

# Themes in The Merchant of Venice

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *The Merchant of Venice* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

## Themes

- Prejudice and social injustice
- Revenge, justice and forgiveness
- Money and love

## Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *The Merchant of Venice* which support the play's themes)

- Gold/ducats, jewels and caskets
- The law
- Rings
- Music

## Themes

**Prejudice and social injustice** and whether such attitudes and behaviour are ever justified.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Bassanio asks to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock, Shylock reminds him and Antonio of past mistreatment and Antonio agrees to the bond.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Shylock speaks of his bitterness at being treated as an outcast ('Hath not a Jew eyes...'), regrets the loss of the turquoise ring his wife gave him, and is excited to hear that Antonio has lost another ship.
- Act 4 Scene 1: In the trial scene Shylock demands his pound of flesh and when Portia finds a legal loophole he loses half his wealth and is required to convert to Christianity.

**Revenge, justice and forgiveness** and the possibility of mercy as a response to injustice.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Bassanio asks to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock, Shylock reminds him and Antonio of past mistreatment and Antonio agrees to the bond.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Shylock speaks of his bitterness at being treated as an outcast ('Hath not a Jew eyes...'), regrets the loss of the turquoise ring his wife gave him and is excited to hear that Antonio has lost another ship.
- Act 4 Scene 1: In the trial scene, Shylock, isolated, demands his revenge while Portia argues that 'the quality of mercy is not strained.'

**Money and Love** and how obsession with money can preclude love and loyalty.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Antonio's support of his friend Bassanio contrasts with Shylock's bitterness over past mistreatment, including Antonio's lending of money without charging interest.
- Act 2 Scene 2: Lancelot explains why he wants to leave Shylock's service and work for Bassanio. He plays a trick on his blind father and then asks for his blessing.
- Act 2 Scene 3: Jessica describes her shame in being her father's child and her plans to elope with Lorenzo.
- Act 2 Scene 6: Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, taking with her a casket of gold and jewels.
- Act 2 Scene 8: Shylock discovers his daughter has gone, with his ducats.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Bassanio rejects the gold casket in favour of the lead and wins Portia. Gratiano announces his engagement to Nerissa and Jessica and Lorenzo arrive in Belmont.

## Motifs

**Gold/ducats, jewels and caskets** as representing avarice, the desire for power and control, self-interest, status, the mercantile world.

For example:

- 'Therefore the lottery that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver and lead'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Should I not say/'Hath a dog money? Is it possible/A cur can lend three thousand ducats?''  
Act 1 Scene 3
- 'She hath directed/How I shall take her from her father's house,/What gold and jewels she is furnish'd with'  
Act 2 Scene 4
- 'The first, of gold, who this inscription bears,/'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire''  
Act 2 Scene 7
- 'All that glitters is not gold''  
Act 2 Scene 7
- 'I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!''  
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'Thou stickest a dagger in me: I shall never see my gold again: fourscore ducats at a sitting!''  
Act 3 Scene 1

**The law** as representing justice, rationality over passion, rigidity, social order.

For example:

- 'The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree''  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!''  
Act 2 Scene 8
- 'The duke cannot deny the course of law''/For the commodity that strangers have/With us in Venice, if it be denied,/Will much impeach the justice of his state''  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'And that no lawful means can carry me/Out of his envy's reach''  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'And earthly power doth then show likest God's/When mercy seasons justice''  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Therefore, Jew,/Though justice be thy plea, consider this,/That, in the course of justice, none of us/Should see salvation''  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'I stand here for law''  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'If thou dost shed/One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods/Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate''  
Act 4 Scene 1

**Rings** as symbols of love and loyalty.

For example:

- 'One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey'  
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'I give them with this ring;/Which when you part from, lose, or give away,/Let it  
presage the ruin of your love'  
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'But when this ring/Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence'  
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- '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'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Music** as soothing, transformational, harmonising, reflective of mood

For example:

- 'Let music sound while he doth make his choice;/Then, if he lose, he makes a  
swan-like end,/Fading in music'  
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!/Here will we sit and let the  
sounds of music/Creep in our ears'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'Come ho! and wake Diana with a hymn!/ With sweetest touches pierce your  
mistress' ear,/And draw her home with music'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,/Their savage eyes turn'd to a  
modest gaze/By the sweet power of music'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark,/When neither is attended, and I  
think/The nightingale, if she should sing by day,/When every goose is cackling,  
would be thought/No better a musician than the wren./How many things by  
season season'd are/To their right praise and true perfection!'  
Act 5 Scene 1