

WJEC

GCSE English Literature

Activities and Exam Practice

The Merchant of Venice

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Characters

The characters in the play are vivid and impress themselves upon the audience. We laugh at the antics of Portia's suitors, worry about Antonio's bond and are pleased when the lovers are all reunited and happy.

Shakespeare's characters have interesting personalities. They represent people of their time and yet appeal to us hundreds of years later. Their problems are as understandable today as they were then. Shakespeare's characters reflect the difficulties that people can encounter when there is greed, betrayal and love involved. The play has many moods – love, mockery, sorrow, happiness and joy, as well as jealousy and anger.

Activity 1

List the characters and draw them as they would appear on the stage. Would you put them in Tudor costumes or modern ones? How would the audience identify the type of character they are through your costume?

Shylock

Shylock is an interesting character. It could appear that Shakespeare is writing an anti-Semitic play showing a Jewish character in a bad light. It could also be argued that Shakespeare is showing the audience that regardless of race or religion, we have a character who feels and can be hurt just like any other person. How the audience sees Shylock can depend on how an actor presents the character on stage. We are shown a man whom Christians revile yet also rely on for loans. He has to deal with people who do not respect him. His daughter rejects her Jewish heritage and takes some of his wealth and his wife's ring from him when she elopes to become a Christian and

Lorenzo's wife. Shylock can be understood as a man wanting revenge on his enemy, Antonio. In demanding the penalty that the law can give him, Shylock is trapped and loses everything to those who have betrayed him – namely Jessica, Lorenzo and Antonio. His life is spared only on condition that he becomes a Christian and leaves his wealth to his daughter and son-in-law.

Although Shylock demands his pound of flesh, the audience is not allowed to forget how he has been treated by Antonio, who does not behave in what Christians today would regard as a Christian manner. His hatred of Antonio is shown in his wish to extract revenge on him and kill him. Jessica provides a glimpse of a harsh and mean father-figure whose concern is for his wealth not his daughter. We see a character hurt by the treatment he receives, yet still capable of harshness and cruelty himself.

Activity 2

Find evidence in the play that shows the audience what type of character Shylock is.

Think about:

- his actions
- what he says about Antonio's situation
- how he responds to people
- what others think of him
- how he behaves towards Jessica
- what you think about Shylock as a character.

Use the Character Sheet to note your evidence.

Characters (continued)

Portia

Portia is lively and quick-witted. She is a wealthy woman whose father, by leaving them the casket test, has tried to ensure that fortune hunters cannot marry her. The one who chooses correctly wins Portia and her possessions. Portia does not like this but is an obedient daughter and follows his will. She has definite views about her suitors and is not afraid to express them in Act 1, scene 2. She can appear racist in her comment about Morocco – do you think she is or is she just expressing the social view of Shakespeare’s time?

Portia is pleased when Bassanio returns to woo her and is willing to marry him, give her wealth to save Antonio and then go to Venice disguised as a lawyer to help. Portia shows different character traits, she is kind and generous with her wealth. She follows the rules but also defies convention by dressing as a man. She shows no mercy to Shylock in the court scene as she allows him to think he has won the case. She then gets her ring back from Bassanio although it was a marriage gift he vowed not to part with. She returns to Belmont and torments him about the loss of the ring before she reveals her part in the trial. Antonio also is given good news. His wealth is restored to him, so he no longer has any hold on the couple. Portia loves Bassanio and is clever enough to ensure that he knows that he owes her Antonio’s life – which frees him of a debt to Antonio.

Activity 3

Imagine you are Portia. Explain how you feel about Bassanio.

Think about:

- what it must have meant to love somebody who wants your money as well as you.
- what your views about the casket test are
- what you felt about Antonio and his relationship with Bassanio
- your decision to help at the trial scene and your actions after the trial

Use the character sheet to help prepare your response to the task.

Extension activity

Imagine you are a witness to the trial. How would you explain the behaviour of the characters in court?

Think about:

- introducing them – how would you describe them?
- the development of their story – their role in the play
- what others thought of them
- how others caused them to change their views
- how they responded to Shylock’s demands for the forfeit.

Conclude with your response to them as characters. Make sure that you use evidence from the play to show that the points you make are valid.