

# The themes of the merchant of venice essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



The play Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare has two major themes running through its story. Even though it was written in the late 1500s these themes still have significance today.

The main characters of this play are Shylock, the Jew, who is a money lender charging interest to make living. Antonio is another character of this play and he is a fairly rich merchant. Antonio has a very good friend Bassanio, who wants to marry Portia, a wealthy woman who is Shakespeare's heroine.

### Prejudice

At first, this play may seem to be anti-Semitic, but prejudice can be found on both sides. This theme mainly involves two characters of the play, Antonio and Shylock.

The character of Shylock seems to be the villain because he wants the pound of flesh of Antonio's, who seems to be a good Christian. But the story behind is much deeper and Shakespeare gives evidence that all is not as it seems.

At the beginning, Antonio expresses his hatred for Shylock but he doesn't give any reasons for this. Later, it can be seen that Shylock hasn't really done anything to harm Antonio and therefore Antonio's hatred is completely unfounded. Furthermore, Antonio knowingly drives down the interest rates by lending money without interest. This makes hard for Shylock to make living since he, as a Jew, cannot do anything else except lend money and charging interest. Also, Antonio spits on Shylock and kicks him, whenever he sees him. It is clear that Antonio's actions spring from pure prejudice and nothing else.

As for Shylock, it is obvious that Shylock has many reasons to hate Antonio. It is understandable then that Shylock seeks revenge when he wants the pound of Antonio's flesh, even though the revenge is fairly cruel.

It is interesting to me, that Antonio, even though he hates Shylock so much, comes for help to Shylock. Because Bassanio, Antonio's good friend, needs money to be able to marry Portia, Antonio goes to Shylock for help because right now he doesn't have the cash to lend Bassanio.

In addition, the Christian characters exhibit same behaviors that they persecute Shylock for. This is a very hypocritical attitude from the Christian side and it can be demonstrated by many examples.

Shylock is accused of being greedy but he is not alone. For example, Bassanio wants to marry Portia because she is wealthy. Bassanio himself says to Antonio that " his chiefly care is to come fairly off from the great debts" (I. i. 126 -127) and that " in Belmont is a lady richly left." (I. i. 160) Then he goes on how if he married her, he would " questionless be fortunate." (I. i. 175) This is a very interesting part and it shows the mastery of Shakespeare. Notice how he uses the word fortunate; fortunate means to be happy but also it means to be lucky and the word fortune, from which fortunate is derived, means wealth.

Furthermore, Shylock is blamed for being merciless when he demands his pound of flesh at the court. That is true but if we look at Antonio at the court, we arrive at the same judgment as with Shylock. When Shylock is overcome by Portia's wit, Antonio, ironically to show mercifulness, wants Shylock to

give half of his property to his daughter Jessica and her fiancé Lorenzo. But Shylock doesn't agree with this marriage and so what could be worse to bless a marriage that one doesn't agree with?

Also, Shylock is blamed for stealing. By this is meant the flesh that Shylock wants to steal from Antonio. Symbolically, Christians steal too; Lorenzo steals Shylock's daughter, his own flesh. This is quite ironic considering that Christians despise Shylock for wanting Antonio's flesh.

In conclusion, this play is not anti-Semitic; rather it wants to show how Christians are prejudiced and hypocritical by using Shylock as the instrument.

### Loyalty

The second major theme of the play is loyalty that is shown through interactions of several sets of characters.

First, there is Antonio and Bassanio. Their loyalty between each other is first revealed when Antonio lends Bassanio a large sum of money without wanting any guarantee. He only takes his word for it. From their conversation it is clear that Antonio has lent money to him before and hasn't repaid it yet. Antonio's loyalty is repaid at the end of the play when Bassanio goes back to Venice from Belmont to help Antonio to get out of the debt to Shylock. When the court is over, Bassanio gives the judge (Portia in disguise) a ring that he got from Portia and promised to never give it away. This shows how much Bassanio is willing to sacrifice to be loyal to his friend Antonio.

On the other hand, Bassanio's behavior is blatantly disloyal towards Portia, his wife. He pledges his loyalty to Portia when he wins her as a wife and then when he leaves for Venice to help Antonio. Bassanio states that he will not cheat on her and that is true but he does give away the ring Portia gave him. I believe that this quite a considerable act of disloyalty, especially when Bassanio promises Portia not to do it the day before. Portia though seems to be loyal to her husband when she forgives him so easily. It can be that she feels guilty that she was disguised as a judge and fooled her husband. Nevertheless, I still see Bassanio's behavior as disloyal even though it was Portia whom he gave the ring.

The last two characters, in which loyalty can be discussed, are Jessica and her father Shylock. She loves a Christian and that Shylock understandably doesn't like. Jessica, by loving a Christian, is disloyal to her father and the disloyalty is topped by her escape from the house. She disguises as a boy and steals all the jewelry and money (ducats) in the house. She says that she is "much ashamed for her exchange" (II. v. 36) and by this she not only means to be ashamed by being dressed as a boy, but also that she exchanged her love and loyalty to her father for the love of a Christian.

These themes are still very significant today since humanity hasn't changed that much. There are still problems with racism and discrimination. Just to name a few groups: for example, the white people versus black people, which is a problem mainly in the US. Here in the Czech Republic, there is a problem between the white people and the Roma people. Another example would be the Untouchables in India, and the list could go on and on. As to the

other theme, loyalty is still considered to be a virtue. In this way, The Merchant of Venice is timeless.