

# [The theme of self-interest in 'the merchant of venice' and 'the crucible'](https://assignbuster.com/the-theme-of-self-interest-in-the-merchant-of-venice-and-the-crucible/)

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Self-interest forms the basis of every relationship, whether it is related to friendship, marriage or trade.

Although human beings ostensibly love and care for each other, in reality they expect some sort of benefit from every relationship. Both William Shakespeare and Arthur Miller depict the role of self-interest in human relationships in their literary works: The Merchant of Venice and The Crucible respectively. They emphasize this thesis through examples of love, friendship, power and Christianity. Even though love and friendship are regarded as two forms of relationships where no one seeks any pragmatical purpose, in fact they covertly embody different sorts of self-interest. The triangular relationship among Antonio, Bassanio and Portia in The Merchant of Venice and the friendship between Abigail Williams and the girls in The Crucible are both based on selfish motives. Bassanio asks Antonio for money in order to marry Portia.

However, his motive for this marriage consists of not solely his love for Portia but mostly his desire to have Portia’s wealth and be able to pay his debts. He reveals this motive in Act 1, Scene 1 when he tells Antonio that he will be able to pay his debts when he marries Portia. Also Bassanio’s asking his friend, Antonio, for money contributes to the claim that friendship can be used for self-seeking economic purposes. Similarly, the indirect relationship between Portia and Antonio serves to an analogous purpose. Since Portia knows that her husband, Bassanio, has an affection for Antonio, she endeavors to save Antonio from Shylock’s malice so that Bassanio does not leave her, grieving over his friend’s self-sacrifice.

Through her powerful actions, most obvious in the trial scene in Act 5, Scene 1 when she is in disguise of a lawyer and saves Antonio’s life, Portia resembles an astute woman figure who transcends women’s standards of her time and fulfills her purpose of not losing her husband. In The Crucible, although Abigail Williams and the girls seem to be loyal friends, why they are actually bound to each other so tightly is that they fear that one of them might reveal their pretense. In fact, the reason of their unity is their common interest of being seen as ‘’the victims” instead of ‘’the witches”. In Act 1, particularly Abigail intimidates the girls, threatening them that she will not let go anyone who reveals ‘’the other things” they did in the forest, including Abigail’s drinking blood to kill Elizabeth Proctor. Therefore their friendship is vastly based on self-interest combined with an immense fear of exposure. Power and Christianity are two concepts illustrated by both Shakespeare and Miller where self-interest can be observed more clearly than in love and friendship.

Revenge, probably the most obvious form of self-interest, is prevalent in both works, portrayed through Shylock in The Merchant of Venice and Mr. Putnam in The Crucible. As a Jew who is constantly persecuted by Christians including Antonio, Shylock seeks revenge. Thus, when Antonio wants to make a bond in Act 1, he immediately seizes the opportunity to take revenge and asks for a pound of Antonio’s flesh if he forfeits the bond. In the following acts, it gets more clear that Shylock’s self motive of his bond with Antonio is not money but revenge; that’s why when he is offered three times the loan, he refuses it and insists on his ‘’pound of flesh”.

The conflict between Shylock and Antonio is simply a matter of power display, resembled by Shylock’s money and Antonio’s Christianity. Shylock attempts to take Antonio’s life to fulfill his self-interest; to quench his yen for revenge. However in the trial, his attempt turns out to be against his favor and Antonio becomes the one who is in charge of Shylock’s verdict. As a Christian who disparages Shylock because of his religion, Antonio uses this advantage to his self-interest and demands two things from Shylock, one of which is converting to Christianity. Antonio’s motive for asking Shylock to give up his religion is his desire to take revenge from the malicious Jew rather than his piety, resembling that of a missionary.

Although Antonio seems to be the one who shows mercy on the Jew, he actually adds insult to injury by taking the last thing Shylock owns: his religion. In The Crucible, Thomas Putnam’s landlust is a great example of revenge as a form of self-interest. Mr. Putnam along with his wife and his daughter accuses many innocent people of witchcraft in order to have their land. Among the victims of Thomas Putnam’s landlust are Rebecca Nurse, Francis Nurse and George Jacobs.

The reason that Mr. Putnam targets exclusively the Nurse family is that he holds a grudge against their immense amount of land and reputable social status. Thus Mr. Putnam aims to possess economical and social power by taking their land and destroying their reputation. Reverend Parris is a calculating character whom Arthur Miller created as a person who values his name and reputation more than anything else. He protects his niece Abigail and the other girls and helps them as they accuse innocent people so that his reputation as a pious Christian, a devoted reverend, is never associated with witchcraft.

On the one hand he seems like the righteous leader of the church of Salem; however behind the scenes he is a scheming, selfish man who does not reveal the girls’ fraud in order to keep his good reputation and watches silently as many innocent people are executed. As a leader who is supposed to be an exemplary Christian role model, he prefers lies to honesty and uses Christianity as a tool to serve his self-interest. The settings of The Merchant of Venice and The Crucible play a significant role in creating the theme of self-interest. The Merchant of Venice takes place in Venice in the sixteenth century. At those times Venice used to be a city of merchandise where capitalism began to thrive. This economic system allowed people to buy and sell goods and services with the incentive to gain interest and maximize their profits.

It is no coincidence that Shakespeare had chosen such a setting where self-interest –mostly in the form of economic profit- was gradually becoming the sole purpose of the life of every individual in the society. Even the Court of Venice that is supposed to be a place of justice and equality, serves to the self-interest of the powerful class in the society: the Christians. The diction The Duke of Venice uses when he addresses Shylock; the way he overtly categorizes Shylock as a merciless, malicious Jew and Antonio as ‘’a poor merchant” reveal his bias in favor of Christians and his prejudice towards Jews. Just like the Court of Venice, the Court of Salem in The Crucible serves to the self-interest of certain groups of people, distorting its function as a court of ‘’justice” and causing many people’s unjust executions. Salem, the setting of The Crucible, is a town established only a few decades before the Salem witch trials.

The church of Salem embodies Puritan beliefs and tries to maintain its authority in the recently founded town of Salem. The people of Salem are European immigrants who are trying to settle down and share the land of Salem. In such a disheveled society that is prone to any kind of chaos and where people are blinded by greed of land and power, it is very likely that a mass hysteria will take place where everyone will strive to maintain his or her own self-interest. Thus, though very different from Venice, Salem forms a perfect setting in order to portray the selfish motives of individuals. Both Miller and Shakespeare convey different kinds of self-interest through various narrative points of view. Since both works are plays, they are not limited by one perspective but they show the reader many points of view.

In The Merchant of Venice, the reader is given the self motives of disparate characters; a Jew’s revenge, a Christian’s religious domination, a woman’s fear of losing her husband and a man’s desire to gain wealth through marriage. Likewise in The Crucible, a greedy man’s landlust, a pretentious reverend’s fear of bad reputation and a scheming girl’s fear of exposure are reflected throughout the play. Therefore, both works enable the reader to see multifaceted relationships that are built upon the same basis: self-interest. The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare and The Crucible by Arthur Miller both accentuate the thesis that every relationship is motivated by self-interest. Both authors prove this thesis through multifaceted characters, intricate settings and various perspectives, using the themes of love, friendship, power and Christianity. Though having very different plots and structures; The Merchant of Venice as a tragic-comedy whereas The Crucible as a historical play, they both make the reader realize that no matter what kind of bond it possesses, every relationship harbors some sort of self-interest and it is inevitable for the conflicts to arise when these interests contradict at some point.