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## Shylock As A Hero Or Villain In The Merchant Of Venice

'The Merchant of Venice' is a comedic play written by William Shakespeare during the time of 1596 or 1597, when there was a constant altercation between that of Christians and Jews within the Venetian society. Shakespeare wrote the play in a time where Jews were seen as lower in prominence compared with that of a Christian, where many had been too afraid to share their religion in the fear of being persecuted or receiving anti-Semitic behaviour. Initially, during the Elizabethan Era audiences would have perceived this play as amusing because it was aimed at those who were Christian. Shylock would have been seen as a comic stereotype villain due to his bright red beard, continually being scorned and abused by the audience. In comparison to our modern-day society, where contemporary audiences would see this play in a serious light with a sense of empathy due to prejudice and discrimination received by current religious groups. Throughout the play, the protagonist (Shylock) is defined as either a villain or a victim due to his individual beliefs and actions displayed before the audience. This divide between good and evil is a major theme that is portrayed through the character of Shylock as he develops within the play and this, therefore, is my main focus.

From the beginning of the play, Shylock's scheming nature can be interpreted as characteristics of a villain due to the first time he speaks out in act 1 scene 3. Shylock's beginning line 'three thousand ducats' immediately conveys to the audience a man who regards wealth as a priority over everything else that is valuable to him, indicating evil traits. Furthermore, the perspectives of an Elizabethan audience would perceive Shylock as 'the devil' because of his strong religious hostility against a society made up of mainly Christians. However, one could argue this hatred for Shylock equally has a negative effect on the Jewish community, which fuelled the motive for his revenge against Antonio. This is because Shylock perceives Antonio, as someone who he sees only in the light of anguish for his hatred crimes and disrespectful behaviour. This is apparent when he admits to the same prejudice views based on the opposing religion, indicating that 'he hated him for he is a Christian'. Moreover, the use of soliloquy here creates a sense of tension between the audience and the characters, as we understand the untold reasons for Shylock's indignant behaviour.

Many people believe, 'The Merchant of Venice', portrays anti-Semitic behaviour throughout the play, as we understand the intentions of Shakespeare for presenting Shylock as a 'Jewish moneylender'; who's main priority is to work without any issues. This is because contextually within 16th century Venice, Jews were discriminated against for their presentation and religion, forced to carry out the profession of usury. This is apparent when Shylock is victimised for his appearance when Antonio; 'spits upon' his 'Jewish gabardine'. In my opinion, this is a strikingly emotive line as Shylock's language is spare and frank unlike the Christians before

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him who are full of hypocrisy – as they similarly describe him as a ‘cut-throat dog’. By presenting Shylock as someone who is ‘cut-throat’, it can have connotations towards someone who is very shrewd and ruthless within business; especially by using the motif of animals – ‘dog’. Subsequently, this is ironic because the Christians have made him this way. Therefore, this presents Shylock as a figure of fun, but also a victim as it conveys the verbal and physical abuse he frequently endures, provoking a sense of empathy from a modern-day audience. Here, Shakespeare provides his audience with a religious theme, which most could relate to as, during the Tudor period, there had been frequent persecutions against people of different faiths.

Essentially, within act 3 scene 1, Shylock gives an eye-opening speech on the prospects of prejudice and its effect on one's hatred for one another through the use of listing, which builds up tension to the point where he only desires revenge. Shylock uses plain, blunt prose when stating that he has the same: ‘organs, dimensions, senses, affections and passions’ as a Christian. This highlights that although in society people may have different beliefs, this should not affect or compare to their individual humanity. Particularly for a modern-day audience, I believe this could evoke a distinct emotion of sympathy as it suggests that despite Shylock becoming de-humanised by the Christians, he is still able to express his feelings and emotions. Thus displaying a poignant character with a range of complex feelings too, however, this negates his stereotypical role previously seen. The use of prose signifies Shakespeare's further intentions to alienate Shylock as his speech lacks formality and metrical structure due to him being lower class, drawing attention to those of upper class – Antonio.

Likewise, Shylock's speech culminates on the idea of revenge when he directly speaks to the Christian audience explaining that ‘the villainy you teach me, I will execute’. Throughout history, ‘if a Christian wrongs a Jew’, they are free to the action of ‘revenge’ and so, therefore, Shylock feels that if Christians are supposed to be forgiving and are not, then their teachings have brought him to understand this principle of ‘revenge’. In addition, this speech can be seen from the viewpoint of an Elizabethan who would most likely see Shylock's frustration as something full of humour. However, a modern-day audience, including myself, may feel Shylock's suffering and passionate tone to be intended as a way of persuasion and plea for understanding.

Shakespeare presents Shylock as a villainous Jew within a prosperous and powerful Venetian courtroom within act 4 scene 1, where our sympathies may shift towards the Christian, Antonio as his life could be at risk. During the scene, the tone shifts to a sense of tragedy as Antonio prepares for death explaining that; ‘I'll pay it instantly with all my heart’. From this, it indicates that Antonio is willing to pay with his life in order to rectify his previous action and fatal flaws. This provokes a feeling of disgust and animosity towards Shylock, the ‘Jew’ who is trying to kill a Christian man, who from the perspective of an Elizabethan audience may consider innocent. This is because they believe that someone of their own religion is going to be stripped away of

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their own life due to a 'strange', 'inhuman wretch' 'Jew' who cannot possess the Christian 'quality of mercy'. Subsequently, the use of strong, powerful adjectives indicates Shylock's evil intentions. In my opinion, a modern audience could view society as being hypocritical, suggesting that the Christian way of thinking is ironically not as perfect as it first may seem.

In addition, Shylock can be seen as a misguided victim by the end of this scene, as he is persecuted for his past intentions to fulfil his bond, losing everything that was ever important to him. This is apparent when Shylock is ordered to 'seek the life of any citizen', indicating that he must become a Christian or otherwise he will be victimised and subject to harsh treatment by law. From my perspective, a sense of sympathy would be provoked, as most would agree that no human should ever be mistreated or alienated from a group of others. Although Shylock has indirectly put this on himself by wanting to go by the law to the letter, in my opinion, he has suffered enough. By losing his daughter, money and now having to 'presently become a Christian' (religion), which is how Shylock deems to be recognised, he is truly defeated. This is shown through Shylock's final lines as he asks that they 'send the deeds after him', suggesting the theme of death. Furthermore, this can be unpicked to highlight that Shylock's loss of everything has inevitably caused him finally to give up the bond but more importantly life as he exits the stage, due to the use of monosyllabic words that create a dull, bitter tone. This would contrast with the perspective of an Elizabethan audience, who would feel relieved that the evil antagonistic Jew has ultimately lost. Moreover, they would possibly believe he deserves the final verdict he receives, which reluctantly I would agree with because he has inevitably tried to kill someone.

Naturally, the perspectives of Shylock being classed as a victim or a villain fluctuates from a dehumanised Jew to one that is empowering, defending his religion against the laws of society. Therefore, one could argue that Shylock's life has a sense of misfortune and tragedy rather than the original idea of a comical effect because his revengeful schemes were ultimately flawed. What's more, the controversial issues raised within the play could make an audience of modern society feel a strong sense of injustice towards Shylock – being a victim – because of the mistreatment of Jews throughout history – especially in the light of the events in the Holocaust. Subsequently, many people agree that this play should be classed as a tragedy due to its connotations to a wider audience who believe that this can no longer be seen in a light-hearted way.

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