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Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. point out in what ways Shylock is a stereotypical character, and discuss in what way Shakespeare's artistry moves beyond the stereotype.
2. discuss the legal and social position of the Jew in Elizabethan society.
3. explain the Elizabethan attitude toward usury.
4. identify those elements that lead some critics to characterize this play as a comedy, and identify those aspects of the play that lead others to view the play as a tragedy.
5. write a short paragraph describing how the concepts of both friendship and love are presented in this play.
6. trace the development of the following motifs in this play:
 - the harmonious life as a result of moderation
 - the relationship between love and wealth
 - the question of mercy tempering justice
 - the distinction between what is real and what is merely appearance
 - the rituals of courtship and marriage in Elizabethan society
7. write a short character sketch on the following characters, pointing out the motives for their actions: Shylock, Portia, Bassanio, Jessica, Antonio, Gratiano.
8. define the concept of "comic relief," state its function, and point out where it occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*.
9. identify the principal comic figure in this play and describe how the actions and language of this character make him a comic figure.
10. define the terms "inversion" and "ellipsis," and point to examples of both in the play.
11. identify and discuss the main plot and three subplots of this play and discuss how all four are linked.
12. discuss the several ways in which this play deals with contrasts. What are the major contrasts, who is involved, and what happens?
13. discuss the Elizabethan view of the use and abuse of money presented.
14. list and discuss those familiar elements of a Shakespearean comedy found in this play.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Some critics have said that in this play, love is another form of wealth. Point out comments or incidents in this play that would support that idea.
2. Discuss Shylock's character, pointing out how within one play Shylock can be a comic figure, a villain, and additionally, a character for whom we can feel sympathy.
3. Launcelot Gobbo and his father are comic figures that are not unlike comic figures seen in other plays of Shakespeare. What aspects of the Gobbos' characters or actions do you suppose might be seen in other Shakespearean characters?
4. Sum up what you think this play has to say about friendship and about love.
5. Consider what has been discussed about harmony and write a short paragraph in which you indicate what this play seems to say about a happy life.
6. One of the subplots in *The Merchant of Venice* is the ring subplot. Identify where it appears in the play, and state what function you think this subplot has in the play.
7. A theme in this play is that reality is not always what it may appear to be. Discuss the incidents with the three caskets and at least two other times in this play that this theme appears.
8. Some critics have pointed out that this play contrasts the Old Testament view of God as a stern lawgiver with the New Testament picture of God as the dispenser of divine mercy. Do you agree with this? Identify and discuss at least two other marked contrasts that appear in this play.
9. In your opinion, is Shakespeare condemning usury in *The Merchant of Venice*?
10. Sum up what you think this play is saying about the use and abuse of money.
11. Some critics label *The Merchant of Venice* a "problem play" since it deals with the problem of usury in Elizabethan society. In what terms might the modern reader see this drama as a "problem play"?
12. Support or refute the thesis that this play is a tragedy and Shylock is the tragic figure. What is Shylock's tragic flaw.
13. Point out the familiar elements of a Shakespearean comedy that are found in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Merchant of Venice

Act I, Scene I - Venice

VOCABULARY

ague – a fever and shaking caused by an illness; a fit
argosies – large merchant ships
gaged – pledged; bound to
gear – an affair, event
gudgeon – an easily caught fish
portly – filled; fat
presages – foretells
signiors – rich, powerful men; a term of respect

1. Antonio, the merchant of the title, is sad but tells us he does not know why. What two reasons do his friends offer for Antonio’s sadness, and what is his response?

2. Upon the entrance of Bassanio and his companions, the friendship motif is raised in a backhanded fashion by Solanio and Salerio. What is the main point of their comments?

Act I, Scene III - Venice

VOCABULARY

eanlings – lambs, kids
fulsome – lustful
imputation – negative charges, incriminations
publican – a tax collector
squandered – scattered

1. Is Shylock’s refusal to have dinner with Antonio and Bassanio based on religious or societal grounds?

2. In the aside that follows, what do we learn of Shylock’s real feelings toward Antonio? For what three reasons does he feel this way?

3. When Shylock makes the following comments, what is his meaning?

“If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.”

Act II, Scene IV - Venice

NO VOCABULARY

1. The conversation at the opening of this scene seems to make little sense until we learn that the young men are preparing for a masque. What is a masque, and what do they need a torchbearer for?

2. What further action do we learn Jessica plans to take when she leaves her father's house? What is Lorenzo's reaction to this news?

3. In what two senses may we take Lorenzo's comment that tonight Jessica will be his torchbearer?
