**Character Analysis of Shylock in “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare**

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In Shakespeare’s edgy and suspenseful play, “The Merchant of Venice”, the character of Shylock may evoke complex feelings within the reader. Shylock is clearly a villain in the sense that he takes repeatedly takes advantage of people in vulnerable economic situations and makes a handsome living in this way. He is not an inherently likeable character throughout  “The Merchant of Venice” by Shakespeare; he avoids friendships, he is cranky, and he is steadfast in his beliefs to the point of being rigid.

Any character analysis of Shylock in “The Merchant of Venice” should note his tendency for selfish behavior and thinking. Shylock is also a man who is unreasonable and self-thinking, demanding, as one of the important quotes in “The Merchant of Venice” goes, “a weight of carrion flesh” (IV.i.41) from a man he suspects will not be able to repay him simply because it is his “humour” to do so (IV.i.43). Because he is the villain of this play, justice can only be served if Shakespeare’s Shylock is punished in a manner that is congruent with his violations of social norms and laws. At the same time, though, his punishment is problematic for it seems to mimic the very crime of which Shylock is really being accused, and that crime is absolutism. By insisting that Shylock must be punished in the way that he is in ‘The Merchant of Venice”, Shakespeare raises doubts about the purity of Christian love and mercy, which certainly creates implications for the very notions of both punishment and villainy.

Shylock is a man who is hardly likeable in all aspects throughout  “The Merchant of Venice”. Already a marginalized member of Venetian society because he is a Jew and occupies the stereotypical profession of the money-grubbing guarantor, Shylock ensures that his peers and the audience will not like him because of his unreasonableness and unwillingness to let go of his tendencies to be greedy, even in a situation that seems to warrant mercy and pity. In several instances in  “The Merchant of Venice” he takes a perverse pleasure in what he refers to in one of the important quotes from “The Merchant of Venice” by Shakespeare, “a merry sport” of exacting “an equal pound/Of…fair flesh to be cut off and taken/In what part of [the] body pleaseth me” as the terms of a loan agreement (I.iii.151-146), terms which he refuses to justify.

At the same time, though, the reader, when performing even a basic character analysis of Shylock, can feel a curious compassion for this character, who is so clearly disliked. Although he has imposed isolation on himself by declaring that he will not “eat/ with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.” ( I.iii/ ll. 33-34), one begins to understand why he has withdrawn from social life when he makes his moving speech in Act III, in which it is asked by Shylock who is the victim of racism, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (III.i.54). The reader begins to understand how Shylock has never been understood because no one has ever seen him for anything other than his Jewishness. Again, this complicates the reader’s relationship with his character and the subsequent punishment he receives because although he is not likable, one cannot help but sympathize with his plight as an outcast.

It is Shylock himself who teaches the reader and his own peers the most about Christian love and mercy in  ”The Merchant of Venice”. As he continues his Act III speech, he muses about the similarities between Jews and Christians  in one of the meaningful quotes, saying, “Fed… the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means… as a Christian is….,” and then confronts his Christian accusers and judges with three profound questions that invoke these themes in “Merchant of Venice”: “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?” (III.i.54-62). The cycle of strange violence that Shylock has set into motion will not end once his punishment has been meted out to him, as he goes on to warn in the remainder of the speech. Rather than learn this lesson—namely, that revenge in the guise of justice will never result in anything other than more revenge—Shylock receives his punishment. Years later, we see the same kinds of issues played out in society, proving that we have learned little about what Shakespeare hoped to teach us through Shylock.