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**Shakespeare’s Powerful Characters**

Throughout the entire history of literature, many have come to the belief that Shakespeare has challenged racial lines and barriers—such as religion and gender issues—through the way he portrays his characters. Shakespeare is the father of modern literature; almost every other piece of literature created by other authors was inspired by an idea that Shakespeare had already brought into the literature world. Many other authors get an idea across to the audience by the way they portray their characters just like Shakespeare has in his literature pieces—only, he was the first to do so. Shakespeare's characters not only portray different ideas, but they are what make a piece of literature stand out from the rest. In Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, he portrays the idea of racism, female inequality and anti-Semitism through the use of his characters.

Some people assume that Shakespeare is sexist. Although this might be true, they don't even consider the idea that all women during Shakespearian times were not as equal as men and weren't trusted as much as men were. The women weren’t even allowed to perform female parts in Shakespeare’s plays—men played the roles. So in Shakespeare’s times, what we see as sexist, they saw as normal. In *The Merchant of Venice*, we can see who has the power in the scene by who has the most lines--in this case most of the men had more lines than any of the women. Jessica had short lines throughout the entire play including lines like, "And what hope is that, I pray thee?”(133). Very short and subtle lines were the only ones granted to Jessica while Bassanio, Shylock, and Antonio were granted many more lines.

What was interesting in *The Merchant of Venice* was the idea that Shakespeare created a powerful female figure within the story. Portia was a female who had a powerful role in the story. Unlike Jessica, Portia had huge monologues like the men did. Before Portia and Nerissa went into the courtroom scene, Portia says to Nerissa, “When we are both accoutred like young men, I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two, And wear my dagger with the braver grace, And speak between the change of man and boy With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps Into a manly stride”(131). Portia has so much confidence and it is shown within this monologue.

Female gender has been treated almost as a literary device within Shakespeare’s plays. They help move the plot line along. In *Othello*, the plot would have been boring without Desdemona being a part of the tragedy; in *The Merchant of Venice*, the story wouldn’t have been so funny if Portia didn’t dress up like a boy in the courtroom scene. If it weren’t for his strong female characters and their non-conformity to the social taboos of the time, then Shakespeare’s plays would not be remembered.

Racism is also portrayed through Shakespeare’s characters. Othello was an African American who was a moor—a higher position than most. Why would Shakespeare decide to have Othello be the main character of a tragedy? Shakespeare could have used an African American figure as his main character because he is racist and the best way to show this would have been to show that African Americans in power lead to tragedy. In *Othello*, Iago—the antagonist—uses racial slurs to describe Othello and Desdemona when he says, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.88-89). Iago was referring to Othello when he said “old black ram” and was referring to Desdemona when he said “white ewe”. Tupping means sleeping together and black rams are a symbolism of evil—almost like the devil. So in these lines he said that the devil is sleeping with Desdemona. Another insult that Iago made about Othello was when he told Brabantio that, “I am one, sir that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs. You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you” (1.1.126-127).There are many references to animals associated with evil when referring to Othello because he is an African American. Shakespeare decided to use more animal references because is more demeaning and symbolic towards the characters which help them portray the concept of racism in a more powerful way.

Shakespeare likes to incorporate religion in many of his plays. Shakespeare himself was Protestant. In *The Merchant of Venice* he incorporates the dilemma between Jews and Christians to show the idea of how these two religions reacted with one another. When Bassanio asked Shylock if he would like to eat with them, Shylock replied by saying, “I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (27). When he refuses to eat, drink, or pray with men who don't share his religious identity, Shylock reveals that he can be just as bigoted as Antonio. Shakespeare made Shylock care about money more than his own daughter, this alone reveals the idea that Shakespeare is trying to portray Jews as greedy. When Shylock finds out Jessica has ran away and stolen his money he says, “Thou stickest a dagger in me: I shall never see my gold again: fourscore ducats at a sitting!”(101). He isn’t even worried about his daughter; he is worried about never seeing his gold again! This is another idea that portrays the concept that Jews are selfish.

Although Shylock is portrayed as someone who is greedy and doesn’t think about anything else besides himself or his money, he had one speech that showed he has some humanity in him. The speech was powerful but the most powerful lines included, “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?” (97). When Shylock mentions the idea of “if you prick us, do we not bleed?” he insists that Christians and Jews share a common humanity. This speech that Shakespeare had Shylock speak could counter argue that Shakespeare was racist towards Jews.

Racism, female inequality and anti-Semitism all still exist today. It’s interesting how we still have all these things today because it goes to show that history doesn’t really change, but it repeats itself. Shakespeare uses his characters to show his world which isn’t much different than our world today. Through the way Shakespeare portrays his characters, we are able to see racism, female inequality and anti-Semitism through his eyes.

Work Cited:

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