

Messina society and its failings in "much ado about nothing" essay sample

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Messina Society and its Failings in “ Much Ado About Nothing” Essay Sample

Shakespeare presents the failings and corruption of Messina society in a number of ways throughout the play. The audience is firstly introduced to a witty, aristocratic and polite society where Shakespeare's use of imagery characterises a civilised place of well-being. However, as the play progresses we begin to feel that beneath this model society lies a materialistic, patriarchal and insecure one based on the distrust of women and the deception of others. Issues of love are not taken seriously and neither language nor appearances can be trusted as reliable indicators of the truth. Shakespeare uses the form of a comedy play to satirise these failings of Messina society and a fragile façade is created which can be easily seen through by the audience.

The audience are introduced to the merry return of the soldiers from victory, and society seems to be in a joyful flow as the “ victory is twice itself” and “ few of any sort have been lost”. This image is soon to be realised as an illusion. Don John's first hearing of news during scene three is his “ model to build mischief on” as he says that it is “ food for his displeasure.” This thought of disruption to the order of Messina seems to be a catalyst for the further disruption in the play. As Shakespeare develops the society's morals through the plot and characters, dramatic changes take place. In turn, this creates an irony based on the deception of appearances which leads to the overall problems of Messina society.

Social rank is clearly important within the play as each character strives to be more powerful than each other with the use of money or language skills. Claudio may be immediately infatuated by Hero, yet his inquiry about whether her father has a son indicates his need for money and power. In Act 5, Leonato seals the marriage of Claudio to a fictitious niece by mentioning that she too comes equipped with a suitable dowry: " This same is she", and therefore so is the money.

The text of the play is replete with antithesis and word-patterns.

Shakespeare presents language as a function to reinforce what is wrong with Messina. Benedick remarks on the change in Claudio by noting his change in language: " He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier, and now is he turned orthography". This shows the transition from uncluttered language to stylistic prose and it is indicative of some of the confusion and problems in the play. The use of prose and blank-verse shows the contrast between people. Usually the important and highly respected characters within a play use blank verse whereas the less important characters use prose. But this is partially untrue of Much Ado About Nothing. Blank verse is used to show deceptive ideas and mistrust. It seems that Shakespeare wants to portray the characters that use this type of speech in a negative manner as they only use it as an act to receive greater respect.

Ursula and Hero begin speaking in blank verse when they are trying to deceive Beatrice into falling in love with Benedick. They are messing with the course of love as Hero says " of this matter is little cupid's crafty arrow

made." Shakespeare uses prose to show the wit and honesty of people as true feelings are brought out in this type of speech. When Benedick talks about Beatrice he reveals that " by this day, she's a fair lady, I do spy some marks of love in her." He speaks truthfully and out of his own mind.

Shakespeare uses this form and structure to show the differences between people. This could show inequality of the characters and present a failing within the play. There are many associations to animals which may depict the society's simplistic nature and lowers the society to the level that we perceive animals. We hear of the " savage bull" that is Benedick, being tamed into marriage. Shakespeare's use of language here portrays the failings of love in Messina. We can also see the use of animal imagery when illustrating the power of the men over the women where " the wolves have preyed" which implies that women are the prey for men.

What people say and above all how they say it counts heavily in Messina. One reason that both Beatrice and Benedick are held in such high regard comes from their capacity for verbal wit. This can be shown in their conversations. Benedick believes Beatrice would make a bad wife as he warns her to " keep her ladyship" so her lover would " scape a predestinate scratched face." Beatrice insults his looks by immediately replying that " scratching could not make it worse, and 'twere such a face as yours were." On the bottom of the social hierarchy, we can see Dogberry trying to use a complex vocabulary over which he has no command or even comprehension. Dogberry says that to babble " is most tolerable and not to be endured."

He actually means intolerable which suggests a lack of education.

Shakespeare also shows this by his use of malapropisms which may suggest Dogberry's desire for status in Messina. He tries to show off and appear intelligent in the presence of Leonato as he informs him of "two aspiring persons." Leonato finds him "tedious" and tells him and Verges to take the examination themselves. We can see that he does not want to waste his time with this lower class character which suggests an unequal and segregated society. Shakespeare creates an irony here as it is the Watch who actually discover the truth. The society seems in an arrogant state as it cannot commune with the lower-class people and so each character tries to compete with one another to gain status or power in Messina.

Women have no recognisable status or power and seem to be treated with little respect in Messina. This could lead to another downfall in the society. Some women such as Hero conform to the behaviour expected of women at the time whilst others rebel against their unequal status in a patriarchal society like Beatrice. Hero is suppressed by the fact that her father chooses who she marries and the lack of speech amongst the males suggests her quiet nature in being a woman. We can see that the males are of higher importance and restrict the female's freedom by their status in Messina. However Beatrice seems to object to the woman's role in the play. This may show a fight against the patriarchal system but in doing so she actually fails and even gives into marriage.

Much Ado About Nothing's structure raises many important issues concerning the institution of marriage. Shakespeare reveals the faults of the

process of love and marriage through the characters of Hero and Claudio and also Hero's father, Leonato. Claudio quickly falls in love with Hero when returning from the war and asks Benedick "didst thou note the daughter of Signor Leonato?" The use of language by Shakespeare here may suggest that it is only the looks that appeal to the men in Messina, as he falls in love just by viewing her. It may also be said that he has become quite engrossed with her money when Claudio asks "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" This fleshes out the welcome fact that Hero will inherit her father's estate if he doesn't and that Claudio wants the money from this. Don Pedro and Benedick know he wants her for her money which is shown by Benedick saying, "Would you buy her that you enquire after her?" We can see that the social institution of marriage has little to do with love. Claudio is willing to marry an unknown person to rise in Messina society and to receive the fortunes that go with her. But before this he wants to see her face as he feels if she were unsightly he would forget about the marriage. Shakespeare therefore shows a materialistic and superficial view of society by Claudio's lack of romantic ideals and by marrying this new Hero. His love depends on looks and money and changes throughout the play to illustrate this point.

Beatrice's courtship with Benedick greatly contrasts with the courtship of Hero and Claudio. Hero gladly and willingly submitted to marriage as her father says to Claudio, "count take of me my daughter." She accepted the role of the relatively powerless woman which reveals the power of men in Messina. In contrast, Beatrice chose her submission after openly criticizing the institution of marriage as she "could not endure a husband with a beard on his face" so if she was married she would "rather lie in the woollen." The <https://assignbuster.com/messina-society-and-its-failings-in-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

language suggests that Beatrice despises marriage. Benedick also shares her views on marriage where if there was a "good horse to hire" then is the only time you would "see Benedick the married man." He is critical of marriage but could be just playing the role of the misogynist. There is much mockery as well seen between these two and others in the play. The oxymoron of a "merry war" could suggest that this battle of wits puts forward a sense of joking around and not taking matters seriously within Messina, whereas love should not be laughed at but seen as a virtue associated with a functioning and prospering society.

Jealousy and love are a major part in Hero and Claudio's relationship; we can see this in numerous parts of the play especially with the idea of sexual intercourse before marriage. When Claudio finds that his love has been unfaithful he humiliates and embarrasses her in front of all the people attending their wedding because of his jealousy. This obviously contradicts the normal sensitive actions within a society. Since women were considered possessions, this infidelity is the ultimate betrayal and a mortal wound to Claudio's self esteem. In reality, Hero had remained the pure and honourable model of a woman in the play. Claudio and Don Pedro immediately believe Don John, which has used by Shakespeare to indicate that they would rather believe the word of an already untrustworthy person than to trust a woman. Leonato, unlike the friar can not perceive the innocence of his own daughter when she is accused of this infidelity. He immediately sides with Claudio and Don Pedro and states that they would not lie: "Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, who loved her so, that speaking of her foulness, Washed it with tears? Hence from her, let her die."

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Leonato's adherence to the male codes of honour and virtue cloud his perception. He too suffers from Claudio's distorted view of women. This illusion, the "Dian" goddess that Claudio refers to, seems to be drawn from male idealism because Leonato and Claudio feel it is their honour that Hero has tarnished. Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio are so immersed in the conventions and codes of patriarchal society that their ability to view these matters of marriage correctly is impaired. So it could be said that Claudio's devotion to courtly ideals seems to be the real reason why he can not distinguish appearance from reality and Don John's slander only reinforces his natural misogyny and mistrust. This inability to observe things correctly due to deception helps demonstrate the gap between appearance and reality in Messina society. Shakespeare may be representing a failing society through the ideas that how people act in Messina is a false façade. Consequently we can see that society is led around deceit.

The whole play is based upon appearances being deceiving, which in itself seems a moral failing of any society. There are many illustrations of deliberate deceptions in the play. The deception of Claudio and Don Pedro results in Hero's disgrace, while the ruse of her death prepares the way for her redemption and reconciliation with Claudio. Lines like "men were deceivers ever" bring about the fact that the deception is a key theme in the play. Deception alters situations and by doing this it shows the overall problems in the society. The masked ball is a great time for deception to thrive. This is the one time when people are supposed to be deceiving, but as Benedick and Beatrice show when insulting each other that the

deceptions are obvious. Deception also leads Claudio to believe that Hero was an infidel and obviously this thought results in more trouble.

Much Ado About Nothing ends with order restored. The unsatisfactory nature of the alleged comic unity at the end of the play outwardly shows this restoration yet inwardly it shows farcical aspects. Despite these farcical aspects of the play there is a sense of satisfaction as the right couples are with each other yet we don't know how long this unity will last for. So in affect, the actual restoration is just temporary which fits in with Shakespeare's primary ideas of deception and appearances. We can see that the world of Messina is in most ways a flawed society: outwardly merry and tolerant, but concealing stains of patriarchy and inequality; its mistreatment of women, its moral double standards, and its concern with social hierarchy and materialism.