

'the merchant of  
venice', comedy play  
essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

When we first meet Shylock he is portrayed merely as a careful businessman. Having been asked to lend Bassanio 3, 000 ducats guaranteed by Antonio, he enquires of Antonio's ability to cover the debt.

(Act 1 - scene 3)

" Ho no, no, no, no; my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies.....

.... And then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks; the man is notwithstanding, sufficient -

Three thousand ducats, - I think I may take his bond".

Here Shylock does not doubt Antonio's reputation, but that all his wealth is tied up in ships on the sea, and that there is the obvious risk that something could go wrong which is out of Antonio's control.

When we first see Shylock meeting Antonio, we get an impression of hatred, both in a religious term, and in a business sense.

(Act 1 - Scene 3)

" How like a fawning publican he looks!

I hate him for he is a Christian

But more, for that is low simplicity

He lends out money gratis, and brings

Down the rate of usance here with us in Venice.

If I can catch him upon the hip, I will feed

The fat ancient grudge I bear him”.

Shylock portrays his hatred of Antonio because of his Christianity, this shows he is a bigot, and dislikes Antonio because he charges no interest for his loans, and makes it difficult for People to loan money with interest like Shylock, and he says that he has no business sense. Antonio doesn't like or dislike Shylock, he doesn't respect him.

(Act 1 – Scene 3)

“ Go to, then, you may come to me, and say,

‘ Shylock, we would have moneys’; you say so:

You that did void your rheum upon my beard,

And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur

Over your threshold; moneys is your suit”.

Shylock reacts to Antonio asking about the rate of interest.

Then Shylock goes on to talk about the treatment of Jews (105 – 109),

And the way Antonio treats him (122 – 125).

This shows Shylock as being any normal person, protecting his beliefs and getting angry at the cheek of Antonio wanting money even after the way he has treated him.

When the Jews first came to England in 1066, they provided a vital service to the kings as bankers. In 1144 the first charge of ' Blood Libel' was made against the Jews, it involved William of Northwich, the Jews were supposed to have purchased a young Christian child before pesach (Passover), during pesach, the Jews of Northwich were supposed to have had tortured with all the works that had been put upon Jesus before he was crucified, the torture was part of a strange satanic ritual. The blood of the child was collected and used in the pesach seder (a ritual meal). Jewish settlements were attacked as a result of this. And then in 1190 there was a brutal attack on the Jews in York, Clifford's Tower, on the 16th of March a small Jewish community were gathered for protection inside the tower,

" Rather than perish at the hands of the violent mob that awaited them outside, many of the Jews took their own lives; others died in the flames they had lit, and those who finally surrendered were massacred and murdered", this is a source taken from ' English Heritage', 1995, it describes the terrible crimes against the Jews

When Bassanio confronts Shylock with the request for a loan Shylock carefully considers the loan, as said in the first quotation he thinks that Antonio investing all of his money in an armada of ships is not a good idea, and considers the dangers of his ships at sea, wind, rocks and pirates, but he still thinks he is sufficient enough despite the ships, so he takes the bond.

(Act 1 – scene three)

” Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound

Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in

What part of your body pleaseth me.”

Here, Shylock shows his cold bloodedness and cruelty by demanding a pound of Antonio’s flesh if he doesn’t pay back the loan in the allocated time.

Antonio and Shylock have a history of hatred towards each other, arguments and fights in the streets.

“ Fair sir you spat on me Wednesday last;

You spurned me such a day: another time

You called me a dog”

This is evidence of their hatred, a slight argument in the street.

After Shylocks daughter Jessica runs away with much of his jewels and money, She says that she is ashamed to be her father’s daughter

“ But though I am a daughter to his own blood,

I am not to his manners”.

He is hurt and furious, and greets rumours of Antonio’s failed ships with ‘ Savage delight’.

(Act three – scene 1)

“... Let him look to his bond! He was wont to call me usurer; let him look to his bond! He was wont to Lend money for a Christian courtesy; let him look to

His bond!”

He says that the bond shall not be forfeited, no matter what happens,

Shylock wants his flesh, and revenge.

This shows him as any normal person wanting payment of a loan.

When one of Antonio’s friends comes up to Shylock and asks him to be

Merciful, Shylock reacts by saying:

(Act three – scene 1)

“...I am a Jew. Hath a Jew not eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, Senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same

Diseases, healed by the same means, warmed

And cooled by the same winter and summer as a

Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you

Tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we

Not die? – And if you wrong us, shall we not want revenge”.

Shylock is pleading the victim; he is saying this in reply to Salerio's speech (47 & 48), just because he is a Jew, and why should the deal not go through, just because Antonio does not have the means to pay the debt? Why should he not have his flesh?

Shylock up to now has been portrayed as a villain; here Solanio says a quote that gives another insight to Shylocks character

(Act 2 scenes 8)

" As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:

' My daughter! - O! My ducats! - O My daughter!

Fled with Christian! - O my Christian ducats! -

Justice! The law! My Ducats, and my daughter!"

This is Solanio talking about what he heard Shylock muttering to himself in the street.

Although he cares deeply for his daughter, it appears he cares more for his money and jewels. This is complex, has Shakespeare portrayed him as the victim? Or the villain? He is the victim because his daughter

Has eloped with a Christian (his servant), taken his money and jewels, but he is the villain in the sense that he must have been a bad father for her to elope, and for her to be ashamed to be his daughter.

Portia and her maid Nerissa go in disguise to Venice to be lawyers for Antonio they go to defend him and make Shylock back down from his bond.

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When Shylock arrives in the courtroom, the Duke addresses him, and he is seated, the duke asks why have useless flesh, when you can have the money back that you lent in the first place?

(Act 4 scenes 1)

“ You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have

A weight of carrion flesh than to receive

Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that!

But say it is my humor – is it answered?”

Shylock is a victim of his own hatred, he won't take the money instead of the flesh, because he dislikes Antonio so much, He would rather scar him than have him in debt. And, he gives no answer to the Duke's question, (20 – 24), apart from, why should he? Why change the bond just because Antonio hasn't the means to pay him?

When Shylock refuses to give in, he is accused of being a bloodthirsty dog and cruel, (Act 4 scenes 1)

“ Not on thy sole, but on thy soul, harsh Jew,

Thou mak'st thy knife; but no metal can,

No, not the hangman's axe, bear half the keenness

Of thy sharp envy. Can no prayers pierce thee?”



This is Shylock as a bloodthirsty dog, and he won't take a hint from anyone, He still wants his flesh, and no knife, not even the 'hangman's axe bear half the keenness of thy sharp envy'.

What Gratiano says (131 - 134), is that Shylock must have been a wolf that was hung for slaughter of a man,

And the spirit went into shylocks body, Shylock is unmoved by this statement.

When the Judge agrees to the taking of the pound of flesh, Portia finds a loophole, Shylock has no idea that Nerissa and Portia are women in disguise and that they are only there to turn his deal against him.

" Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.

Shed thou no blood; nor cut thou less nor more

But just a pound of flesh: if thou cutt'st more

Or less than a pound,

...Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate".

So Shylock must ensure that he cuts exactly one pound of flesh, not a hair in either direction, and he must not drop a single drop of Antonio's blood otherwise he would be killed, and his money shared.

He is a victim of his own misfortune; he did not look closely enough into the bond and all of its requirements, so missing out on his chance of revenge.

After this, Shylock tries to get the money instead of facing death, but Portia says that he denied the money in front of the court.

(Act 4 - scenes 1)

" It is enacted in the laws of Venice,

If it be proven against the alien

That by direct or indirect attempts

He seek the life of any citizen,

The party ' gainst the which he doth contrive,

Shall seize one half his goods; the other half

Comes to the privy coffer of the state,

Of the dukes only, ' gainst all other voice".

As said, Shylock tried to kill a citizen of Venice, the person that he tried to kill is entitled to at least half of his money and possessions.

And only the duke can say otherwise.

And so Shylock is forced to become a Christian, and to have two godfathers, and when he dies, his money shall be shared with Lorenzo and Jessica and the state of Venice, he must make the will in front of the whole courtroom.

(Act 4 - scenes1)

" I am content; so he will let me have

The other half in use, to render it

Upon his death unto the gentleman

That lately stole his daughter.

Two things provided more, - that for this favor,

He presently become a Christian;

The other that he do a recorded gift,

Here in the court, of all he dies possessed

Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter."

I have come to the conclusion that Shakespeare portrayed Shylock as a complex character, at first he was portrayed as a careful businessman, and as the play proceeded he was a victim of his own greed and misfortune. His daughter left him, and took a lot of his jewels and money, and then he went to court to get his flesh, he was not only confronted by a biased lawyer, but also told that he must either die, or convert to Christian, and was told to make a will in front of the court, which states that he must, when he dies, give half of his money to his daughter Jessica and Lorenzo, and the other half to the state of Venice.