1. What does Shylock's speech mean?

**Shylock's** following **speech** denotes his lack of sympathy towards Antonio's current situation and how he now has to provide a pound of flesh to **Shylock**. Along with this, the **speech** provides a further understanding to the deep rooted history of **Shylocks** mistreatment by Antonio and other Christians.

1. Is Shylock a villain or a victim?

**Shylock** is a combination of both **victim** and **villain** in The Merchant of Venice. He is a **victim** of discrimination and mistreated by Antonio and his daughter, Jessica. **Shylock's** greedy, vengeful nature is what makes him a **villain**, which helps drive the plot of the play.

1. Why did Shylock hate Antonio?

**Shylock** explains his enmity for **Antonio**. He has a bias against **Antonio** as a Christian and **hates** him even more for **Antonio's** practice of lending money without interest, undermining **Shylock's** usury business. ... **Antonio hates** people of the Jewish faith and always speaks badly about **Shylock's** merchant deals.

In an aside during the third scene of the play when Bassanio and Antonio approach Shylock for the loan, Shylock describes the reasons he hates Antonio, ending with this description of revenge. His use of “ancient” references a history of anti-Semitism in Europe much older than him and Antonio, and “feed fat” is an example of the base, animal language that characterizes Shylock as gruesome and monstrous. This aside sets up Shylock’s main motivation for the play, which is revenge on Antonio as a symbol for revenge on a society that has wronged him and his ancestors.

**Themes**

**Self-Interest Versus Love**

On the surface, the main difference between the Christian characters and Shylock appears to be that the Christian characters value human relationships over business ones, whereas Shylock is only interested in money. The Christian characters certainly view the matter this way. Merchants like Antonio lend money free of interest and put themselves at risk for those they love, whereas Shylock agonizes over the loss of his money and is reported to run through the streets crying, “O, my ducats! O, my daughter!” (II.viii.15). With these words, he apparently values his money at least as much as his daughter, suggesting that his greed outweighs his love. However, upon closer inspection, this supposed difference between Christian and Jew breaks down. When we see Shylock in Act III, scene i, he seems more hurt by the fact that his daughter sold a ring that was given to him by his dead wife before they were married than he is by the loss of the ring’s monetary value. Some human relationships do indeed matter to Shylock more than money. Moreover, his insistence that he have a pound of flesh rather than any amount of money shows that his resentment is much stronger than his greed.

Just as Shylock’s character seems hard to pin down, the Christian characters also present an inconsistent picture. Though Portia and Bassanio come to love one another, Bassanio seeks her hand in the first place because he is monstrously in debt and needs her money. Bassanio even asks Antonio to look at the money he lends Bassanio as an investment, though Antonio insists that he lends him the money solely out of love. In other words, Bassanio is anxious to view his relationship with Antonio as a matter of business rather than of love. Finally, Shylock eloquently argues that Jews are human beings just as Christians are, but Christians such as Antonio hate Jews simply because they are Jews. Thus, while the Christian characters may talk more about mercy, love, and charity, they are not always consistent in how they display these qualities.

**The Divine Quality of Mercy**

The conflict between Shylock and the Christian characters comes to a head over the issue of mercy. The other characters acknowledge that the law is on Shylock’s side, but they all expect him to show mercy, which he refuses to do. When, during the trial, Shylock asks Portia what could possibly compel him to be merciful, Portia’s long reply, beginning with the words, “The quality of mercy is not strained,” clarifies what is at stake in the argument (IV.i.179). Human beings should be merciful because God is merciful: mercy is an attribute of God himself and therefore greater than power, majesty, or law. Portia’s understanding of mercy is based on the way Christians in Shakespeare’s time understood the difference between the Old and New Testaments. According to the writings of St. Paul in the New Testament, the Old Testament depicts God as requiring strict adherence to rules and exacting harsh punishments for those who stray. The New Testament, in contrast, emphasizes adherence to the spirit rather than the letter of the law, portraying a God who forgives rather than punishes and offers salvation to those followers who forgive others. Thus, when Portia warns Shylock against pursuing the law without regard for mercy, she is promoting what Elizabethan Christians would have seen as a pro-Christian, anti-Jewish agenda.

The strictures of Renaissance drama demanded that Shylock be a villain, and, as such, patently unable to show even a drop of compassion for his enemy. A sixteenth-century audience would not expect Shylock to exercise mercy—therefore, it is up to the Christians to do so. Once she has turned Shylock’s greatest weapon—the law—against him, Portia has the opportunity to give freely of the mercy for which she so beautifully advocates. Instead, she backs Shylock into a corner, where she strips him of his bond, his estate, and his dignity, forcing him to kneel and beg for mercy. Given that Antonio decides not to seize Shylock’s goods as punishment for conspiring against him, we might consider Antonio to be merciful. But we may also question whether it is merciful to return to Shylock half of his goods, only to take away his religion and his profession. By forcing Shylock to convert, Antonio disables him from practicing usury, which, according to Shylock’s reports, was Antonio’s primary reason for berating and spitting on him in public. Antonio’s compassion, then, seems to stem as much from self-interest as from concern for his fellow man. Mercy, as delivered in *The Merchant of Venice,* never manages to be as sweet, selfless, or full of grace as Portia presents it.

**Hatred as a Cyclical Phenomenon**

Throughout the play, Shylock claims that he is simply applying the lessons taught to him by his Christian neighbors; this claim becomes an integral part of both his character and his argument in court. In Shylock’s very first appearance, as he conspires to harm Antonio, his entire plan seems to be born of the insults and injuries Antonio has inflicted upon him in the past. As the play continues, and Shylock unveils more of his reasoning, the same idea rears its head over and over—he is simply applying what years of abuse have taught him. Responding to Salarino’s query of what good the pound of flesh will do him, Shylock responds, “The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction” (III.i.60–61). Not all of Shylock’s actions can be blamed on poor teachings, and one could argue that Antonio understands his own culpability in his near execution. With the trial’s conclusion, Antonio demands that Shylock convert to Christianity, but inflicts no other punishment, despite the threats of fellow Christians like Gratiano. Antonio does not, as he has in the past, kick or spit on Shylock. Antonio, as well as the duke, effectively ends the conflict by starving it of the injustices it needs to continue.

**Friendship**

The theme of friendship drives most of the action in *The Merchant of Venice.* Bassanio needs money and turns to Antonio, who has already offered him substantial financial support in the past. Antonio immediately and unquestioningly agrees to do whatever he can to help his friend, including offering a pound of his own flesh to Shylock if he defaults on the loan. Antonio never rebukes Bassanio for leading him into the situation that later threatens his life. Instead, Antonio repeatedly says that he is happy to die for the sake of his friend. In return, Bassanio tells him that “life itself, my wife and all the world / Are not with me esteemed above thy life” (IV.i.275-276). Thus, the play depicts friendship as one of the most intense and important emotional bonds humans can experience and suggests that the bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio may even run deeper than romantic love. The importance of friendship is also displayed between Bassanio and Gratiano and between Portia and Nerissa. Gratiano and Nerissa show great loyalty to and trust in their friends, and they even fall in love with each other after being brought together by their friends. The final double marriage means that the four friends will never have to be separated from one another, which further supports the importance placed on friendship.

### Wealth

*The Merchant of Venice* highlights the complexities of wealth and treats this theme with ambivalence. Several wealthy characters are depicted as unhappy despite their vast fortunes. At the beginning of the play, Antonio is a prosperous merchant on the verge of more financial success, but he still suffers from a sense of melancholy. As he explains, “And such a want-wit sadness makes of me, / That I have much ado to know myself” (I.i.6-7). He cannot figure out why he is so miserable. Likewise, Portia is a wealthy heiress but complains that “my little body is aweary of this great world” (I.ii.1). The uneven distribution of wealth causes problems for several characters. Bassanio seems to be a noble person, but he suffers from a lack of money, forcing him to selfishly borrow from Antonio, while the vengeful Shylock makes substantial profits by exploiting others. Moreover, wealth is presented as fickle and liable to disappear at any moment. For example, Antonio is confident that he will have more than enough money to repay his loan, but he ends up losing his fortune.

While money is depicted as a source of greed and dissatisfaction, the play also asserts that wealth gives individuals freedom and power. For instance, Bassanio is only able to court Portia because he gains access to money. Then, when Bassanio and Portia find out that Antonio is unable to pay back his loan, Portia suggests a solution, stating that, “You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over” (III.ii.313-314). Portia’s wealth allows her to help resolve a dangerous situation. At the end of the play, the redistribution of wealth functions as both a punishment and reward. Shylock is punished for his viciousness by losing half of his income, which he laments by saying that “you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live” (IV.i.392-393). Antonio is rewarded with the surprising news that not all of his ships were lost after all, and Jessica and Lorenzo secure an income from the money extracted from Shylock.

### Prejudice

Prejudice is a force that creates barriers and divisions between the people of Venice. As a Jewish man, Shylock deeply disdains Christians. When he first appears in the play, Shylock describes his feelings about Antonio, saying, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (I.iii.34). Shylock continuously refers to his animosity toward Christians, such as when he warns Jessica to shut up the house because he does not trust “the Christian fools with varnished faces” (II.v.32). Shylock’s strong prejudice against Christians is one reason Jessica runs away to be with Lorenzo, which permanently destroys the relationship between father and daughter. For his part, Shylock sees his daughter’s choice to marry a Christian as the ultimate betrayal.

The Christian characters show deep prejudice toward Shylock because of his Jewish identity. Antonio makes it clear that borrowing money from Shylock does not change his opinion of him, saying that “I am as like to call thee [dog] again / To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (I.iii.128-129). After Antonio’s failure to repay his loan, many characters prejudicially link Shylock’s Jewish identity to his refusal to compromise or show mercy, and Antonio’s insistence that Shylock convert to Christianity indicates a desire to undermine Shylock’s identity. While anti-Semitism is the most apparent type of prejudice in the play, many characters are also prejudiced against outsiders and anyone who is different than them. After the dark-skinned Moroccan prince fails to solve the casket riddle, Portia responds with relief by saying, “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (II.vii.83). She does not want anyone who looks like him to correctly solve the riddle and win her hand in marriage, indicating her deep-seated prejudice against people who look different from herself.

### Revenge

Revenge is a powerful, corrupting, and destructive force in the play. Shylock wants to hurt Antonio because of Shylock’s desire for revenge against the entire Christian community, which he blames for persecuting and degrading him and also for stealing his daughter and the money she took when she ran away. Shylock explains why he feels justified in seeking revenge: “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?” (III.i.54-56). The lines indicate that Shylock feels he has been wronged by Christians and is entitled to seek revenge in response to their dehumanization. He views this revenge as a natural human response to mistreatment. Because of his desire for revenge, Shylock will not consider altering the conditions of Antonio’s bond in any way. Ironically, his insistence on the exact nature of the law being enacted is what leads to his downfall when Portia finds a legal loophole and then uses the same law to condemn him. Shylock’s desire for revenge makes him behave in an emotional rather than a logical way, and he ends up losing everything as a result.

## Plot Analysis

**Main Ideas** Plot Analysis

*The Merchant of Venice* is essentially a play about property: in telling the story of a merchant who treats his own flesh as property to secure a loan, and the moneylender who calls in the debt, the play asks questions about the value of life itself. Throughout the play, tangible objects such as rings and caskets stand in for intangible ideas about love and fidelity. A test where three suitors must choose between silver, lead, and gold caskets functions to remind audiences that “all that glisters isn’t gold,” and the true value of life has no financial equivalent. However, money plays a significant role for most of the characters, for whom financial security equals independence. Language about penalties, bonds, and forfeitures add to the sense of life reduced to commercial transactions. The fact that the most avaricious, greedy character in the play ends up having lost both his physical wealth as well as his daughter and his religion warn against the dangers of excessive greed. While the play culminates in a trial scene, Portia’s soliloquy suggests that mercy, or forgiveness, is ultimately more important than legal justice.

The major conflict driving the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*takes place between Bassanio, who wants to marry Portia to gain the financial means to pay back his debt to Antonio, and Shylock, who wants revenge on Antonio for lending money without interest and for his anti-Semitic insults. Shylock’s desire for revenge on Antonio implies a deeper desire to defend his humanity and his way of life. During the play’s inciting incident, Bassanio uses Antonio’s credit to secure a loan from Shylock, binding Antonio to Shylock and making their final confrontation inevitable. Though the men separate after this incident, the stakes of their conflict are raised during the rising action of the play. First, Lancelot and then Jessica rob and abandon Shylock in quick succession, fueling his fury. Next, Bassanio wins the chance to marry Portia in the casket game, fulfilling his superficial desires for money and marriage and bringing him close to proving his character by repaying Antonio in money, love, and loyalty. Finally, Antonio’s ships fail to return, giving Shylock has the opportunity to get his revenge and Bassanio the opportunity to prove his character by coming to Antonio’s rescue.

The conflict between Bassanio’s desire to redeem his character by proving himself a loyal friend and Shylock’s desire to defend his humanity by enacting revenge on Antonio comes to a head in the play’s climactic trial scene. Shylock makes the case for his right to collect his bond by arguing that he has the same rights as any other hateful character in Venice. But Portia, disguised as Balthazar, argues that in trying to collect on his loan, Shylock has threatened Antonio’s life, and therefore broken the law. Not only can Shylock not collect the money he loaned, he is stripped of his livelihood and religion, signaling that the world of the play will not accept Shylock’s humanity or his way of life. Bassanio, Portia, Gratiano, Nerissa, Lorenzo, and Jessica all finish the play happily married and financially secure in Belmont. While the couples in the play end up happy, Shylock’s punishment seems neither merciful nor just. Not only is he unable to collect the money he is rightfully owed by Bassanio, he loses the rest of his wealth, his daughter, and his Jewish faith. While Shakespeare’s contemporaries would have seen Shylock’s conversion to Christianity as a victory for his immortal soul, Shylock’s forced conversion is shockingly anti-Semitic and unjust to modern readers.