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How Racial Issues are Reflected by Shakespearean Play and Disney Animation

A1091151黃宇婕, A1101104陳多安, A1101108林宜嫻, A1101116熊家賢



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Abstract

Disney’s animation and the Shakespearean play share many similar themes worth exploring, highlighting how specific views have changed over different eras. Take Disney’s animation *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the Shakespearean play *The Merchant of Venice* for example. Both works discuss racial prejudice and discrimination. This study aims to delve into the differences between the two texts on these topics. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* fully illustrates the discrimination of white people against the Gypsies, portraying them as criminals, thieves, homeless, and sources of social problems. It shows that white people were the mainstream in society at that time. They oppressed the rights of Gypsies. Meanwhile, *The Merchant of Venice* primarily explores the religious conflict between Jews and Christians. At the end of the play, the place of final judgment emphasizes that Christian thoughts are equated with justice. The conflict of ideas between Judaism and Christianity is pointed out. In the conclusion, we will compare the oppressors and victims by analyzing the two texts from both religious and historical perspectives. Additionally, we will examine the social phenomena of the time through a contemporary lens. This comparative analysis will offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in issues of oppression and discrimination.

Keywords: Racial Prejudice, Racial Discrimination, Gypsies, Jewish, Christian, Religious Conflicts

Introduction

This essay will delve into the themes of racial prejudice and discrimination as depicted in the Disney animation, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and the Shakespearean play, *The Merchant of Venice*. These works, though separated by centuries and different mediums, both highlight the marginalization and mistreatment of specific ethnic groups: the Gypsies and the Jews. In a society that continues to grapple with issues of race and discrimination, examining these portrayals provides valuable insights into the historical and cultural roots of prejudice. By analyzing the plotlines that depict the mistreatment of the Gypsies in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the discrimination faced by Shylock, a Jewish man, in *The Merchant of Venice*, this essay will explore the underlying causes of such biases. Through a comparative analysis of the historical, cultural, and religious contexts of these two groups, we aim to uncover the commonalities in their experiences and the persistent nature of racial discrimination.

Textual Analysis and Interpretation

Both the Jews and the Gypsies face serious social, racial, and religious discrimination and prejudice throughout history. From *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, we can understand that the discriminations and prejudices are due to the conflict caused by the different religions and the prejudice formed by the various values and the historical background of the race.

From the Perspective of Religious Differences

In *The Merchant of Venice*, we can see the conflicts caused by racial discrimination and irreconcilable religious differences. Shylock says:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. 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. (1.3.28–32)

In Jewish doctrine, pigs are considered unclean and should never be eaten, while Christians allow it. Shylock’s refusal shows his disdain for Christians. This paragraph also reflects the intolerance of religions in Venice in the 16th century. People were willing to work or trade with people of different races and religions while they refused to contact or engage in their social or religious matters. This social value separated the Christians and Jews and caused conflicts and discrimination.

The different perspectives of imposing usury are another reason that creates conflicts in the play. Shylock claims that:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances. / Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, / For stuff” rance is the badge of all our tribe. / You call me misbeliever, cut-throat, dog, / And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine, / And all for use of that which is mine own. (1.2.102 – 09)

In Jewish doctrine, Jews can impose usury on Christian people; however, charging interest to others is forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church. From Shylock’s perspective, Antonio’s behavior of lending money without imposing usury influenced his business. On the other hand, for Antonio, Shylock’s behavior is against the Christian code. This is the reason why Antonio dislikes Shylock and decides to condemn him in the public. It deepens the hatred between them and reflects the relationship between Christians and Jews.

The other scene is about the discussion about Christian mercy in Act 4 Scene 1. In the trial, the Duke of Venice and Portia keep trying to persuade Shylock to forgive Antonio’s debt by showing “mercy.” Even though Shylock’s request of a pound of flesh is unreasonable, the Christian trial’s request of “mercy” is “not mercy” from our perspective nowadays. “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.” (4.1.34) represents that the Duke and Portia try to impose Christian values on Shylock, and the whole trial is undertaken under Christian law and value. It shows that the social value that Jewish values are wrong and inferior to Christian society in the era.

In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the situation of Gypsies and their relationship with Christians has some similarities to Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*. Unlike Christians, Gypsies do not have certain religions and believe in divination and fortune-telling. Their belief in witchcraft makes them considered heathens and witches by Christians. When Frollo realizes his sexual desire for Esmeralda, the Gypsy girl, he claims, “It’s not my fault. I’m not to blame. It is the Gypsy girl the witch who set this flame. It’s not my fault.” (50:00-50:14). He believes

that his desire is due to Esmeralda’s witchcraft and seduction. Frollo also uses his social and political power to oppress Gypsies and deprive their rights. We can see this in two scenes: “The gypsy, Esmeralda, has refused to recant. This evil witch has put the soul of every citizen in Paris in awful jeopardy.” (1:13:05-17) and “The prisoner, Esmeralda, has been found guilty of the crime of witchcraft. The sentence: Death.” (1:12:20-31). Frollo claims Esmeralda is a witch who cannot be tolerant of Christian doctrine and sentenced her death by his own will since she refuses to obey him. It also shows that Frollo sees Gypsies as objects, not humans.

Perspective of Racial and Cultural Differences

In *The Merchant of Venice*, as the trigger of the event throughout the whole story, Bassanio is trying to convince Shylock to lend him 3,000 ducats for three months, with Antonio bound to repay the debt. During their conversation, although Shylock notices Antonio at once, he ignores him at first, remarking privately that he harbors an ancient grudge towards the Christian. Shylock explains that he hates Antonio because he “lends out money gratis”(1.3.40), or free of interest, thereby bringing down interest rates for professional moneylenders such as himself. More importantly, Antonio has repeatedly insulted the Jewish people in general and Shylock in particular. Shylock is determined to get revenge on Antonio not only for himself but also for his “tribe”. In Act 1 Scene 3, we can see that Shylock has hated Antonio for a long time because Antonio never takes a usurious interest in others, which goes against those merchants who do, like Shylock. Meanwhile, Shylock’s behavior emphasizes the prejudice that Jewish merchants are selfish, greedy, and have no mercy with their trading objects, which may result in several ill will towards them.

The behavior of Shylock in Act 2 Scene 8 also explains why those Christian merchants are disgusted with those Jewish moneylenders. Salerio and Solanio gossip about Jessica and Lorenzo’s elopement in this scene. When Shylock learns that Jessica had eloped and stolen his money, he cried “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian!” (2.8.15-16) again and again. Moreover, all the boys in Venice now imitating Shylock’s anguished call: “Justice, The law! My ducats and my daughter!” (2.8.17) In this stanza, we can see that although Shylock cries for his daughter’s leave, he also keeps yelling about the luxuries she has taken away, which implies that what he cares about is his wealth and reputation. These long-existing biases and prejudices worsen their relationship, causing them to turn against each other.

The same phenomenon also appeared in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which occurs between the French and the Gypsies. When the four Gypsies illegally immigrate to Paris, Frollo catches them and calls them “Gypsy vermin.” When Frollo sees the baby in the Gypsy woman’s arms, he immediately accuses the woman steal the baby. Due to long-existing bias towards the Gypsies, those soldiers identify them as criminals even if the Gypsies haven’t done anything with them.

These prejudices even caused the Gypsies to live in homeless and poor conditions and perform on the street for a living while being mocked and oppressed by the authorities. When two soldiers pass by the performance of Esmeralda, they say: “Gypsies don’t earn money. They steal it.” (17:29-30) When Frollo sees Esmeralda’s performance, he criticizes: “Look at this disgusting display.” (23:21-23) showing his discrimination against Gypsies. Moreover, Frollo tells Captain Phoebus that: “The Gypsies live outside the normal order. Their heathen ways inflame people’s lowest instincts. And they must be stopped.” (19:46-56) Those mocking words and irrational orders convey that they consider Gypsies to be troublemakers. Their prejudice and resistance towards each other eventually result in the tyranny of Frollo and the strong opposition from Esmeralda and Quasimodo, which is similar to the conflicts between Antonio and Shylock. Both of the conflicts in these two works result from their prejudice towards each other, and such prejudice is formed from the differences in the attitude and lifestyle of the two groups.

Findings and Conclusion

In *The Merchant of Venice*, we find out about the racial discrimination between Jews and Christians in the 16th century. Different living habits, religious beliefs, and social values lead to conflicts, with Christians holding the dominant position in society and viewing Jewish values as wrong. This phenomenon is mirrored in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, where the Gypsies are also a disadvantaged group. Due to their belief in divination and fortune-telling, Christians see them as pagans and witches. Frollo believes that his desire for Esmeralda is due to her witchcraft and seduction, as he cannot accept that a Christian as pure as himself could have sexual desire for a Gypsy girl.

Both works illustrate how contemporary ethnic groups often oppress minority groups to exclude dissidents. They automatically classify people who are not Christian as inferior. Those who oppress often consider themselves to be on the side of justice, all their behaviors are just to stabilize the social order. However, from a modern perspective, their actions are primarily motivated by a desire to maintain their own power and interests. They tend to oppress specific groups, particularly those with whom they have religious, historical, or cultural conflicts.

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