

Mr Bruff

ONLINE REVISION

MR Bruff's Guide To

'THE MERCHANT OF VENICE'



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SAMPLE

SAMPLE:

ORIGINAL TEXT	MODERN TRANSLATION
ACT I	ACT 1
SCENE I. Venice. A street.	SCENE 1. A street in Venice.
<i>Enter ANTONIO, SALARINO, and SALANIO</i>	<i>Enter ANTONIO, SALARINO, and SALANIO</i>
ANTONIO	ANTONIO
In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.	Truthfully, I don't know why I am so sad.
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;	It drains me; you say it drains you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,	But how I came to feel like this,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn;	The cause or where it's come from, I don't know;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me	And such a lack of insight regarding this sadness
That I have much ado to know myself.	Makes me feel as if I don't understand myself.
SALERIO	SALERIO:
Your mind is tossing on the ocean;	Your thoughts are focused on the ocean;
There where your argosies, with portly sail -	There where your ships, with grand sails -

Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,

Or, as it were, the pageants of the sea -

Do overpeer the petty traffickers,

That curtsy to them, do them reverence,

As they fly by them with their woven wings.

SOLANIO

Believe me, sir, had I such venture forth,

The better part of my affections would

Be with my hopes abroad. I should be still

Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind,

Peering in maps for ports and piers and roads;

And every object that might make me fear

Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt,

Would make me sad.

Like gentlemen and rich inhabitants of the ocean,

Like a spectacular sea borne procession -

Do look down on the little boats,

Which politely and respectfully move out of the way,

As they fly past, sails billowing.

SOLANIO

Believe me, sir, if I had a business like yours,

Most of my attention would

Be focused on my ships at sea. I would be constantly

Throwing grass into the air to find out in which direction the wind is blowing,

Scrutinising maps for ports, piers and roads;

And anything that caused me to worry

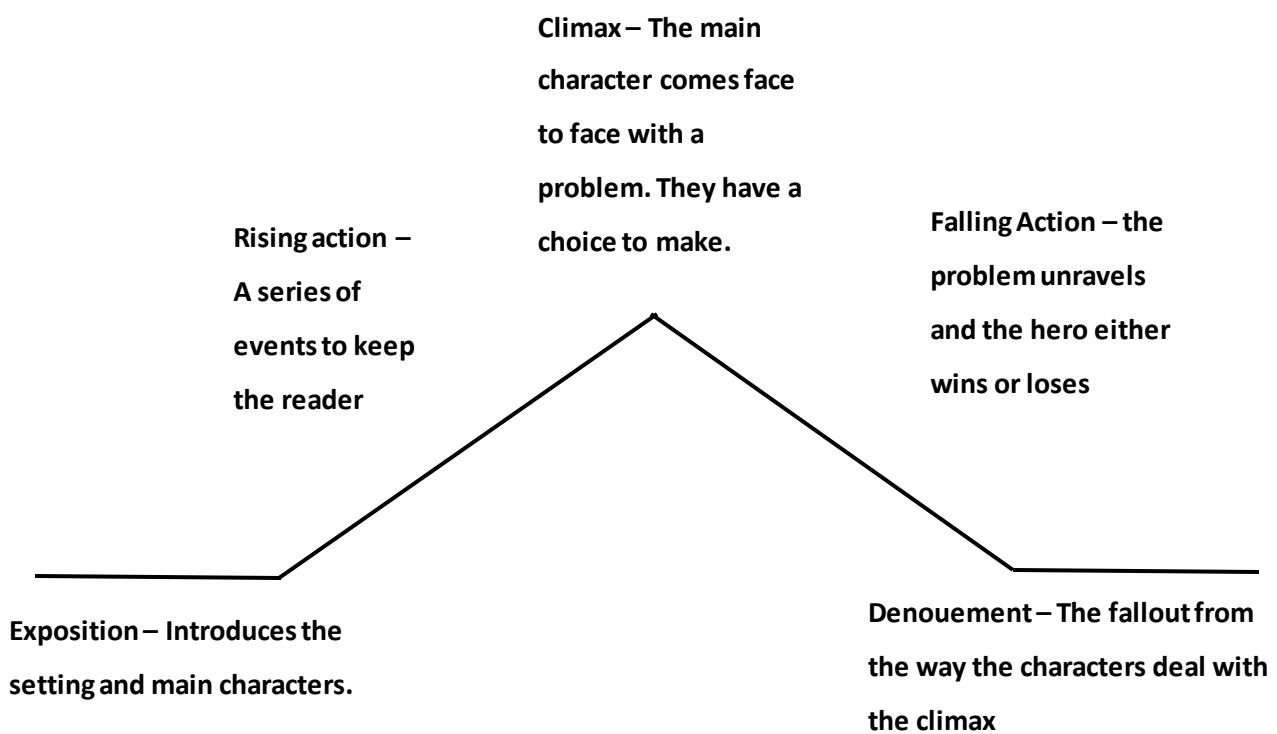
About my ships' safety, would

Definitely make me sad.

ANALYSIS: ACT 1 SCENE 1

'The Merchant of Venice' is a complex play. It contains a vast number of characters and numerous plot-lines. Therefore, it is essential that Shakespeare uses the opening scene to establish the main characters and storyline. In terms of structural analysis, this scene is one of several expositions found in the opening act.

Structure refers to the organisation of a text. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, around the year 335 BC, wrote 'Poetics', a book which included theories on narrative structure. Aristotle believed that drama could be divided into three sections. In the 19th Century, building on the work of Aristotle, the German novelist Gustav Freytag proposed that all five act plays follow the same format:



Following Freytag's pyramid, we learn many important points in this opening exposition scene:

- 1) Antonio is a successful merchant whose wealth is totally invested in trading- ships which are currently all at sea.
- 2) His friend, Bassanio, is in love with a rich lady called Portia. Bassanio wants to marry Portia, but first wishes to borrow money to make his lifestyle appropriately lavish in order to impress such a rich lady.
- 3) Antonio wants to lend Bassanio the money, but has none available as it is all invested in his trading- ships. He tells Bassanio that he can borrow money and use Antonio as a guarantor for the debt.

It is a sign of Shakespeare's talent that these details are revealed, not by Antonio, but by other characters. Knowing that Antonio, his friend, is depressed, Salerio wonders if it is due to the fact that "your mind is tossing on the ocean...where your argosies...overpeer the petty traffickers". What does this mean? Salerio is trying to encourage his friend Antonio that his huge merchant ships are far superior to other sea vessels. It is through the words of his friends that we discover a vital plot point: Antonio is currently risking his entire wealth on his trading- ships. If he loses his ships, he will lose all of his wealth.

The literary device of foreshadowing is used when Salerio mentions the 'dangerous rocks' which can wreck ships. Straight away, in this opening scene, Shakespeare lays out Antonio's situation and hints at how it will end. Cleverly, he does this not through the words of Antonio himself, but through those of Salerio and Solanio.

When Antonio enters the scene, the second piece of the exposition is revealed: the primary love story. Antonio asks Bassanio for an update on the 'pilgrimage' he wishes to embark upon. The word 'pilgrimage' is a religious word, referring to a religious journey to a sacred destination. This language suggests that Bassanio is truly in love, but Bassanio's reply suggests something different:

'My chief care

Is to come fairly off from the great debts

Wherein my time something too prodigal

Hath left me gaged. To you, Antonio,

I owe the most, in money and in love,

And from your love I have a warranty

To unburden all my plots and purposes

How to get clear of all the debts I owe.'

It appears that Bassanio wishes to marry Portia simply to inherit her wealth and to pay off his debts. Indeed, when asked to describe Portia, the structure of his reply is equally startling:

'In Belmont is a lady richly left;

And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,

Of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes

I did receive fair speechless messages:

Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued

To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia:

Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,

For the four winds blow in from every coast

Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks

Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;

Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,

And many Jasons come in quest of her.

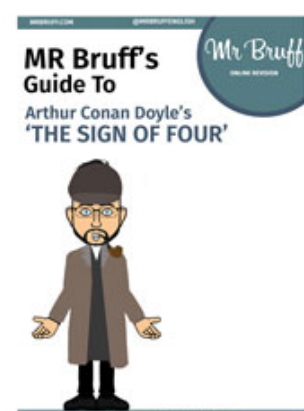
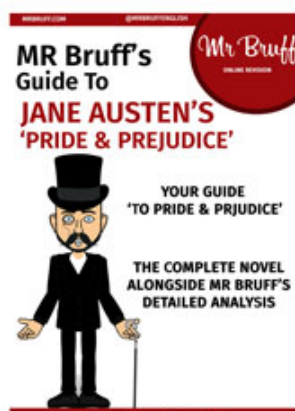
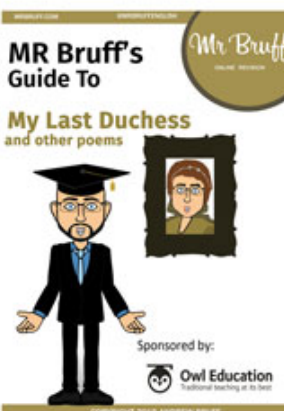
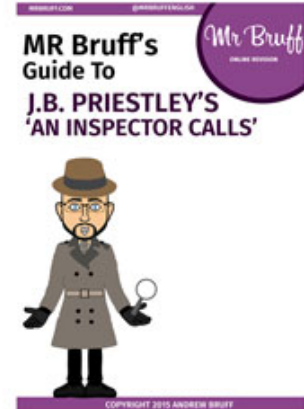
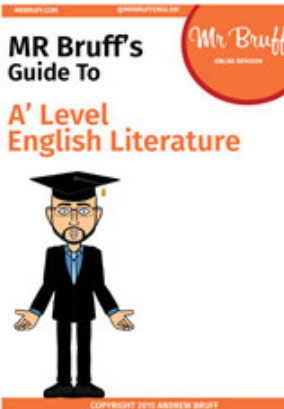
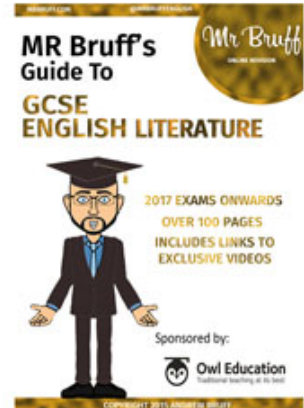
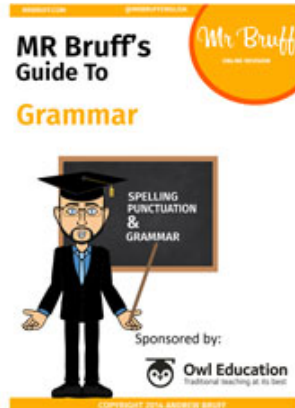
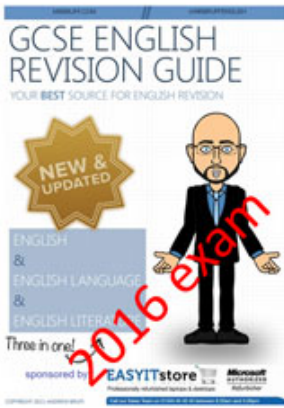
O my Antonio, had I but the means

To hold a rival place with one of them,

I have a mind presages me such thrift,

That I should questionless be fortunate!

Despite supposedly being in love with Portia, the very first thing Bassanio chooses to mention is her wealth. After appraising her wealth, Bassanio moves on to a description of her physical appearance - 'she is fair', 'sunny locks'. This also does not paint a positive picture of Bassanio, who seems only to be interested in money and sex. We learn nothing of Portia's personality in this speech. Even the references to her looks are intertextual references to wealth. The 'golden fleece' simile is a reference to the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts. In this tale, Jason wanted to take his place as king. In order to do so, he had to find a magical ram and take its golden fleece. The reference portrays Portia as the golden fleece, and Bassanio on a journey to claim her. When he is married to Portia, Bassanio will be, like Jason, king of his domain. This reference clearly portrays women as objects to be possessed. It's not a great start for Bassanio.



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