

How does
shakespeare present
the issues of love and
money in the play
essay sampl...



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Through the exploration of three central relationships in the play, Shylock and Jessica; Antonio and Bassanio and Bassanio and Portia, I will investigate the presentation of the themes of love and money and also examine how the plot provides a variety of interpretations.

The relationship between Bassanio and Portia can be interpreted in different ways. On the surface, their relationship appears to be very pure, seemingly based upon true love. The couple consistently express their love for one another, and we as the audience accept their relationship to be entirely honest and innocent.

' Bassanio: Fair Portia's counterfeit! What demi-God / hath come so near creation?'

However, it is possible that Bassanio possessed ulterior motives to marry Portia besides love. Bassanio first describes Portia as ' a lady richly left.' This seems to focus on her wealth, rather than her beauty. Furthermore, Bassanio does not tell Antonio he is in love with Portia; instead he tells Antonio how he feels he will make a huge profit from marrying her.

' I have a mind presages me such thrift.'

There are several other interpretations of why Bassanio says this. Firstly, Bassanio may simply be telling the truth, indicating his financial reasons for seeking Portia. Others claim that he was too embarrassed to ask for money without offering future repayment, given his record of wasteful spending.

It is also possible that Bassanio avoided saying he loved Portia, for fear of upsetting Antonio. Antonio sustains a relationship with Bassanio that can be viewed as homo-erotic and slightly possessive.

When asking Bassanio who Portia is, Antonio acquires the tone of an angry wife who suspects an affair.

' Antonio: Well tell me now what lady is the same/ To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage/ That today you promised to tell me of.

Bassanio: ' Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,/ How much I have disabled mine estate.'

In response, Bassanio changes the subject immediately. After all, declaring his love for another woman would surely jeopardise his chances of being lent the money.

It can be argued that Antonio clings to the belief that Bassanio will leave Portia in favour of himself. Bassanio even postpones his wedding to Portia so that Antonio can die with this hope alive. During the trial, Antonio he takes comfort in the fact that he is making the ultimate sacrifice for Bassanio. Building up to his death for so long leaves Antonio exhausted and anguished; after all, he has been stripped of his one chance to prove his love for Bassanio. Indeed many productions have chosen to portray Antonio as isolated and miserable at the end of the play.

The relationship between Shylock and Jessica provides an interesting subplot. Shakespeare presents a superficial picture of Shylock and Jessica

that does not reflect the character as a whole. On the surface, Shylock
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seems to be solely obsessed with a love of money, and is generally recognised as the villain of the play. However, it can be said that Shylock has a kind and caring side as well.

Jessica is Shylock's only outlet for affection. Because of this he is extremely careful to protect her from harm.

' Do as I bid you, shut doors after you. / Fast bind, fast find:'

It is only when Jessica elopes that we see Shylock's personality change. Prior to her elopement we sympathise with Shylock; the victim of Antonio's shocking racial hatred.

However, in light of Jessica's departure Shylock makes an unnerving speech about revenge, condemns Jessica and shows manic glee at Antonio's misfortune.

'...If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?'

' I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin.'

' What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?' ' I thank God, I thank God. Is it true?'

It can be argued that Shylock ' thanks God' because of his love for honour and justice. However, if this were the case, surely Shylock would be satisfied with a full repayment from Antonio, rather than enthusing about the prospect of taking Antonio's flesh. Maybe Shylock sees Antonio's ill luck as a

form of Godly moral justice; that has been granted after Antonio ' spat on my Jewish Gaberdine' and after severe ridicule from Salarino and Solanio. In the end, it is ironic that Shylock is thankful for Antonio's misfortune. After all, it is this ill luck that leads to Shylock losing his faith and proves his ultimate undoing.

In truth, Shylock is an ambiguous character, whose actions are not consistent enough to warrant a definite opinion regarding his attitudes to love and money.

Similarly, Jessica does not conform to the frequently adopted opinion of her character. In general, the audience view Jessica as the righteous beauty who rises up against her tyrannical father by eloping with her Christian partner. However this is not entirely the case.

Throughout the play, Jessica's character reveals several negative similarities between herself and Shylock. Perhaps the most noticeable similarity is their affinity with money and its power. Even Shylock can recognise their likeness.

Shylock: ' I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.'

Salarino: ' There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory;'

(Shylock's words are again highly ironic. The bond between him and Antonio is also flesh and blood. Although Shylock presents ' flesh and blood' as a positive description of his bond with Jessica - it proves his ultimate undoing when in the courtroom with Antonio.)

Jessica is first seen in Act 2 Scene 3, immediately offering Lancelot money for nothing more than his company.

‘Thou a merry devil / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness./

But fare thee well: there is a ducat for thee.’

Her language contains monetary puns, giving subtle clues to Jessica’s true personality.

Comparisons can be drawn with Bassanio and Portia’s relationship, however whilst Bassanio’s lust for money leads him to Portia, Jessica’s lust for money leads her away from Shylock

On the whole, Jessica is a contradictory character, whose treatment of her father is grossly overlooked by a sympathetic audience. However, Shylock’s comments in Act 3 scene 1, (‘I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear’) ensured that Jessica received an understanding and good-natured response from the audience.

Shakespeare also uses the play’s plot to present contrasting views on love and money. Portia’s father devised the three caskets in order to ensure his daughter married the right man after his death. The note in the lead casket explains how Bassanio deserves Portia as he ‘choose not by the view’ and values inner beauty above outward appearances.

However, it is obvious that his plan contained some fundamental flaws.

Firstly, it is debateable whether Bassanio was interested in Portia’s inner beauty; instead it seems likely he wanted her for her wealth.

Secondly, despite the lead casket symbolising money's irrelevance in the face of love, Portia's suitors needed money to take the casket test in the first place.

It can be argued that the casket test stands as a microcosm for Shakespeare's views on love and money in society. Despite his best attempts, Portia's father could not prevent her from marrying a man set on obtaining her money. This would represent Shakespeare's rather bleak attitude to love, whereby relationships are based on greed and lust for wealth.

However, Shakespeare provides a more positive attitude to love through Portia's actions. Portia may have persuaded Bassanio to choose the lead casket through her choice of song. The lyrics prior to Bassanio's decision contained words that rhyme with lead, giving him subtle clues. 'bred, head, nourished fed'

After Bassanio chose correctly Portia is quick to condemn herself; however in the presence of Gratiano and Nerissa, she must disguise her confession.

' I would not be ambitious in my wish/ To wish myself much better, yet for you/ I would be trebled twenty times myself,/...only to stand high in your account'

(Portia provides another indication as to her obsession with money through her language here: ' account' ' trebled twenty times')

If Portia had not cheated with her song, it seems likely Bassanio would follow his monetary instincts by choosing either the gold or silver casket. This <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-shakespeare-present-the-issues-of-love-and-money-in-the-play-essay-sample/>

restores faith in Portia's father's system, and restores optimism in the audience, who are again led to believe that a relationship need not require money as an incentive.

'The Merchant of Venice' provides varying interpretations of the issues of love and money. Shakespeare creates a superficial view of characters in the play, whilst aspects of their real personality often remain hidden. I believe that whilst Shakespeare provides a web of contradictions and contrasting attitudes in his subplots, his fundamental view of love and money is made clear through the dominant 'flesh-bond' tale, and his depictions of Antonio and Shylock. It is they who embody Shakespeare's residing opinion upon love and money, through their failed quest to find happiness despite their wealth.