Much Ado About Nothing, published in 1600 and probably written in 1598, brilliantly juxtaposes love and cynicism, wit and violence, lightheartedness and sadness. The play meshes together two love stories: the conventional story of the innocent and virtuous Hero and Claudio whose impending marriage is almost destroyed by the villainy of Don John, and the eternally modern story of the smart, boisterous characters of Beatrice and Benedick who are tricked into discovering and finally admitting their love for one another. 

Much Ado About Nothing is unique among Shakespeare's plays in that the characters speak predominantly in prose rather than the blank verse that prevails in the majority of the bard's works. Unlike much of modern prose, Shakespeare's is playful, deeply metaphorical, and rhetorically inventive. The almost breathless bantering between Beatrice and Benedick serves to sympathetically and deeply humanize them. While Shakespeare's presentation of their kind of love-making has provided a pattern for many of the greatest English comedies, Beatrice and Benedick reign supreme in their charm and power and in the challenge they present to actors. Beatrice must be vivacious without being a shrew. She must amuse the members of Leonato's household while always being aware of her position as a woman. Benedick must rail against women and marriage while evermore endearing himself to the women in the audience. We must come to love both of them for their self-mockery, sense of irony, and ultimate respect for each other as worthy adversaries and lovers.

Numerous metaphors arise in Much Ado About Nothing that underscore its meaning. The characters constantly refer to eating, to the stomach, to nurturing. The play also has much to do with masking: characters hide their feelings from one another, Don Pedro and Claudio hide and watch a false seduction, and the characters actually dance in masks and mistake appearance and reality.

"Nothing" in Shakespeare's time was pronounced "noting," and the characters indeed do much noting of one another. This behavior, combined with the use of disguise, provides some of the finest irony in the play. Beatrice and Benedick, for example, think they are noting others while in reality they are being tricked by those same people who are, in fact, noting them! Finally, it is illusion that allows us to come together as a society and to embrace one another. As critic Stephen Greenblatt explains:

If the Claudio/Hero plot and the Beatrice/Benedick plot are two ways in which Shakespeare's comedy shows the saving necessity of illusion, there is a third manifestation: the illusion that evil manifests itself as Don John—that is, in a supremely incompetent and finally impotent form—and that it may be exposed by an idiot like Dogberry.

While Much Ado About Nothing is a comedy, it clearly has darker overtones, and with a slight tip in the plot could become a tragedy. The play is set in a world in which men are constantly at war and in which women are commodities who are sold to the highest bidder. It's also a world in which unfaithfulness in men is treated as a joke in puns about cuckoldry, while unfaithfulness in women is dangerous and can be met with disownment and even death. Furthermore, there is dancing in Messina at the end, but we know that the next day Don John will be tortured to death.

What makes Much Ado About Nothing resolve itself in joy is its final insistence on life. The play celebrates the triumph of fertility over death, of life lived to its fullest in the face of darkness. Much Ado About Nothing thus becomes the perfect expression of carpe diem and of hope in a future. As Benedick joyfully announces, "The world must be peopled!" That hope, in turn, resides in one thing only—the supreme power of love to conquer every obstacle in its path, even in the darkest and saddest of times.