The Merchant Of Venice

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Shylock's Character

Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" is a fascinating play that contains many interesting and compelling characters. Although he only appears in five scenes of the play, it has to be said that Shylock holds the interest of the audience from beginning to end.

The most important aspect of Shylock's character is the fact that he is a Jew living in a city controlled by Christians. Everything that Shylock values and holds dear is despised by these Christians. They hate the fact that he's a moneylender, and are deeply mistrustful of his religion. Probably the most famous monologue of the play is where Shylock defends himself. He is treated badly by every Christian character in the play. They call him a 'non-believer, [a] cut throat dog and spit upon [his] Jewish gabardine'. However, Shakespeare does not present Shylock as merely being a victim. In fact Shylock's defence of his plight is one of the most moving and thought provoking speeches in literature:

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, heal'd by the same means,
warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer,
as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?

Yet, for all his passionate humanism, he can be a deeply unpleasant character. His own daughter resents him, he exploits the economic difficulties of others, and he mistreats his servant, Lancelot. When his daughter runs away, taking money and jewels with her, he concerns himself with the lost money wishing that she were "were dead at [his] foot, and the jewels in her ear."
What makes Shylock so fascinating is that it is very difficult to know how to react to him. When one examines the play carefully, one finds that Shylock has many strong motives for behaving as he does. Although he treats Antonio despicably, he is not as we have seen without cause. The latter has by his own admission "spat on" him, "spurned" him, and "called [him] dog." Furthermore, Antonio is entirely dismissive of Shylock's complaints. In fact, he even goes so far as to promise to do the same again:

\[
\text{I am as like to call thee so again, to} \\
\text{spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.}
\]

What makes Shylock's character so interesting is the fact that he embraces an all-consuming hatred fuelled by a desire to achieve vengeance at any cost:

\[
\text{If I can catch him once upon the} \\
\text{hip, I will feed fat the ancient} \\
\text{grudge I bear him.}
\]

As a result, he devises a reprehensible plot to destroy Antonio. However, Shakespeare once more unsettles the reader when Shylock's plans are uncovered and he is brought to justice. Much of the play centres on the notion of justice and "the quality of mercy." Yet, when Shylock throws himself at the mercy of the court, Christian justice is exposed for what it is:

\[
\text{Be assured, thou shall have justice} \\
\text{more than thou desirist.}
\]

In the heartbreaking trial scene we witness a profound abuse of judicial power. Here, Shylock is forced to renounce his religion and surrender half his money to Antonio, while the other half is promised to the daughter who betrayed him. Despite his crimes, the sight of a broken and virtually destitute Shylock is difficult to bear:

I found Shylock to be a fascinating character because he inspires so many mixed emotions in me. I felt revulsion at his attempted murder of Antonio, and
anger and pity over the trial scene. Although this play is called "The Merchant of Venice" it is in fact, more than anything else a play about Shylock, the Jewish moneylender.

**Points to consider about Shylock**

- Shylock is the negative and stereotype picture of the usurer that most of the Elizabethans had—one that was seen as a ‘greedy dog’, ‘a leech’.

- The interpretation of Shylock's character is difficult and also to some extent ambiguous. He has been portrayed variously as a comic character a malevolent villain and a victim.

- While he can be played as being comic, when he is the tragic protagonist he ‘usurps the centre of the stage.’ Shylock “represents the killjoy against whom the pleasure-loving characters unite.”

- Shylock exists as a visible complication to the smooth running of Bassanio’s friendship with Antonio and his courtship of Portia. One can almost say that is the character that makes the plot possible.

- As John Palmer has said, Shylock is “An imaginative realization of what it means to wear the Star of David.”

- Shylock is a Jew in a Gentile Society, an alien who is never accepted. He is proud of his race, his religion but he is up against a Venetian society that is insufferable to the outsider.

- Even his daughter attacks all that he holds dear. She marries a Christian and takes away his money—his family pride, the only “props” in his life.
He is humiliated and scorned at by the Christians. One feels sympathy for such a man, who is more sinned against than sinning.

During the trial scene it is even less easy to make a moral decision, a comfortable discrimination between the gentle Christian and rapacious Jew.

The reader’s and the audience’s sympathies are directed towards Shylock who earlier had pleaded his humanity: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?”

Our compassion is due to Shylock’s plight but also because of the unease that we experience at the behaviour of the Christians: “A Daniel...! Mark Jew!”

Here the Christian cruelty is on par with that of the Jew. However in the 20th C we are more sensitive and conscious about political correctness.

The issue of racism has further complicated Shylock’s character. Shylock’s role attracts greater sympathy.

One feels that the Venetian Christians have denied Shylock’s humanity and we are all the time reminded of the Anti-Semitism of the Nazi’s and of the Genocide that took place during the holocaust.

These modern attitudes then in the words of Edwin Booth, tend “to lift (Shylock) out of the darkness of his native element of revengeful selfishness into the light of the venerable Hebrew, the Martyr, the Avenger.”
Shylock can be seen as a product of centuries of racial persecution. Thus Shylock’s character oscillates between the malignant caricature and the dignified tragic hero.

Is Shylock a representation of the Jewish hatred for Christians or is he motivated due to his personal hatred for Antonio? When Shylock says, “I hate him for he is a Christian: But more for...He lends out money gratis...” one realises that his hatred is based on money and he is not the religious martyr that he portrays himself to be.

He takes a gamble when he lends the money and makes Antonio sign the “merry” bond. He has no way of knowing that all of Antonio’s fortune will sink and that he will be able to take the forfeit. His hatred for Antonio and the rest is apparent throughout.

It could be that he is a villain who is allowed to express the sort of treatment that has made him what he is and he justifies his route to villainy.

However the humanity of Shylock as seen here is an unconscious by product of the Shakespeare’s dramatic genius. It is an example of the interplay between technical craft and creative imagination. It is an example of a character so dynamic that it takes over from the writer and assumes dimensions of an independent entity. He evokes an interest that is beyond the scope of the play. Shylock for us is not just a Jew; he stands for all the people that are discriminated against, people who suffer injustice due to their colour, religion and even caste.

And this is the universality of Shakespeare; he created a character not for his time but for all times. But Shakespeare also set a dramatic problem when he established ‘the villain as hero’ as Shylock does ‘steal the show’ and overshadows the formal hero. And it is true that, as E.W. Godwin said, “at Shylock’s exit the play is virtually over.”
Shylock evokes multiple reactions in the reader and the audience. When we view the Christian smugness and hypocrisy we see a modern parallel to the treatment of the any underclass. But one is also repulsed by his treatment of his daughter and his mercenary attitude.

“The Merchant of Venice” - A Dramatic Scene

The play that I have studied is the merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare. In the play, a noble but impoverished Venetian asks his friend Antonio for a loan to impress an heiress. His friend agrees but is forced to borrow a sum of money from a cynical, Jewish moneylender. In order to obtain the loan, shylock forces Antonio to sign a chilling contract to honour the debt with a pound of his own flesh. In my opinion the most dramatic scene in this complex and controversial comedy is the trial scene which takes place in Act IV, scene i.

In this scene, Antonio has been brought before the Venetian court as a result of his failure to honour the terms of his agreement with Shylock. In my opinion, this scene is highly dramatic for a number of reasons. Shylock enters the scene well past the point of reconciliation. He wants Antonio dead and is deaf to the pleas of mercy from all those present. The arrival of Bellario of Padoa (Portia in disguise) does much to heighten both the tension and dramatic irony of the scene. Portia agrees with shylock that the law must be upheld. By insisting on the strict observation of the law, Portia forces the scene to its inevitable and dramatic conclusion. At this point the audience is resigned to Antonio’s death. As shylock prepares to take his pound of flesh Portia stops him. In a moment of great drama, she tells him that he may not spill one drop of the merchant’s blood. Furthermore, she reminds him that should he do so “his lands and goods [will] by the laws of Venice be confiscated”.

The effect on Shylock is devastating and the audience relishes in his undoing. The heightened tension of the previous moments is replaced by an overwhelming sense of relief as we come to realise that Antonio’s life will be spared. Shylock attempts to leave with the original 3000 ducats. However, Portia reminds him that he has already refused such a sum “in open court” at the same time she makes one further dramatic proclamation. She reminds the court and of course Shylock that if any foreigner should “by direct or indirect attempts seek the life of a citizen”, then he must forfeit half his goods to the citizen and the other half to the state. In a dramatic twist of faith, Shylock is forced to turn to the duke for mercy.

Two Characters in Conflict

The play I have studied is the “Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare. The two characters in conflict are Antonio, the Christian merchant of Venice, and Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. The bitter conflict is finally resolved in the trial scene, in act IV scene 1.

There are a number of reasons for the conflict between Shylock and Antonio. The first of these reasons is simply Shylock’s hatred of Christians. This is obvious in the way he talks about Antonio; “how like a fawning publican he looks, I hate him for he is Christian”. The second reason is Shylock’s deep resentment of Antonio’s anti-Semitism. Shylock rails against the injustice of how he has been treated and reminds us that he is every bit worthy of respect as his fellow Christians:

‘hath not a Jew eyes?’

Furthermore, Shylock views Antonio as being bad for business because he “lends out money gratis and brings down the rate of usance in Venice”. If all this were not enough, Antonio has publicly ridiculed and demeaned him in the past and consequently, he wants to “catch him once upon the hip,” in order to “feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him”. The conflict between the two is further accentuated by fundamental differences in their personalities. They are at the opposite end of
the moral spectrum. Shylock is ego-centred, acquisitive and mercenary. This is shown when his daughter Jessica elopes with a Christian, stealing a sum of his money in the process. Shylock is more concerned about the loss of his money than the loss of his own child professing that he “would [his] daughter were dead at [his] foot and the jewels in her ear”. On the other hand, Antonio is selfless, caring and good-natured:

“*A kinder man threads not the earth*”.

The longstanding conflict between Antonio and Shylock is ultimately resolved in the denouement of the play, the trial scene. When Bassanio asks Antonio for financial help to impress an heiress, Antonio agrees but is forced to borrow a sum of money from Shylock. In order to obtain the loan, Shylock forces Antonio to sign a chilling contract to honour the debt with a pound of his own flesh. In the trial scene Antonio has been brought before the Venetian court as a result of his failure to honour the terms of his bond. Shylock enters the court well past the point of reconciliation, he wants Antonio dead and is deaf to the pleas of mercy from all those present. He sharpens his knife ready to rip out Antonio’s heart. A disguised Portia takes charge of proceedings, but shylock is unmoved by her pleas for mercy. He insists that the terms of the bond must be met:

“*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.*”

Although all the cards seem in his favour, Shylock suffers a crushing reversal. The conflict is ultimately resolved in Antonio’s favour when the villain is undone by his own treachery. Portia points out that if he takes a single drop of Antonio’s blood he will loose everything; because, this is not part of the bond. Shylock is “*hoist by his own petard*”. As a result of his conflict with Antonio, he loses half his wealth and is forced to become Christian. He leaves the court a broken man.
For a variety of reasons Shylock and Antonio engage in a bitter and long running Conflict. In the end, Shylock is destroyed by this conflict and the audience is left wondering about the justice of what happens to him.