

## Studied Drama – Merchant of Venice

### 2009 Junior Certificate Examination

From a play you have studied, choose one important relationship.

- i) Describe the main characteristics of this relationship throughout the play (15)
- ii) How does either the setting (time and place) or another character have an influence on this relationship? Support your answer with reference to the text. (15)

i) The play I have studied is William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'. The relationship that I believe is most important is that between Antonio – the merchant of the title – and his dearest friend, Bassanio.

I think that this relationship is characterised by selflessness and love on the part of Antonio, and an initial carelessness and thoughtlessness on the part of Bassanio, although he does come to realise what he has done to his friend and tries his best to make amends.

Antonio appears to be a lonely man who has nobody close to him but Bassanio. When we first meet Antonio, he seems world-weary: 'In sooth, I know not why I am so sad'; and it seems that the only thing he lives for is his friendship with Bassanio. Salanio recognises this when he says of Antonio 'I think he only loves the world for [Bassanio]'.

The love Antonio has for Bassanio means that he is willing to do anything his friend asks. We know that he has already lent money to Bassanio, but even though Bassanio has not repaid that money, Antonio is willing to lend him more. He assures Bassanio that 'My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions'.

*When you need to replace a word in a quote with one of your own so that the quote will make sense, you should put the substituted word in square brackets.*

Antonio's ships are still at sea, so he has not yet the money to lend to Bassanio, but his love for his friend is so great that he is willing to borrow money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. This is not something he would normally do, but he says that 'to supply the ripe wants of my friend / I'll break a custom'.

Shylock makes what seems to be a ridiculous demand. If Antonio's ships do not come in and

bring the money he owes Shylock, then Shylock can take a pound of Antonio's flesh. I believe that the way in which Antonio and Bassanio respond to this shows us something very important about their relationship. Antonio is willing to agree to the bond because he loves Bassanio so much, and Bassanio – despite some token resistance – agrees to it. I think that this shows Antonio's incredible selflessness and Bassanio's selfishness. How could he agree to his friend making such a dreadful deal?

When Shylock demands payment of the bond, Bassanio at last shows that he is a worthy friend for Antonio. He volunteers to take Antonio's place and to die in his stead: 'The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all / Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood'. He even offers to sacrifice his wife, not knowing that she is in the court and listening to all of this!

The bond between the two men is shown clearly when Bassanio brings Antonio with him to his new home with Portia. This seems only fitting, as the marriage would not have taken place without Antonio's incredibly selfless sponsorship of Bassanio's courtship.

- ii) A character who I believe significantly influences the relationship is Shylock, the Jewish moneylender.

When the bond is first proposed, Bassanio does not put up much of a fight. He does say that Antonio should not 'seal such a bond' for him, and claims that he would rather live on his meagre funds than ask any more of his friend. However, his claims ring hollow when we see that he knows full well that Antonio does not have the necessary funds, but is willing to allow Antonio to agree to Shylock's terms nonetheless.

Shylock's bond forces Bassanio to face up to the fact that his reckless spending and his demands on Antonio have put his friend's life at risk. This realisation brings out a better side to Bassanio. Having stood by rather passively when the bond was being arranged, he now shows that he does care for and is willing to fight for Antonio. He even offers to die in Antonio's place. I don't think Bassanio would have ever been forced to face how much Antonio means to him were it not for Shylock's gruesome bond.

Similarly, we see Antonio express his love for Bassanio when it appears that Shylock's bond will cost Antonio his life. All that Antonio wants now is to see his dearest friend once again, and he writes to Bassanio to tell him that 'all debts are cleared between you and I if I might

but see you at my death'. If Bassanio will come to see him one last time, Antonio will not mind facing death.

Bassanio does come to the court, and he expresses his love for Antonio in the strongest possible terms. He says that he would sacrifice his new wife to save his friend:

*Antonio, I am married to a wife  
Which is as dear to me as life itself,  
But life itself, my life, and all the world  
Are not with me esteemed above thy life'.*

While Bassanio is spared having to make such a choice, he nevertheless makes his priorities clear at this point in the play. Were it not for Shylock forcing the pair to see how much they meant to one another, I don't think that the true closeness of their friendship would ever have been revealed. It is ironic to think that Shylock's determination to take everything from Antonio actually resulted in Antonio realising the extent of his friend's love and loyalty.

The play ends with Bassanio bringing Antonio with him to Belmont. Shylock's dreadful bargain has only succeeded in consolidating the relationship between the two men.