

Maxims for understanding the society in *Much Ado about Nothing*.

1. Allusions.

Allusions are references to well-known songs, stories, historical events, bible stories, and popular culture. Allusions cause readers to make connections almost without knowing it. “My parents were screaming at me
5 last night. It was like bombs bursting in air.” As soon as the reader sees the words “bombs bursting in air,” the reader automatically makes a connection with the “Star Spangled Banner.” Authors use allusions for many reasons. (See the Author’s Purpose list). Allusions have the effect of reinforcing a sense of **community** – a group of people who have memories and experiences
10 in common.

Today, most allusions come from popular culture, especially movies and songs. In Shakespeare’s day, allusions were drawn from the Christian religion, Greek and Roman mythology, hunting, music, folklore, and farming.

2. Comparisons, Analogies, and Imagery.

15 Almost every line of Shakespeare’s plays contains a metaphor. Frequently, the comparisons are developed and elaborated into analogies – complex comparisons. In I, i, 75, Beatrice compares Benedick to an infectious disease. Benedick’s companions are like the victims who have caught this disease. Just as one pays a physician to cure a disease, Benedick’s
20 companions will have to spend a great deal of money to rid themselves of Benedick’s company.

Often, one character will begin a simple comparison and another character will develop it into an elaborate analogy. Leonato (I, i, 61) compares the arguing and teasing between Benedick and Beatrice to a “merry
25 war” and a “skirmish of wit.” Beatrice takes up the metaphor and develops it into an analogy. A man’s wits in an argument are like soldiers in a battle. In the last conflict, Beatrice wounded four out of Benedick’s five soldiers, leaving him with just one soldier, in other words, with very little intelligence.

This creative word play can be very entertaining. There are other
30 reasons Shakespeare makes his characters use so many comparisons. See again the Author’s Purpose List.

3. Man and Master.

*All men are **not** created equal.* In most periods in history some people have had more rights and privileges because of the family they were born
35 into. Noble families had more rights and privileges than ordinary folk, but they also had more responsibilities.

“I pledge allegiance to—my master.” In Shakespeare’s time, as in many other periods in history, the health and stability of society depended upon loyalty, fidelity, and allegiance between people. Great men such as Don
40 Pedro would have followers or retainers, soldiers, servants, and other people who owed him some kind of allegiance. Some of these men would have

taken a solemn oath to serve their “lord” for a certain period of time. (Swearing an oath, which means making an important promise, was serious business; breaking an oath had serious consequences.) By way of contrast, in
45 modern times, our society is held together by money – wages and prices. If we need something, we work to earn money so that we can buy it. Five hundred years ago, however, there was a lot less money and still fewer things to buy.

50 Back then people depended more on personal relationships to get what they wanted. Society was held together by vows and oaths. Families were held together by unbreakable marriage vows. (Divorce – breaking the vow—was not permitted.) There were vows to the church, oaths to the king, allegiances pledged to a local duke or lord.

4. Courtesy and Honor.

55 Courtesy may be defined as “*the beautiful politeness* that makes social occasions run smoothly.” Courtesy is nearly the opposite of egotism. To be courteous is to direct your attention away from yourself and toward the needs and comfort of your neighbor or guest. Gratitude—expressing thanks—is the cousin of courtesy. Both involve giving: giving attention and giving thanks.
60 Courtesy was a goal or ideal that noblemen tried to reach.

Death before dishonor. Another important ideal is honor. For the noble man, honor means keeping one’s word and one’s courage. For the noble lady, honor means remaining chaste (practicing abstinence) before the wedding and remaining faithful to one’s husband throughout marriage. Honor is not about
65 an individual. It extends to the entire family. A man or woman, who was dishonored, brought shame and disgrace to the entire family.

When a gentleman’s honor was offended, he challenged the other man to a duel. If a lady’s honor was offended or even questioned, then a male relative would fight a duel to protect her honor and the honor of the entire
70 family. Men fought and died in duels for the sake of protecting their honor.

In our modern society, many people seek “self-fulfillment.” The focus is on themselves and not on their neighbors. Many people seek freedom—the ability to do whatever they want. In Shakespeare’s time freedom meant something very different. To be free meant to be wise, self-restrained,
75 community-minded, and brave. The free man participated in the life of the community through the military, the church, or government.

5. Marriage.

Marriage is for life. The sentence has two meanings: marriage *lasts* for life (until either the husband or wife dies). There is no possibility of divorce.
80 Marriage is also for life in the sense that the purpose of marriage is *procreation*. “The world must be peopled.”

What about arranged marriages? Did girls have to marry the man selected by her parents? That depended. Among wealthier people and the nobility, marriage was more about establishing strong family connections

85 than about love. Today in modern societies, love is a kind of warm, fuzzy
feeling. In other societies in the past, love demanded a *commitment*. If there
were any warm, fuzzy feelings between a man and a woman, those feelings
were not expected to last long; however, the commitment or vow of love
90 needed to last for a lifetime in marriage. A marriage was not just a union of
bodies but also a union (or “knitting”) of souls. An alternative to getting
married was to join a religious *community*, in other words, to take a vow of
chastity and become a priest, friar, monk, or nun. This choice also involved a
vow and a lifetime *commitment*.

So, how did parents control the selection of a husband for their
95 daughter? A wealthy father would give his daughter a dowry or marriage gift
to help her maintain her social position after she left her father’s household
and started a new household. Many newly married couples could not
maintain their status without this marriage gift or dowry from the parents. A
father would have a great deal of control over the choice of a husband for her
100 daughter by withholding the dowry. No dowry—no husband, because
marriage is less about warm, fuzzy feelings and more about the security of the
family, perpetuating the family name, and renewing the *community* through
children.

As in all human relationships, there was always room for negotiations.
105 See *Much Ado* I, i, 50-56. Of course, if you were a poor girl and your poor
father had no dowry to give, then you were totally free to marry another poor
man.

A wedding was a family and a *community* celebration because each
marriage (and subsequent children) created a new mini-community and
110 renewed the larger *community*.

6. The Double Standard.

Only women have babies. Society had one set of expectations for men
and another set for women. There were two different standards (a double
standard) or sets of expectations. A woman was expected to practice
115 abstinence *before* getting married and fidelity to her husband *after* getting
married. A man was expected to keep his promise to support his wife and
their children. In our times, it seems unfair that men and women were not
held to the same set of expectations. In previous times, it was assumed that a
woman who could not remain chaste *before* marriage would likely not remain
120 faithful to her husband *during* marriage. That is why the accusations against
Hero are so serious. There is, moreover, no possibility of divorce. An
unfaithful wife might bear a child who was not her husband’s. Legally, the
child was still considered the husband’s son or daughter.

If a man cheated on his wife and fathered a child with an unmarried
125 woman, that child was considered illegitimate and could not inherit titles.
Illegitimate “bastards” such as Don John may have been bitter about this

unfair treatment. This unfair discrimination, however, served to protect the rights of children born in wedlock.

130 A wife's infidelity raised doubts about a husband's manhood. The husband of an unfaithful wife was called a cuckold. According to an old myth, horns would grow on the forehead of a cuckolded husband. (Shakespeare's characters did not *literally* believe this myth, but they used it to tease each other.)

7. Feasts and Banquets.

135 Feasts, that is, dining in large groups, used to be an important feature of many societies in Shakespeare's time and before. These feasts, where many guests ate, drank, sang, and danced together, were another important way of strengthening the *community*. The idea of comedy is closely related to the idea of the feast. Comedy in Shakespeare's time meant more than just humor. 140 Some scholars believe that the word *comedy* comes from the Greek word for a wedding feast. Every comedy ended with a community celebration of a wedding feast.

1. Underline the sentence from section one that supports the idea that references to well-known stories, myths, or songs help strengthen the feeling of belonging to a group.

2. Complete: Analogies are made up of _____ and _____.

3. According to the information in section three, why were vows and oaths so important in previous times?

4a. Underline the definition of courtesy. 4b. Courtesy is closely related to _____. 4c Egotism is synonymous with what other idea mentioned in section 4? 4d. What saying or maxim explains why gentlemen were willing to risk their lives in order to defend their reputation?

5. The saying, "Marriage is for life," has a double meaning. Explain both meanings of the phrase.

6. What saying helps to explain "the double standard"?

What key concept best explains *society* in *Much Ado about Nothing*? (Give the one-word answer of this concept; then give its definition.)