

 **AQA GCSE English Literature**

The Merchant of Venice

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Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Overview

The Merchant of Venice question is part of Paper 1, Section A of your GCSE. For this, you are required to write one essay-length answer to one set question. This can seem daunting at first, but this page contains some helpful information, and links to more detailed revision note pages, that will enable you to aim for the highest grade. This page includes:

- **A summary of The Merchant of Venice**
- **A brief overview of what is required in the exam**
- **The Merchant of Venice characters**
- **The Merchant of Venice context**
- **The Merchant of Venice themes**
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The Merchant of Venice summary

The Merchant of Venice was written by William Shakespeare during the late 16th century. It depicts the story of Antonio, a merchant from Venice, who fails to repay a substantial loan borrowed from a Jewish moneylender named Shylock.

It is classified as a comedy and is similar to other romantic comedies by Shakespeare. The play is largely known for its dramatic scenes and for the character of Shylock. Shylock is renowned for demanding a "pound of flesh" as retribution. The play also includes two famous speeches: one from Shylock about the nature of humanity and Portia's speech on mercy. It contains many of the typical conventions of comedy such as marriage, misconception, and disguise and gender. For more on the conventions of tragedy, see [The Merchant of Venice: Writer's Methods and Techniques page](#).

The play is about Antonio, a merchant, who owes money to Shylock, a vindictive moneylender. Antonio borrows the sum on behalf of his friend, Bassanio, to woo and marry a woman named Portia. After Antonio's trading ships sink, he cannot repay the debt, prompting Shylock to demand a pound of flesh as per their agreement. However, Portia, disguised as a man, intervenes during the trial and saves Antonio. As a result, Shylock is instructed to convert to Christianity and Antonio recovers his wealth from his sunken ships. For a more detailed summary, please see [The Merchant of Venice: Plot Summary page](#).

How is The Merchant of Venice assessed in the exam?

- Your GCSE Paper 1 requires you to answer two questions in 1hr 45min. That means you have approximately 52 minutes to plan, write and check your Merchant of Venice essay
- Paper 1 is worth 64 marks and accounts for 40% of your overall GCSE grade



Your notes

- The Merchant of Venice essay is worth 34 marks in total, because it also includes 4 marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar
- Section A of Paper 1 contains The Merchant of Venice question and you are required to answer the one available question on the play
- Your question will also include a printed extract of about 25 lines from the play
- It is a closed-book exam, which means you will not have access to a copy of the text (other than the printed extract) in your exam
- The question will require you to analyse and write in detail about an aspect of The Merchant of Venice
- Your answer will need to address both the extract from the play that you will be given, and the play as a whole

For a much more detailed guide on answering The Merchant of Venice question, please see our revision notes on [How to Answer the Shakespeare Essay Question](#).

The Merchant of Venice characters

The characters you should focus on when revising The Merchant of Venice are:

- Shylock
- Portia
- Bassanio
- Antonio

When considering a Shakespeare play or any other text, it is crucial to remember that characters are intentionally crafted by the writer to serve a specific purpose. In many cases, these characters embody certain concepts or beliefs, and the writer, such as Shakespeare, uses them to reflect on and examine these ideas. For more details on how Shakespeare uses his characters in The Merchant of Venice, please see [The Merchant of Venice: Characters](#) revision notes page.

The Merchant of Venice context

Understanding what context actually is can be tricky at GCSE. Examiners understand context not as historical information, or biographical facts about a writer, but as the ideas and perspectives explored by a writer through their text. Therefore, The Merchant of Venice context you should explore in your essay response is not information about medieval Italy, or facts about William Shakespeare, but ideas about:

- Prejudice and intolerance
- Love and friendship in the Elizabethan era
- Wealth and power

Lots of these ideas and perspectives are universal, so your own opinions of them are valid and will be rewarded in an exam. For a detailed breakdown of the contextual topics listed above, see [The Merchant of Venice: Context](#) page.



The Merchant of Venice themes

Understanding the themes that Shakespeare explores in The Merchant of Venice is one of the best approaches any student can take when revising the play. This is because to get the highest mark on your exam, you need to take what examiners call a “conceptualised approach”: a detailed and perceptive exploration of Shakespeare’s ideas and intentions. The main themes explored by Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice are:

- Prejudice and intolerance
- Justice and mercy
- Love and friendship
- Wealth and power

Shakespeare explores numerous other themes in The Merchant of Venice beyond those mentioned above and you are encouraged to examine these themes too. However, the above list makes a great place to start and detailed breakdowns of each of these themes can be found on [The Merchant of Venice: Themes](#) page.

The Merchant of Venice quotes

Although you are given credit for including quotations from The Merchant of Venice in your answer, it is not a requirement of the exam. In fact, examiners say that “references” to the rest of the play are just as valid as direct quotations: this is when students pinpoint individual moments in the play, rather than quoting what the characters say. In order to select references really successfully, it is extremely important that you know the play itself very well, including the order of the events that take place in the play. This detailed [act-by-act breakdown](#) of the plot will help you to revise the chronology of The Merchant of Venice.

However, it can also be useful to revise a few – very well selected – quotations from the play that can be used in a variety of essays on different themes and characters. Luckily, we have made that selection for you! For a ‘translation’ and detailed analysis of each of these quotations, see [The Merchant of Venice: Key Quotations](#) page.

Top tips for the highest grade

Please see our revision pages on the Shakespeare exam for guides on:

- [Structuring The Merchant of Venice essay](#)
- [The Merchant of Venice methods and techniques](#)
- [How to include context in The Merchant of Venice essay](#)
- [Understanding The Merchant of Venice mark scheme](#)

- [A Shakespeare model answer](#)



Your notes



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Plot Summary

One of the most vital and helpful things you can do in preparation for the exam is to ‘know’ the plot of The Merchant of Venice thoroughly. Once you know the text well, you should be comfortable and familiar with key events that you can then link to larger ideas. Having an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the play will help you to gain confidence to find the most relevant references to support your response.



Your notes



Bassanio asks his friend Antonio for money so that he can pursue Portia

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE PLOT STORYBOARD



Antonio and Bassanio agree to a loan from Shylock



Bassanio chooses the correct casket and weds Portia



Shylock takes Antonio to court and demands his pound of flesh



Portia, in disguise, rules that Shylock must forfeit his wealth and convert to Christianity



Dejected and defeated, Shylock leaves the court

Overview

Bassanio is a noble Venetian who desires to court Portia, a wealthy and beautiful heiress from Belmont. However, he has squandered his money and requires 3,000 ducats to fund his efforts as a suitor. With no other viable alternatives, he turns to his wealthy merchant friend Antonio for assistance, who agrees to help despite his money being tied up in his ships out at sea. To secure the loan, Bassanio asks the Jewish moneylender Shylock to lend him the funds and Antonio agrees to be the guarantor for the debt. Initially, Shylock is hesitant to give the loan due to his previous mistreatment from Antonio. However, he agrees to lend the money on the condition that if Antonio fails to repay the loan on time, Shylock can take a pound of Antonio's flesh as repayment. Bassanio is hesitant about Antonio accepting these terms but Antonio signs the contract. Bassanio sets off for Belmont with his friend Gratiano.



While at Belmont, Bassanio learns about Antonio's inability to pay back the loan. Bassanio marries Portia and Nerissa, Portia's maid, marries Gratiano. Portia provides funds to Bassanio and Gratiano, who journey to Venice in an attempt to save Antonio's life by settling his debt with Shylock.

Shylock takes Antonio to court. After Bassanio offers Shylock 6,000 ducats, Shylock refuses and demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. The Duke of Venice is unable to cancel the bond, so he refers the trial to a young judge, Balthazar, who is Portia in disguise. Portia urges Shylock to show mercy to Antonio. However, Shylock refuses and Portia demands that he may not remove any blood from Antonio's body. Defeated, Shylock reluctantly agrees to Bassanio's offer of money in exchange for the defaulted bond. Portia then denies his request, citing that he had already rejected it in court. She refers to a law according to which, as a Jew, Shylock has forfeited his property and now must give half to the government and half to Antonio, and his life is now solely at the mercy of the Duke.

The Duke shows mercy to Shylock and allows him to keep his life. Antonio agrees that he is willing to give up his right to half of Shylock's wealth. In return, Shylock is required to convert to Christianity and leave his entire estate to his daughter, Jessica, and her love, Lorenzo. Faced with the threat of death, Shylock ultimately agrees to the conditions. Bassanio offers a payment to Portia though she declines and requests his ring instead. Bassanio initially refuses to do so, but he finally relinquishes the ring; Nerissa requests the same from Gratiano who also surrenders his ring.

At Belmont, Portia and Nerissa teasingly berate Bassanio and Gratiano for giving away their rings before revealing that they were the disguised lawyer and clerk. Antonio's wealth is restored. The play ends as the three couples prepare to celebrate their marriages.

Act-By-Act Plot Summary

Act I

- Antonio, a merchant from Venice, is in a melancholic state and anxious about his ships that are currently at sea
- His friend, Bassanio, confesses to squandering the money he received from Antonio
- Bassanio has his heart set on winning the hand of Portia, a wealthy heiress from Belmont
- To fulfil his goal, he asks Antonio for a loan of 3,000 ducats



Your notes

- Despite facing financial difficulties due to his ships being out at sea, Antonio agrees to help
- Antonio proposes using his name to secure a loan in Venice
- Portia is not allowed to choose her husband and has to abide by her father's wishes
- The suitor who chooses the correct casket out of the three will win the chance to marry her
- Shylock becomes aware of Bassanio's appeal and requests a conversation with Antonio
- Shylock suggests a unique loan arrangement whereby Antonio agrees to the bond of a pound of flesh in place of traditional interest

Act II

- Bassanio is convinced to hire Launcelot, a servant of Shylock
- Shylock's daughter, Jessica, desires to leave home and become a Christian in order to marry Lorenzo, a friend of Antonio
- Launcelot delivers a letter to Lorenzo with plans for him and Jessica to run away that evening
- Jessica absconds with gold and jewels from Shylock
- The following day, Bassanio embarks on a journey to Belmont while Shylock expresses fury over his daughter's disappearance and the theft of his treasure
- In Belmont, the suitors of Portia, the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon, choose to open the golden and silver caskets, respectively
- Both make the mistake of selecting the incorrect casket and are unsuccessful
- Upon Aragon's departure, Portia receives word of Bassanio's arrival and rushes excitedly to greet him

Act III

- Shylock becomes aware that his daughter, Jessica, is recklessly spending the money she took from him and begins to rant bitterly against all Christians
- He informs Antonio's acquaintances that if he does not receive the loan repayment on time, that he will enforce the original contract of one pound of flesh
- Bassanio, in Belmont, picks the lead casket and he wins the hand of Portia
- Gratiano, a friend of Bassanio, requests the hand of Nerissa, Portia's maid, in marriage
- Portia entrusts her ring to Bassanio, with the condition that he never gives it to another
- As Lorenzo and Jessica reach Belmont, news arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost at sea
- Knowing that Shylock is insisting on the fulfilment of his bond, Bassanio and Gratiano hastily depart to assist Antonio

- Portia and Nerissa also decide to help Antonio by disguising themselves as lawyers and going to Venice

Act IV

- In a courtroom in Venice, Shylock insists on receiving his promised pound of flesh
- During a court session, the Duke consults with a lawyer named "Balthazar", who is actually Portia in disguise, for legal guidance
- Portia pleads with Shylock to show kindness and compassion to Antonio
- Bassanio suggests using the money his wife possesses to pay the outstanding debt, which surpasses the required amount, but Shylock declines the offer
- Balthazar's explanation that the bond involved only flesh and not blood prevents Antonio's death
- Shylock is unable to obtain the pound of flesh he desired
- As a consequence of endangering the life of a citizen of Venice, Shylock is required to surrender his assets
- Antonio declines his portion of compensation and instead requests that it be placed in a trust for Lorenzo and Jessica
- Additionally, he insists that Shylock convert to Christianity
- After being broken into submission, Shylock departs from the court
- Bassanio and Gratiano express their gratitude towards the lawyers, who request their rings as payment for their legal services
- Bassanio and Gratiano initially decline the request to hand over their rings, but they comply when Antonio intervenes



Your notes

Act V

- Portia and Nerissa return home at night to find Lorenzo and Jessica in Belmont
- When their husbands arrive, Portia and Nerissa chastise them for giving away their rings
- Eventually, they reveal themselves as the lawyers from the trial
- Antonio receives news that his ships have returned safely after all
- The play ends as the three couples prepare to celebrate their marriages



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Themes

Themes

Exam responses that are led by ideas are more likely to reach the highest levels of the mark scheme. Exploring the ideas of the text, specifically in relation to the question being asked, will help to increase your fluency and assurance in writing about the novel.

Your exam question could be on any topic. However, having a really good grasp of the following themes and, crucially, why Shakespeare is exploring these themes, will enable you to produce a “conceptualised response” in your exam. This list is not exhaustive and you are encouraged to identify other ideas within the novel.

- Prejudice and Intolerance
- Justice and Mercy
- Love and Friendship
- Wealth and Power

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Prejudice and Intolerance

Prejudice is a prevalent theme in The Merchant of Venice. The majority of the Venetian characters exhibit strong prejudice and intolerance against Shylock in the play.

Knowledge and evidence:

- Through Shylock, Shakespeare depicts the plight of the outsider in society due to prejudice and intolerance
- Despite his reputation as a **malevolent** character, Shylock is portrayed as a man who has experienced significant abuse:



Your notes

- His frequent mentions of past mistreatment at the hands of Christians, make him a more complex and sympathetic character
- As a character he is continually subjected to prejudice and humiliation:
 - Antonio's harsh behaviour towards Shylock reveals a violent and cruel aspect of Antonio's character
 - Antonio confesses of having used offensive language towards Shylock, including calling him a non-believer, as well as spitting on him
- Although the audience is not expected to sympathise completely with Shylock, his **malice** could be seen to be partly driven by the other characters' prejudices towards him
- Prejudice and intolerance are also demonstrated through the play's plot when Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity, thus abandoning his faith and livelihood:
 - Antonio's insistence on Shylock's religious conversion would be viewed as denying liberty of religion by a contemporary audience
 - However, from Antonio's Christian perspective, it could be viewed as a gesture of goodwill and an attempt to save Shylock's soul
- In turn, Shakespeare also demonstrates Shylock's own prejudice against the Christian characters in the play:
 - Before meeting Antonino, Shylock states that he despises him: for example, "I hate him for he is a Christian"
 - However, it appears that Shylock detests Antonio as much on business terms as much as religious ones
 - For example, Antonio's lending of money with no profit hurts Shylock's business
- In Act I, Scene iii and Act III, Scene i, Shylock presents his argument that Jews and Christians share a universal sense of humanity and a similar desire for **retribution**:
 - For example: "If you prick us do we not bleed? ...And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"
 - However, neither of these assertions could be viewed as entirely persuasive and Shylock's incapacity to show mercy is starkly contrasted with Antonio's tolerance and benevolence towards him later on in the play
- Shylock becomes so fixated on following the exact wording of the law and consumed by his own prejudice and hatred that he is unable to perceive anything beyond the cruel act of cutting Antonio's flesh
- Despite Bassanio extending an invitation to dine together, Shylock refuses to eat with Christians or forgive Antonio, one of the fundamental principles of Christianity



Your notes

- However, in this speech, we gain insight into Shylock's character and the reasons behind his actions, revealing him as a more intricate and complex character than initially assumed
- Through the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo, Shakespeare may be highlighting the potential for two people with significant differences to come together in unity and equality

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- It can be suggested that Shakespeare may be subtly critiquing his characters for holding prejudiced and intolerant views
- Shakespeare appears to suggest that Shylock's anger stems from the maltreatment he has endured over time rather than being inherently tied to his Jewish identity, therefore holding prejudiced views only fuels further intolerance

Justice and Mercy

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In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explores the theme of justice and mercy by using a range of literary techniques. Justice is demanded when a person senses injustice, while mercy refers to the act of granting forgiveness, which may not be easily bestowed.

Knowledge and evidence:

- Ideas relating to justice and mercy are a central focus of the play and Shakespeare encourages the audience to reflect on these concepts:
 - Shakespeare demonstrates that justice is not always settled in court and that it involves the natural rights of individuals within society
- Throughout the play, the notion of revenge appears in various forms and Shakespeare portrays it in both serious and humorous forms:
 - For example, the more serious aspects are conveyed through Shylock's attempt to claim a pound of flesh from Antonio, Portia's punishment of Shylock in court and Antonio's coercion of Shylock to convert



Your notes

- For example, the more comical aspects are evidenced through Portia and Nerissa when they deceive their husbands regarding the rings they were supposed to keep
- Shylock attempts to enact his revenge by strictly **adhering** to the justice system in Venice:
 - However, both Portia and the Duke advise Shylock to demonstrate mercy rather than seeking revenge, though Shylock rejects this
- Whilst religious intolerance and personal vengeance could appear to dominate much of the play, mercy is still very much in evidence
- Shakespeare illustrates the theme of justice and mercy by portraying the contrasting beliefs of Shylock and Portia
- During Portia's trial scene, she delivers an important speech regarding mercy: "earthly power doth then show likest God's / When mercy seasons justice":
 - She indicates that mercy cannot be coerced but must be voluntary
 - She effectively advocates for mercy by persuading the Duke to grant Shylock's pardon
 - Further, she also urges Antonio not to seize all of Shylock's wealth
- She emphasises that this virtue is not frequently expected of ordinary individuals, but rather bestowed upon kings and rulers by divine right
- The Venetian trial embraces both mercy and justice, allowing for the sparing of a citizen's life while also ensuring consequences for a person's actions
- The differing interpretations of the law during the trial scenes help to raise questions about the validity of different codes of law and what happens when they potentially conflict:
 - Shylock's request for his bond, which was legally agreed upon, is deemed just while Portia pleads for mercy
 - Shylock demands justice but is asked to show mercy
- Conversely, requiring Shylock to convert to Christianity could be viewed (largely by an Elizabethan audience) as a means of granting him salvation
- The symbolism of Portia is particularly evident when she assumes the identity of a lawyer and ventures to Venice:
 - This **juxtaposition** portrays Portia in a city where her idealistic values are challenged by a harsh reality
- Shylock's rigid adherence to the law, without any consideration for compassion or empathy, ultimately leads to his downfall
- However, an audience who may feel that Portia's punishment of Shylock is too severe:

- While the court may consider the verdict to be appropriate for Shylock's actions, their strict interpretation of the law results in the complete destruction of an individual

What is Shakespeare's intention?



Your notes

- Shakespeare highlights the importance of showing mercy in order to receive mercy
- This is evidenced through Launcelot's request for his father's forgiveness; Portia and Nerissa's forgiveness of their husbands for giving away their rings; and Shylock who receives no mercy because he shows none to Antonio

Love and Friendship

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The Merchant of Venice explores the theme of love and friendship between many of its characters. The chief romantic relationship in the play involves Bassanio and Portia, and other relationships are also explored through Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo, the wedding between Nerissa and Gratiano, and the bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio.

- Antonio and Bassanio's bond could be viewed as the strongest friendship in the play and their unwavering alliance is a key aspect
- The dynamic between Bassanio and Antonio, appears to be contradictory but despite their different personalities, they maintain a strong friendship:
 - Antonio is older and more generous, while Bassanio is younger and more carefree
- Antonio expresses a faithful loyalty towards his companion Bassanio and he conveys his love for his friend with great exuberance
- However, it is important to note the distinction between the conventional sentimental relationships between men during the Renaissance
- Antonio acts as a generous benefactor, advisor and **confidante** to Bassanio:
 - Antonio displays a tolerant attitude towards Bassanio's indulgence and willingly consents to lend him more money



Your notes

- The play highlights the idea that economic interests can often taint even the purest form of love:
 - For example, the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio could be perceived to be one-sided as Antonio appears to sacrifice many things for Bassanio though this does not appear to be reciprocated
 - This is exemplified by Bassanio's borrowing of money in order to pursue his romantic interests with Portia
- However, Shakespeare portrays a role reversal between Antonio and Bassanio as the play progresses:
 - The play initially depicts Bassanio as someone in need, but later on, Antonio seeks aid from Bassanio
- As a result of the deep mutual trust and support between Antonio and Bassanio, their friendship brings positive consequences for their relationship:
 - Their camaraderie thus becomes more balanced which presents a stronger and more reciprocal bond to the audience
- The central romantic relationship between Portia and Bassanio is mirrored by other romantic plots within the play:
 - Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo and the marriage of Nerissa and Gratiano
- The love between a father and child is exemplified through Shylock and Jessica's disordered relationship:
 - Although Shylock is not affectionate towards Jessica, his affection for her is still evident in the play
- The relationship among the Venetian Christian characters in the play is depicted as strong, and they all come together to support Antonio

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare uses the themes of love and friendship to demonstrate how they can be used to overcome the most challenging of circumstances and that these are more important than wealth and material possessions

Wealth and Power

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Your notes

The Merchant of Venice highlights the complexities of wealth and power through several characters. Although Bassanio is portrayed as a noble character, his financial struggles are a significant obstacle which leads him to borrow from Antonio, while Shylock's vengeful actions enable him to profit by taking advantage of others.

Knowledge and evidence:

- The play contains multiple references to wealth and prosperity, as well as alluding to the uncertainty surrounding Antonio's shipment and the caskets
- Shakespeare uses the opening scene of the play to introduce the character of Bassanio and his pursuit of Portia, which is the chief romantic storyline and also sets in motion the bond plot point:
 - In the opening scene, although Antonio inquires about Bassanio's courtship of Portia, Bassanio deftly shifts the conversation to concerns about money
- From Bassanio's speeches, the audience could interpret that he may not be financially reckless:
 - He is willing to further burden Antonio, who has already been generous towards him
- Hence, the play is predominantly driven by Bassanio's desire for wealth, which encompasses most of the other characters in some way:
 - Bassanio seeks to resolve his money concerns by trying to win Portia's affection which is evident when he mentions her wealth before her beauty: she is "richly left"
- Shylock's actions are largely motivated by his miserliness and greed, and Antonio is a merchant venturer
- The hatred between Shylock and Antonio is due to Antonio's attitude to **usury**
- The play explores the divergent attitudes towards the acquisition of wealth that are displayed by the characters, specifically Antonio and Shylock, who are both merchants but have fundamentally different approaches to accumulating money



Your notes

- During the trial scene Shylock's obsession with Antonio is clearly evident when he declines Portia's initial proposal:
 - It could suggest that justice proves to be more significant to Shylock than his wealth, or he would not have insisted on the bond
- Throughout the play, the characters of Bassanio and Portia demonstrate a shared understanding of the importance of wealth; however, they also acknowledge its lack of intrinsic value:
 - Within their romanticised world, the concern for money could be seen to not be a priority
- Both Bassanio and Portia's perspective on money is sharply contrasted with that of Shylock's:
 - Shylock's character is largely defined by his need to use money as a defence against those who oppress him
- Antonio prioritises love and friendship over monetary possessions when it comes to his relationship with Bassanio:
 - When Bassanio requires help, Antonio willingly offers all of his financial assets to assist him

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare highlights the complexities of wealth and power through several characters and demonstrates that whilst money can be viewed as a negative force associated with greed and discontentment, Shakespeare also suggests that having wealth can also provide individuals with autonomy and authority



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Characters

It is vital that you understand that characters are often used symbolically to express ideas. Shakespeare uses all of his characters to symbolise various ideas prevalent in his society, and the differences between characters reflect contemporary debates. Therefore, it is very useful not only to learn about each character individually but how they compare and contrast to other characters in the play.

It is important to consider the range of strategies used by Shakespeare to create and develop characters within The Merchant of Venice. This includes:

- how characters are established
- how characters are presented:
 - physical appearance or suggestions about this
 - actions and motives for them
 - what they say and think
 - how they interact with others
 - what others say and think about them
- how far the characters conform to or subvert stereotypes

Major Characters

- Shylock
- Portia
- Bassanio
- Antonio

Minor Characters

- Jessica

Shylock

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Your notes

- The character of Shylock is open to a wide range of different interpretations by audiences
- As a character, Shylock first appears with Bassanio in Act I, scene iii and departs alone in Act IV, scene i
- Whilst Shakespeare does not give him a significant physical presence on stage, he is a pivotal figure in the play:
 - Shylock only appears in five scenes out of twenty, yet his character dominates much of the play's plot
 - Although he is only encountered in Venice, he impacts all the characters in both Venice and Belmont and motivates most of their actions
 - As a character, Shylock is already depicted as **ostracised** from Venetian society before the play commences
 - Shylock is not portrayed as a cruel master or father:
 - His servant Launcelot leaves not because of Shylock's harshness but because he is concerned about being tainted by being employed by a Jew
 - His strictness towards his daughter, Jessica, is due to his **aberration** of the **frivolity** of Venetian society, which he believes is wholly inappropriate for his daughter
 - Many of Shylock's actions could be seen to be largely motivated by his miserliness and greed and his language primarily revolves around money
 - Shylock is sharply contrasted with the play's other characters and his **malice** is partly driven by their cruelty towards him:



Your notes

- As a character he is continually subjected to humiliation which evades some sympathy from the audience
- Antonio's disdainful behaviour towards Shylock reveals a violent and cruel aspect of Antonio's character
- Further, the audience cannot help but feel empathetic towards him when we learn Jessica has eloped and converted to Christianity, stolen his money and his precious ring
- He poses a significant threat to the romantic happiness of many of the other characters, but his frequent mentions of past mistreatment at the hands of Christians make him a more complex and sympathetic character
- Shylock's obsession is complex: on the one hand, he possesses an extreme fixation with profit, while on the other, he is a deeply devout follower of his religion
- After Act III, scene iii of the play, it becomes challenging to empathise with Shylock as he is devoid of both compassion and balance:
 - His fixation on exacting a pound of flesh from Antonio can be viewed as an act of cruel vengeance
 - He insists on getting what he believes is rightfully his, without entertaining any form of opposition or reason
- It could possibly be viewed that the other characters misinterpret Shylock's motives because they are oblivious of his true intentions:
 - They wrongly perceive that money is his only obsession, when in reality, his animosity towards Antonio and the other Christians far outweighs his financial aspirations
- As a result, he could be perceived as having lost touch with his own humanity which he outwardly professes to have
- Despite being spared from death, Shylock faces severe consequences, including losing his possessions, his daughter, profession and religion:
 - After losing his assets and being forced to convert to Christianity, Shylock declares himself as if dead:
 - He issues no further threats of retribution and quietly retreats, stating that he is "not well"
- Whilst Shylock is a complex character, he does not undergo any significant changes throughout the play:
 - His inflexibility and rigidity are some of his most notable traits and they persist until the end of the play

Portia



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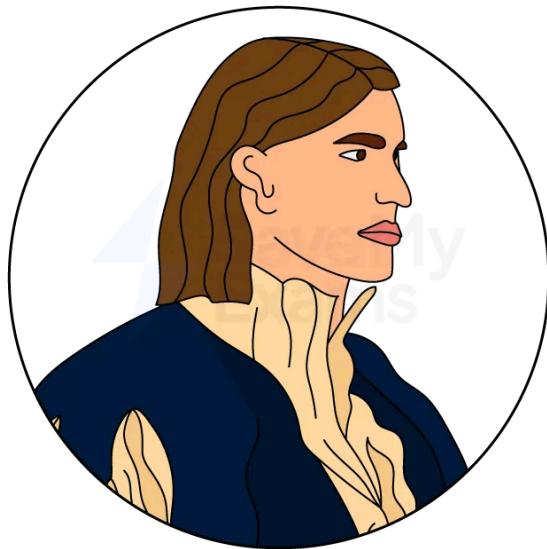
Your notes

- Portia is the romantic heroine of the play and she is first introduced in Act I Scene ii
- Shakespeare initially depicts her as a beautiful and dutiful daughter:
 - Her strict adherence to her father's will is significant as Shakespeare uses it to underscore her rule-abiding nature
 - This aspect of her character is significant and is further evidenced during the court scenes with Shylock
- Due to Portia's immense wealth, only suitors from the highest **echelons** of society are eligible to court her
- The casket test appears to be an impartial method of selecting among all of her international suitors:
 - It could be used to symbolise the financial community of Venice, which is open to people of different nationalities and religious **affiliations**
- While Portia desires Bassanio as a husband, she does not appear to have a romantic disposition and approaches her marriage from a practical standpoint:
 - She confesses to him that though she is not in love with him, she is prepared to accept him as her husband
 - She is aware that Bassanio seeks her fortune as well as her beauty, though she is accepting of his superficial traits
- Although Bassanio has found a dependable wife, it appears she will continue to assert her superiority over him

- Despite her obedience to her father, Portia is also presented as independent and determined:
 - As soon as she discovers Antonio's predicament, she instinctively acts in a generous and decisive manner
- As a character, Shakespeare enables her to transition easily between different identities and environments:
 - She resides in the luxury of Belmont as a wealthy heiress, but effortlessly shifts to her disguise as a man in the much harsher reality of the Venetian legal system
- She possesses a sharp sense of humour with an astute ability to make wise judgements
- In the courtroom, she displays a commanding presence, which contrasts with Shylock's rigidity:
 - Portia succeeds in defeating Shylock by imposing a stricter interpretation of the bond than Shylock originally intended



Bassanio



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- Shakespeare uses the opening scene of the play to introduce the character of Bassanio and his pursuit of Portia:
 - It sets up the chief romantic storyline and also sets in motion the bond plot point
- Bassanio is a young "noble kinsman" of Antonio's and serves as a kind of catalyst, provoking much of the play's action



Your notes

- He is first depicted as a good-natured, but irresponsible, young man who has incurred heavy debts by living beyond his financial means:
 - He exudes a suave demeanour and appears to be accustomed to getting his way
- Antonio and Bassanio have a strong bond and Antonio acts as a generous benefactor, advisor and confidante to his friend:
 - Antonio displays a tolerant attitude towards Bassanio's indulgence and willingly consents to lending him more money
- From Bassanio's speeches, the audience could interpret that he is financially reckless:
 - He is willing to further burden Antonio who has already been generous towards him
- Shakespeare uses Bassanio as a sharp contrast to Antonio:
 - Antonio is older and more generous, while Bassanio is younger and more carefree
 - Bassanio is concerned with love and romance, while Antonio is concerned with commerce and trade
- However, it becomes evident that he harbours genuine love and care for his friend when Antonio's misfortunes unfold:
 - Bassanio quickly returns to Venice to assist Antonio, highlighting his loyalty and devotion
- He is characterised as a gentle soul and his response to Antonio's letter and his subsequent trial are genuine and deeply felt:
 - Bassanio's faithfulness towards Antonio remains steadfast and he proposes to take care of Antonio's debt
- At times, Shakespeare portrays Bassanio's character as rather shallow and superficial:
 - To settle his debts, he aims to marry a wealthy heiress and decides upon Portia
- Bassanio also has an impulsive, generous and almost reckless nature and displays hints of immaturity
- However, he demonstrates his astuteness when choosing the correct casket in order to marry Portia:
 - He also possesses a keen intuition to mistrust Shylock due to his cautious remark: "I like not fair terms and a villain's mind"
- By the end of the play, Bassanio has shown deep affection for both Antonio and Portia, but he still nonetheless derives satisfaction from the wealth he obtains from them both

Antonio



Your notes



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- Antonio is the character after whom the title of the play is named and he is the main driving force behind the key events
- Despite this, he is presented as quite a muted and passive character:
 - In contrast to characters such as Portia and Bassanio, who take an active role within the play, Antonio remains an observer and assumes a contemplative and resigned manner
- When Antonio is first introduced to the audience, he is in a **melancholic** state of which he cannot rid himself: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad"
- A defining characteristic of Antonio is his faithful loyalty towards his companion Bassanio and he expresses his love for his friend with great **exuberance**
- Antonio exhibits traits of kindness, patience and selflessness and he displays a tolerant attitude towards Bassanio's indulgence:
 - Antonio's reaction to Bassanio's plea for financial help is immediate, generous and unrestrained
- As the play progresses, Antonio transforms into a self-pitying character who lacks the strength to defend himself against execution:
 - He faces the trial with an attitude of acceptance and resignation
- At the beginning of the play, Antonio's cruel behaviour towards Shylock goes against his typical courteous demeanour:
 - He publicly expresses his antipathy towards Shylock, acknowledging that he has insulted him by calling him a disbeliever and even spitting on him



Your notes

- His Christian benevolence is not directed at Shylock and he remains unapologetic for his poor treatment of him:
 - Antonio's insulting behaviour is an example of the pervasive mistreatment of Shylock by the Christian characters in the play
- However, by the end of the play, Antonio does eventually show mercy to Shylock:
 - He sticks resolutely to his inner moral code of not gaining from the hardships of others and refuses to claim his share of Shylock's property

Minor Character: Jessica

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- Although Jessica is a minor character, her role in the play is pivotal
- Her decision to elope with Lorenzo and take her father's casket of gold ducats is the trigger for Shylock's desire for revenge against Antonio
- Additionally, Shakespeare uses Jessica's character as a contrast to Portia's:
 - Portia's devoted loyalty to her father's will is contrasted with Jessica's neglect of her expected duties as a daughter
 - Jessica exhibits a severe attitude towards her father, taking his money, running away from home and even trading his cherished ring for a monkey
- Jessica does not express any significant dissatisfaction with her father, except for the monotony of their life together and his overt strictness

- However, Jessica decides to break free from her father and her Jewish background in order to wed Lorenzo and become a Christian:
 - Her elopement demonstrates her eagerness to disassociate herself from her Jewish background, perhaps due to the perceived negative perceptions attached to it
- Further, Jessica and Lorenzo's elopement could appear to be somewhat ambiguous:
 - Her desire to elope and convert could be viewed as recklessly impulsive and bordering on selfishness
 - Jessica's insistence on taking a large amount of Shylock's treasure with them
- Although Shylock is not free of guilt, Shakespeare lets the audience decide as to whether his daughter's maltreatment is fully justified



Your notes



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Context

Shakespeare plays dating from before April 1603 are considered Elizabethan as they were written and performed at the time Elizabeth I was on the English throne. The Merchant of Venice was written between 1596 and 1598 and is therefore an Elizabethan play.

- In 1290, King Edward I issued an edict expelling all Jews from England:
 - This expulsion remained in effect for over 350 years
- By the time of Elizabeth I's reign, Jews were still officially banned, but a small minority lived in England
- At this time Jews faced significant prejudice and were barely tolerated by society:
 - Jews often had to conceal their faith and live as Christians to avoid persecution
 - Many were forced into specific occupations, such as moneylending, which often exacerbated negative stereotypes
 - They were often stereotyped and vilified in literature

How this links to the play The Merchant of Venice

Attitudes towards Jews	The historical context forms the foundation of the religious conflict and anti-Semitism portrayed in the play. Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock reflects contemporary attitudes towards Jews. This is also evidenced in how the Christian characters demonise Jews. For example, Antonio does not deny insulting and spitting on Shylock.
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The Merchant of Venice social context

The play explores various social themes and issues of Shakespeare's time. The play juxtaposes the bustling, commercial world of Venice with the more intimate inner world of love and relationships, including explorations of gender and discrimination.

Prejudice and intolerance

- Despite being involved in various trades, Jews were renowned for their occupation as **usurers**, lending money at interest rates
- During the Elizabethan era, there was a prevalent belief that Jews had animosity towards Christians and would resort to any means necessary to harm them



Your notes

- Consequently, it was not uncommon for Renaissance comedy to feature a Jewish character as the primary **antagonist**
- At the time, Venice was a commercial port and one of the richest trading cities in the world:
 - Trade would have been an essential aspect of Venice's economy and it would have been imperative to provide equal protections to merchants of all religions and nationalities:
 - However, prejudice and intolerance would still have been common

How this links to the play The Merchant of Venice

Prejudice towards Shylock	As moneylending was a despised practice among the Elizabethans, Shakespeare's audiences would have also scorned Shylock as an unconverted and alien Jew. Shylock's downfall in Shakespeare's play would also have been met with different responses depending on the audience. In Elizabethan England, people seeking cultural homogeneity would have found solace in observing the coerced conversion of Shylock. Those who were of the opinion that non-Christians would suffer eternal damnation would also have viewed it as a favourable result. Furthermore, it was considered inconceivable for a Jew to retaliate against their persecutors, which is the exact course of action taken by Shylock.
Other forms of prejudice	Prejudice is also evident through other characters in the play. For example, the Prince of Morocco expects to be met by Portia with a negative response to his skin colour and declares "Mislike me not for my complexion".

Love and friendship

- In 16th-century England, **platonic**, passionate friendships between men were a commonality
- Marriages in the Elizabethan era, especially among the aristocracy (but also extending to the middle and lower classes) were frequently organised between families:
 - This was done to benefit both parties and marriage was highly influenced by factors such as money, status and alliances
- Women had no influence over who they were to marry and were obliged to comply with their parents' (particularly fathers') decisions
- However, as Europe moved towards modernisation, there arose a new ideal of marriages based on mutual attraction and love:
 - Therefore, traditions surrounding courtship and marriage went through substantial changes
- In Venetian culture, paternal authority was held in high regard and was considered to be sacred:
 - Any resistance or rebellion against it ran the risk of facing severe consequences, including the possibility of death, although typically such a severe punishment was not carried out

- Sons who disobeyed their fathers were typically disowned or sent into exile, whereas daughters were often locked up or sent to convents



Your notes

How this links to the play The Merchant of Venice

Male platonic friendship	In viewing the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio, it is important to consider the convention of sentimental friendships between men during the Renaissance period: Antonio's help in Bassanio's pursuit for Portia's love is his way of showing love for his friend.
Gender inequality	Women's lack of agency in matters of love is evidenced through Portia who is unable to choose her own husband and must comply with her father's will.
Paternal authority	Paternal authority is also explored through Jessica as her conduct would have typically outraged an orthodox Jewish family. Shylock's declaration that he would rather see Jessica dead, along with the stolen ducats, is therefore plausible.

Power and wealth

- For centuries, wealth was predominantly held by landowners and the aristocracy
- Venice was a city driven by trade and commerce:
 - Its **opulence** was founded on business rather than inherited wealth or noble status
- The Merchant of Venice was written during a period in which a new group of merchants and business people were on the rise
- Lending money with the intention of profiting from it was considered to be against Christian religious beliefs
- In England, borrowing money to finance ventures was made legal, although it still carried negative connotations since it was traditionally done through Jewish lenders

How this links to the play The Merchant of Venice

Conventions of courtship	Due to the social conventions of courtship during this period, Bassanio needs wealth in order to pursue Portia. Shakespeare's use of Portia's predicament with her suitors also enables Shakespeare to mock the aristocrats of varying nations for the entertainment of his Elizabethan audience.
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Your notes

Attitudes towards money	Shylock, a character who values his wealth over his own daughter, Jessica, would have been viewed unfavourably by Shakespearean audiences. His fixation on his home, jewellery, finances, and assets reveal his status as an outsider to Venetian society, which is further emphasised by the legal principles Portia speaks about. However, as an audience, it is important to have an understanding of the reasons why money held such significance to Shylock: he views usury as a means of maintaining his financial stability.
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The Merchant of Venice literary context

The Merchant of Venice is known as a Shakespearean comedy. Knowing this — and that an audience would also have certain expectations when watching a comedy — can help to elevate your analysis of Shakespeare's choices as a playwright.

The structure of a comedy

Many of Shakespeare's comedies follow the same five-part structure:

Part	Definition	In The Merchant of Venice
1: Exposition	The introduction to the play for the audience, and an introduction to the themes and atmosphere	Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock and Portia are introduced and the settings of Venice and Belmont are established. Bassanio's request for money from Antonio leads them to Shylock, and introduces the themes of financial difficulty and prejudice
2: Rising action	When complications in the main plot are exposed and an inevitable chain of events starts	Antonio's ships are thought to have been lost and Shylock, angered by his daughter's elopement, is determined to have his bond
3: Climax	The point in the play where the tension and excitement reach the highest level	The trial scene indicates that Antonio cannot be saved from his fate
4. Falling action	The events that occur immediately after the climax has taken place and the action shifts towards resolution, instead of escalation	Shylock is ordered to convert to Christianity and bequeath his possessions to Lorenzo and Jessica; Portia and Nerissa persuade their husbands to give up their rings

5. Denouement	Normality and the natural order is restored	The lovers all gather safely in Belmont and Antonio's ships return safely
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Your notes



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Writer's Methods and Techniques

'Methods' is an umbrella term for anything the writer does on purpose to create meaning. Using the writer's name in your response will help you to think about the text as a conscious construct and will keep reminding you that Shakespeare purposely put the text together.

The best responses at GCSE don't limit their analysis to individual words and phrases. Examiners are really looking for analysis of Shakespeare's overall aims, so try to take a "whole-text" approach to writer's methods and techniques. Each of the below topics do just that:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Blank Verse and Prose**
- **Symbolism**

Form

Form

The Merchant of Venice is a Shakespearean comedy. It is important that the examiner knows from your essays that you understand the conventions of comedy, as this is valuable – and sophisticated – understanding of the writer's craft and methods.

The Merchant of Venice is a Shakespearean comedy. It is important that the examiner knows from your essays that you understand the conventions of comedy, as this is valuable – and sophisticated – understanding of the writer's craft and methods.

Shakespearean comedies usually consist of:

- **Marriage:** Comedies generally tend to have marriage as a central theme
- Typically, weddings are seen as symbols of happiness and new beginnings, which Shakespeare deemed crucial enough to represent in multiple marriages in some of his plays
- **Misconception:** Shakespearean comedies often derive humour from the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of lovers
- Shakespeare's comedies typically rely on harmless misinterpretation and deception where the audience know more than the protagonists
- **Disguise and gender:** Shakespeare's use of disguises in comedy, specifically women disguised as young men, leads to a form of dramatic irony

Structure

The structure of a comedy



Your notes

Many of Shakespeare's comedies follow the same five-part structure:

1. **Exposition:** this is the introduction to the play for the audience, and an introduction to the themes and atmosphere. In the Merchant of Venice, Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock and Portia are introduced and the settings of Venice and Belmont are established. Bassanio's request for money from Antonio leads them to Shylock.
2. **Rising Action:** here is when complications in the main plot are exposed and an inevitable chain of events starts. In the Merchant of Venice, Antonio's ships are thought to have been lost and Shylock, angered by his daughter's elopement, is determined to have his bond.
3. **Climax:** this is the point in the play where the tension and excitement reach the highest level. In the Merchant of Venice, the trial scene indicates that Antonio cannot be saved from his fate.
4. **Falling Action:** this is the event that occurs immediately after the climax has taken place and the action shifts towards resolution instead of escalation. Shylock is ordered to convert to Christianity and **bequeath** his possessions to Lorenzo and Jessica; Portia and Nerissa persuade their husbands to give up their rings.
5. **Denouement:** normality and the natural order is restored. The lovers all gather safely in Belmont and Antonio's ships return safely.

Comedic Conventions

- Although both tragic and comedic elements can be found in The Merchant of Venice, the latter genre is much more dominant.
- While the play includes the tragic theme of despair, it is primarily a comedy due to its use of lovers being separated, characters in disguise and a happy resolution.
- The play uses a comedic element in the form of lovers being frequently separated:
 - Initially, Jessica and Lorenzo are not permitted to marry; Bassanio has to return to Venice to see Antonio, leaving Portia behind.
 - This separation highlights the struggle of the young lovers.
- Although typically, weddings serve as a resolution in Shakespearean comedies, The Merchant of Venice play takes a different path, with the lovers already married.
- In Shakespeare's comedies, it was common for women to disguise themselves as men as a plot device.
- All three female characters disguise themselves as men at one point, adding to its comedic quality with their disguises:



Your notes

- First, Jessica dresses up as a torchbearer to run away from her father's home
- Similarly, Portia and Nerissa dress up as lawyers to help Antonio, using disguises as a means to achieve their objectives
- As her father's will no longer restricts her, Portia seizes the opportunity to showcase her intelligence and capabilities while defying gender norms
- In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare also utilises a unique timeline where time seems to pass at a varied pace:
 - While Antonio's three-month timeline in Venice seems to pass quickly, Belmont's timeline appears to move slowly, with only days passing
- To restore the play's comedy aspect, Shakespeare introduces a third storyline that focuses on the exchange of rings in his play:
 - It is possible that Shakespeare understood how an audience might react to the fall of Shylock and, therefore, this plot point underscores this as the happiness experienced in Belmont hinging on this exchange of rings
- Thus the play's language reverts to the realm of romantic comedy after Shylock's exit:
 - After Shylock exits the stage, the tone of the play becomes much more light-hearted

Poetry and Prose

- Shakespeare used three forms of poetic language when he wrote his plays:
 - Blank verse
 - Rhymed verse
 - Prose
- Each of the three forms are used throughout The Merchant of Venice
- Shakespeare used these different forms of language for dramatic purposes to perform different functions:
 - To distinguish characters from one another
 - To reveal the psychology of characters
 - To show character development

Blank verse

- Blank verse consists of unrhymed lines of ten syllables, although it does not always exactly fit that pattern
- Typically in Shakespeare plays, blank verse represents human feelings in speeches and soliloquies, and the everyday ordinariness of life:



Your notes

- It is the form used the most by Shakespeare
- In the Merchant of Venice, Shylock's soliloquy in Act III is in blank verse

Rhymed verse

- Rhymed verse consists of sets of rhyming couplets: two successive lines that rhyme with each other at the end of the line
- Shakespeare frequently used rhyming couplets to end a scene or a character's dialogue
- In Act I, Scene iii of the play, Antonio concludes his speech with a rhyming couplet, stating: "My ships arrive a month before the day, So no need for dismay"

Prose

- Prose is unrhymed lines with no pattern or rhythm
- Shakespeare used prose for serious episodes, letters, or when characters appear to be losing their minds (when it would be unrealistic for them to speak poetically)
- In The Merchant of Venice, only approximately 20 per cent of the play is written in prose

Literary Devices

- Shakespeare presents two contrasting worlds in the play:
 - Venice is portrayed as a bustling city filled with tradespeople and moneylenders; while Belmont is a fantastical realm where dreams and romance flourish
- In the 16th century, writers often used imagery of a ship battling storms and searching for a secure refuge as a symbol for the turbulent trajectory of common human experience, susceptible to the will of destiny:
 - In the Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare uses Antonio's ships as a symbol of this
 - Foreshadowing is used to provide the audience with subtle hints about the loss of Antonio's wealth due to his overconfidence of investing all his money in one fleet of ships
- Additionally, Shakespeare uses Antonio's exaggerated offer of his life to help Bassanio to symbolise the extremity and risk that the future bond will hold
- Moreover, Shylock's unwavering disposition foreshadows his forced conversion towards the end of the play
- Shylock's desire for a "pound of flesh" from Antonio can be interpreted in a variety of ways
- It mainly serves as a metaphor for the closely intertwined relationships within the play and highlights Shylock's unwavering devotion to the law:
 - Additionally, it underscores the level of loyalty between the characters of Antonio and Bassanio, as evidenced by the binding nature of their debt

- Further, Shylock's insistence on the repayment of Antonio's debt with his own flesh is strengthened by the fact that he has just lost his own daughter, Jessica



Your notes



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Key Quotations

Remember the assessment objectives explicitly states that you should be able to “use textual references, *including* quotations”. This means summarising, paraphrasing, referencing single words and referencing plot events are all as valid as quotations in demonstrating that you understand the text. It is important to remember that you can evidence your knowledge of the text in these two equally valid ways: both through references to it and direct quotations from it.

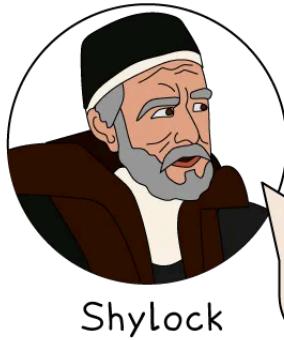
Overall, you should aim to secure a strong knowledge of the text, rather than rehearsed quotations, as this will enable you to respond to the question. It is the quality of your knowledge of the text which will enable you to select references effectively.

If you are going to revise quotations, the best way is to group them by character, or theme. Below you will find definitions and analysis of the best quotations, arranged by the following themes:

- Prejudice and Intolerance
- Justice and Mercy
- Love and Friendship
- Wealth and Power

Prejudice and Intolerance

Prejudice is a prevalent theme in The Merchant of Venice. The majority of the Venetian characters exhibit strong prejudice and intolerance against Shylock in the play.



Shylock



“I hate him for he is a Christian”



Shylock



“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”

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“I hate him for he is a Christian” – Shylock, Act I, Scene iii

"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" – Shylock, Act III, Scene i

Meaning and context

- The first quote appears in Act I Scene iii when the audience is first introduced to Shylock

Analysis

- Here, Shakespeare demonstrates Shylock's own prejudice against the Christian characters in the play, particularly Antonio

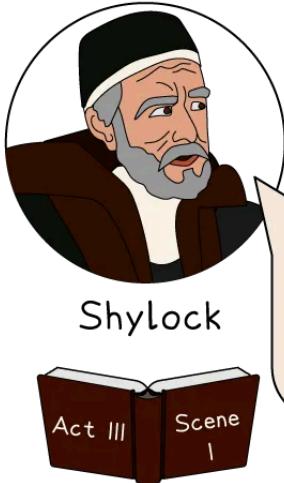


Your notes

- As a character, Shylock is a deeply devout follower of his religion, yet this quote displays his prejudice and intolerance for other faiths
- However, in the second quote, Shakespeare appears to suggest that Shylock's anger stems from the maltreatment he has endured over time rather than being inherently tied to his Jewish identity
- As a character he is continually subjected to prejudice and humiliation



Your notes



“ If you prick us do we not bleed? ...
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? ”

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“If you prick us do we not bleed? ...And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” – Shylock, Act III, Scene i

Meaning and context

- This quote appears in Act III, when Shylock delivers a long monologue which reveals much about his character

Analysis

- During Shylock's monologue, he presents his argument that Jews and Christians share a universal sense of humanity and a similar desire for retribution
- While the monologue concludes with Shylock defending his strong desire for revenge, it could be interpreted as a plea for equality
- During this speech, the audience is provided with a valuable insight into the character of Shylock and the motivations behind his actions, which unveils a more sophisticated and intricate persona of his character compared to the one that Shakespeare first portrays

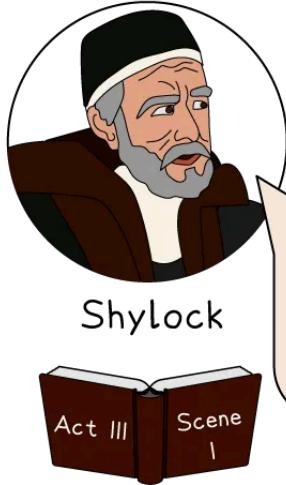
Justice and Mercy

In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare explores the theme of justice and mercy by using a range of literary techniques. Justice is demanded when a person senses injustice, while mercy refers to the act of

granting forgiveness, which may not be easily bestowed.



Your notes



“The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction”



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**“The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction” – Shylock,
Act III, Scene i**

Meaning and context

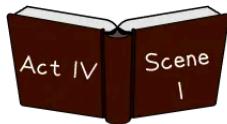
- This quote is spoken by Shylock when he is speaking to Salerio and Solanio who are taunting him

Analysis

- This quote demonstrates Shylock's fixation on his revenge with Antonio as he insists on getting what he believes is rightfully his, without entertaining any form of opposition or reason
- This quote also suggests that Shylock's behaviour towards Christians is learned from them: “the villainy you teach me”
- After this part in the play, it becomes challenging to empathise with Shylock as he is devoid of both compassion and balance



Shylock



“ You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live ”


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“ You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live ” – Shylock, Act IV, Scene i

Meaning and context

- This quote appears in Act IV and shows Shylock speaking to the court

Analysis

- This quote reveals Shylock's demise as a character for despite being spared from death, he faces severe consequences, including losing his possessions, profession and religion
- Upon leaving the court, he issues no further threats of retribution
- An audience may feel that Portia's punishment of Shylock is too severe – her strict interpretation of the law results in the complete destruction of his character

Love and Friendship

The Merchant of Venice explores the theme of love and friendship between many of its characters. The chief romantic relationship in the play involves Bassanio and Portia, and other relationships are also explored through Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo, the wedding between Nerissa and Gratiano, and the bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio.



“But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit”


Your notes

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“But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit.” – Jessica, Act II, Scene vi

Meaning and context

- This quote appears in Act II, Scene vi and is spoken by Jessica

Analysis

- This quote illustrates how Jessica is blinded by love in the play as she willingly gives up her life of riches to be with Lorenzo
- Jessica conveys the belief that love makes people oblivious to the flaws of their beloved and acknowledges that in the state of being in love, one may also believe they are perfect
- The quote underscores the themes of romance and wealth in the play and either one can impair one's judgement



Portia



“First go with me to church
and call me wife, and then
away to Venice to your friend”


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**“First go with me to church and call me wife, and then away to Venice to your friend” – Portia, Act III,
Scene ii**

Meaning and context

- This quote appears in Act III, Scene i after Bassanio has chosen the correct casket

Analysis

- In this quote, Portia portrays her altruistic side as a character by encouraging Bassanio to wed her promptly, so that he can aid his acquaintance, Antonio
- Moreover, she pledges to provide Bassanio with any amount of gold necessary to settle Antonio's debts and save his life
- As a compassionate woman, Portia understands that Bassanio could never allow his friend to perish due to his financial obligations

Wealth and Power

The Merchant of Venice highlights the complexities of wealth and power through several characters. Although Bassanio is portrayed as a noble character, his financial struggles are a significant obstacle which leads him to borrow from Antonio, while Shylock's vengeful actions enable him to profit by taking advantage of others.



Bassanio



“I like not fair terms and a villain's mind”



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“I like not fair terms and a villain's mind” – Bassanio, Act I, Scene iii

Meaning and context

- This quote appears in Act I of the play and is spoken by Bassanio concerning Shylock's terms for the bond

Analysis

- Although Bassanio, at times, could be viewed as quite an immature character, this quote reveals his shrewdness and good intuition when he mistrusts Shylock's terms for the bond
- Whilst Antonio appears oblivious to the strangeness of Shylock's terms and willingly accepts them, Bassanio's caution in allowing Antonio to accept them demonstrates his ability to show wisdom and sound judgement



Bassanio



“In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair and – fairer
than that word – of
wondrous virtues”


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**“In Belmont is a lady richly left, And she is fair and – fairer than that word – of wondrous virtues” –
Bassanio, Act I, Scene i**

Meaning and context

- This quote appears in Act I and is Bassanio speaking to Antonio about Portia

Analysis

- Though he acknowledges Portia's physical beauty and admirable qualities, this quote reveals Bassanio's primary motivation for pursuing her, which is to lessen his financial woes and attain great wealth
- He mentions her vast riches first before her beauty and openly admits that they play a significant role in his decision
- This quote reveals how the desire for wealth and material possessions can influence one's behaviour



Your notes

The Merchant of Venice: Character Quotations

GCSE English Literature exam questions usually focus on a theme, a character or a relationship between two or more characters. Examiners reward responses that track the development of characters or themes through the play.

When revising, try to consider quotes in terms of their narrative effects — how characters are presented, what attitudes or relationships are presented and why these ideas have been shown to the reader.

- Shylock
- Portia
- Bassanio
- Antonio



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Something to bear in mind when you are revising ‘The Merchant of Venice’ quotations is that the dialogue conveys the characters’ attitudes and often shows how they conduct their relationships. Examiners suggest that you consider the ideas represented by the characters, and how this is illustrated in their interactions.

Examiners like you to use references or quotations as support for your ideas. That’s why we’ve included a “key word or phrase” from our longer quotations to help you remember important references from across the play.

Shylock

“ ”

“Antonio shall become bound; well” — Shylock, Act 1, Scene 3

 Shylock	Key word or phrase to memorise: "bound" and "well"	What the quotation means: Shylock is quick to repeat that Antonio is indeed "bound" to him when he enters into a deal with Bassanio that means that Antonio owes him money	Theme: Wealth and Power
---	--	--	-----------------------------------



- Shakespeare presents ideas about wealth and the way it brings power through Shylock:
 - His **pun**, "bound", alludes to the way Antonio's debt (which he is "bound" to pay back) will figuratively bind him (like a trap) to Shylock
 - His pleasure at the certainty of this is conveyed in the addition of "well"
- Shakespeare **foreshadows** the conflict that this relationship will bring:
 - Shylock's obsession leads him to seek merciless vengeance on Antonio

“

“I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!” — Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1

 Shylock	Key word or phrase to memorise: "jewels in her ear"	What the quotation means: Shylock is furious that his daughter has disappeared and asks Tubal if he has found her, adding that he would rather she were dead so that the jewels she wears are returned to him	Theme: Love and Friendship
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- Shylock's emotional outbursts are often about the cost of things, or his loss of wealth
- Shakespeare illustrates Shylock's value for money over his relationships:
 - While he seems desperate to find his daughter, his real worry is revealed
 - Shylock's wish for the "jewels" rather than her safe return portrays his callousness

- It would be a mistake, though, to suggest that he does not care for his daughter at all:
 - Much of his anger here comes from a sense of betrayal — her disappearance hurts him because he trusted her
 - The **plosive alliteration** of the “d” sound here gives a sense of his fury, suggesting that he spits these words out



Your notes

“

“Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that” — Shylock, Act 4, Scene 1

 Shylock	Key word or phrase to memorise: “take my life”	What the quotation means: When Shylock’s judgement comes, he is offered a pardon if he gives half his wealth to Antonio and half to the state, but Shylock refuses, asking instead for them to take his life	Theme: Prejudice and Intolerance
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- Shakespeare illustrates how Shylock considers money to be vital to life:
 - His need for his “living”, he says, is more valuable than “life”
 - He suggests that he cannot sustain life without money
 - The play presents ideas about a society that prioritises wealth
- Shakespeare’s Shylock is intolerant of Antonio’s values and seeks vengeance:
 - In this scene, though, Shylock is forced to surrender all of his values
 - The play raises questions about justice and intolerance
- Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience would have found this line, which plays into racial stereotypes of covetous Jews, amusing:
 - Modern audiences, though, recognise the cruelty and racially-motivated injustice with which Shylock is treated here

Portia

“

“if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me” — Portia, Act 1, Scene 2



Your notes

 Portia	Key word or phrase to memorise: “condition of a saint” and “complexion of a devil”	What the quotation means: Portia is frustrated at her father’s wish that she find a suitable man to marry through a series of tests, joking that she cares less about their nature and more about their skin colour or race, and that she would prefer a foreign man to be her priest than her husband	Theme: Prejudice and Intolerance
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Shakespeare illustrates society-wide discriminatory attitudes:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Portia’s witty comment reveals her casual, flippant racism▪ Her joke links non-white races to the “devil”, playing on the common belief that the devil had black skin▪ The play portrays a number of oppressed characters who exhibit prejudice against other minorities:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The rhyming of “wive” with “shrive” (which means ‘to confess) perhaps indicates ironic resignation at her limited role in her marriage▪ Portia links suitors and priests, illustrating the influence of both			

“

“There’s something tells me, but it is not love, I would not lose you; and you know yourself,

Hate counsels not in such a quality” — Portia, Act 3 Scene 2

 Portia	Key word or phrase to memorise: "it is not love" and "lose you"	What the quotation means: Portia tells Bassanio that she wants him to stay longer, but not because of love (she does not want to admit her feelings just yet, or push him away), but that it is definitely not "hate" as they get along so well	Theme: Love and Friendship
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- Shakespeare's female character, Portia, is conventionally measured in matters of love:
 - She is portrayed as hesitant to enter a relationship although she enjoys Bassanio's company
 - She insists that she does not feel love and contrasts this with "hate"
- Shakespeare portrays Portia as an independent female who finds a sense of power in her status and singledom:
 - Portia's desire for friendship and a worthy companion supersedes her need for marriage and love

“

If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honour to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring — Portia, Act 5, Scene 1

 Portia	Key word or phrase to memorise: "half her worthiness that gave the ring"	What the quotation means: Portia mirrors Bassanio's words and contradicts him, saying that he would not have given away the ring if he had known the significance of it, the worth of the person who gave it, or was honourable enough to take care of it	Theme: Wealth and Power
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- Shakespeare portrays Portia and Bassanio as equals:
 - His attempts to justify himself are met with a witty, sophisticated reply



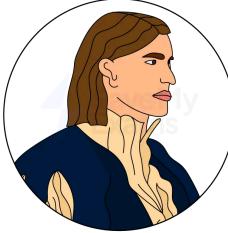
Your notes

- Portia's superior knowledge gives her the power in this scene
- The list structure (emphasised by the **polysyndeton** of "Or" and the repetition of "the ring") creates a sense of verbally punishing Bassanio, attacking him with fault after fault
- **Dramatic irony** and disguise is used to create comedy:
 - Portia's scolding is **ironic** as she is withholding information from him

Bassanio

”

“**Brutus' Portia: Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth**” — Bassanio, Act 1, Scene 1

 Bassanio	Key word or phrase to memorise: “wide world” and “worth”	What the quotation means: Bassanio tells Antonio of Portia’s reputation around the world as a beautiful and wealthy woman	Theme: Wealth and Power
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- Shakespeare’s ideas about wealth and power are introduced by Bassanio:
 - He is frustrated that he could never win Portia’s love as he has no “means” or money
- Shakespeare foreshadows the relationship between Bassanio and Portia:
 - Bassanio expresses his admiration for her reputation and wealth with **alliterative** “wide world” and “worth”

”

“**I like not fair terms and a villain’s mind**” — Bassanio, Act 1, Scene 3

 Bassanio	Key word or phrase to memorise: "fair terms" and "villain's mind"	What the quotation means: After Antonio has made a deal with Shylock, Bassanio expresses his suspicious and distrustful attitude towards Shylock, suggesting that even if the deal is "fair" Shylock may cheat him as he probably has evil plans	Theme: Prejudice and Intolerance
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- Shakespeare illustrates the prejudicial way Antonio and Bassanio refer to Shylock:
 - While Bassanio does not know Shylock he suspects him as a cheat
 - He implies Shylock is **conniving**
- The play examines the conflict that comes from divisions and imbalances:
 - Bassanio's position makes him vulnerable and suspicious
 - Shylock's access to money affords him some power which he exploits

“ ”

“Sweet doctor, you shall be my bed-fellow: When I am absent, then lie with my wife” — Bassanio,
Act 5 Scene 1

 Bassanio	Key word or phrase to memorise: "Sweet doctor" and "lie with my wife"	What the quotation means: Bassanio makes a joke when he finds out that Portia was, in fact, the doctor, and he says that he wants the doctor to sleep with him, and when he is not there, the doctor can sleep with his wife (herself, in other words!)	Theme: Love and Friendship
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- Shakespeare's challenge to gender stereotypes is presented in the relationship between Bassanio and Portia:
 - Portia's superior position in the relationship defies social norms
 - Their relationship, though, is presented as balanced and fair despite Portia's higher social rank



Your notes

- Bassanio's good-natured reply to her deception is comical
- Bassanio's joke blurs gender and sexuality and portrays him as tolerant:
 - The joke also alludes to the fact that, during the Elizabethan period, Portia, Bassanio's wife, would have been played by a young boy actor, which adds to the humour of the scenario
 - References to gender trickery therefore remind Shakespeare's audience that it is looking at a boy playing a woman playing a man

Antonio

“

“Neither have I money nor commodity”

To raise a present sum: therefore go forth;

Try what my credit can in Venice do” – Antonio, Act 1, Scene 1



Antonio

Key word or phrase to memorise:
“money nor commodity” and “my credit”

What the quotation means:
Antonio tells his friend, Bassanio, that he cannot help him as he has no money or wealth, but that his reputation in Venice may be of some worth

Theme:
Wealth and Power

- The play explores a society in which money equates to independence, social opportunities, and individual power:
 - Antonio's desire to help his friend is limited to his “credit” or reputation
 - His reference to having neither “money nor commodity” implies he is powerless to help
 - This conveys the limited choices for individuals like Antonio

“

“Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,

And he repents not that he pays your debt” — Antonio, Act 4, Scene 1



Your notes

 Antonio	Key word or phrase to memorise: “lose your friend” and “pays your debt”	What the quotation means: Antonio tells Bassanio to regret only that he will lose their friendship and that he does not regret sacrificing himself to settle his debt	Theme: Love and Friendship
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- Shakespeare’s presentation of the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio examines loyalty:
 - Antonio is portrayed as a **martyr**, but his words are **hyperbolic**
 - The **repetition** of “repent” highlights the “saintly” quality he attributes to his actions
 - Antonio’s willingness to die for Bassanio is considered by many to be an indication of Antonio’s romantic feelings for Bassanio
- Shakespeare’s play links the value of money to the value of relationships:
 - Antonio’s reminder, that he “pays” Bassanio’s “debt” is a stark reminder of his broken bond

“

“My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord

Will never more break faith advisedly” — Antonio, Act 5 Scene 1

	Key word or phrase to memorise: “soul upon the forfeit” and “break faith”	What the quotation means: In the resolution, Antonio tells Portia that he is sure that his friend will not break a deal again, and that he would bet his “soul” on his faith in his friend	Theme: Justice and Mercy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In the resolution justice is delivered: 			

- Antonio's loyalty to his friend is presented as forgiveness
- He offers his "soul" as sacrifice if Bassanio breaks "faith"
- Shakespeare explores the nature of justice and mercy:
 - Bassanio's request for forgiveness is granted by Portia and Antonio
 - There is some **irony** here, though, given that Bassanio has already broken one significant promise to Portia (the ring)



Your notes

Source

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, OUP (2008)