



WARM UP

1. Attitudes Survey. Have students take this attitude survey, answering 1 for agree or 4 for disagree. After the survey, have students defend their positions.

Use this survey frequently throughout the play to revisit their attitudes and to see how those perceptions have changed. Revisit the survey at the end of the play to determine how this play may have changed their attitudes:

Money can affect my level of happiness.

Appearances can be deceiving.

Spouses should have the same values.

People who do not follow or practice my faith are wrong.

A true friend would do anything for their friend.

People should forgive those who have wronged them.

People should keep their promises, no matter what.

2. The decisions the characters make could change their life forever. Shakespeare teaches us to consider our choices and think before we speak and act.

In real life, we make decisions every day – some more important than others. Discuss with a partner what you can do in the following situations, using I can / can't :

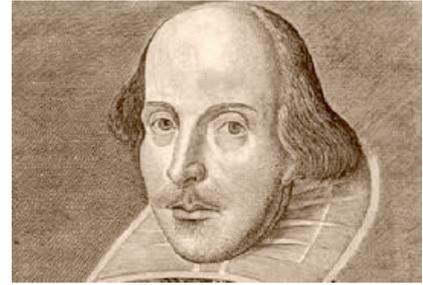
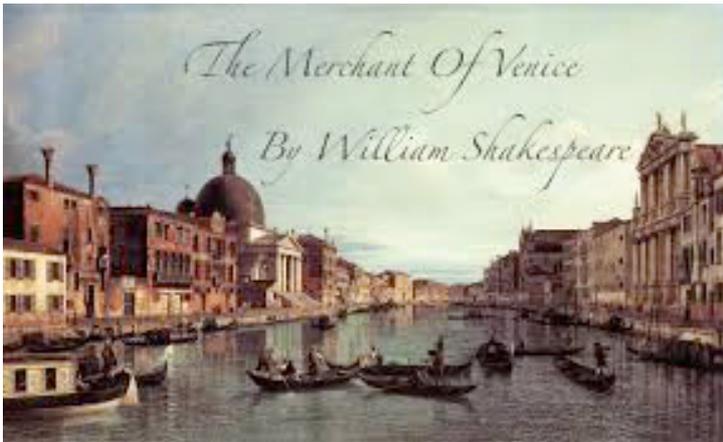
Your parents don't like your new boyfriend/ girlfriend

You borrowed money from a friend but you can't pay it back

You need to choose between three options (for sport, a party, a holiday, for school, etc) and don't know what to choose.

3. Concept Map Activity. In groups of four, students discuss the relationships among these words: money, love, religion, law, marriage, justice, and mercy. What connections do these words have with one another? Students create some visuals to show how these words interact.

4. What is a stereotype? Where do stereotypes come from? Identify characters in television, film, and literature that are built on a stereotype (of age, class, region, ethnicity, race, etc.). Label characters that reinforce negative images. Which characters break the stereotype? How do they do this? What purpose do these stereotyped characters serve? Should they remain part of our cultural landscape? Why or why not?



THEMES

WOMEN

Women and Men: their Status

The concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign to most in Shakespeare's day: Adam was created first, and Eve from his body; she was created specifically to give him comfort, and was to be subordinate to him, to obey him and to accept her lesser status. A dominant woman was unnatural, a symptom of disorder¹.

Shakespeare introduces very new and bright ideas such as women's rights and their equality with men which were totally unacceptable for the people of the Elizabethan time. In that male dominated world women were considered no better than cattle or land and to talk directly about their rights and needs was useless and even impossible.²

What is a role model ?

A person looked to by others as an example to be imitated.

Women were not allowed to perform as actresses in plays, so all the female characters were played by young boys. So... boys played girls which then played boys³.

Portia is limited by her circumstances as a woman and has to obey her dad and navigate relationships with men (like Bassanio) who want her for her money. But she manages to play by society's rules (mostly) while having a lot of fun twisting said rules to her own advantage. In the end, Portia outsmarts everyone and winds up on top.

“Portia grows through the trial. She realizes she’s married this shallow guy, Bassanio, who’s going to spend the rest of his life in bars and so forth.”

Jerry Tallmer talks to Michael Radford about his film version of The Merchant of Venice⁴.



1 The Merchant of Venice, Education Pack, by Propeller

2 <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Women-in-The-Merchant-of-Venice-F3J3CBYZTJ>

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JR_Ek7rE-A

Jessica goes against the gender roles for women, because she is making her own decision for her life. She doesn't ask her father if she can leave and marry Lorenzo, she just does it because she wants to. This behavior goes against prescribed roles for women in Shakespeare's time period.



Shylock and antisemitism

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Merchant of Venice — Act III, scene I

During the 1600s in Venice and in other places, Jews were required to wear a red hat at all times in public to ensure that they were easily identified. If they did not comply with this rule, they could face the death penalty. In Venice, Jews had to live in a ghetto protected by Christians which was probably for their own safety. The Jews were expected to pay their guards.⁵

In Shakespeare's time, no Jews had been legally present in England for several hundred years (since the Edict of Expulsion in 1290). However, stereotypes of Jews as money lenders remained from the Middle Ages. Historically, money lending had been a fairly common occupation among Jews, in part because Christians were not permitted to practise usury, then considered to mean charging interest of any kind on loans, and Jews were excluded from other fields of work. At the same time, most Christian kings forbade Jews to own land for farming or to serve in the government, and craft guilds usually refused to admit Jews as artisans. Thus money lending was one of the few occupations still open to Jews.



In many ways, we can see the Merchant of Venice as an exploration of the ways that society has damaged this man.⁶

4 The Merchant of Venice, Education Pack, by Propeller

5 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shylock>

6 <https://www.hancox.me/home/2018/5/9/was-shylock-really-so-awful>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS⁷



Bassanio lives well beyond his means. Why, then, does Antonio continue to lend him money willingly, even though Bassanio has yet to pay him back? Would you lend money to him?

What does Antonio get from his relationship with Bassanio?

What favors have you asked of a friend? Is there one friend you repeatedly turn to for favors? Why do you turn to that friend so frequently? Or, conversely, do you have a friend for whom you continue to grant favors, even though you know they won't repay them? Why do you continue to do those favors?



Portia's father created a lottery to best determine a proper husband for his daughter, even after his death.

What have your parents done that was "for your own good"? What was the end result of their actions? Was it indeed "for your own good"? Do you think that Portia's father's test seems like a good one? Why or why not?

What does it mean when Shylock says, "Antonio is a good man" (1.12)? How does Bassanio take his meaning? What distinction does this show between the two men in terms of their priorities or states of mind?

Describe Shylock. What stereotypical characteristics do you notice in the way Shakespeare's words present Shylock's character? What do you see that defies stereotypes?

How does Shylock's loan to Antonio differ from Antonio's loan to Bassanio?

Why is it such a crisis for Shylock that his daughter converted and married a Christian?

Do you think Jessica will be happy with Lorenzo? Why or why not?

Based on how Shylock has been treated by Christians, is it wrong for him to want revenge?

Is Shylock a villain or a victim of persecution?

Shylock's speech, beginning, "Hath not a Jew..." (11.50-69) is often called "Shylock's Defense." Divide the class into two groups: one reading the speech from the perspective that Shylock is a villain; the other, reading from the perspective that Shylock is a victim. Each group should find textual examples to support their claim. Share results and discuss.

What does Antonio's letter indicate about his feelings for Bassanio?

Why would Portia even consider helping Antonio?

Why does Shylock refuse to get a doctor to attend to Antonio?

How does Portia save Antonio's life?

How does Shylock feel about the outcome of the trial? How do you feel about it?

What does the fact that both Bassanio and Gratiano give their rings away say about relationships between men and relationships between men and women?

Does this play have a "happily ever after" ending? Why or why not? What contributes to that feeling? What detracts from it?

⁷ A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classics Edition of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

ACTIVITIES

Write Portia's advertisement asking for an ideal husband. Write down the qualities he must have.

This play is a comedy. Did you expect this ending? What changes would you make? Write a new ending making everybody happy at the end.

Create a table listing good and bad qualities of each of these three characters: Shylock, Bassanio, and Antonio? Who qualifies as "good"? Who qualifies as "bad"? Why?

Have students create a T-chart (table with two columns): one side listing positive character traits (honesty, compassion, etc.) and the second of negative character traits (greed, cruelty, etc.).

Create two portraits of Shylock: how he sees himself, and how others see him.

Write a monologue for Shylock depicting his actual reaction to discovering Jessica's theft and disappearance.

Write a journal entry as though you were Portia describing the man of her dreams. Base the description on what you know about her character.

British actor Peter Ustinov said once in an interview, "A comedy is just a tragedy gone wrong, and a tragedy is just a comedy gone wrong." Using evidence and direct quotes from the play, write a persuasive essay in which you convince your readers that *The Merchant of Venice* is either a comedy or a tragedy.

Create a list in which you examine the various types of love featured in *The Merchant of Venice*: friendship, love between father and child, romantic love, as well as love of possessions/money. Which type of love is shown to be the strongest in the play? What about the tensions in some of the relationships? What is Shakespeare telling us about the nature of love?

About History

Why were Jews and Christians separated in Shakespeare's time? How was this separation delineated in society? What rights and privileges did Christians have that Jews did not?

One major stereotype about Jews involves money. Research how the exclusion of Jews from guilds, their inability to own land, and the Christian prohibition against usury led to the subsequent creation of "middleman" occupations such as money lending, selling, and estate management.

KEYS

CHARACTER LIST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classics Edition of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

Antonio: Antonio is a wealthy but sad older merchant who claims never to have borrowed money but is willing to lend to **friends**, especially Bassanio, without benefit of interest.

Bassanio: A young man with expensive tastes and rich friends who **borrow**s money from Antonio in order to court the rich, intelligent, and beautiful Portia.

Gratiano: Bassanio's friend with a bawdy and clownish demeanor. Accompanies Bassanio to Belmont to court Portia and falls in **love** with Portia's servant Nerissa.

Lorenzo: Bassanio's friend who falls in love with Shylock's **daughter** Jessica.

Portia: Noblewoman who is as intelligent as she is rich and beautiful.

Nerissa: Portia's handmaid who falls in love **with** Gratiano, Bassanio's friend.

Shylock: The Jewish merchant of Venice who **lends** Antonio the money on his friend Bassanio's behalf. He serves as both the villain and the most tragic figure of the play.

Jessica: Shylock's daughter, who **escapes** from her father's house in order to marry Lorenzo. She converts to Christianity in order to further assimilate into the Christian society of Venice.

The Duke of Venice: The reigning official of Venice who presides over the **court** where Shylock intends to collect on his bond.

Key of the exit test

1C 2D 3B 4A 5B 6C 7D 8D 9A

References

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Pour le dossier « prof » :

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