

The Merchant of Venice: A Tragicomedy

Patricia Green

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare in the High School Classroom

The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare, does not fit the conventional definitions of a tragedy or a comedy. It is categorized as a comedy, although one of the two distinct plotlines is a tragedy. This play is multi-faceted and is really a combination of two plays in one; therefore it lends itself well as a source for teaching different lessons in the high school classroom. This curriculum unit can be used in conjunction with social studies, math and the arts, so it is not restricted to drama or literature in the English classroom.

This unit is important because Shakespeare is an integral part of the English curriculum. Shakespeare's tragedies are the major focus, so it would add an extra dimension if students were exposed to the comedies. *The Merchant of Venice* is particularly a good choice because it bridges the gap between comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare blends serious issues and values with light comedic elements in this rather complex play. The two main plots are the comedy about Portia and her marriage to Bassanio and the tragedy about Antonio, the merchant and Shylock, the Jew.

BACKGROUND

A brief synopsis of the play will help to clarify the ensuing details for those who are unfamiliar with *The Merchant of Venice*. The comedy revolves around one of Shakespeare's strongest female characters, Portia. This plot deals with the choice of a husband for Portia. The setting is Venice and Belmont, Italy at the height of the merchant trade during the Middle Ages. Antonio is the protagonist and the merchant of Venice from whence the title is derived. He is admired for his good deeds and honor. He is melancholy because he fears the impending marriage of his best friend, Bassanio, will take up much of his friend's time. Bassanio has the highest rank of anyone in the play with the exception of the Duke. He is a suitor for Portia's hand in marriage and he needs to borrow money (3,000 ducats) from Antonio in order to pursue his goal. Portia is a wealthy noblewoman who has agreed to abide by the wishes of her deceased father and allow an elaborate game that he set up to find the perfect husband for his daughter. A very humorous scene ensues in which Portia and her maidservant and friend, Nerissa discuss the suitors who have attempted and failed to win Portia's hand. Shakespeare adds foreshadowing by having Portia recall meeting Bassanio and wishing that someone like him would win the contest. The game, or contest, that Portia's father has formulated involves three caskets (treasure chests). One is gold, one is silver, and one is lead. The

suitor who gets to choose does not know the choice of previous contestants. Each casket comes with a riddle that must be solved before it can be opened. Inside, if the counterfeit (picture) of Portia is enclosed, then that man will become her husband. The first man to try in Act 2 is Morocco who chooses gold and loses. Then Aragon, the Spaniard, tries after professing that if he loses then he will never marry. He chooses the silver and loses. To Portia's surprise and delight, Bassanio is next. He chooses the lead casket and wins Portia's hand in marriage. Since this is a comedy, the main characters live happily ever after. Bassanio's manservant, Gratiano becomes enamored with Nerissa and the feelings are mutual, so both couples marry. Bassanio was able to woo Portia because Antonio gave him the loan of 3,000 ducats. Antonio's ships are at sea and his fortune is tied up with them, so he goes to a usurer. During the Medieval times it was considered a sin for a Christian to lend money for interest, so the job was often performed by a non-Christian. Shylock the Jew is probably one of Shakespeare's most famous characters. If Antonio does not pay his loan on time then Shylock will take his collateral of a pound of flesh. Antonio is generous because his friend needs the money and he is confident that his ships will come in. Shylock is betrayed by his daughter, who steals all of his riches and runs off to marry a Christian and convert. This increases Shylock's need for vengeance. Antonio is unable to repay his loan because his ships are believed to be lost at sea. Antonio needs support of his friends, so Bassanio and Gratiano leave their brides in Belmont to travel to Venice for the trial. The wives graciously agree to part with their husbands under the condition that they never remove their wedding rings. After their husbands leave, Portia and Nerissa travel to Venice to help Bassanio's friend, Antonio. They disguise themselves as the Duke (judge) and a law clerk. This is a very interesting scene because Shakespeare creates Portia and Nerissa as very strong female characters. A suspension of belief is required here, since Bassanio and Gratiano don't recognize their wives. Shylock follows the letter of the law and wants his pound of flesh. He is offered twice the amount of the loan and still demands his due. Portia turns the letter of the law against Shylock by demanding that he take his pound of flesh, but he is forbidden to shed one drop of blood. Shylock then becomes the accused and as punishment, he must leave all of his worldly goods to his daughter and convert to Christianity, which also ends his career as a usurer. Antonio's ships are found to be safe as well. The Shylock plot ends in Act 4, but there is still the plot involving Portia and Bassanio. The two husbands are so grateful to the Duke and the law clerk for saving their friend, Antonio that they offer payment. The Duke (Portia) and the law clerk (Nerissa) insist that the only payment that they require is their wedding rings, thus the promise is broken. Portia and Nerissa make it back to Belmont before their husbands and chastise them dearly for giving away their rings, perhaps to other women. After a humorous scene of explanations and confusion, the women confess to their part in the court and, as in other Shakespeare comedies, everyone but the villain (Shylock) lives happily ever after.

The Three Caskets: The Arranged Marriage

For centuries marriages have been arranged. It may be enlightening to some students to find out that some cultures still practice this today. As an introduction to the play or to the

events in Act 2, the teacher can give examples of matchmaking as practiced in different cultures around the world. Playing the song or showing the video of the song, “Matchmaker” from the play, *Fiddler on the Roof* is one example. Leading up to the song, Tevye’s daughters are poking fun at the possible male suitors for the eldest daughter’s hand in marriage, just as Portia and Nerissa laugh about the suitors who have thus far failed to choose the correct casket, much to Portia’s relief. The Walt Disney movie, *Mulan*, has a fun scene concerning matchmaking. Students with cable may be aware of the 1960s game show called *The Dating Game* and several “reality” programs have been broadcast recently that relate to choosing a compatible mate. On a serious note, respecting the good judgment of the parents is an important discussion or writing topic.

Anti-Semitism

In the Middle Ages, Christians were forbidden to lend money for interest (but not to borrow), so the profession of usury was conducted by non-Christians. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the usurer is Shylock the Jew. Shylock is not so much a villain as he is an anti-hero. He is a fascinating character study because Shakespeare most certainly had never met a Jew since Jews had been banished from England for three and a half centuries (1290-1655). This would be a good topic for students to research. The anti-Semitic theme can be approached in the classroom and this can offer a cross-curricular opportunity with the social studies department.

In order for the students to understand usury and its connection to anti-Semitism, a short explanation is in order. The source from the Anne Frank Foundation gives a quick easy-to-understand synopsis of the economic sources of anti-Semitism.

In the last half of the Middle Ages, an increasing number of occupational groups formed guilds. Membership in a guild was limited to Christians, and only members of guilds were allowed to practice a craft. Jews were thus excluded from more and more occupations. The one alternative to trading in secondhand goods permitted was lending money at a rate of interest. For Christians this was explicitly forbidden by the Church as a sin. The unstable political and economic situation made interest rates high. This situation, the result of anti-Jewish measures, became the source of a new and tenacious anti-Semitic stereotype: the Jew as a greedy moneylender. Jews could buy protection from secular lords-for a great deal of money! -but they were never certain of their position. It was common for powerful persons who were in debt to Jews to banish them from the city or the country. Various anti-Jewish attitudes of economic or religious origin became deeply anchored in the thinking of the Christian world towards the end of the Middle Ages, and the result was a fundamentally anti-Jewish attitude. (Boonstra, 36)

Shylock offers the opportunity to explore the roots of anti-Semitism in Medieval Europe as well as Renaissance England. One of Shakespeare’s most famous speeches comes

from Shylock in Act 3, scene 1:

Hath not a Jew Eyes? Hath not a Jew organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? -fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? 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? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (Shakespeare, 87)

This monologue lends itself well to a lesson on the delivery of a speech in a play. Thoughts can be presented vindictively or sympathetically, depending upon the actor's interpretation. This can be a lesson in comparison if two students are chosen to recite the two different interpretations in front of the class.

When Charles Macklin revived *The Merchant of Venice* in 1741 (it had not been performed since Shakespeare's time), he played Shylock as a monster, reviving old biases. Shylock was not portrayed sympathetically till Henry Irving's 1879 performance. (Felsenstein)

Shylock, the man, appears to be his own worst enemy because he is so consumed with greed and hate. A discussion on destructive emotions could be approached here. Also, an additional lesson about rhetorical questions can enhance the understanding of this speech. In order to gain a larger understanding of the character, the relationship between Shylock and his daughter, Jessica, can be scrutinized. This is yet another interesting facet of this complex play.

The father-daughter relationship is another important component and motivation for Shylock's revenge. The students need to understand why it is a crisis for Shylock that his daughter converted and married a Christian man. It gives some insight into the importance of his religion. He is ridiculed for mourning over the loss of his ducats and his daughter in the same lamentation, indicating to the other characters and the audience that his lost wealth is as important to him as his daughter. This reinforces the villainous clown and the stereotype of the greedy Jew whose only interest is money. To emphasize the human side of Shylock, it is a good idea to spend some time discussing his lamentation over the loss of his late wife's ring that his daughter so callously traded for a monkey. Shylock has a heart after all. His vengeance toward Antonio may be enhanced

due to this later disappointment, even though Antonio had treated Shylock with cruelty before the action of the play. It is made known to the audience in the dialogue between Antonio and Shylock. Antonio is portrayed heroically and the renaissance audience would see nothing wrong in Antonio's action of spitting at Shylock because it was acceptable practice in Medieval Europe to be able to show outward signs of disgust.

“Fair sir, you spet on me Wednesday last,
You spurn'd me such a day, another time
You called me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys?” (1.3)

It may seem shocking to students today that people were treated so harshly. Another scene which displays, not just cruelty, but an intention to 'help' the misguided Shylock is the courtroom scene in Act 4. Portia, disguised as the Duke (judge) orders Shylock to convert to Christianity. According to the belief of the European people in Medieval times and the Renaissance audience, Portia did Shylock a favor by “saving his soul.” The latter information can be glossed over if the teacher deems it offensive to his or her students. In this era of political correctness, it is the emphasis in school and in society to treat all people with respect, to understand and to appreciate the differences and unique qualities in a culturally diverse world. Two discussion topics can spawn from this: the importance of treating each other with respect and the fact that in all probability, Shakespeare's audience had never seen a Jew. If there is time, or it can be offered as an extra-credit assignment, students can research why the Jews were driven out of England and when they were allowed to return. (The Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and were not allowed to return until the seventeenth century). For a larger connection, students can come up with other incidents in history that demonstrate prejudice or it can be connected to a unit on the Holocaust, since that happened almost four centuries after Shakespeare wrote this play.

Censorship

Censorship in literature is a good enrichment lesson regarding Shakespeare, especially since *The Merchant of Venice* involves anti-Semitism. This is by no means the only controversial Shakespearean play taught in the high school classroom.

There are some English textbooks that censor a line in *Macbeth* because it may be offensive. In the witches' incantation in Act 4, scene 1, two lines are omitted: “Liver of blaspheming Jew, Gall of goat, and slips of yew” (*Riverside Shakespeare*, 1376). A lesson on censorship and the reasons why certain materials are censored would be a valuable lesson in today's high school classroom. This can be an extension of a censorship unit from another work of literature, such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* or a discussion about freedom of speech and the list of books that have been banned in schools for generations. The subject of political correctness is another relevant connection.

Strong Female Characters

Much of the canon that is taught in the high school curriculum has strong male characters and male-dominated plots. *The Merchant of Venice* is an important play to teach because there are few female protagonists in literature as strong as Portia. Shakespeare was ahead of his time in creating such an independent, intelligent and witty female character. He also counteracts her strength by making all of her suitors and her husband weak and shallow in comparison. An interesting comparison would be the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. There appears to be a paradox that such a strong woman would agree to acquiesce to the choice of husband that her deceased father has arranged in the choosing of the caskets. It is made clear to the audience that Portia has agreed to go along with it, but she can back out at any time if she so chooses. Portia and her maidservant, Nerissa, outsmart not only their husbands, but a courtroom full of people.

In Act 1, scene 2, when Portia and Nerissa are humorously recalling the suitors who have come and gone, they have the upper hand in the age-old theme of the battle of the sexes. It is an opportunity to engage the class in a debate or argument over who has the upper hand, the boys or the girls. They can cite examples in literature and history to enhance their position.

In the courtroom scene in Act 4, Portia manages to disguise herself so that even her husband doesn't recognize her. Nerissa is also disguised by dressing as a law clerk. Important facts to share with the class: there were no women actors in the sixteenth century and there were no women lawyers or law clerks. This can start an interesting discussion on what the roles of women were during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. She is also knowledgeable enough in the law to convince everyone in the courtroom that she is indeed the Duke. This suspension of reality and the theme of reality versus illusion is common in Shakespeare's plays. Portia is clever enough to turn Shylock's very argument of upholding the letter of the law against him by insisting that he submit to the letter of the law. He must take his bond, which is Antonio's pound of flesh, but he must not shed a drop of blood, or else he will be breaking the law because blood is not part of the bond. This of course, is impossible, so Shylock must follow the orders of the court to give his wealth to Jessica and convert to Christianity which puts an end to his profession as a usurer. Portia not only saves Antonio's life, he is not obligated to repay the loan of 3,000 ducats, and the villain gets his due.

Another humorous scene occurs at the end of Act 4 and continues into Act V to conclude the play with a happy ending, thus giving it the distinction of being a comedy. Portia and Nerissa, vicariously through Portia's plan, decide to test their husbands' promise and faithfulness. Still disguised as the Duke and law clerk, they accept Bassanio and Gratiano's insistence on paying for their services because they saved Antonio's life. The women in disguise will accept only the wedding rings as payment. Bassanio feels

obligated to do as the Duke wishes, even though taking off the ring will betray the trust and promise that he made to Portia in Belmont (Gratiano also made the same promise to Nerissa). Portia even has an alibi as to why she and Nerissa were not at home. She and Nerissa went to pray. When the husbands return home, the women question their husbands as to the whereabouts of their wedding rings, accusing them of giving them to other women and swear not to have anything to do with their husbands until the rings are back on their fingers. This is an opportunity to teach dramatic irony because the audience knows all along that Bassanio and Gratiano gave their rings to none other than their own wives and they are the only ones who are unaware of this situation. Timing in comedy is vital and here is a chance to discuss how long the female characters stretch out the suspense and awkward situation before they confess their charade to their husbands. It might be possible for students to come up with a list of stories or movies that have similar scenes in which one party is fooled by the other and then resolved in a happy conclusion.

RELATIONSHIPS

The *Merchant of Venice* is an excellent work of literature to teach students the dynamics of interrelationships between characters. Students can learn that, even though this play was written over four hundred years ago, human nature is timeless. Students tend to relate literature to their own personal experiences and a study of the characters in this play give the students the opportunity to do this.

Parent-Child Relationship

The Merchant of Venice abounds with family relationships and friendship. The parent-child relationship is precarious in many teenagers' lives and the importance of friendship and peer approval is also a subject of interest to the high school student. The parent-child relationship between Shylock and Jessica is dysfunctional at best and utterly destructive at its worst. As additional, optional reading, *King Lear* is also a good study of the breakdown of a parent-child relationship.

Even though Portia's father is dead, he still is a strong influence in Portia's life, since she has agreed to let him "choose" her husband with the caskets. This is a good example of a strong bond that includes respect for each other.

The father-son relationship with Launcelot the son and Gobbo the father. Gobbo doesn't recognize his son because he hasn't seen him in so long. It is an emotional scene which includes the famous quotation, "Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long-a man's son may, but in the end truth will out" (2.2). Another relationship involving Launcelot is his unhappy employment as clown/ servant to his boss, Shylock.

Friendship

Friendship creates the stronger bonds between characters in the play. The friendship of

Antonio and Bassanio is one of the main themes. The loyalty and friendship shared between master and servant borders on friendship in the cases of Bassanio and Gratiano as well as Portia and Nerissa. Shylock and Launcelot would be the exception. Friendship does not exist for Shylock. There is a strong bond of friendship forming between the married couples. How generous it was of Portia to offer her new husband twice the sum of Antonio's debt in order to save Bassanio's friend.

Marriage

Marriage is another example of relationships that the students can discuss. There are three sets of newlyweds in this play and their happiness conveys the essence of the comedy in that everything works out well for the 'good' characters (Bassanio and Portia; Nerissa and Gratiano; Jessica and Lorenzo). Most of Shakespeare's genuine lovers are, like Portia and Bassanio, humbled by their love (Myrick, xxx). It would be an interesting discussion to observe the original motive that Bassanio had in courting Portia and Portia's initial impression of Bassanio. A comparison of Petruchio's ulterior motive for wooing Katherine in *Taming of the Shrew* is a relevant enrichment lesson. If the students are not familiar with the latter play, the teacher can play a video version of a scene or two. The students may notice the differences in the two men, Bassanio being a weak character and Petruchio being more dominant. A comparison of Kate and Portia would be a nice crossover to the lesson on the strong female character.

THE LAW

One of the lessons applies to the law. Whether the teacher chooses to conduct the trial scene as it is explained or to modify it to a partial lesson, it is an excellent opportunity to get into a class discussion about how the law is interpreted and executed. It is interesting how Portia can interpret the law to work in Antonio's favor. She is clever enough to realize that Shylock is depending on the exact letter of the law and she manipulates that information to turn the law against Shylock. This is a good bridge between the subject of the law and that of the strong female character. A comparison of the legal system in Medieval Europe versus the American legal system today would enrich the students' knowledge base. A lawyer could come to the class as a guest speaker and discuss points of law with the students.

ECONOMICS

Students are rarely taught the system of credit cards and interest rates in the traditional math class, yet many of these students will be procuring student loans for college, car loans and everyone is aware of the onslaught of credit card opportunities as soon as the student turns eighteen. It was stated on a recent news program that 50% of seniors polled could not answer questions about credit. A guest speaker who could discuss the principles of credit lending might be appreciated by juniors and seniors. The students could even attend a company shareholders meeting to expand their knowledge. It's important to learn

how to spend, save, invest and donate. The students can learn to fill out a credit card application form and study interest rate charts and calculate how much an item borrowed on credit would cost after interest is accrued. This is an opportunity for the English teacher to teach a cross-curricular lesson with either the math or social studies department. To keep the lesson as an English assignment, the students can read Polonius' speech to his son, Laertes as he is about to embark on a trip to the university in Act 1, scene 3 of the play, *Hamlet*.

Neither a borrower nor a lender [be]
For [loan] oft loses both itself and friend,
and borrowing dulleth [th'] edge of husbandry.
This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (Riverside, 1195)

Students should be aware of the consequences of their action in fiscal situations. The quotation above is a good sounding board for a discussion about how borrowing or lending money affects friendships.

GEOGRAPHY

Students can combine a history and geography lesson by using maps to trace the travel explorations of Medieval merchants, such as the fictional Antonio or actual explorers such as Marco Polo. It will enhance the meaning of the play if the students are aware of the extensive exploration that took place in the Middle Ages.

Vocabulary

Shakespeare is always a golden opportunity to teach the students new words and words that have changed in meaning over the centuries. It helps to go over the vocabulary before reading the play and then point out the vocabulary words as the students are reading. I always have my students read the play out loud. The speech is meant to be heard and the students are challenged with the iambic pentameter. In this way, the students can gain insight into the English language as a living, changing language. The vocabulary lesson can be expanded to include a poetry and speech lesson. After teaching the students iambic pentameter and blank verse with examples, have the students listen to each other speak in a normal conversational voice, then exaggerate the second syllable in the same sentence they just recited. It may be a revelation to many students that normal English speech patterns often fall into an iambic pattern. The study of how Shakespeare skillfully manipulates the words to fit into iambic pentameter, such as contracting two syllable words into one word (o'er for over). It is interesting to the students to find out how many words Shakespeare

Summary

The Merchant of Venice is a valuable learning experience. The comparison of comedy and tragedy can be observed in one play. The two plots, the one involving Portia and her marriage to Bassanio (comedy) and the plot involving Antonio and Shylock (tragedy) are interwoven into a rich tapestry of ideas, character study, and poetry. So many subjects can be taught in this play: literature, drama, psychology, sociology, geography, economics, law, art, music, and ethical values.

To those who can see Shylock as neither an entire villain nor a hero, but a gifted man whose fanatical hatred makes him his own worst enemy until he is saved from himself, *The Merchant of Venice* is no tragedy. To those who can view the play from the point of view of the wise, realistic and compassionate heroine, it is one of Shakespeare's most beautiful and most significant comedies. (Myrick, xxxviii)

It is important for the students to develop critical thinking skills, drawing conclusions and formulating opinions based on knowledge of a subject. I always encourage my students to question the text and challenge the critics. They can think for themselves and gain an understanding of the literature by being actively involved in the class activities. By offering a diverse selection of lessons based on the play, the students can appreciate its relevance to their own lives. To those who don't agree with the viewpoint of Myrick, stated above, they can come up with their own interpretation after a thorough reading and study of the complex, multi-faceted play, *The Merchant of Venice*.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Relationships

This lesson is intended to teach the students the importance of common values when choosing a friend or compatible mate. It is an introductory assignment that sets the stage for *The Merchant of Venice* and gives the students some insight into why Portia decides to go along with her father's casket scheme. This plan can be taught before the class reads the play, although some teachers may choose to teach it after Act 2 when the students have already read about the men choosing the three caskets, or at the end of the play as a follow-up and review. This way the students do not have any preconceived notions about the project they are working on and don't fall into the literalists pattern of copying directly from the source. This requires critical thinking skills, a little psychology, and an exploration of ethical and moral value systems. It is also an opportunity for students to work in groups and to be artistically creative.

Materials

Each group of students need one shoe box. Other materials needed are: markers or crayons, tape, glue, construction paper, wrapping paper, and miscellaneous art supplies. The writing portion can be handwritten or a word processor can be used.

Objectives

The student will:

- Read about and discuss positive values and characteristics.
- Work cooperatively in a group to come to a common decision and understanding.
- Create a casket or treasure chest similar to the ones in the play, only the value that is emphasized will be the students' choice.

Prior Knowledge

A teacher-directed discussion is necessary in order to explain and clarify just what a value system is, what types of characteristics are positive human traits, and what values the students believe are important. A connection can be made to prior works of literature that the class has read. For instance, a positive trait that Brutus had in *Julius Caesar* was nobility and Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* demonstrated courage and resolve. A short vocabulary lesson explaining that the word casket means chest may be necessary. It is a good idea to begin a Shakespeare unit with a vocabulary lesson for a full understanding of the play.

Lesson

Spend one half to one class period discussing value systems. Then break the class up into groups of three to four. Brainstorm for ideas. The group must decide which value they are going to display in their casket. One person in each group needs to bring in a shoebox. The following day the students form groups and decorate their casket. The outside should indicate what value is hidden inside. On the inside of the box the students need to create a riddle and a picture that indicates what the value is. The riddle is displayed on the outside of the casket and the illustration (the solution) on the inside. It is a creative and critical thinking exercise because some characteristics or qualities are difficult to put into words or to illustrate. My students were very proud of their products. Because I had two sophomore classes, the morning class had to figure out the riddles in the afternoon class's caskets and vice versa. They also make a colorful visual aid display in the classroom. Because my class created their caskets after reading Act 2, some of the caskets were not as original, but just as creative. One group used clay and paper clips to create the characters in Act 2 and folded construction paper into tiny gold, silver, and lead caskets to create a diorama of the scene in the play. Their riddle was clever because it incorporated information from the play. Another group chose courage and the symbol was a lion. Some were more artistic than others, but the discussions that took place as the

students worked together and the fun they had creating these caskets made it a very worthwhile lesson.

Lesson Plan Two: The Trial

This lesson is an opportunity to learn about the law and the court system. The class can act out the courtroom scene in Act 4 or they can put on their own trial. The Students may want to view a video version of a courtroom scene, such as *Twelve Angry Men* or *To Kill A Mockingbird* as well as the video version of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Materials

A graduation robe (to use as a judge's robe) and information about the legal system.

Objective

- To teach the students the value of the law and the legal system.

Prior Knowledge

None. Students can do research to learn about the legal system.

Lesson

The students can recreate the court scene in Act 4 or they can create their own trial and put a student on trial with fictional charges. For fun, the teacher may want to volunteer to be the defendant.

Lesson Plan Three: Economics Lesson

This lesson can teach students about the importance of fiscal responsibility.

Materials

Credit card application forms (or a facsimile), loan application sheets, and interest rate charts.

Objective

To teach the students about the importance of knowledge about credit and the banking system.

Lesson

Students will get a lesson on interest rates and the monetary responsibility of credit cards. Students can calculate with the interest rate chart how much something really costs if it is borrowed at a specific interest rate and paid for over a period of time. They can also calculate how much money they will accumulate if they learn the value of saving. Some teachers may want to extend this lesson to investing or how to fill out loan applications and the ramifications of cosigned loans.

Lesson Plan Four: Man versus Woman

The battle of the sexes is an interesting topic for high school students.

Materials

None.

Objectives

- To make the students aware that there have always been conflicts between men and women.
- To learn to respect someone with an opposing point of view.

Lesson

Divide the class into two sides, girls on one side and boys on the other. One day can be set aside to go to the library and do research. Students can look up accomplishments of men and women in many areas, such as: education, discovery, sports, history, and literature and the arts. In order to give them direction you can divide each side into smaller groups who are in charge of looking up the above-mentioned categories. The teacher can direct the debate or appoint a student. Each side has an opportunity to prove the accomplishments of their gender based on research. This can also be conducted as a game show. Students enjoy a good, fair competition and this is of wits and who did their research.

Lesson Plan Five: Prejudice

This lesson can begin with a writing lesson. The student writes about a time when they either witnessed or experienced bigotry. This lesson can also be taught in conjunction with a lesson about the Civil Rights movement or the Holocaust.

Materials

Hidden labels or index cards with the label to hand to students as they enter the room.

Objective

To expose students to experiences from both sides of a situation involving prejudice.

Lesson

This lesson has been done in the past on younger children. I have never given this lesson. The lesson is modeled after the one involving dividing the class into two groups, students with brown eyes and students with blue eyes. The students are unaware of what the purpose is when they enter the classroom because that would reduce the effect. The teacher can randomly hand out cards that say what label the student will have or the desks can have a paper or number taped underneath. One group is the predominant, “acceptable” group and the other group is “unacceptable.” Labeling can involve what color card the student receives when he/she enters the room or the label will be taped to the desk. For the length of the class period the teacher shows preference and kindness to the acceptable group, and is intolerant of the unacceptable group. The following day, or halfway through a class period, the students reverse roles. This way all of the students have an opportunity to be on both sides of the issue in order to understand the other point of view. This assignment should be followed up with a writing assignment and/or class discussion.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This collection of Shakespeare's plays offers illustrations and several pages of commentary and criticism about each play.

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The essay, "The Merchant of Venice," by Harley Granville-Barker, describes the play as a fairy tale. She discusses the two disparate themes and the characters. The description of Shakespeare's Venice is also good background information.

John Russell Brown's "Love's Wealth and Judgment of *The Merchant of Venice*" explains the key scenes: the three caskets, how Shylock stands for the law, and the ring promise.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

This collection of literary criticism is very valuable, particularly if the students are working on research projects on this play. It is also valuable as enrichment information for the teacher to present in the classroom. Information includes Freud, pound of flesh stories, the model for the play, scapegoating, the three caskets, the use of vocabulary, and the quest for material and spiritual riches. Important facts are included, such as the date when Jews were expelled from England (1290) and the fact that there were no Jews living in England when Shakespeare wrote this play. Bloom states that the play should be staged with Shylock as a comic villain.

Boonstra, Janrense, Hans Jansen, and Joke Kniesmeyer, eds. *ANTISEMITISM: A History Portrayed*. Amsterdam: Anne Frank Foundation, 1998.

This reference book is very valuable in teaching the treatment of Jews through the ages. The economic sources of anti-semitism and the legend of the Wandering Jew are explained. It is an illustrated book with everything from medieval paintings, manuscripts, and political cartoons to photographs of concentration camps. Statistics and historical explanations are brief and easy to understand.

Durband, Alan. *Shakespeare Made Easy: The Merchant of Venice*. London: Barron's, 1985.

This version of the play is useful in the regular classroom because the student can read Shakespeare's text on the left side and see an updated modern version on the right, so there is an immediate comparison and clarification.

Fallon, Robert Thomas. *A Theatergoer's Guide to Shakespeare*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001.

The contents are broken down into tragedies, comedies and histories. *The Merchant of Venice* title is followed by "A Tragic Comedy" to differentiate it from the other comedies. It states that there are two distinct plotlines in the play: one is comedy and one is tragedy. It gives a comprehensive summary of the plots. There is a concise explanation of usury, the history of the reason for resentment and banishment in Medieval England and Europe, and background on how actors portrayed Shylock in different time periods.

Felsenstein, Frank. *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660-1830*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995.

This book is a good reference for the historical background of Jews in England with an explanation of the Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753 and the political upheaval it produced. It also explains the stereotypes that predominated the day which helps to explain some of the characteristics that Shakespeare gave to Shylock.

Holden, Anthony. *William Shakespeare: the Man Behind the Genius*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1999.

This biography goes beyond the basic background that is covered in high school textbooks. It explores the lost years and summarizes several plays' plotlines and why Shakespeare chose to include the information. The pictures, illustrations and title pages are very good. Maps, the Shakespeare coat of arms and portraits of famous people affiliated with Shakespeare, as well as the theaters are included.

Macrone, Michael. *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1990.

This book is a quick, easy reference that explains various famous quotations from many of Shakespeare's plays. There is also a list of all of the plays in order and the dates when they were written.

Masefield, John. *Three Comedies*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1965.

The introduction gives the reader background on the origins of Shakespeare's ideas for the play. The text of the play follows.

Matthews, Honor. *Character & Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays*. New York: Schocken Books, 1962.

The chapter entitled, "The Parliament of Heaven" deals with the treatment of justice in Elizabethan England, citing several plays including *The Merchant of Venice*.

www.Shakespeare.palomar.edu 17 June 2002.

Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet
Palomar. Online. Google.

Myrick, Kenneth, ed. *William Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice*. New York: New American Library, 1965.

This is a reasonably priced, small, pocket size book that students can purchase and write notes in the margins. The introduction by Kenneth Myrick is informative and the book also has a description of each character and a list of all of Shakespeare's plays and their dates.

Nunn, Trevor (director). *Royal National Theater Production: The Merchant of Venice. Exxon Mobil Masterpiece Theater*. Houston: PBS Television, 2001.

This production puts a new perspective on the play by placing the setting in twentieth century Europe during the time between the world wars. It is always a valuable experience for students to view a production of the play that they are reading. This could be a good tool to use as a comparison to a production in a traditional setting.

Ornstein, Robert. *Shakespeare's Comedies: From Romantic Farce to Romantic Mystery*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1986.

This provides good literary criticism of the play as well as historical background.

Quennell, Peter and Hamish Johnson. *Who's Who in Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

This is a valuable reference book for anyone teaching or learning about Shakespeare. It gives a quick, readable explanation of every character in every play. It includes scenes in which the characters appear. It's also interesting to see the repetition of characters' names in different plays (for example, Portia in *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*).

Rubin, Theodore Isaac, M.D. *Anti-Semitism: A Disease of the Mind*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990.

On the first page of the book is an interesting quotation by Mark Twain concerning the contributions of Jews through the ages that will be interesting to the students studying Mark Twain. One chapter focuses on symbol sickness, such as envy. This might be useful in a lesson to teach about stereotypes or what goes on in the mind of an envious person. The chapters on Hitler could be incorporated into a social studies lesson. Rubin explains the psychological reasoning in the anti-Semites mind in a way that laymen (and students) can understand. It is very enlightening.

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Shakespeare's Globe Research Database on The University of Reading site

This is a valuable website for both the teacher and the student. Information about the old Globe Theatre and the new Globe Theatre is available. It includes illustrations, a schedule of upcoming performances, and additional links.

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. New York: Signet, 1965.

This is a highly recommended version of the play for the classroom because it is a small paperback, it is affordable, and the introduction contains a good plot summary. This is a version that students could buy for themselves and write notes in the margins.

Trachtenberg, Joshua. *The Devil and the Jews: the Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1943.

This book gives detailed accounts of the historical background of the major myths that perpetuated anti-Semitism. Because the setting of the play is set in Medieval Europe, this information is useful. It gives a basis for the origins of many misconceptions that still exist today. The drawings that existed during that time period are included.

Wistrich, Robert S. *Antisemitism: the Longest Hatred*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

This book explores the medieval prejudices and legends. The devil was an important motif linked to the Jews as a means of dehumanization. This book gives a historical perspective to the attitudes at the time that the story takes place which might lead to a better understanding of the characters' behavior.