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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

Much Ado About Nothing

from

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by

Magedah Shabo



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General Introduction to the Work

Cast of Characters

Main Characters

Don Pedro – Prince of Arragon

Don John – his bastard brother

Claudio – a young lord of Florence

Benedick – a young lord of Padua

Leonato – Governor of Messina

Antonio – a brother of Leonato

Hero – daughter of Leonato

Beatrice – niece of Leonato

Minor Characters

Balthasar – attendant on Don Pedro

Borachio – follower of Don John

Conrade – follower of Don John

Dogberry – a Constable

Friar Francis

Margaret – gentlewoman attending to Hero

Ursula – gentlewoman attending to Hero

Verges – a Headborough

A Sexton

A Boy

Mythological/Archetypal Theory Applied to *Much Ado About Nothing*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One**“O Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been...”**

1. As a class, review the following characteristics of the archetypal hero:
 - The hero’s search for identity and/or fulfillment results in his or her destruction, often accompanied by the destruction of society in general.
 - He or she usually dies an extraordinary, often sacrificial death.
 - In many instances of the archetype, the hero’s body is not buried.
 - In the aftermath of the death of the hero, there is progress toward some ideal.
 - The deceased hero often becomes an object of reverence or even obsession.

2. Now, discuss the following questions:
 - Does Hero seek fulfillment, at the beginning of the play? If so, what form of fulfillment does she pursue?
 - In pursuing this goal, Hero is, in a sense, destroyed. What specific damage is done to Hero, in Act IV, Scene I?
 - Does her downfall lead to the breakdown of other elements of her society? Identify the problems that arise after Hero’s denunciation in Act IV, Scene I.
 - Can Hero’s “death” be viewed as sacrificial? In what sense does her destruction seem to atone for the mistakes of others? Explain your answer with evidence from the play.
 - Hero is given a mock funeral. However, like the archetypal hero, her body is not buried. Does she also become an object of great reverence, upon her false demise? (See Act V, Scene III.)
 - Does Hero’s “death” and “resurrection” bring about some form of progress? What specific changes take place as a result of Hero’s downfall and revival, and what conflicts are resolved? Can the play’s ending be called “idyllic”? (See Act V, Scene IV.)

Feminist Theory Applied to *Much Ado About Nothing*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Analyzing Male Characters from A Feminist Perspective

1. First, divide the class into three groups, or a number divisible by three.
2. Assign one of the following to each group:
 - Claudio's denunciation of Hero at the beginning of Act IV, Scene I
 - Leonato's speech beginning "Wherefore! Why, doth not every earthly thing/Cry shame upon her?" at the end of Act IV, Scene I
 - Benedick's description of his ideal woman at the beginning of Act II, Scene III
3. Have each group look for evidence of misogyny in their character's speech, including words and passages that:
 - convey a possessive and/or controlling attitude towards women
 - discuss the female body in degrading terms
 - treat women as objects or commodities
 - emphasize the value of the female body over her intellect, soul, etc.
 - suggest a prejudiced view of the female character
4. Reconvene the class and discuss each group's responses, asking students to support or refute a view of each character as a misogynist, using evidence from the play.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Much Ado About Nothing*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” encompass two different and almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, interpretation should be limited to the work itself. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One may best understand a literary work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols within the text, with the understanding that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- The *Oedipal complex* is often emphasized in Psychoanalytic criticism. According to this Freudian theory, children of both sexes view their father as a competitor for their mother’s love. The son desires his mother, and the father envies his son as a rival for the mother’s attention. Jung disagreed with Freud regarding the feelings of females, asserting that they experience an *Electra complex*, in which they daughters desire their fathers, and mothers envy their daughters as rivals for the father’s attention. Of course, these motives all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking taboos.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. Psychoanalytic theory asserts that dreams reveal subconscious desires that a person cannot express or do because of social rules. For the most part, people are not even aware of these secret desires until their subconscious thoughts come out unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Analyzing Don John from A Psychoanalytic Perspective

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Have each group review the following:
 - Don John's brief exchange with Leonato in Act I, Scene I
 - Act I, Scene III
 - The discussion of Don John at the beginning of Act II, Scene I
3. Next, have each group discuss the following questions:
 - How does Leonato feel about Don John, based on Act I, Scene I?
 - How does Don John portray himself, in this scene?
 - Compare Don John's behavior in this scene to that in Scene III. Does he seem to be consistent in his public and private behavior and attitudes? Justify your answer with details from the text.
 - What language do the other characters use to describe Don John at the beginning of Act II, Scene I? How would you characterize their feelings towards him?
 - Describe Don John's self-image. What language and imagery does he use to describe himself, in Act I, Scene III?
 - From a psychoanalytic perspective, why might Don John feel that he is at odds with the rest of the world? Is the conflict between Don John and the others real or imaginary? Does the conflict originate in Don John or in the others? Explain your answer with evidence from the play.
4. Reconvene the class, and discuss each group's responses.