

## The Merchant of Venice – Sample Answer 2011 Exam – Hero or heroine or Villain

### Sample answer 1: 2011 examination– based on *The Merchant of Venice*

1. Identify a hero, heroine or villain from a play you have studied. Explain why, in your opinion, this character deserves the title hero, heroine or villain. Support your answer with reference to the play. (30)

#### **Plan:**

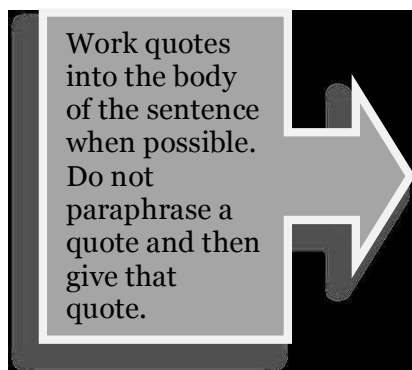
1. Name play and playwright. Thesis – Shylock meant to appear a villain, but modern audiences have degree of sympathy
2. Loves money. Hates Christians – shocking to audience at time – wants to hurt Antonio
3. His actions affect central characters – pose challenges – create conflict
4. Home life – Lancelot says he is devil, Jessica says house is hell. Shylock focuses on money when she leaves.
5. Courtroom – violence and death – refusal to accept money – no mercy
6. Sorry for himself at end. Beaten man. However, audience would think conversion happy ending.
7. Shylock has not changed by choice. Only powerless because of Portia. Would be seen to deserve punishment. Modern audience has some sympathy with S, despite his villainous nature.

*The play I have studied as part of my Junior Cert course is William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice', and the character of Shylock in this play is undoubtedly one of the best-known villains in literature. However, although Elizabethan audiences would have viewed Shylock as an evil, greedy, deceitful man simply because he was a Jew, modern audiences have some sympathy for him, despite his*

This is the thesis, and it will be referred to once again in the conclusion.

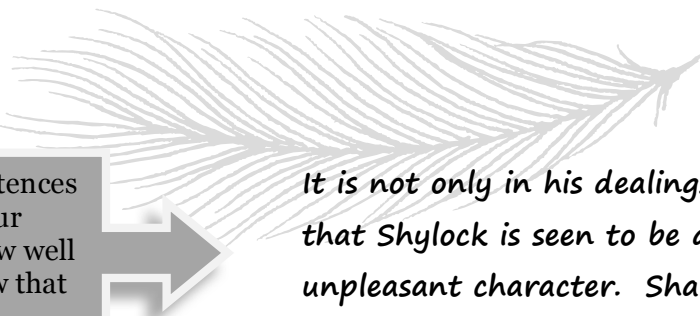
often monstrous behaviour. Changing times and attitudes have allowed us to see Shylock as a far more complex and ultimately more interesting villain than Shakespeare may have originally intended.

Our introduction to Shylock clearly sets him up as the villain of the piece. His first words – ‘Three thousand ducats; well’ –and his repetition of them, along with his calculated assessment of Antonio’s worth and the interest he will charge, show us both how completely he is absorbed in the world of money and also how much he enjoys the power he has over Bassanio. Rather than giving a quick answer, Shylock drags out his decision. An Elizabethan audience would be disgusted to see a Jew lording it over a Christian in this manner, and they would be further shocked to hear Shylock openly admit that he hates Antonio



‘for he is a Christian.’ Shylock continues to show his villainous nature when he goes on to claim that he will ‘feed fat the ancient grudge’ he bears Antonio. His desire for vengeance and his hatred for his enemy make him a repellent character for both Elizabethan and modern audiences. At the same time, however, we can understand Shylock’s resentment for Antonio who, when challenged with spitting on Shylock, spurning him and calling him ‘dog’, says openly that he is ‘as like to call thee so again.’

Shylock’s determination to hurt Antonio sets in motion the central conflict of the play. Because of Shylock’s grisly ‘bond’ (which he chillingly refers to as ‘merry sport’), Antonio’s life is placed in danger and Bassanio and Portia must do all in their power to save him. Without Shylock’s villainous plot to kill his sworn enemy in the name of a business deal, the central characters would not be forced to endure the mental torment of Antonio’s impending death and – in Bassanio’s case – the knowledge that he is partly responsible for bringing his friend to this end.




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It is not only in his dealings with Antonio that Shylock is seen to be a mean-spirited, unpleasant character. Shakespeare makes sure we frequently see him in an unsympathetic light by showing us that even his own servants and daughter dislike

him. Lancelot calls his master 'the very devil incarnation', and leaves his service. Jessica mourns Lancelot's departure, confiding in him that 'Our house is hell' and later admitting to herself that she is 'ashamed to be my father's child.' This negative depiction of Shylock's domestic life shows what a monster he is and how little loyalty he evokes in those close to him. Even when Jessica leaves home, Shylock's only concern seems to be for the jewels she has taken with her. He goes so far as to wish 'my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!' It is hard to feel anything but contempt for such an unfeeling father.

Shylock's monstrous nature is brought fully to the fore in the courtroom scene. Here we see his utter determination to torture and kill Antonio. He refuses to show any mercy, even when the Duke, Gratiano and Portia/Balthazar plead with him and he is offered three times the original sum borrowed. Shylock's implacable hatred for Antonio means that he is unmoved by even Portia's beautiful speech, claiming that 'There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me.' His desire to kill Antonio overwhelms even his love of money and it is hard to argue with Gratiano's use of animal imagery when he describes Shylock as a 'damn'd, inexorable dog!' and one whose desires are 'wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous.' Shylock's evil behaviour makes him seem less than human in this part of the courtroom scene.


However, as Portia's plan unfolds and she defeats Shylock by using his own bond against him and insisting that he remove nothing but the exact



Showing a  
knowledge of  
the way the  
playwright's  
use of symbols  
/ language  
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further the  
case you are  
making and is  
a good way to a  
high grade.

pound of flesh named in the bond, the tables turn and we begin to feel a measure of sympathy for the completely defeated villain. In a swift turnaround, he loses not just the court case, but his religion and half his worldly goods. He must leave the rest of his money to his daughter and her Christian husband. It is likely that an Elizabethan audience would not share our sympathy and that they would instead view Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity as the only hope of salvation for this villain. To us, on the other hand, this conversion seems not only unnecessary, but cruel. Shylock's last words, in which he begs the court to give him leave to go, are moving. The use of the word 'pray' in his entreaty show how far he has fallen from the proud and independent businessman he was to becoming one who must plead for permission to go to his own home. He is a broken man, and Gratiano's gloating and contempt: 'Had I been judge, though shouldst have had ten more [godfathers] / To bring thee to the gallows, not the font' make Shylock appear less a monster and more a humiliated, broken, helpless old man.

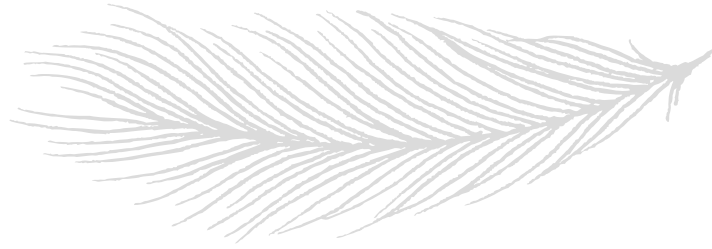
While there can be no doubt that Shylock would not have become a pathetic figure at the end if it were not for Portia's cleverness in defeating him at his own game, the depths to which he is reduced once again bring to mind his legitimate complaint against his treatment at the hands of his Christian countrymen. His religion is a large part of their reason for hating him, as we see when he is forced to convert to Christianity before his enemies are satisfied. Although their actions may be partly motivated by a genuine desire to save Shylock from hell, the conversion and the complete humiliation of Shylock at the end of the play leave us with mixed feelings about this most interesting of villains.



Conclusion refers back to the thesis statement at the start of the answer.



*Shylock After the Trial, by Sir John Gilbert (pre 1873)*



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