

# Shylock – college essay



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As an important means of Literary Criticism and an anti-traditional thought, Deconstruction has been widely used in criticizing the text. The main feature of Deconstruction is to prove that so-called two oppositions in structuralism such as men and women, homosexual and heterosexual, bad or good are actually inseparable and there is inbetween in the two extremes. That is to say the two oppositions can neither be completely separated nor strictly divided to two categories. So the usual conclusion is that these categories are actually not fixed or exists in any absolute form.

The Merchant of Venice has been recognized as an early Shakespeare's representative works among his comedies, and it is full of social satire. In this work, the author creates a new series of distinct images of humanism. As a negative character, Shylock arouses interest of readers and critics for his complex personality. Since Marx had such comments on the theme of the drama that the play reflected " the contradiction between capital and loan-sharking"[1]85, for a long time Shylock has been defined as a typical usurer who is mercenary and ruthless. Even in some dictionaries, Shylock has become a noun to describe the unscrupulous miser.

However, these comments are somewhat partial, such as John Gross said, " If Shylock is merely a typical image, he can not occupy the stage over 400 years. "[2]273 There are still certain positive aspects in his personality. Then in recent years, people have begun to get away from the influence of stereotyped bias on Shylock and give Shylock a fair and objective evaluation. The paper here is intended only to reverse the term of " binary opposition", use the theory of deconstruction to analyze Shylock, and study the real

Shylock through the interpretation of Shylock's language, action and psychological description.

In this paper, three sections can be identified: the study of theories of "binary opposition" and Deconstruction, the analysis of Shylock's image from the perspectives of these two theories, and the various factors influencing the formation of Shylock's image. 2. Review of "Binary Opposition" and Deconstruction Binary thought often appears in people's minds. People like to look at the problem from the perspective of binary opposition because of the relatively simple way of thinking. Deconstruction, corresponding to binary opposition, is a pluralistic analysis approach, and similar to the multiple results of the mathematical analysis.

1. Theory of "Binary Opposition" Structuralism is one of the most frequently used methods to analyze the language, culture and society in the second half of the twentieth century. As the core of Structuralism, "binary oppositions" provides us with an effective method of comprehending such a critical approach [3]128. In critical theory, a binary opposition is a pair of theoretical opposites. It is often seen as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture, and language. The most classic example of "binary opposition" is rational and emotional, while in western philosophy, rationality has always enjoyed higher evaluation than sensibility. Another example is presence and absence. Similarly, the former position in the Western philosophy is much higher than the latter. The similarity of "high concept" is regarded as the impact of the logical centrality's western philosophy. The reasons why people tend to look at the problem in the perspective of binary

opposition are the influence of empiricism in addition to the simple way of thinking.

Empirical approach is to use the direct impact of the self-experience and imagination to judge or determine the nature. The simplest qualitative ways are the ones like: good or bad, I like or I do not like, like me, or do not like me, you can believe or not believe. Usually people's thinking is qualitative. Binary world may exist in only two parts, and usually the two are absolute and opposed. Briefly, it is hard for people to avoid the dualistic way of thinking in fact, because people used to grade or think about things according to their experience.

2. Theory of Deconstruction The emergence of the term of “ binary oppositions” helps people get away from the chaotic living appearance and expose the integrity of the hidden structure. However, in post-structuralism, the categorization of binary oppositions is “ often value-laden and ethnocentric”, with an illusory order and superficial meaning. It simplifies the results. Because there are a variety of positions located between these two extreme positions. In fact, many arguments about the structuralism are trying to clarify the mentioned problems.

In a word, facing the complex research questions, structuralism takes evasive attitude rather than a positive attitude to overcome difficulties and press ahead despite difficulties. This is negative. In 1967, the publication of a French philosopher Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* marked the birth of the theory of deconstruction. “ Deconstruction” is derived from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and the original meaning is decomposition, digestion,

revealing and so on. The word Heidegger used means decomposing or disassembling the structure, and then exploring the meaning out.

Deconstruction is also called post-structuralism. Post-structuralism encompasses the intellectual developments of certain continental philosophers and sociologists who wrote within the tendencies of twentieth-century French philosophy. The criticism of binary opposition is not simply to reverse the oppositions, but in essence, the deconstruction doesn't tend to any arm of binary opposition. Deconstruction is the "event" or "moment" at which a binary opposition is thought to contradict itself, and undermine its own authority.

Generally, deconstruction attempts to demonstrate a discrete text contains several patchy contradictions; therefore that any text has one more interpretation; the text itself is inextricably linked to the interpretation; these irreducible interpretations is not compatible; and thus that an interpretative reading cannot go beyond a certain point. J. Hillis Miller has described deconstruction this way: "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.

Its apparently-solid ground is no rock, but thin air. "

3. Analysis of Shylock's image from the perspective of two theories From the perspective of "Binary Opposition", Shylock is defined as a ruthless mercenary miser, all the hateful aspects gathered in his personality. This is stereotyped unitary Shylock. However, in terms of Deconstruction, Shylock is not a simply-defined anti-hero. Deconstruction will reveal a complex multifaceted Shylock with some positive characteristics. 3. Stereotyped

unitary Shylock in terms of “ Binary Opposition” According to this term, we know that according to “ binary opposition”, everything has two sides. For example, in The Merchant of Venice, it reflects the conflicts between the capitalists and usurers at the beginning of the capitalist society. The theme of this play is to praise kindness, friendship and love, so the evil aspects can be found in the play. In this play, Shylock and such Antonios are oppositions. Antonio is the embodiment of friendship.

In order to help Bassanio marry Portia, Antonio can sacrifice anything no matter it is money or life. His merit is to be admired. Bassanio is the embodiment of love. He is very brave to pursue his own true love. In process of love pursuit, he is witty, intelligent and courageous. As the heroine this play, Portia is the embodiment of wisdom and beauty. She focuses on morality instead of wealth, family status, and uses her intelligence and wisdom to fight against Shylock. We can infer these conclusions from the following excerpts. Antonio’s friendship.

4. The factors influencing the formation of Shylock’s image With the increase of Shylock’s research, the comments about Shylock also become various.

We can see from the above analysis, Shylock is not only a mercenary usurer, but also a man deserves our sympathy. Of course, at the same time, more and more people begin to focus on the causes of his character. The paper here sum up three factors influencing the formation of Shylock’s image. 4. 1 Social background in Shylock’s age

When Shakespeare wrote The Merchant of Venice, Britain was in the period of rapid development of capitalism, and gradually expanded overseas. The

accumulation of wealth was an important goal of national development. Although the usurers represented by Shylock had ever supported the economic development, they were finally overwhelmed by the rolling tide. Because the loan sharks did not create new wealth for society, they were only for personal interests. They were called parasites by the rising bourgeois.

The businessmen such as Antonio became the typical emerging bourgeoisie with time going by. They were engaged in overseas trade, set up UK's image outside the territory, spread the impact of the UK, and also brought wealth for the country to complete the primitive accumulation of capitalism. In such an economic context, Shylock's situation would have never turned out to a comedy. The fate of Shakespeare's Shylock was predetermined by the tragic status of usurers based on such economic foundation.

The Merchant of Venice took place in medieval Europe when Christian dominated world, the Church of Rome tried to publicize an idea that the Jews were people God cast aside. Jews were regarded as the culprit of all evils and become main objective the European rulers to pass all sorts of conflicts over. But the Christians seem to have forgotten that Jesus himself was Jewish. The Jews stick to their beliefs, refuse to believe in Jesus, so in the history, Jews were attached to the words closely: rove, persecution, and discrimination.

As a Jew living in Venice, in a society with racial and religious differences, Shylock's social status is very low. Venice residents, Christians even his servant call him " the Jews" or even " Jewish dog". In particular, Antonio often humiliates him with no reason, alienates his friends, and incites his

enemies. He calls Shylock a heretic in public for many times and also spits on his Jewish robe. About it, weak Shylock can do nothing but swallow his anger, most with a shrug, to show his carelessness. Actually, however, these insults damaged Shylock's national feelings.

In turn, it became deep-seated hatred to Venetian and Christians[11]]23.  
from <http://www.lunwen315.net/> In religion, Christianity is the main body of the European society. They dominate the social and political life. According to Christian propaganda, the Jews are the sworn enemy to the Christianity. Because at that time in Europe, in economic field, wealthy Jewish incurred the resentment of emerging bourgeois and feudal aristocracy, in particular, such as Shylock has a certain economic status of the Jews.

However for the face of law, they can not openly restrict the Jews politically, and only can play tricks on Jews in the economic and religious. Antonio lends money with no interest. On the one hand that is his kindness; on the other hand can not deny that it is economically competitive with Shylock's loan business. Although Shylock has a certain economic status, according to bourgeois law, in the hierarchical society of Europe, he is also ruled in the political and religious position. 4. 2 Shylock's personality Firstly, Shylock has a strong spiritual force.

He is tough, stubborn and unyielding, and his vengeance in mind is very strong. He loves money, but there is still something he values other than money, namely the easing of his wounded spirit, the just vengeance for inexpressible injuries. That is why though they offer him ten times the amount of the borrowed sum he refuses it. It is because that the desire in his



subconscious has been hidden for too many years. He wants revenge, because he can tolerate no more, whether in terms of economy or religion. He loses the case, and refuses to kneel for mercy, because he is full of hatred.

Secondly, he is weak. In class society, the superstructure of the legal system must be serving the interests of the ruling class. Shylock demands his execution in accordance with the laws of Venice. There is no doubt that Shylock's words are truth. Shylock's tragedy is that he does not realize that the Venetian law enacts for their own interests, which can be an arbitrary interpretation according to their needs. This should be the most serious legal system, however in the capitalist society, it only serves ruling class that lead Shylock to change his belief finally indirectly. . 3 Shakespeare's views of creation In the play, Antonio and Shylock commencing proceedings around a contract are based on the folklore of the east story " pound of flesh of the contract". In this prototype story, the hero is a Jewish merchant with a strong vengeance. Shakespeare used this theme into his own play. After the creation and processing, he gave the man greedy, mean, treachery and other personalities to make this image even more vivid. But Shakespeare could not have been affected by the prototype of the story, and retained some of these characters.

Moreover, the birth of The Merchant of Venice was related to the political events that in the same year. In 1594, Jewish physician Lopez of Queen Elizabeth was innocently executed. With absence of sufficient evidence to prove the Jews Lopez a spy sent by the King of Spain, he was arbitrarily sentenced to death. But London residents still endorsed the spirit of brutal

acts for prejudice. In such social background, *The Merchant of Venice* was born. More or less, it reflects the author's position on racial discrimination, not just the mockery of some unhealthy tendencies.

Actually, Shakespeare's views play the most important role in the play. Shylock's failure can not be equivalent to the fact that he is an evil. Shylock converts to Christianity, which reflects Shakespeare's faith in Christian. Shakespeare repeatedly stressed the need for the kind of Christianity, and the Christianity rooted in his mind. However, he is also a humanist who is not mature enough at that time. He has class limitations. Humanism itself also has time limitations.

On the one hand, he is a devout Christian, the religious discrimination against Jews; on the other hand, he is a humanist, to promote bourgeois theory of human nature, the performance of his ideas of equality. And he is also in sympathy with Shylock. Some people think that the tragedy of Shylock is a usurer that shall be subject to punishment, but actually existence of a usurer is generated in the legitimate bourgeois class. The undeniable reason of sneering the usury is racial prejudices of Shakespeare, as he praised the people who have a common subconsciousness of discrimination against Jews.

## 5. Conclusion

The above discussion is by no means comprehensive but it can serve our purpose to analyze the characters in the literature and know more about the Shylock. The idea of "deconstructing" is a good way for readers and researchers to study Shakespeare and his works. The study here endeavors

to accommodate the theoretical and practical objectives of the thesis: to work towards an integrative model of deconstruction analysis and testify the model by analyzing some specific text.

In summary, Shylock well deserves research as an immortal classic literary figure in the history of world literature, and he is the first personalized Jewish with his own flesh and blood on the stage in UK. Shylock is abhorrent, and all his actions center for money. So he is indifferent to the friendship between people and the righteousness of the heart; Shylock is poor.

Facing the law of Venice, he is weak; of course, Shylock has his merits. He exposes the true darkness of the ruling group and has his courageous struggle alone. It is these different factors of personalities that do not make the character fade away with the passage of time. On the contrary, it will even show the more charming and eternal artistic brilliance as time goes.