

Do you sympathise
with shylock, and is
the play a comedy



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The Merchant of Venice by Shakespeare was intended to be and is performed as a comedy; however throughout its several plots it has many tragic elements. For this reason it may be best described as a tragi-comedy. Of the plots, those involving Shylock, the Jewish moneylender are perhaps the most famous. As a Jew, Shylock is insulted and mistreated by the Christians of Venice; he is generally regarded as inferior. He remarks in his first scene; “ You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,” the Venetian society hate him because of his race. However, he is an affluent man, having made a fortune from money lending, which was a typical Jewish profession at the time. Of Shylock’s many Christian rivals he despises Antonio especially as he lends money free of interest thus undermining Shylock’s business.

In the play Bassanio, a young friend of Antonio a rich merchant, requires money to woo a young noble called Portia. Antonio, in order to get Bassanio his money goes to Shylock, who agrees to loan Antonio the money placing a bond or contract stating that if Shylock is not paid back in three months he will be owed a pound of Antonio’s flesh.

Firstly I will say that I do sympathise with Shylock, I do not however, sympathise with him in every respect. The reasons for this are not that he is a Jew, but because of the way he is treated for being so, yet in the end not all of his actions are justified.

We can see that Shakespeare was very much setting up Shylock to look the villain. For example he comes back to challenges with quotes from the Scripture; the Old Testament, which to the first audiences was a very

apparent comparison to the devil: “ When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban’s sheep-This Jacob from our holy Abram was, As his wise mother wrought in his behalf,

The third possessor; ay, he was the third.” This was because in other Scripture, in particular the Christian New Testament this is how the devil behaves to cover his point of view and actions.

Shakespeare also neglected to include a scene in which Shylock first learns of his daughter’s elopement, which it can argued that would have promoted a large amount of sympathy for the character; seeing that she was his only family. Instead we are shown Lancelot’s comic interpretation of the character’s reaction: “ Oh my Ducats, Oh my daughter, Oh my Ducats.” This, as with Shylock’s opening line; “ Three thousand ducats,” ducats of course being the currency, presents the character as a very greedy, materialistic, miserly old man.

So we can tell that the audience was not meant to be wholly sympathetic with Shylock, but today I feel that he being promoted as a villain is a good reason for sympathy. Especially so as this play can be considered so controversial today and would certainly not be allowed if it were new; it is saying that we should hate this wicked Jew, while in our modern society where we strive to treat people of different races and cultures equally, we cannot accept this.

In the meantime, in another related plotline Shylock’s daughter Jessica has fled her father with Lorenzo a Christian friend of Bassanio. She takes with her father’s money and jewels and forsaking her religion. Shylock did deserve to <https://assignbuster.com/do-you-sympathise-with-shylock-and-is-the-play-a-comedy/>

lose his daughter though, because she was ashamed of him and he had struck her and kept her locked in his house with all his possessions, almost like she belonged to him as well. But this also shows Shylock as a victim as he is afraid of the world in which he is mistreated and has been reduced to striking his daughter because of this.

Seeing as Shylock has lived a substandard life due to the taunts of others and that he has recently saddened and angered at the Christians for the loss of his daughter and his money he is now not looking for the most peaceful end for his deal with Antonio, in fact he is looking for a way to murder him.

Then tragedy does ensue when the audience hear that a ship of Antonio's has been wrecked in the channel so he has not the money to pay Shylock back and that he is to take the bond seriously. From a religious man we expect compassion, yet from a Jew the original audience could expect only the most wicked of characters. He takes the bond to the court, demanding his pound of flesh.

This is where Shakespeare works in the perhaps only passage in which we are to pity and relate to Shylock, where before the trial he recounts his feelings about his oppression and mistreatment, and begins to speak about Antonio:

“ He hath disgraced me, and

hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses,

mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my

bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine
enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath
not a Jew 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
revenge?"

This is very powerful, relating back to how he is treated just because he is a Jew, despite his physical similarities, which we all share. This is set up to justify what he is about to do.

The action then proceeds to the court and from the moment the judge says: "Send in the Jew," we see that he, just like the many others, is prejudiced against him. The court however, hesitant as they are, can find no problem with his contract and so Shylock comes incredibly close to killing Antonio right there, with a knife to his chest ready to remove the pound of flesh

closest to his heart. We then see Bassanio offer great sums of money from his wealthy new marriage to Portia in order to save his friend. These are then tripled, but still Shylock stands by his bond. So we see that he was not the greedy character he was made out to be, but that he is greedy in an entirely different, more sinister way.

The court then sees in who they believe to be a doctor of laws, but is really Portia dressed as this man, a fact that they are all unaware of. This creates a great effect of both dramatic irony and the humour of this situation. She says that it truly is the right of Shylock to take his pound flesh, unless he shows mercy; “ Portia: Then must the Jew be merciful. Shylock: On what compulsion must I? tell me that.” The audience find it hard to sympathise with Shylock here because he is so vicious. Portia then discovers that if Shylock spills a drop of blood his fortune will go to the state, which would surely have happened were he to pierce the skin. Portia then reaches the conclusion that for attempting to murder a citizen in this way, half of Shylock’s money goes to the state, the other half and his life are in the hands of the wronged party. Antonio by contrast is merciful with his advantage setting the conditions in exchange for Shylock’s life as that he must become a Christian and upon his death leave all his money to his Christian daughter and her family. Shylock has lost everything, his friend Tubal, another Jew left them in disgust, when he was on the verge of killing Antonio. All these punishments form the worst possible thing that could happen to Shylock.

To analyse Shylock to the full we have to see that he is an immensely complex character, who while presenting some passionate evil tendencies, such as the striking of his daughter and his murder attempt in the <https://assignbuster.com/do-you-sympathise-with-shylock-and-is-the-play-a-comedy/>

courtroom, he is really just an incredibly frail character who has been broken by the cruel and harsh world in which he lives.

In a sense Shylock deserves to lose his religion as he was seeking to murder Antonio, so not truly following it anyway. He also loses his only friend, his daughter and his wealth, which is tragic but he did deserve it although it is tragic that we do not see anyone granting him forgiveness. Many bad things happen in the play but all of the characters with the exception of Shylock have happy endings, but to the intended, generally Christian, Elizabethan audience they would have seen his ending as a happy one as he has become a Christian, he has been 'cured' of his Judaism. It really is the end for Shylock, while he does not die he really loses everything, even his religion the thing he is most proud of.

Another point is that Jessica; a Jew to begin with, ends up perfectly content, whilst Shylock; her father does not. So being Jewish in origin has nothing to do with how happy you end up. So Shakespeare was not saying that bad things would happen to all Jews, but just those who like Shylock seek to harm others. Although we can sympathise with those who did, as they were mistreated and to an extent had their lives ruined. But this went further than just simple teasing, there was extreme racial hate and prejudice, the big example of this in recent history being the holocaust.

Ironically had Bassanio not had the money to woo Portia, she would not have defeated him in court, conferring on him his punishment. But this was Shylock's fault, not just because he made the bond but because he desired to spill Antonio's Christian blood; therefore making himself indirectly

responsible for his own downfall. So overall I definitely do sympathise with him a great deal, and although I can understand him wanting to harm those who are cruel to him, there is no justification for his attempt at taking Antonio's life. He simply does go too far.

In regard to the play's genre you can look at it in many different ways, it is certainly not simply a tragedy due to its comic elements, yet these elements leave its position debateable. Many people would surmise that the mere presence of comedy within the play means that it is strictly a comedy, some arguing that there are therefore no serious issues in the play, or rather that the audience are not meant to take them seriously. When this story comes to be categorised among Shakespeare's plays it is often, if not always to be found under Comedy, yet this may also be just because it contains some comic sections.

There is also a strong argument for the humorous parts of the play being simple comic relief to break up and relieve the play's tension and other elements. Something, which at the time it was first being performed, was definitely effective and of which there is a sufficient amount for it to be a "tragi-comedy". There are lot of both these conflicting elements throughout the play, but it is where the two meet that it becomes most powerful and where it also becomes so controversial when considered today. So it is fitting to describe the play as a merger of both. A major problem in this debate is that language and communication as a whole have altered so dramatically in the 400 or so years since the writing, in which time the humour has not lost its meaning, but lots of it has become significantly less accessible to people

today. Yet the comedy is still there, as is the tragedy with Antonio's near death and Shylock losing everything.

Consequently, both these elements remain as the jointly dominant themes of the play and are inseparable in what can only be called the great tragedy-comedy *The Merchant of Venice*.