

Mercy in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

Lesson plan

Topic: Shakespeare**Level:** B1-B2**Time:** 80 minutes**Aims**

- to develop students' vocabulary on the theme of mercy
- to give students practise in reading for specific information
- to revise the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* and raise students' awareness of one of the play's central themes: mercy.

Introduction

This lesson is about Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, and has been written primarily for students who are already familiar with the play, for example for those students who have already done the lesson in the British Council's Shakespeare anniversary materials **Money in *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare**, also available from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/shakespeare>. However, for students who are not familiar with the plot, the lesson plan does contain a summary of the main events from the play (see below). Once the teacher has explained this to the students, they should be able to do the lesson, even if they have not done the lesson about money.

This lesson focuses on the play's theme of mercy. Students begin by thinking about everyday situations which would require them to show forgiveness. They go on to consider the concept of mercy, before reading and listening to Portia's speech about mercy. After summarising the speech and completing comprehension and vocabulary tasks, students write their own speeches on the subject of forgiveness, inspired by modern-day situations.

Preparation

Make one copy of the student worksheets for each learner in the class, and make sure that you can access and play the podcast.

Plot Summary: *The Merchant of Venice*

Antonio and Bassanio (two Christian merchants) ask Shylock (a Jewish moneylender) for a loan of money. The two merchants have often been unkind to Shylock because of his religion. Shylock agrees to lend Bassanio money, on the condition that he will be entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh should the loan go unpaid.

Bassanio is in love with a beautiful and intelligent woman called Portia. He passes the test Portia's dead father has left for his daughter's suitors, and they agree to be married. Just then, the couple receive terrible news. All of Antonio's ships have been lost at sea. He will not be able to pay his loan back and Shylock will be able to claim the pound of flesh.

There is a trial to decide the matter. Shylock is determined to get his pound of flesh from Antonio, saying that this payment is rightfully his. Just then, a legal expert appears at the trial. The legal expert is really Portia in disguise. After making a speech about mercy, Portia

looks at the contract and announces that Shylock is entitled to his pound of flesh. She reminds him, however, that the contract does not mention any blood. Shylock can take his payment only if he does not spill any blood in the process. Shylock quickly decides to accept the money he has been offered, but Portia insists that he can have the flesh or nothing.

Portia accuses Shylock of trying to murder a Venetian citizen. This means that he must give half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. The Duke spares Shylock's life and says he can keep the state's half of the property, but must pay a fine. Antonio says that Shylock can keep his property, but he must convert to Christianity.

The play ends with Bassanio and Portia celebrating their love and good fortune, along with Shylock's daughter, Jessica, and her husband Lorenzo.

Procedure

Warmer (10 minutes)

- Focus students' attention on the questions and the sentences. Ask them to read the situations and decide who they would find most difficult to forgive and why.
- Ask students to share their answers with a partner. Monitor, encouraging students to give reasons for their choices.
- Conduct class feedback. Generate as much discussion as possible and write new language on the board.

Example suggested answers:

(1) I would find it most difficult to forgive my neighbour. Everyone knows that drinking and driving is a really bad idea. Also, nothing he said would ever be able to replace my cat.

(5) I would find it really difficult to forgive my partner if he had an affair with my best friend – I would never be able to trust him again. Also, it would be impossible to forgive my best friend in this situation.

Task 1 – The meaning of 'mercy' (10 minutes)

- Read the sentences about mercy aloud to your students. Then ask them to match the phrases in italics to their meanings.
- Allow students to check their answers with a partner before conducting class feedback.
- Ask students if they can explain the difference between *mercy* and *forgiveness* (we show mercy to someone we have some degree of power over: forgiveness occurs between people who are on a more equal footing).

Answers:

1 d, 2 e, 3 c, 4 a, 5 b

Task 2 – Mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* (10 minutes)

Note – this task is intended for students who are already with the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*. However, if your class do not know the story, you can read aloud to them the **Plot Summary: The Merchant of Venice** (above).

- Ask students to work in pairs. Give them a time limit of four minutes to answer the questions about *The Merchant of Venice*.
- Circulate as students do this, offering support where necessary.
- Conduct class feedback.

Answers:

1. *Shylock doesn't want to show mercy because Antonio and Bassanio have been unkind to him in the past. He wants to take a pound of flesh from Antonio.*
2. *Portia tries to persuade Shylock to be merciful so that he will spare Antonio's life.*
3. *Antonio.*
4. *The Duke shows mercy (by asking Shylock to pay a fine rather than offer up half of his property to the state) and Antonio shows mercy (by saying that Shylock can keep the other half of his property).*

Task 3 – Pre-reading: Portia's speech (5 minutes)

- Focus students' attention on the words and objects in the pictures. Check that students understand the meaning of the words by using concept questions, e.g.
 - *Do people wear crowns on their feet? (No)*
 - *Do they wear crowns on their heads? (Yes)*
- Organise students into pairs. Tell students that these items all feature in Portia's speech. Give students a minute to discuss what these items have to do with mercy.
- Collect ideas around the class.

Suggested answers



The scales represent JUSTICE.



The MONARCH is sitting on a THRONE, wearing a CROWN and holding a SCEPTRE in his right hand.



The illustration suggests a staircase leading upwards to HEAVEN.

Task 4 – Reading Portia’s speech (10 minutes)

- Read the speech aloud to your students or play the recording while students follow the text.
- Ask students to find and underline the words from Task 3.
- Conduct class feedback.

Answers – see ‘Modern Translation’ next to Shakespeare’s original text.

Task 5 – Summarising Portia’s speech (5 minutes)

- Focus students’ attention on the three summaries of Portia’s speech. Ask them to choose the most accurate summary.
- Allow students to check their answers with a partner before conducting class feedback.

Answer: a

Task 6 – Checking understanding (10 minutes)

- Focus students’ attention on the sentences. Ask students to find and underline the parts of Portia’s speech which mean the same as the sentences.
- Check answers around the class.

Answers:

1. *The quality of mercy is not strained/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven*
2. *It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*
3. *'Tis mightiest in the mightiest.*
4. *It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings.*
5. *And earthly power doth then show likest God's/ When mercy seasons justice.*

Task 7 – Vocabulary in context (10 minutes)

- Ask students to match the words from Portia’s speech with their meanings.
- Allow students to check their answers with a partner before conducting class feedback.

Task 8 – Writing and role play (10 minutes)

- Organise students into pairs. Remind students of the situations they read about in the Warmer activity.
- Ask students to choose one of the situations in the Warmer. They need to write a modern day version of Portia’s speech in order to persuade their friend (the person who has been wronged) to show forgiveness.
- Circulate as students complete this activity, offering support and language input wherever necessary.
- Nominate students to read out their speech to the rest of the class. The rest of the class should offer feedback on how persuasive their classmates’ speeches are.