

Is shylock a victim or a villain



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However, Jews were greatly discriminated against. Elizabethans hated the traditional image of the Jew. They saw them as a bogeyman, devil, the killer of Christ and the ultimate in cruelty and greed. The Elizabethans also believed that only Christians could attain salvation and go to Heaven. Usury was a career many Jews pursued but Christians saw this as a sin, so only Jews were allowed to lend money for profit. This meant that Christians had to go to Jews to lend money.

The Jews in Venice were shut up in their Ghetto at nightfall every day and were guarded by Christians whose wages they had to pay. All the windows in the Ghetto that looked outwards on the city were blocked up. Jews had to wear red hats to identify them from the Christians. To stay in Venice, Jews had to have a permit which cost a lot of money and they were not allowed to own land so had to pay rent to live in the Ghetto. They were seen as inferior to such an extent that they weren't even called humans by Christians.

Overall, Jews were treated very harshly and with severe discrimination, and although they conformed to their established religion, many pretended to be Christian so they would be treated more equally and avoid discrimination. So the character of Shylock faced very little respect and sympathy before he'd even opened his mouth. The Elizabethan audience would have hated Shylock straight away.

At the end of Act 1, Scene Three, my general feelings towards the character of Shylock are mixed. He seems both a victim and a villain.

Shylock makes a real meal of lending the money and deliberately keeps Bassanio waiting for a decision which prolongs the frustration and

desperation Bassanio feels by saying “ Three thousand ducats, 'tis a good round sum. Three months from twelve, then let me see the rate”. Shylock sees the prospect of lending Antonio money as a way of getting his own back on him. The consequence of cutting a pound of Antonio's flesh from his body is extreme yet is not to be taken as a joke. Shylock takes pleasure from discomforting Antonio and Bassanio and hides his real intentions behind friendliness and reconciliation by saying “ Why look you how you storm, I would be friends with you, and have your love, Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with” he loves seeing the pair begging him and coming to him for help.

However, Shylock is probably only acting this way as he's been the object of racial and religious prejudice at the hands of Antonio, a Christian, because of the simple reason that he's a Jew. Shylock has had his profession as a moneylender trashed by Antonio, who sees lending money to gain profit as wrong and sinful. As Antonio doesn't charge interest, people go to him to lend money instead of Shylock. Antonio isn't sorry for the brutal way he's acted towards Shylock. Shylock identifies with his religion totally, and is completely dedicated to its rules. He's just a religious man who is discriminated against because of his faith. All the isolation, sorrow and hate he feels makes him want revenge, which is the normal human response.

To an Elizabethan audience, Shylock would be the vilest, wickedest character possible and would instantaneously be seen as a villain. In these times Jews were seen as inferior. There was a history of Jews being persecuted across Europe. Many plays such as Marlow's Jew of Malta depicted Jews as wicked villains. Shakespeare tapped into the audience's

expectation that a vice figure in a play would be both humorous and calculatingly wicked. A Shakespearean comedy needs an outsider to define the norm. Discrimination and prejudice against Jews was seen as normal and accepted.

Nowadays the history of anti-Semitism ended in the Nazi Holocaust and people are more open to the vast world of different race, sex and religion. It's hard to see Shylock straight away as a villain just because of his religion as we're very sensitive and mature about people's ethnics.

I think Shylock in this scene is both a victim and a villain as the way he's been badly treated has led him to hate certain people and seek revenge.

In Act Two, Scene Five, Shylock comes across as a very bossy, selfish father. He orders Jessica around a lot and tells her to do as he says. He is speaking to Jessica and Launcelot. When Launcelot calls Jessica, Shylock snaps at him saying: "Who bids thee call? I do not bid thee call" he isn't even letting Launcelot speak. By this it is clear who has the authority and that Shylock thinks that no one can do what they want in his house until he grants them to.

When Jessica enters Shylock says that he's going to the supper with the Christians that evening. He states that he is not going out of love but out of hate. He says he does not want to go as he "did dream of moneybags tonight". This makes Shylock sound like all he wants his money and that he's disappointed that he can't make any that evening.

A little later in the scene Shylock is ordering Jessica around, telling her that she must “ Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum And the vile squealing of the wry-neck’d fife, Clamber not you up to the casements then, Nor thrust your head into the public street To gaze on Christian fools with varnish’d faces: But stop my house’s ears, I mean my casements, Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter My sober house” he doesn’t want Jessica to see or get involved with the drunken Christians that will pass the house. He is racist himself towards Christians as he calls them ‘ Christian fools’. He doesn’t want the sound of drunkards to enter his house through windows or doors so he orders her to lock the windows and the doors. He doesn’t want Christians to taint his ‘ sober’ house.

After Launcelot and Jessica have spoken, he warns Jessica not to go against what he says because he may come home straight away. He further tells her to shut the windows and doors by saying “ Do as I bid you, shut doors after you, fast bind, fast find, A proverb never stale in thrifty mind”

At the beginning of Act Three, Scene One, Shylock comes across as caring and concerned about his daughter as he says to Salarino and Solanio: “ You knew none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter’s flight”, basically saying ‘ You knew about my daughter taking off’. This quote by Shylock makes it sound like he cares about his daughter and is angry that he’s lost her and people who knew she was running off didn’t tell him.

But Shylock makes it sound as though when he gets his daughter back he’s going to be very angry at her and teach her a lesson by saying: “ She is damn’d for it.”

Shylock says he wants revenge on Antonio for disgracing and humiliating him. He makes a long speech about how Antonio has laughed at his losses, mocked him and scorned him, as well destroying his relations with people. He sounds very hurt and upset about how Antonio treats him, just because he is a Jew, and so wins some sympathy from the audience. Shylock is explaining how he is just the same as a Christian and reacts to things in the same way. He says that if a Christian's way of getting his own back is revenge then he will seek revenge also, using the superb line: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction". This makes him sound evil and like he won't be happy unless he gets revenge. But all the terrible things Antonio has done to him has probably turned him this way and he is a deeply sensitive and isolated person at heart.

When Tubal enters, Shylock asks him whether he's found his daughter yet, making it sound as though Shylock wants his daughter back.

Shockingly, the genuine reason for his desperation for his daughter is revealed in his next comment when Shylock pretty much says his precious jewels and gold are more important than her and that he'd rather have them with him than his daughter! This makes Shylock a very shallow, cruel and vain person. He says somebody's probably stolen his treasures and he'd like to get revenge on them. So perhaps Shylock is a villain; he obviously cares for his gold more than his daughter.

Shylock is extremely angry when Tubal tells him that his daughter's been spending all his money, especially when he's told that his daughter swapped

one of her expensive rings for a monkey! He said he wouldn't have swapped the ring for a 'wilderness of monkeys'.

He then continues to say that he will have the heart of Antonio if he forfeits his promise of paying Shylock back. I think overall Shylock is a villain as he doesn't care about his daughter, he'd much rather have his wealth. He's evil and just wants to hurt people. Despite the fact that Antonio has been very insulting and demeaning to him perhaps he should try to rise above his ignorance instead.

In the court scene (Act Four, Scene One), Shylock is obsessed by getting his bond. He won't give a reason why but just says "I can give no reason, nor I will not, More than a lodg'd hate, and a certain loathing I bear Antonio, that I follow thus A losing suit against him" Bassanio says that he's cruel and Shylock responds by saying "I am not bound to please thee with my answer"

Bassanio tries to convince him to take the money instead, which has doubled to six thousand ducats but he refuses stating that "if every ducat in six thousand ducats Were in six parts, and every part a ducat, I would not draw them, I would have my bond" Shylock is absolutely set on having his bond and revenge on Antonio for all the names he's called him in the past and the way he's treated him. He asks the crowd in the court whether they'd let their bought slaves be free and marry their heirs and whether they'd let them have the same luxuries as them, and compares the ownership of these slaves with the ownership Shylock has on Antonio's pound of flesh stating "The pound of flesh which I demand of him Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it"

When Portia begins her role in the court case, she says to Shylock “ Is your name Shylock?” to which Shylock answers: “ Shylock is my name” this is the first time in the case that someone has directly addressed Shylock by his name and not Jew or another offensive name. This makes Shylock instantly have respect for the lawyer and think that he (actually a she!) is on his side.

Shylock is so hungry for revenge on Antonio that he says “ My deeds upon my head, I crave the Law, The penalty and forfeit of my bond” he is clearly hell-bent on killing Antonio.

Although everyone, included Portia whom he looks to for sympathy, advises that he take the money he still will not. He insists that no one will convince him to, that “ There is no power in the tongue of man To alter me: I stay here on my bond”

The thing that finally brings Shylock around in his decision is the fact that he cannot spill any of Antonio’s blood. His blood is not included in the bond and if any is spilt, the State of Venice will take away all his land and goods. So it’s impossible to Shylock to have his bond. Shylock then accepts the money.

Then it is learnt that all of Shylock’s possessions can be taken away, half by the State and half by the victim, under Venetian law as Shylock deliberately tried to take away the life of one of its citizens. Shylock breaks down at this point as the law has turned the whole case back on him. But when Antonio is asked whether he will take away his half of Shylock’s possessions he refuses. This is very kind of him. Instead he asks two things; that Shylock must turn Christian and that when he dies his possessions are given to Lorenzo and his daughter.

In this scene I feel that Shylock is a villain as he wants to kill someone.

Antonio has spat on Shylock in the past and called him names such as 'dog' and 'misbeliever' but nothing bad enough to have his life taken away.

Shylock could easily just ignore these comments and abuse but he wanted severe revenge instead. Antonio should be recognised for his kindness as he leaves Shylock with half of his fortune.

To really understand whether Shylock is a victim or a villain we need to understand why Shylock is the way he is and what feelings lead him to be this way. In the following two speeches we can see some of the feelings Shylock experiences and realise how deeply Antonio has affected him:

The first speech is written in prose as it lets Shylock's emotions out more and poetry in this case would sound unnatural. By being written in prose this speech is able to show the difference in class, making Shylock seem lesser of a person than Portia and Bassanio. Also, the scene is quite private, involving two people so prose is used. If this were a public scene poetry would probably have been used.

In this speech Shylock fires rhetorical questions such as 'Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?', defining who he is and what his rights are. He uses these questions to pull his status up. He makes Jews sound the same as Christians as they react in the same way. The speech is also deeply egocentric as he thinks everything has to refer to him in some way and is obsessed by himself. He's very self-absorbed and hurt by what people have done to him. Shylock's mind is racing, as he's so angry.

After years of bottling up and suppressing his feelings he's finally letting them out in one burst of anger.

There's an awful logic in Shylock's head, which no matter how hard he tries, cannot argue against it. He can justify how he thinks and can't break down these justifications. He can't destroy the evil and anger in his head. On the last sentence of his speech, Shylock blames the Christians for why he's like this. He blames them for all the anger and bad inside him. He accuses them of teaching him how to be evil and how to get his own back and says he will better the villainy they teach him.

However, Shylock's speech has a massive flaw in it. The one thing he has is choice. He can choose whether he wants to ignore the way he's treated or seek out revenge. Where he refers to the fact that Jews react the same to Christians by his examples such as 'if you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?' these are automatic reactions. If you are pricked by a needle you can't stop yourself from bleeding, it's just what naturally happens. But if you're treated badly you have a choice. Revenge isn't an automatic reaction. You can choose to deal with it as you please. And Christians are taught to forgive those who do wrong against them, so really Shylock's argument doesn't work. He doesn't really have anyone to blame but himself.

In Shylock's second speech, Shylock feels very hard done by and thinks that his 'nation' (the Jews) are a separate race from anyone else and that people are always awful to them. This makes Shylock sound like a hypocrite because in his first speech he was trying to make Jews sound equal and

similar to Christians and now he is trying to say that they are completely different races of people.

It is clear Shylock is very obsessed by money. It has a real grip on him. He is more concerned that if his daughter were dead at his foot, her ' precious' jewels would still be in her ears. He thinks that not having his daughter is less of a loss than not having his jewels. He is upset that he couldn't get revenge on the thief, as he doesn't know who it is. He is a deeply self absorbed, money obsessed man.

I think overall Shylock is a villain because of the evil way he thinks. Revenge is a natural instinct but self-control takes over feelings such as these. It's understandable that Shylock wanted his own back on Antonio for the cruel way he mistreated him, but taking his life is many a step too far. If you were spat on and called names it wouldn't provoke you to kill that person. You might say you wanted to kill them, but you never really would. Shylock is obviously a very, very mentally unstable and hurt man. He feels deeply isolated and pained. His deep feelings lead him to do the things he does and act in the unreasonable way he does.

I think the reason Shylock is the way he is is because of Antonio's treatment of him. Shylock is the outsider and the person people look down on and it must be hard for him because people think of his religion as rubbish whereas to Shylock it's his biggest faith and the thing he believes in. I feel a bit sorry for him. He must be so confused, angry and upset inside, but killing someone is not acceptable at all. He should ignore ignorant people and get on with his

life. The way he went around dealing with Antonio was evil, wicked and calculating.