

Conflicts in "merchant of venice" essay sample

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Conflicts in “ Merchant of Venice” occur as a result of four major life themes: love, money, prejudice and disguise. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender is usually, and somewhat unjustly, held responsible for many of these conflicts. Though Shylock’s behaviour is, in many ways, evil, and should by no means be exonerated, the conflicts he does cause are most often merely his vengeful attempt to respond to the prejudices he has experience caused by his religion. In the time of Shakespeare, prejudices were deep-seated and common. Most of society (the white Christians) regarded anybody who was different as inferior and worthy of suspicion, especially those with dark skin or alternate faith. These feelings of superiority were classically expressed by ostracism and isolation of the involved party.

Most frequently throughout the play, even the most noble members of Venetian society, especially Antonio, refer to Shylock in only derogatory terms such as “ cur”, “ devil” and “ dog”(I, iii) which are all cruel references to animals and subhuman beings. It is as a result of these constant attempts to steal his dignity that Shylock first bears his “ ancient grudge” against Christians. It has required that he seek solace in the moneys he earns, considering them more dear to him than ever before following the abandonment he receives from both his servant Lancelot Gobbo and his daughter Jessica. Before she left, he treated her with care, considering her “ his treasure” (II, v, 4) while trying to ensure that she was unaffected by the evil of Christians. Once she has left him and stolen much of his money, the object of his affections and obsessions becomes the money, as he wishes

that “ my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear” (III, i, 69-70). This money is accumulated by charging interest, something that competing lenders such as the rich merchant.

Antonio can afford not to resort to- having the more dominant source of income in his fleets. Because he requires a profit from his business, Shylock is ostracised and isolated within society, as Antonio “ rails/ Even there where merchants most do congregate/ On me” (I, iii, 4-0-42) a situation which has led to the death of any mercy Shylock may have had, leaving only a suspicious and vindictive man behind. Indeed he considers the likelihood of repayment by all prospective clients before entering into contracts with them. When considering the matter of Antonio’s loan, Shylock displays to the audience the intimacy with which he has investigated Antonio’s credibility.

It is Antonio who Shylock incorrectly believes to be at the centre of a gigantic Christian conspiracy against him. Lorenzo does share his intentions to “ take her [Jessica] from her father’s house” (II, v, 30) to Gratiano- involving him in what Shylock later perceives to be a kidnapping orchestrated by Antonio. This belief intensifies his mistrust of the “ Christian fools with varnished faces” who are already disguising themselves from him with masks.

These Christian have indeed conspired together- inviting Shylock to dinner on the night of Jessica’s removal and the theft of his money. Later again Portia and the Duke conspire to humiliate Shylock, as they offer him repeatedly the opportunity to release Antonio from their “ bond” in return for extra money before informing him of the loophole left in their legal contract which deprives Shylock of both the previously offered money and the pound

of flesh that Shylock so desires of Antonio. This leads to Shylock's eventual mortification and humiliating punishment- removing all which he holds dear to him- his money and his religion- and increasing his general hatred of Christians.

Shylock's request for a pound of Antonio's flesh, and his refusal to relinquish his rights to it, are violent, merciless and often cruel. From the outset, his intentions are to " catch him [Antonio] once upon the hip" (I, iii, 38) as a dog catches a deer- in a death grip, by which he " can feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" (I, iii, 39). Shylock achieves his goal, earning the right to " an equal pound/ Of your [Antonio's] fair flesh" (I, iii, 142-143) and refusing to abandon his religion's concern with the written word of the law for the spirit of the law so embraced by Christians, which would require that he leave his rights to Antonio's flesh for the money Antonio owes him. In this way, he refuses to display the mercy that Portia regards as a " gentle rain from heaven" (IV, i, 181) despite pleas from all others present, thereby confirming for the Christians, though perhaps only in vexation, that he is " an inhuman wretch" (IV, i, 4).

Shylock's eventual defeat in the courtroom- and his resultant losses in life- are at the behest of a group of Christians exerting control over him. Though Shylock has indeed been malicious and cruel, the punishment he is dealt seems also to be excessively cruel. It requires that Shylock part with that which has been most loyal to him: his money and his religion. Both are points on which he has never wavered. Antonio insists that Shylock bequeath the entirety of his fortune to his son in law Lorenzo, the Christian who "

stole" his daughter and that he convert to Christianity". Both requirements appear to have been designed to cause maximum misery and humiliation for Shylock, who would have preferred the worst Jew to have married his only daughter, rather than a Christian and for whom religion seemed to be paramount. This punishment seems to have removed Shylock's sense of self-worth and strength of spirit, for when asked to comment upon his punishment, he replies only that he is "content" (IV, i, 389), completely devoid of any anger, dignity, care or choice.

When all of the above-listed cruelties are coupled with the expectation that such injustices occurred frequently in Shylock's life, his considerable malice and hate towards the Christians as a group is understandable. he seems to be merely fulfilling his promise- that he, a Jew, taught "villainy" (III, i, 56) by the Christians, will follow the example which had been set for him and perform it better, or more cruelly, than those Christians who taught him. As he inquires of Salarino "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (III, i, 52) as the Christians of the time were well aware of a human's desire for revenge.

Though Shylock's dogged determination to kill Antonio was too extreme for the circumstances, his hatred and mistrust of the Christian community in general is both understandable and expected. Had Shylock not felt that retaliation was necessary, Shakespeare would have created an almost inhuman character, too righteous to have been conceivable, especially as he was a Jew. As a result, it is prejudice which has caused the majority of conflicts in "Merchant of Venice".