

Through Archetypal Criticism in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

Muhammad Arslan Sadiq

Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

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ABSTRACT: *This paper presents a brief overview of archetypal criticism, a literary theory that seeks to identify universal patterns and themes in literature rooted in the human psyche. It is based on the idea of archetypes, symbols and motifs in the collective unconscious of humanity, popularized by Carl Jung. As applied to literature, the theory of archetypal criticism involves exploring these universal themes and symbols in work and how they reflect the human condition. The paper aims to analyze William Shakespeare's tragedy *The Merchant of Venice* through the lens of archetypal criticism to uncover deeper meanings in the literature. The play explores themes of justice, mercy, and true love through its complicated characters and dramatic plot. Through archetypal criticism, the play delves deeper into its universal meaning. It reveals psychological and emotional truths about the human condition, inviting reflection on beliefs and values that shape our experiences in the world. The paper explores the play by applying archetypal criticism. There are archetype characters of Shylock and Jessica that embody the outsider archetype as Jews in a predominantly Christian society and moneylenders. The archetypal criticism also explores different forms of love, including romantic love between Bassanio and Portia, the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio, and the complex relationship between Shylock and Jessica. The theme of revenge is embodied by Shylock and depicts an archetype. The play features archetypal symbols, including the casket challenge, the green-eyed monster, the test of worthiness, and the trickster. Some situations in the play and the play's ending are also significant from an archetypal perspective.*

KEYWORDS: archetypal, archetype, the merchant of Venice, character, theme, symbol.

INTRODUCTION

Archetypal criticism is a literary theory that seeks to identify and understand universal patterns and themes in literature that are deeply ingrained in the human psyche. It is based on the idea that universal symbols, images, and motifs repeat across cultures and throughout history and that these archetypes reflect the collective unconscious of humanity. The theory was popularized by Carl

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Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, and psychologist, who believed that the human mind has a natural disposition towards certain universal symbols and themes. These archetypes, he claimed, are present in human's dreams, myths, and religious traditions, and they reveal the unconscious desires, fears, and beliefs that all people share (Walker 17).

Steven Walker in his book *Jung and Jungians on Myth* states Carl Jung identified several archetypes in his work on psychology and mythology. Some of the most well-known archetypes identified by Jung include:

1. The Self: represents the unity and integration of all aspects of the psyche and represents the central core of the personality.
2. The Shadow: represents the unconscious and repressed aspects of the personality and includes negative or taboo desires and impulses.
3. The Anima/Animus: represents the unconscious feminine or masculine aspects of the personality, respectively.
4. The Mother: represents the nurturer, caretaker, and protectress.
5. The Father: represents authority, structure, and protection.
6. The Hero: represents the archetypal figure who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and overcomes obstacles and challenges.
7. The Trickster: represents the archetype that challenges social norms and acts as a catalyst for change and transformation.
8. The Innocent: represents the archetype of purity, innocence, and simplicity.

These are just a few of the many archetypes that Jung identified and studied. According to Jung, these archetypes are universal patterns and symbols that exist in the collective unconscious and are shared across cultures and throughout human history. By understanding these archetypes, we can gain insight into our own unconscious motivations, desires, and fears, and we can better understand the world around us (31).

Here's a quote from Jung that explains the concept of archetypal criticism:

Archetypes are the mysterious prototypes of all things and represent the inborn tendencies and dispositions in human psychology. They are the unconscious images that are projected onto the world, and they form the basic patterns of our dreams, myths, religious symbols, and ways of thinking (Jung). *In this quote, Jung is explaining that archetypes are inherent and universal patterns that exist within the human psyche and influence our perceptions and experiences of the world. They can manifest in the dreams, cultural symbols, and even the way humans think and approach problems.*

Literary Criticism and Archetypal Criticism

In the context of literary criticism, archetypal criticism seeks to identify these universal symbols and themes in works of literature and explore how they reflect the human condition. This can involve looking at a piece of literature's characters, plots, settings, and symbols and tracing their roots in the collective unconscious. Archetypal criticism also often explores the relationship between the individual and the larger cultural and historical context in which the work of literature was created. For example, a critic might examine how a particular archetype in a piece of literature reflects the societal norms and values of the time it was written. It is a valuable tool for understanding literature because it provides a framework for exploring the more profound, universal meanings beneath the surface of a work of literature. It allows people to see how literature speaks to the human experience and can help one understand oneself and one's place in the world.

Northrop Frye was a Canadian literary critic who is best known for his work on the theory of archetypal criticism. Here's a quote from Frye that encapsulates his views on the subject: "Archetypal criticism is a form of cultural criticism which explores the symbolic patterns and universal themes that pervade literature and other cultural expressions across time and place" (23). Frye explains that archetypal criticism is a way of looking at cultural expressions, including literature that seeks to identify and understand the underlying patterns and themes that are common to all such expressions. Frye believed that these patterns and themes are rooted in the collective unconscious, and that they can reveal important insights into the human experience and the ways that make meaning in the world.

Shakespeare's Classic Masterpiece: *The Merchant of Venice* through Archetypal Lens

The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare in the late 16th century, is a play that has intrigued audiences for centuries with its complicated characters, scenic twists, dramatic plot, and thought-provoking themes. At its core, the play is a meditation on justice, mercy, and the nature of true love, and it remains one of Shakespeare's most enduring and popular works. Through its richly drawn characters, its exploration of timeless themes, and its use of symbols and motifs that tap into the collective unconscious, *The Merchant of Venice* is a prime example of the power of archetypal criticism. Using this critical lens, we can delve deeper into the play's universal meaning and uncover the underlying psychological and emotional truths that it reveals about the human condition. From its memorable characters, such as Shylock and Portia, to its timeless themes of love, greed, and justice, *The Merchant of Venice* invokes one to reflect on beliefs and values and consider how they shape the experiences in the world. Through archetypal criticism, it gives a deeper appreciation of this classic play and its enduring relevance to our lives.

Archetypal Characters

The figure of the moneylender is one of the most prominent and intriguing archetypes in *The Merchant of Venice*. Embodied by the character of Shylock, the moneylender represents the archetype of the greedy, heartless usurer consumed by a love of money and a desire to accumulate wealth at any cost. However, as the play unfolds, Shylock emerges as a complicated and multi-faceted character whose motivations and desires are not easily reducible to one-dimensional caricatures. Shylock is portrayed as a moneylender driven by his love of money and obsession with accumulating wealth. He is depicted as a cold, calculating figure willing to lend money to anyone, regardless of their ability to repay the loan, so long as he can extract the highest possible interest rate. This desire for wealth is a manifestation of the archetype of the moneylender, which is rooted in the collective unconscious and reflects a deep-seated fear of scarcity and a desire for financial security.

Here is a quote from Shylock, the moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice* where, that illustrates his archetypal character:

"If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. He hates our sacred nation, and he rails, even there where merchants most do congregate, on me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift, which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him!" (Act 1, Scene 3).

In this quote, Shylock is speaking about his hatred for the Christian merchant Antonio and his desire for revenge. The image of "catching him once upon the hip" refers to a wrestling move where one person grabs the other's hip in order to throw them down, symbolizing Shylock's desire for domination and control. The image of "feeding fat the ancient grudge" highlights his deep-seated anger and resentment, and his sense of being wronged by Antonio and other members of the Christian community. These lines are an example of how Shylock embodies the archetypal figure of the greedy, vengeful moneylender.

Archetypal Themes

The theme of love is depicted in a multitude of forms in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. From the romantic love between Bassanio and Portia to the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio to the complex relationship between Shylock and Jessica, love is a central and recurring motif throughout the play. At the heart of the play is the portrayal of the classic romantic love story between Bassanio and Portia. Their relationship is depicted as transcending societal and cultural boundaries, and their journey together serves as a testament to the perseverance and power of love in the face of adversity. This archetype of romantic love is a timeless and universal theme that has been explored in literature for centuries.

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The friendship between Antonio and Bassanio is also a prominent theme in the play. Their bond is depicted as strong and unbreakable, built on trust, mutual respect, and shared experiences. Through their relationship, Antonio and Bassanio embody the archetype of the loyal friend and highlight the significance of having someone in one's life to rely on and trust.

The relationship between Shylock and Jessica is a complex one, and their love for one another is portrayed as a mixture of pride, anger, and tenderness. This relationship speaks to the universal human experience of balancing one's love for others with personal needs and desires. Jessica's journey to escape her father's household and convert to Christianity serves as a testament to the transformative power of love. The theme of love is a recurring and central motif in *The Merchant of Venice*. Through its portrayal of different forms of love, the play invites reflection on the power and significance of love in the human experience. The timeless and universal nature of love as a theme ensures the relevance and continued relevance of Shakespeare's work.

The play also explores the theme of revenge, as embodied by the character of Shylock. Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh as repayment for the loan he has given to Antonio is a symbol of his desire for revenge against the Christians who have mistreated him. This desire for revenge illustrates the dangers of hate and the destructive consequences of seeking revenge. In the words of Shylock, "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" (Act 1, Scene 3).

Archetypal Figures Contributing to Archetypal Themes

The archetype of the moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice* is a powerful and enduring, and its presence in the play speaks to timeless themes of greed, justice, and the human condition. Through its exploration of the figure of Shylock, the play invites the readers to consider how universal archetypes shape their desires and motivations and to reflect on the deeper psychological and emotional truths that they reveal about the human experience. The moneylender archetype in *The Merchant of Venice* is a testament to the power of archetypal criticism and the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's works to our lives today.

The archetype of the outsider is another prominent and recurring theme in *The Merchant of Venice*. Embodied by the characters of Shylock and Jessica, the outsider archetype speaks to the universal human experience of feeling like an outsider, excluded, or marginalized from mainstream society. In the play, Shylock and Jessica are depicted as outsiders both because of their religion, as Jews in a predominantly Christian society, and because of their status as moneylenders, who were often viewed with suspicion and disdain.

In the play, Jessica, Shylock's daughter, is also portrayed as an outsider. She is depicted as a young woman who feels trapped and oppressed by her father's oppressive household and is desperate to escape and forge her path in life. Through her journey to escape her father's household and convert

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to Christianity, Jessica embodies the archetype of the outsider, and her experiences speak to the universal human experience of feeling like an outsider and the longing for a sense of belonging and acceptance. The outsider archetype in *The Merchant of Venice* speaks to timeless themes of exclusion, discrimination, and the human condition. Here's a quote from *The Merchant of Venice* that showcases Jessica, Shylock's daughter, as an archetypal outsider: "Alack, what heinous sin is it in me to be ashamed to be my father's child? But though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners" (Act 2, Scene 3).

In this quote, Jessica is expressing her feelings of being an outsider and her sense of disconnection from her father's culture and traditions. She recognizes that as Shylock's daughter, she is bound to him by blood, but she also feels estranged from his beliefs and attitudes. This disconnection is a common theme in stories about outsiders, and Jessica's character is a classic example of the archetypal outsider figure.

This archetypal figure can represent a number of different themes, including alienation, rejection, and the struggle to belong. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica's outsider status is closely tied to her father's status as an outsider in the Christian society of Venice, and her desire to escape that identity and forge a new path for herself is a key part of the play's larger themes of identity, belonging, and the tension between different cultures and beliefs.

Archetypal Symbols

The play also features archetypal symbols. Here are some of the most prominent archetypal symbols in the play:

1. **Portia's Casket Challenge to her Suitors:** The three caskets represent the choice between worldly goods, a fleeting pleasure, and true wisdom and worth. The scene explores the theme of judgment and the dangers of superficiality and suggests that true worth and wisdom come from within.
2. **The Green-Eyed Monster:** The character of Shylock is often seen as embodying the archetypal figure of the greedy, jealous, and wrathful moneylender. This figure is often associated with the "green-eyed monster" of envy, a universal symbol of greed and resentment.
3. **The Test of Worthiness:** The play's central conflict revolves around a test of worthiness, as Bassanio must prove himself to be a worthy suitor for Portia's hand in marriage. This test is a classic example of the archetypal motif of the hero's journey, which involves a protagonist undergoing a series of trials and tribulations to prove their worthiness and attain their goal.
4. **The Trickster:** The character of Launcelot Gobbo can be seen as a trickster figure whose wit and cunning provide comic relief throughout the play. Tricksters are a typical archetypal figure in many cultures and often serve as a foil to the more serious and straight-laced characters in a story.
5. **The Power of Mercy:** Portia's famous speech on the quality of mercy is one of the play's most powerful moments, and it underscores the archetypal theme of the power of mercy. This

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scene symbolizes the idea that it is possible to transcend the boundaries of revenge and hatred and achieve a higher, nobler form of justice through compassion and forgiveness. She advocates for a merciful interpretation of the law and the importance of compassion and understanding. This speech highlights the tension between the letter of the law and its spirit and suggests that true justice should be based on a deeper understanding of human nature and the needs of the individual.

Archetypal Situations

In addition to archetypal characters, themes, and symbols, the play also features archetypal situations and structures. The main plot of *The Merchant of Venice* revolves around a legal dispute in which the character of Shylock sues Antonio for the repayment of a loan. This archetypal situation of a legal dispute highlights the theme of justice and the tension between the law and its spirit. The play also features several subplots and comic scenes, which relieve the tension of the main plot and provide a contrast between the serious and the lighthearted (Mambrol 16).

The ending of the play is also significant from an archetypal perspective. The resolution of the legal dispute and the punishment of Shylock are seen as unjust by many critics, and the play has been interpreted as a commentary on the limitations of the legal system. The play's ending also raises questions about the nature of mercy and forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation between different groups and individuals.

The use of disguise and deception is also a significant aspect of the play from an archetypal perspective. Characters such as Portia, use disguises at various points in the play, and these disguises serve to highlight the themes of truth, identity, and illusion. For example, Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer to participate in legal proceedings and argue for the quality of mercy. This disguise serves to illustrate the theme of gender roles and to question the restrictions placed on women in Renaissance Venice (Zolper).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the archetypal criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* provides a valuable framework for exploring the play's deeper meanings and implications. By examining the play's archetypal characters, themes, symbols, situations, and structures, it becomes easier to have a deeper understanding of the play and its universal significance. The play's exploration of love, justice, mercy, and the dangers of greed and revenge continues to be relevant and thought-provoking, and the archetypal criticism of the play provides a useful tool for exploring its deeper meanings and implications.

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Author contribution: Dr. Fariha Chaudhary, Zarmina Arshad