

Year 8 English - 'The Merchant of Venice' by William Shakespeare



1 Plot Overview

Antonio is the 'Merchant'. He is depressed and has no idea why. His ships are out at sea and coming back with various treasures.

His great friend Bassanio visits him and asks to borrow a large sum of money. He has borrowed from Antonio before and lost it all.

But this time he needs it in his attempt to win and marry Portia. Portia is an heiress and lives outside of Venice itself in Belmont. She is rich, beautiful and brilliant. Bassanio is in love with her and he thinks she is interested in him.

There is a challenge for any man who wants to claim Portia. He must choose between three caskets. One is gold, one silver and the last is lead.

Antonio feels for Bassanio - he would lend him the money if he had it but all his capital is tied up with the return of his ships. Antonio suggests that his credit might be good for a loan in town

2 Characters

Shylock:

- Bitter
- Cruel
- Victimised
- Stubborn

Antonio:

- Loyal
- Kind
- Prejudice
- Popular

Bassanio:

- Young
- Poor
- Resourceful
- Loyal

Portia:

- Clever
- Wealthy
- Brave
- Faithful to her father's wishes



3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Like much of the rest of Europe, England severely restricted the rights of Jews. Jews were banished completely from England in 1290 by King Edward I, and were not officially allowed to return until 1655, when Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews to return. This exile was technically in effect during Shakespeare's time, but scholars believe that a few hundred Jews still lived around London in the guise of Christians. One of the reasons Renaissance Christians disliked Jews was the Jews' willingness to practice usury—this means they would lend money but would charge high rates of interest. Sometimes asking double the amount of money back in return. Christians were forbidden to lend money and charge interest.

ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism, often called 'the longest hatred', is both an age-old problem and a current challenge. For centuries Jews have been accused of treacherous acts, including the murder of Jesus, poisoning wells, the ritual murder of Christian children, the Bubonic plague and controlling the media and the banks. Many of these falsities have roots in historical circumstances, and longstanding fear and misunderstanding. Certainly one of the most characteristic and troubling aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* is that the depiction of Shylock reinforces the stereotype of Jews as money-hungry and greedy.

SHAKESPEARE'S AUDIENCE

Elizabethan theatergoers would have recognised Shylock as a Jew immediately. His red wig, large nose and huge cape immediately label him as the other and as an 'outsider'. Even though Jews were not living in England (at least not openly), they represented a stereotype: evil, cunning, greed and at the very core, heartlessness. Throughout the play, Shylock is despised and insulted by the other characters. Shylock is spat upon by Antonio, detested even by his servants, abandoned by his daughter, Jessica, and ultimately undone by Portia. The characters continually mock him and it is hard to imagine that the theatergoers in Shakespeare's time would not have shared the feelings of disdain conveyed by the players in *The Merchant of Venice*.



4 Useful 'translations' from Shakespearean to modern English:

- Thee** and **thou** = *you*
- Thy** = *your*
- (**'thee'**, **'thou'** and **'thy'** were more informal versions of **'you'** in Shakespearean times. Characters are more likely to use **'you'** and **'your'** when they are being respectful or polite, e.g. when speaking to someone with a higher status than them.)
- afear'd** = *afraid / scared*
- art** = *are* (e.g. in 'We are less afraid to be drowned than thou art?')
- cuckold**= (mocking name) given to a man with an unfaithful wife.
- false** = *to be disloyal, untrue, deceitful*
- gentle**= *well-born, honourable, noble*
- hath** = *has*
- humour** = *mood / temperament*
- o'er** = *over*
- oft** = *often*
- 'twixt** = *between*
- wench** = *girl*
- Tarry** = *wait*



Shylock must now convert to Christianity. Shylock agrees, beaten, sick with the disgrace and humiliation.

But Shylock is adamant and the court has to concede that the law is on his side however brutal.

Antonio's certain his ships have in fact floundered at sea. His whole fortune has gone under. He has been arrested on account of his debt to Shylock.

All of Portia's suitors have chosen the wrong casket and she is very relieved. Bassanio arrives to view the caskets and read their riddles.



REVENGE



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The Purpose and Function of Symbolism



What is symbolism?

Symbolism helps readers to visualise complex ideas and track their development easily. They often communicate big ideas in an efficient and artistic way. Symbols usually suggest the growth and changes within a character over the course of the story. Symbolic meaning is often given to simple/ordinary objects (usually of important/sentimental value) or colours which have a far deeper meaning or significance within the novel. For example, they may link to abstract emotions/traits/ideas (greed/guilt/freedom/love.) or they may be linked/ representative of time (past memories or future ambitions/goals.

Reasons why Writers use symbolism:

- To help readers grasp/ visualize complex ideas/themes.
- To make a text more emotive
- To allow writer's to communicate 'big ideas; more efficiently.
- To introduce controversial topics/ ideas in a subtle and sensitive way.

Where can we see symbolism in 'The Merchant of Venice'?

The Caskets made of lead, silver and gold. To win Portia, Bassanio must ignore the gold casket, which bears the inscription, "**Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire**" (II.vii.5), and the silver casket, which says, "**Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves**" (II.vii.7). The correct casket is lead and warns that the person who chooses it must give and risk everything he has. The contest combines a number of Christian teachings, such as the idea that desire is an unreliable guide and should be resisted, and the idea that human beings do not deserve God's grace but receive it in spite of themselves. Christianity teaches that appearances are often deceiving, and that people should not trust the evidence provided by the senses—hence the humble appearance of the lead casket. Faith and charity are the central values of Christianity, and these values are evoked by the lead casket's command to give all and risk all, as one does in making a leap of faith.

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Themes



PREJUDICE: The Venetians in *The Merchant of Venice* express extreme intolerance of Shylock and the other Jews in Venice. Shakespeare seems to criticise this prejudice and allows Shylock to vent his fury at being mistreated and abused.



REVENGE is a powerful, corrupting, and destructive force in the play. Shylock wants to hurt Antonio because of Shylock's desire for revenge against the entire Christian community, which he blames for persecuting and degrading him and also for stealing his daughter and the money she took when she ran away.

MERCY: The conflict between Shylock and the Christian characters comes to a head over the issue of mercy. The other characters acknowledge that the law is on Shylock's side, but they all expect him to show mercy, which he refuses to do.

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What the Caskets symbolise



Lead could be used to represent:

- People prepared to take risks and make sacrifices
- People not easily fooled by appearances
- Spiritual, intellectual people
- People prepared to give more than they receive.



Silver could represent:

- People being cautious
- People who try to be something they are not
- People who take the less difficult route
- People who sacrifice spiritual health for material wealth.



Gold could be used to represent:

- Greed
- People taken in by flashy outward appearances
- Materialistic People
- People who take without giving.



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Key Quotes Analysed

*'I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano—
A stage, where every man must play a part;
And mine a sad one.'*

Antonio presents the view that men occupy different roles in life. According to this personal perspective, every individual "**must play a part**"; some must win, some must lose. The world is "**but as the world**," a bland reality that lacks imaginative possibilities, and, every man has "**a part**." Antonio is an individual, but he is also interpreted in association with other parts and is made up of a combination of various social, racial, ethnic, and religious categories. Tensions between these categories will develop as the play continues.

*'Still I have borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.'*

As in many other moments of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock here describes the type of prejudice and discrimination that he faces, and that "**all our tribe**" faces, in Venice. Yet here Shylock also explains that the very individuals who criticise him as a "**misbeliever**" or "**cut-throat dog**," also use him as a money-lender, borrowing his own funds -- "**that which is mine own**." Shylock exposes the unfortunate contradiction that Venetians mistreat the individuals whom they need, the money-lenders who fulfill an essential and respectable function in society. The injustices he lists here also serve to make Shylock a more complex character -- one who is portrayed as a stereotypical villain, but who has possibly been made that way by the prejudice of a "Christian" society.



FRIENDSHIP: The theme of friendship drives most of the action in *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio needs money and turns to Antonio, who has already offered him substantial financial support in the past. The importance of friendship is also displayed between Bassanio and Gratiano and between Portia and Nerissa. Gratiano and Nerissa show great loyalty to and trust in their friends, and they even fall in love with each other after being brought together by their friends.