

Merchant of Venice

Gabby

Background

- **Context of composition:** it is estimated to be written in either 1596/978 in England
- **Date of publication:** 1623 ‘
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Setting:** Venice and the nearby estate of Belmont
- **Climactic Scene(s):** The trial of Antonio, merchant, Shylock and the Jewish moneylender
- **Genre:** the *Merchant of Venice* is a typical example of a Shakespearean comedy however it makes a few deviations from the known typical comedic form making it a tragicomedy/revenge comedy
 - Lovers: comedies typically keep lovers apart against their will → MOV however, sees lovers marrying half way through the play and thus are less important characters/features compared to Shakespeare's other plays
 - Villains: despite Shylock being a villain we aren't supposed to typically like, Shakespeare awards Shylock with likeable qualities that make us feel quite sympathetic for him when he experiences mistreatment.
- **Tone:** A fusion of disappointment, celebration, seriousness and playfulness

Plot

- Venetian Bassanio, needs a loan of 3000 ducats to impress Portia, a rich heiress. He asks his friend Antonio, a merchant, but he is short of money due to his fleets being at sea. So, Antonio out of kindness for Bassanio goes to Jewish moneylender, Shylock.
- Shylock agrees, but on the condition that the loan must be paid in 3 months or a pound of flesh if not - Antonio agrees!
- Bassanio however needs to also get the approval of Portia's father in Belmont before marrying her. The condition is he must choose among three caskets and if he chooses the one with a portrait of Portia, he can marry her. Thankfully, he picks correctly and they marry immediately - so he didn't need to impress her with money after all!
- Meanwhile, Antonio is still in debt to Shylock and his ships have been wrecked - he is falling deeper into debt.
- To solve his debt, he must go to court. Thankfully Portia (who is clever and has heard of the situation through her husband Bassanio) thinks of a plan to help Antonio. She dresses up as a male lawyer and argues Antonio's case against Shylock.
- In court Portia argues that Shylock can have a pound of flesh, but this cannot draw blood from Antonio as it is against the law to draw blood from a Christian.
- Also, she argues that Shylock has conspired to murder a Venetian citizen and orders he forego his wealth; half must go to the city of Venice and the other half to Antonio. He must also convert to Christianity. Shylock is broken but accepts.
- News (at rather funny timing!) that Antonio's ships have arrived comes and all (except Shylock) celebrate a happy ending to the somewhat dramatic past few months!

Main Characters

Shylock

- A Jewish moneylender in Venice who often faces persecution from Christian characters
- The other characters in play view him as inhumane, however he occasionally reveals himself to possess likeable qualities

Portia

- A wealthy heiress from Belmont who both beautiful and clever, yet confined to her father wishes
- She manages to marry her true love, Bassanio, through her own wit and intelligence

Antonio

- A merchant whose actions are motivated by his friendship with Bassanio
- He also has a strong dislike for Jews therefore is often moody and melancholy as a result of being indebted to Shylock, a Jew

Bassanio

- Bassanio is a kinsman who is in love with the wealthy Portia. Since he is not wealthy, he has to borrow money from Shylock in order to be eligible for Portia's love.

Theme 1: Self-interest versus love

- Throughout the play there is a clear depiction of characters indulge in selfishness instead of sacrificial love
- Christian characters initially appear to value human relationships over business transactions
- Jewish characters (Shylock) appears to place greater value on money, however towards the end of the play, this notion is challenged
- In the same tone, the Christian characters appear to represent an inconsistent picture on whether or not they reflect love and mercy
- Finally, Shylock argues that Jews are human beings, as are Christians reflecting that whilst the Christian characters may discuss love, mercy and charity far more frequently, they are not always consistent in their display of such characteristics

Have a go at writing a 'topic sentence' regarding this theme:

Theme 2 - The divine quality of mercy

- The issue of mercy is most clearly reflected in the conflict between Shylock and Christian characters. Despite characters owing Shylock money, they expect him to show mercy which he refuses, thus leading to a court case.
- During the court case, Shylock asks Portia what could possibly compel him to be merciful with her response being, “The quality of mercy is not strained” and reflective of the Christian value of mercy during context of composition
- Ultimately, the response reflects the Elizabethan Christian values of the era, that would have been supportive of Christian beliefs, whilst supporting an anti-Jewish agenda

Try to write a ‘topic sentence’ regarding this theme:

Theme 3 - Hatred as a Cyclical Phenomenon

- Throughout the play, Shylock justifies his own hatred by claiming he is only applying the lessons he has learnt from his Christian neighbours → this ultimately becomes a key part of his character and also his court argument
- At the start of the play, Shylock plans to conspire against Antonio, but only as 'payback' for the insults and injuries Antonio seems to continually upon him
- These types of responses of hatred and racial prejudice would have been extremely common during the Elizabethan period where Christians were against and intolerant of non-Christian beliefs and thus this theme can be argued to be a commentary of Shakespeare of his context

Attempt a 'topic sentence' for this theme:

Symbols

3 Caskets:

- The three caskets (gold, silver and lead) in which suitors have to pick in order to be allowed to marry Portia, is somewhat reflective of the cultural and legal system of Venice
 - The caskets represents opportunities awarded to citizens according to to their ethnicities, religions and social class

The Pound of Flesh:

- A metaphor for two of the play's relationships
 - Shows the tenuous relationship between Antonio and Shylock
- Also reflects Shylock's nature for 'strict justice'
 - Shows how Shylock's values and morals are in accordance to numerical calculations and strict payments - most individuals would measure such a situation with emotions and discussions, Shylock is far more concerned with justice and numerical repayments

Leah's Ring:

- Leah's ring is given to Shylock before his marriage by Leah, who is presumed (but never confirmed) to be his wife
- It is an object of great important for him and reflects his humane qualities - when it is wrongly sold he is extremely vulnerable and upset, reflecting human emotion

Practice Questions

1. Is the play anti-Semitic, or does it challenge Anti-Semitism?
1. Is Shylock a victim, a villain or an equal combination of the two concepts?
1. Are Portia and Bassanio really in love? Do they love each other equally or Bassanio drawn to Portia as a result of her favourable wealth?
1. Describe Shylock's dramatic function in the MOV. What do critics mean when they suggest that Shylock is "too large" for the play? Does he fulfill or exceed his role?
1. In the end, how comic is the MOV? Does the final act succeed in restoring comedy to the play?
1. Discuss the relationship between Jessica and Shylock. Are we meant to sympathise with the moneylender's daughter?