. Also he could mean that the man with the yoke around his neck, is no longer self dependent, but is controlled by his wife. This prospect terrifies Benedick and he seems determined to avoid falling in love.

In lines 155-215, Don Pedro enters the conversation, and so Benedick immediately stops talking about how much sweeter Beatrice is, and says, " I will never trust a woman, I will live a Bachelor." Benedick says to Claudio, that he will never trust one woman, and that he would rather live alone and not have the responsibility of caring for a wife. Also here Shakespeare uses a lot of graphic imagery, in Benedick's speech when he tells his friends, " If you ever see me fall in love, then pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen, and hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind cupid." The audience find Benedick's speech amusing because the more he protests he will never fall in love, the more certain we become that he will. He says he will not get married, and tells his friends they can scrape out his eyes with a feather quill, and hang him for all the women to see and laugh at above a brothel house. Lastly Benedick says to hang a sign bearing " blind cupid" around his neck;

Benedick is trying to cover up his love for Beatrice by saying, if he ever fell in love with a woman, then cupid must be blind.

In a similar pattern to Beatrice's language Benedick says of Beatrice, " she speaks poniards, and every word stabs," meaning that he thinks she speaks " daggers" and that her words and insults pierce his heart. Then he moves on to say, " I would not marry her," showing that Benedick is thinking about marriage with Beatrice already, even though nobody has mentioned anything about marriage. He also refers to Beatrice as " harpy," which is a mythological Greek monster, with a beautiful alluring face, showing that he thinks behind her harsh words, she is very attractive and beautiful. Perhaps he thinks she is a monster as he is terrified of her rejection. He also mentions <https://assignbuster.com/changing-character-of-benedick-in-the-opening-scenes-of-the-play-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

that “[he] cannot endure [his] Lady Tongue,” meaning that he can no longer bear any more insults from “his Lady.” These comments by Benedick reveal how much deeper his feelings for Beatrice really are. He pretends he is not in love but the audience can see that he is really trying to deceive himself.

Don Pedro who says of Benedick, “He is of noble strain, of approved valour, and confirmed honesty,” is planning to “gull” (or trick) Benedick and Beatrice into thinking that they are loved by each other, (which they already are.) The prince wants to bring the two together because he is tired of them arguing and insulting, when it is obvious they have feelings for each other. He also probably wants to assert his authority as a prince. But the main reason is because he wants to show up Benedick, as he is always saying how he will never fall in love, and he doesn’t need women in his life. Don Pedro says that Benedick is of “confirmed honesty” and that he is not living up to his honesty by pretending that he doesn’t like Beatrice. Also, Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio just want a bit of fun with Benedick, so they can make him believe that Beatrice likes him too. They are playing cupid for Beatrice and Benedick. Also Don Pedro knows Benedick too well and can see through his camouflage.

Just before the three friends “gull” Benedick, he is alone in Leonato’s orchard, and talks to himself using a soliloquy. The soliloquy opens with Benedick complaining about how hypocritical Claudio is, by saying, “one man sees another man as fool, when he dedicates his behaviour to love, will after he hath laughed at such follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn, by falling in love.” He thinks Claudio is a fool for falling in love, but the audience see the irony in this speech because Benedick has also <https://assignbuster.com/changing-character-of-benedick-in-the-opening-scenes-of-the-play-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

fallen in love himself. Now it is certain that Benedick is in love with Beatrice. He then goes on to say how different Claudio is acting now that he is in love; the music he likes and the clothes he worries about. Benedick asks himself whether he will do the same, “ May I be so converted and see with these eyes?” then, as the soliloquy progresses, reassures himself and goes into denial. “ I cannot tell, I think not.” Benedick goes on to describe his ideal woman showing that he still has his shallowness. He describes her as beautiful, smart, virtuous (honourable), rich, mild, noble, a musician, and then cheekily says that she can have whatever colour hair God pleases. Shakespeare uses Benedick’s soliloquy to reveal that Benedick is being hypocritical, egotistical and that he is slightly angry and frustrated, but also that Benedick is quite confused about love and about his feelings for Beatrice.

Shortly after Benedick speaks this soliloquy, the Prince, Claudio and Leonato play the trick on him. They explain that Beatrice “ dotes” on him, and that she could never reveal her affection because she fears rejection. As they are gulling him, Benedick thinks to himself, “ I should think this is a trick, but for the white bearded fellow speaks it,” showing that he thinks that it must be true if Leonato speaks. When Claudio says “ Beatrice will die if Benedick does not love her,” Benedick realises she really does love him.

After the trick, Benedick has a change of heart. Suddenly he feels giddy and in love even more. All of a sudden women aren’t that bad and he speaks a second soliloquy where he keeps reassuring himself that it is not a trick, and that he has no reason to doubt it. The soliloquy is effective as the audience can hear the dramatic change in Benedick’s character. He then goes into <https://assignbuster.com/changing-character-of-benedick-in-the-opening-scenes-of-the-play-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

denial again by asking himself, “ why” and if it is true. Benedick decides he must make his feelings known to Beatrice, and decides to sort out his own faults; he had convinced himself he was perfect and that Beatrice had something wrong with her for not loving him. But now Benedick can admit he loves her. He then goes on to say that he will get a lot of grief if he admits being in love with her, as he has been against love for so long. But he then remarks that these “ paper bullets” will not affect him as he is so in love, and makes excuses to have babies with her, “ The world must be peopled.” Benedick also makes another excuse; he had said he intended to die a bachelor. He now pronounces that he did not think he would live as long as this, as he is a soldier. This soliloquy completes the change in Benedick’s character. He has transformed from pretending to be a misogynist to being quite openly love struck. By the end of Act 2, Scene 3 the audience have no doubt that Beatrice and Benedick will marry.