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William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

In Venice, a wealthy Christian merchant, Antonio tentatively waits for his fortune to arrive by sea. His friend Bassanio, a frivolous man, asks Antonio for a loan to travel to Belmont to woo the rich and beautiful Portia. Antonio helps after borrowing from the wealthy Jewish moneylender, Shylock.

They engage in a bond to ensure payment. Shylock, often humiliated by Antonio, wishes to revenge his pain so the default is agreed as a pound of Antonio's flesh.

Bassanio goes to Belmont and wins the heart of Portia. Before the lovers can enjoy their wedding night, news arrives from Venice that Antonio has lost his fortune at sea and will serve his bond with a pound of flesh. Meanwhile, Shylock's daughter, Jessica has eloped with a Christian, Lorenzo, taking her father's jewels. At Antonio's trial, Portia disguises herself as a learned doctor of law, and argues a technicality to reverse the judgement against Antonio. Shylock is converted to Christianity and loses half his fortune to Antonio. The other half is awarded to his daughter and her new Christian husband.

Themes and Issues

- friendship
- love
- money
- Anti-semitism
- Money-lending, bonds and interest
- Tolerance and intolerance
- Gender issues-the woman behind the man, women's intellect

Language and Structure/Objectives for using this play

Drama in simple themes :(love, money, business, religion, persecution)

Famous speech by Shylock - talk about tolerance today

Resources

Film: 1973 Olivier version

1980 and 1996 BBC versions

Reading: *W.H. Auden "Brothers and Others"*

Joan Ozark Holmer *The Merchant of Venice: Choice, Hazard and Consequence*

James Shapiro *Shakespeare and the Jews*

During Shakespeare's time, Jews were exiled from England and it is possible Shakespeare never met a Jew. Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock is an unforgiving portrayal of a Jew as a villain and a devil.

1. Playwrights in training- students will divide up into groups of 4-5 and write a storyboard for the Merchant of Venice. Each group takes a scene and illustrates the events using poster board, drawings and words. A gallery walk displaying all the scenes in pictures and words will be used to make the story come alive for students.

2. Write a children's book illustrating the Merchant of Venice. Work in groups or individually. The teacher can use examples to explain expectations.

3. Shakespearean board game. Use quotes, characters and themes from the play. The students should write out instructions for the game.

4. Write a mini novel using the themes of the play.

5. Host a Shakespearean festival banquet with the characters from The Merchant of Venice with food, clothing, music and entertainment. The group can work as groups to divide up the jobs.

This would be an excellent final project !

6. The graffiti wall- in graffiti style use large pieces of paper (to cover at least one wall), felt pens or paint. Illustrate the theme(s) or character(s) in the play. Present your art and explain.
8. Shakespearean cd-put The Merchant of Venice to music and write a paragraph per song to describe your choice.
9. Journal-use a journal to write down your responses to each scene upon completion in class. You may want to imagine you are an actor in a role and write from his/her perspective.
10. Historical background-work in groups to uncover the historical events and life at the time of the play. For example, groups can research Jews, usury, Venice at that time etc.
11. Working in small groups, read the most mercy speech in different ways-angrily, happily, whispering etc. How does this change the meaning? Say the speech in a round with the whole group. (use the speech starting with The quality of mercy// is not straine'd...)
12. Conduct the trial from The Merchant of Venice-look into prejudice and justice. Use current examples of racial prejudice in the court system. Will your trial be modern or ancient?
13. Radio report- students will make news reports in pairs. Are you a Venice reporter or a Belmont reporter? Report back to group about your perspective of the trial.
14. Anti-semitism- write an essay comparing the anti-semitism in the play to anti-semitism in Nazi Germany or today.
15. Art project-Make masks for the play and research why certain masks were traditionally used.
16. Find a children's book with a theme from the play and read it to the group. Explain why you chose this book.
17. Art and life-Research what a coat of arms represents. How are they used? Use your research to draw a coat of arms for the cities of Venice and Belmont. Draw a coat of arms for each character.
18. Was Shylock a villain or a victim? Write an obituary on your own for Shylock to show your feelings for him as a character.
19. Drama-Hot seat- Each student will pick a character out of a hat. Acting as your character you must answer questions from the audience.
20. Hold a press conference after the trial. What point of view do you have? Why?