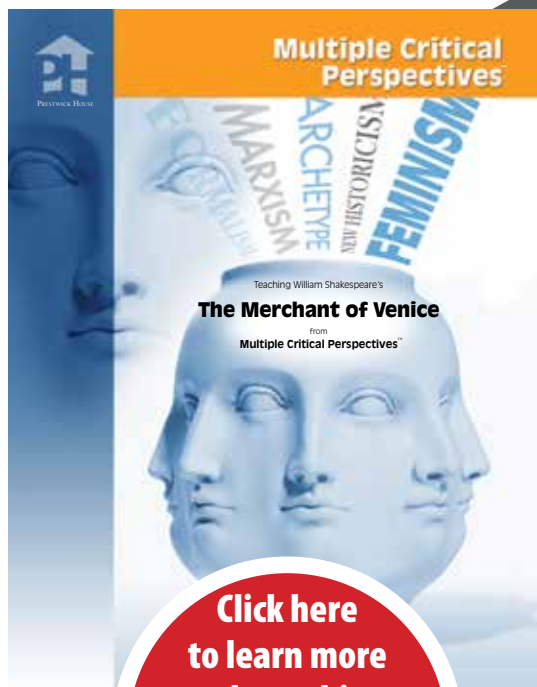




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Teaching William Shakespeare's

The Merchant of Venice

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE is believed to have been written between 1596 and 1598. While he is neither the title character nor the protagonist of the play, the Jewish moneylender Shylock is, without a doubt, the best-known character in the play.

Anti-Semitism and the Character of Shylock

While still staged today (Al Pacino played Shylock in a well-received film version in 2004), *The Merchant of Venice* presents an interesting dilemma to modern audiences. Critics continue to debate the exact nature of Shylock's character—whether he is sympathetic or villainous—and the extent to which the play espouses anti-Semitic feelings.

Medieval and Renaissance English society is generally regarded as unfriendly to Jews. Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and were not permitted to return until the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell in 1655. Jews were often portrayed on the Elizabethan stage as hideous caricatures, with hooked noses and bright red wigs. They were usually depicted as avaricious usurers. Probably the most famous example is Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, which features an outrageously malicious and bloodthirsty Jewish villain called Barabas (most likely a reference to the Barabbas of the Gospels). Jews were almost universally characterized as evil, deceptive, and greedy.

Some see *The Merchant of Venice* as further evidence of England's anti-Semitic sentiments and policies. Evidence suggests that *Merchant...* was sometimes known as *The Jew of Venice*. It is entirely possible that Shakespeare intended the moneylender's forced conversion to Christianity to be a "happy ending" for the character. As a Christian, Shylock will be "redeemed" from his former sins. Others, however, suggest that *Merchant...* has its roots in medieval morality plays in which the Virgin Mary (here represented by Portia) argues for the forgiveness of human souls, against the Devil's (Shylock) prosecution. Whether this reading establishes the play as anti-Semitic (good Christian, bad Jew) or whether Shylock, then, becomes a highly developed stock character easily recognized by Shakespeare's audience is still a matter of debate.

Shakespeare's treatment of the Jewish moneylender, however, suggests that Shylock be viewed more humanly and humanely. One of the play's most famous and most eloquent speeches is given to Shylock: Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions... (III, I) Nor are Shylock's anger and hatred unmotivated. Several times throughout the play, Shylock comments on

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *The Merchant of Venice*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining Shylock as the Archetypal Villain

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Merchant of Venice* Archetypal Activity One: Shylock Compared to the Archetypal Villain
2. Review with the class the explanation of the Villain in the introduction to the Archetypal approach: “the VILLAIN: the male or female personification of evil. Note that, while nearly all works of literature include an antagonist to provide conflict with the protagonist, not all antagonists are villains. Villains truly personify evil. Their malice is often apparently unmotivated, or is motivated by a single grievance from the past. The villain’s malice is often limitless, and rarely is the villain reformed within the context of the story. Examples of archetypal villains are Satan and Loki (from Norse mythology).”
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
4. Allow each pair or group to determine how it will divide up the play and the characteristics listed on the handout in order to search for evidence.
5. Have students search for evidence (both whatever supports a reading of Shylock as villain or whatever refutes that reading) and complete the handout.
6. Reconvene the class and discuss whether the evidence supports a reading of Shylock as an archetypal villain.

Psychoanalytic Approach Applied to *The Merchant of Venice*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Offering A Psychological Analysis of Shylock

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Merchant of Venice* Psychoanalytic Activity One: Analysis of Shylock's Character.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups of three or four.
3. Have groups review the play, especially
 - Act I, Scene III
 - Act III, Scene I
 - Act III, Scene III
 - Act IV, Scene I
4. While students review the play, have them answer the questions on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and discuss the extent to which Shakespeare creates Shylock as
 - a full and complex character;
 - a sympathetic character.

NOTE: While some of the answers to the questions on the handout are matters of textual fact (e.g., we know that Shylock has at least one child, his daughter Jessica), others are matters of inference from textual clues and social/historical background (e.g., Shylock was probably an overprotective father, apparently bringing up his daughter without the benefit of a mother, as well as being a member of a hated minority in the city). Allow students to voice their various interpretations, but do insist on textual support.

Feminist Approach Applied to *The Merchant of Venice*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining the Relationship of Gender and Power in the Play

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Merchant of Venice* Feminist Activity One: Power and Gender
2. Discuss with the class the types of power evident in the play:
 - economic
 - legal
 - parental
 - emotional
3. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
4. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the two main couples in the play:
 - Portia and Bassanio
 - Jessica and Lorenzo
5. Have each group peruse the play and answer the questions on the handout pertaining to its couple.
6. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
7. As a class, discuss the following:
 - What is significant about the fact that, in both couples, it is the woman who has the wealth?
 - What is significant about the fact that it is a woman who comes up with the idea that saves Antonio?
 - What is significant about the fact that Jessica, in addition to being able to anger her father, has the power to hurt him as well?
 - What is the significance of the “ring game” that Portia and Nerissa “play” with their husbands?
 - Overall, are the powerful characters in this play male or female? What might Shakespeare’s point have been in devising this?