

Is shylock a victim or a villain analysis



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When Shakespeare wrote his play in the 16th century all Jewish people had been expelled from England 300 years before , and hence found new homes in various places across Europe namely Venice ,(a place which was ruled by Christians who hated the Jewish people for supposedly killing “ Jesus Christ”) where his play is set .

Shakespeare had known that the Elizabethan audience were still very racist towards Jewish people and consequently he deliberately portrayed Shylock as a villainous and evil man . Yet in today’s modern era people are far less racist towards Jews and as a result can perceive Shylock differently , as a victim of the times and circumstances he lived in. Firstly I would like to discuss the text which portrays Shylock as a villain , we first see Shylock in “ Act 1 Scene 3” this is when Basanio who is already in debt is told by Antonio to seek money in his name. In the scene we learn of Shylock’s hate for Antonio not just for the racial prejudice Antonio treats Shylock with but also for the fact that such Christians as Antonio take way Shylock’s precious business and money “ He lends out money gratis , and brings down the rate of usa ce here with us in Venice” Shylock as a Jew beholds an ancient grudge with the Christians and sees Antonio as the perfect way to repay the Christians for the prejudice that he and his people have suffered from , “ If I catch him once upon the hip , I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (Act 1 Scene iii)Shylock is seen to be very cunning and makes a bond with Antonio for the 3000 ducats Antonio believes Shylock is being his friend and even thanks him for the favour “ The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind.

Act I Scene iii)" but in the terms of the bond Shylock asks for a something sinister if Antonio does not pay the 3000 ducats within 3 months " If you repay me not on such a day In such a place , such sums or sums as one expressed in the condition , let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me"(Act 1 scene iii) perhaps Antonio only accepts such a bond because as a merchant he was very confident at least one of his ships would return with plenty of spices and silks, in which he could sell and raise money to repay Shylock , however back in the 16th century a ship carrying such a cargo was not safe as there were pirates and bad storms which resulted in not one of Antonio's ships returning after the 3 months. Shylock as a person is hated by all people including his own " flesh and blood" Jessica his daughter hates her father and therefore becomes a Christian by eloping with her lover a Christian named Lorenzo . She proves her hate for Shylock when speaking to Lorenzo and Gratiano " Our house is hell ! I am ashamed to be my fathers daughter. I shall end this strike"(Act 2 Scene iii) . When Jessica runs away she takes more than just herself when leaving Venice , she takes her fathers precious ducats , Shylock is then confused and was thought to of wondered the streets of Venice confused about what was more important " My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter, Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! "(Act 2 Scene Viii) he the shockingly stated " I would my daughter were hearsed at my foot and the jewels in her ear ! Would she be at my foot and the ducats in her coffin"(Act 3 Scene i)Shylock blame Antonio for the loss of his ducats and daughter as it was Antonio that claimed Jessica and Lorenzo were not on Basanio's ship to Belmont yet they were and this fuel

the ever growing rage towards Antonio however further fuels Shylock's hate for Antonio " I'll plague him; I'll torture / him: I am glad of it.

" (Act III Scene I). Perhaps Shakespeare knew that racism towards Jews would eventually end and wrote his play for not only the present but the future as well ? We first see of the victimization of Shylock in (Act 1 Scene iii) while Antonio is asking for money Shylock can not believe the audacity of the Christian for them to ask him for money and replies " You call me misbeliever cut throat dog , and spet upon my Jewish gaberdine" this is interestingly towards Antonio Shylock is hated by all Venation Christians yet almost all his hate is taken out on Antonio , perhaps it is simply because Antonio was the man asking Shylock for money and he as a cunning Jew saw this as a opportunity to seek revenge . Yet Antonio is defiantly not the only Christian to be prejudice towards him , Antonio's friends for example Salerio and Solanio are constantly tormenting Shylock and mock him at every opportunity they get , they tend to mock Shylock when Shylock is at his lowest points for example just after his daughter Jessica had eloped with her lover Lorenzo to Belmont " Shylock: You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of/ my daughter's flight. Salerio: That's certain: I, for my part, knew the tailor / that made the wings she flew withal. " (Act III Scene i)Shylock is often victim to many anti Semitic comments threw out the play he is hated by all Venation Christians he is forced to live in ghetto's with other fellow Jews and he can not own property , he is a Jew in a Christian world and he is under their rule as he lives in Venice.

Shylock knows it is because of his religion , he knows that he is only victimized because he does not believe in Jesus " For sufferance is the badge

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of our tribe” Shylock may be thought to be a villain because of his evil thirst for revenge, however a modern audience may empathise with him as it is human nature to have vengeance and to want to make the person or group of people that have hurt you pay and suffer for the pain that you have caused them this is Shylock’s motive to hurt Antonio it is vengeance. Shylock’s speech after he loses his daughter Jessica is designed to make the audience feel sympathy for him, “if you prick us, do we not bleed?” “if you poison us do we not die?” (Act III Scene i) the audience realise that Shylock is as human as the man he hates the Christian Antonio, Shylock is a man who is simply a victim of the times and society he lived in. The court scene. The 3 months have passed and perhaps the prayers of Shylock were answered? Antonio has failed back to pay back the 3000 ducats he owes Shylock. However Shylock is nowhere to be seen, yet Antonio is present in the court room, unfortunately for Shylock the Duke who is supposed to also be the judge and the Jury, is very good friends with Antonio this already puts Shylock in a very bad position before the court case starts as the Duke’s obvious hate for Shylock is shown he describes Shylock as “A stoney adversary, an inhuman wretch, incapable of pity, void and empty from any dram of mercy”(Act IV Scene I) this could be viewed as Shylock simply has a reputation in Venice of being an evil person and the Duke’s words are true, or it could be seen that he is just being criticized behind his back, it is very clear that the Duke is very biased towards Antonio the room is only inhabited by Christians and in the room Shylock is referred to as “Jew” not Shylock he is unnamed he is nameless like an animal, he is the lowest of low creatures according to the Christians to them he is a purely evil villain. Shylock is obviously being criticized by the Christians in the room and when he

eventually does appear he has no idea of the dukes hate and bitterness towards him nor how bias he is towards Antonio.

When entering the room Shylock has one thing and one thing only “ having his bond” or in other words killing Antonio and taking revenge on the Christians. Shylock enters with 3 items a knife in which he hopes to use to cut the flesh of Antonio , some scales in which he hopes to way a “ Pound” of Antonio’s “ fair flesh” and most importantly his precious “ bond” in which he is very proud of , he honestly believes that with his bond he is within the law to kill a Christian despite a bias duke in his way.