

# The Merchant of Venice

## *Sample Analytical Paper Topics*

The following paper topics are based on the entire play. Following each topic is a thesis and a sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

### **TOPIC #1**

Much of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is generated by contractual obligations. These take the form of legally binding contracts, such as the bond between Antonio and Shylock, as well as less formal arrangements, such as the ring given by Portia to Bassanio. Examine the way the individual will is forced to negotiate with external demands.

#### ***Outline***

**I. Thesis Statement:** *One of the major conflicts illustrated in The Merchant of Venice is the struggle of the individual will against the imposed obligations of society. This struggle is primarily manifested through the various contracts characters must fulfill throughout the course of the play.*

#### **II. Act I**

- A. Bassanio owes Antonio money and seeks to repay his debt by marrying Portia, a wealthy heiress.
- B. Portia must marry whoever can solve the riddle of the three caskets, as specified in her late father's will.
- C. Many of Portia's suitors give up their attempt to win her hand, unwilling to abide by the strict consequences of her father's will.
- D. Antonio, in the past, has helped people escape the consequences of their contracts with Shylock, the usurer, by lending them money at no interest.
- E. Antonio must sign a bond promising to sacrifice a pound of his flesh to Shylock, so that the usurer will lend Bassanio money for his quest.

#### **III. Act II**

- A. Morocco objects to the terms of Portia's father's will, because it doesn't allow the individual to succeed on his own merits.
- B. Gratiano must agree to curb his usual behavior if Bassanio is to allow him to join his expedition.
- C. Morocco must leave Portia and remain a bachelor for the rest of his life, for failing to solve the riddle of the three caskets.
- D. Aragon suffers the same fate as Morocco for failing in his choice.

#### **IV. Act III**

- A. Shylock intends to have Antonio arrested for being unable to repay the loan on time.
- B. Portia desires Bassanio to wait before attempting to solve the riddle, knowing that, if he fails, she won't be permitted to see him.
- C. Bassanio wins Portia by fulfilling the terms of her father's will.
- D. Portia gives Bassanio a ring which he must wear to prove his love for her.

- E. Gratiano, whose proposal was contingent on Bassanio's success, becomes engaged to Nerissa.
- F. Antonio's life is in danger as he has failed to repay his debt to Shylock on time.
- G. Antonio absolves Bassanio of all debt, on the condition that the latter comes to Venice immediately, before the merchant's death.
- H. Antonio has been taken into custody so that he cannot escape from Shylock.

#### V. Act IV

- A. The Duke feels he cannot stop Shylock's quest for Antonio's flesh without breaking the law.
- B. Shylock insists the Venetians must allow him to fulfill the terms of his bond, otherwise Venice will lose its good international standing.
- C. Portia, disguised as a doctor of law, informs Bassanio that "There is no power in Venice/ Can alter a decree established."
- D. Portia informs Shylock that, although entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, he has no legal right to spill any of the merchant's blood.
- E. Portia decrees that, according to Venetian law, Shylock is liable to a fine and possible execution for attempting to harm a citizen.
- F. Shylock is forced to sign a deed, willing his possessions upon his death to Lorenzo and agreeing to become a Christian.
- G. Portia, disguised as the lawyer, demands Bassanio's ring in payment for her services, but Bassanio must refuse, due to his prior agreement with Portia.
- H. Bassanio breaks his agreement with Portia by giving the disguised Portia her ring.
- I. Gratiano breaks a parallel agreement with Nerissa.

#### VI. Act V

- A. Portia and Nerissa censure their future husbands for violating their agreements about the rings.
- B. Portia reveals that she and Nerissa provoked the violation.

### TOPIC #2

Much is made of differences between races and religions in *The Merchant of Venice*. Explore the various, sometimes inconsistent attitudes toward, and behaviors based upon, these aspects of culture as they are exhibited in Shakespeare's play.

#### Outline

**I. Thesis Statement:** *In The Merchant of Venice, characters display an impulse to categorize one another on the basis of religious and racial characteristics, but this is frequently complicated by certain characters' actual behavior.*

#### II. Act I

- A. Portia and Nerissa discuss the former's suitors on the basis of their national/racial characteristics.
- B. Shylock refuses to dine with Bassanio and Antonio for religious reasons.
- C. Shylock tells the audience that he hates Antonio "for he is a Christian..."
- D. Antonio, in the past, has publicly scorned Shylock for both his religion and occupation.
- E. Antonio thinks that Shylock has overcome some of his Jewish characteristics when he lends the merchant the 3,000 ducats.

#### III. Act II

- A. Morocco, on meeting Portia, asks her to "Mislike [him] not for [his] complexion" (i.e. to not hold their racial differences against him).
- B. Portia assures Morocco that his race cannot be a factor in her decision to wed.

- C. Launcelot Gobbo decides to terminate his employment with Shylock because Shylock is a Jew.
- D. Launcelot believes Jessica may yet marry a Christian, despite being Jewish.
- E. Jessica regrets her Jewish blood and hopes Lorenzo will make a Christian out of her.
- F. Lorenzo worries that Jessica's personal merits might not prove sufficient to offset her Jewishness.
- G. Shylock decides to dine with the Christians, despite their religious differences.
- H. Shylock expresses contempt for the Christians' street festivities.
- I. When Morocco departs after failing to solve the riddle of the caskets, Jessica expresses relief that she will not have to marry one of his "complexion."
- J. Shylock, it is reported, is outraged that his daughter has fled with a Christian.

#### IV. Act III

- A. Salerio claims that there is a vast difference between Shylock and his daughter, despite their blood relationship.
- B. Shylock makes an impassioned speech denying an inherent difference between Christians and Jews, though also claiming that his desire for revenge is not inborn malice but rather behavior learned from Christians.
- C. Launcelot teases Jessica that she is damned for being a Jew.

#### V. Act IV

- A. Antonio claims it is pointless to reason with Shylock because he is a Jew.
- B. Shylock points out that the Venetians keep slaves who are not allowed to mix with Christian society.
- C. Portia, disguised as the young judge, informs Shylock that he is not allowed to spill "Christian blood."
- D. The Duke attributes his own mercy toward Shylock to "the difference of our (i.e., the Christians') spirit."
- E. Shylock is forced to become a Christian as punishment for his deeds.

### TOPIC #3

In *The Merchant of Venice*, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon the interpretation of ambiguous phrases. Contrast the lighthearted play with ambiguity as embodied in the character of Launcelot Gobbo with either the more purposeful and consequential scenes of the three caskets or the trial scene pitting Portia against Shylock.

#### Outline

**I. Thesis statement:** *Shakespeare presents two types of ambiguity in The Merchant of Venice, one which the audience is invited to enjoy for its comic merits, the other which the audience recognizes to have serious—perhaps even deadly—consequences. This can be illustrated by contrasting the scenes involving Launcelot Gobbo with those concerning \_\_\_\_\_.*

#### II. Launcelot Gobbo.

- A. Launcelot often mispronounces or mis-selects his words, lending them an inappropriate or even opposite sense to what he intends to convey.
- B. Launcelot evades responsibility for his impregnating "the Moor," by transforming her—through a series of verbal twists and turns—into a linguistic display, involving puns on "much," "more," "less," and "Moor" (Act III, Scene 5).
- C. Launcelot manages to shirk his minor household duties by reinterpreting the commands into senses inappropriate to the particular context.

#### III. The Riddle of the Three Caskets.

- A. Whoever correctly interprets the inscriptions in order to solve the riddle of the three caskets wins Portia's hand.
- B. Whoever fails to interpret correctly the inscriptions in order to solve the riddle of the three caskets must leave Portia and also may never marry anyone else.
- C. Morocco is tricked into choosing the wrong casket by a very improbable interpretation of the inscription on the gold casket.

- D. Aragon misinterprets the inscription on the silver casket through his own conceit.
- E. Bassanio correctly interprets the riddle by concentrating not on the slippery language of the inscriptions but rather on the materials from which the caskets are constructed.

#### IV. The Trial Scene to Decide Antonio's Fate.

- A. Shylock insists on a strict, unambiguous interpretation of the law, in order to allow him to claim the pound of flesh Antonio has signed over to him.
- B. Neither Bassanio nor the Duke can think of an interpretation of the law or Shylock's bond which would allow for Antonio's escape.
- C. Portia, disguised as the doctor of law, insists that the bond must be adhered to and that Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh.
- D. Shylock insists that nowhere in the bond does it specify that he must declare his motives, or demonstrate mercy, or provide a surgeon to prevent Antonio from dying from his wounds.
- E. Portia reinterprets Shylock's bond by widening its context. In other words, she brings up factors not accounted for in the words of the bond, and rules that Shylock is not allowed to spill blood because the bond doesn't provide for it. There is, of course, no way for Shylock to cut Antonio without making him bleed.
- F. Portia invokes other laws in conjunction with the case at hand, to demonstrate that Shylock has broken the law and is subject to financial penalties and possibly death.
- G. The Christians draft a new deed, dictating Shylock's future behavior.

#### TOPIC #4

Various characters in *The Merchant of Venice* undergo transformations during the course of the play, but none more dramatically or substantially than Portia. Discuss Portia's transformation from her role as the submissive daughter at the beginning of the play to her position as manipulator of events by the end.

#### Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** *The character of Portia may be seen as one who moves from a submissive to a domineering role over the course of events in The Merchant of Venice. In doing so, Portia sheds the role traditionally allotted to women in her society and assume a position of power usually reserved for men. This is best exemplified in the trial scene, in which Portia literally assumes a male position in her disguise as a young doctor of law.*
- II. **Act I**
  - A. Portia is bitter over the terms of her father's will, which stipulates that whoever solves the riddle of the three caskets wins her hand in marriage, leaving her no choice in the matter of her husband.
  - B. None of Portia's present suitors appeals to her, but she must let them attempt to solve the riddle.
- III. **Act II**
  - A. Portia informs Morocco that "In terms of choice [she is] not solely led/ By nice direction of a maiden's eyes./ Besides, the lott'ry of [her] destiny/ Bars her the right of voluntary choosing."
  - B. Portia expresses great relief when Morocco fails to solve the riddle of the three caskets, as she didn't want to marry him but would have been unable to refuse had he succeeded.
  - C. Portia tells Aragon that "If [he] choose[s] that [casket] wherein [she is] contained,/ Straight shall [their] nuptial rites be solemnized."
  - D. Portia refers to herself as "worthless," due to her inability to control her destiny.
- IV. **Act III**
  - A. Portia begs Bassanio to wait before attempting to solve the riddle, telling him: "I would detain you here some month or two/ Before you venture for me. I could teach you/ How to choose right, but then I am foresworn./ So will I never

be. So may you miss me.” She expresses frustration as she finally has a suitor she esteems but cannot marry if he should fail to solve the riddle.

- B. Portia is freed from the tyranny of her father’s will when Bassanio makes the correct choice.
- C. According to the custom of her day, Portia “commits [herself] to [Bassanio’s will] to be directed,/ As from her lord, her governor, her king.”
- D. Portia offers to pay off Antonio’s debt, in order to relieve his plight at the hands of Shylock.
- E. Portia decides to disguise herself and Nerissa as men—a doctor of law and his clerk—in order to prevent Antonio from losing a pound of his flesh at the hands of Shylock.

**V. Act IV**

- A. Portia is introduced to the Venetian court as Balthazar, “a young doctor of Rome,” and is enlisted by the Duke of Venice to help settle the dispute between Antonio and Shylock.
- B. Portia questions Antonio and Shylock on the particulars of the case, supporting her judgments in reference to Venetian law.
- C. Using her knowledge of Venetian law, Portia turns the tables on Shylock, so that he is at the mercy of the court and Antonio is freed from the threat of death.
- D. Portia, still disguised, tricks Bassanio into giving her the ring that he earlier promised her he’d never part with.

**VI. Act V**

- A. Portia arrives in Belmont ahead of Bassanio and informs her household not to reveal her absence.
- B. Portia grills Bassanio over his loss of the ring, declaring they cannot be together faithfully unless the ring is restored.
- C. Portia brings the play to a happy conclusion. She reveals her role in the trial of Antonio, letting Bassanio off the hook for giving up her ring, and she informs Antonio that some of his ships have arrived safely, restoring to him much of his lost fortune.