

# Seemingly the same but Different--a Comparative Analysis of The Scholars and The Merchant of Venice

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**Abstract:** Yan Jiansheng and Shylock are the main characters in *The Scholars* and *The Merchant of Venice* respectively. As typical miser images in literary history, Yan Jiansheng and Shylock have long been criticized by readers. In order to try to comprehensively interpret Yan Jiansheng and Shylock, through a series of comparative analyses, we can get the similarities and differences between the two images of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock, as well as the factors that produce the similarities and differences. This thesis focuses on the similarities and differences between the miserly characters of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock. Firstly, a brief introduction to the main character traits of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock. Secondly, the thesis summarizes the differences between the characters of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock from political and economic factors and then compares and analyzes the similarities between the characters of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock from the value of money, family concepts, tragic ending, and class consciousness. Finally, it briefly elaborates on the reasons for the differences between the two images.

**Keywords:** miserly image, Yan Jiansheng, Shylock, *The Scholars*, *The Merchant of Venice*

## 1. Introduction

In the long history of human literary creation, the history of Chinese and foreign drama is full of exquisite examples of miserly creation. They are not only the epitome of human life experience but also the reflection of different cultural environments. Shylock, the miser in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and Yan Jiansheng in Wu Jingzi's *The Scholars* represent these characters who share certain commonalities. People haven't seen the positive side of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock for a long time. They always think of these two characters as unfavorable. They believe that their existence is merely a satire of a class of people in society. This view is certainly not wrong, but the light of humanity must be preserved behind the darkness.

The miser in the gallery of characters in literature is a unique set of character line images that will leave a deep impression on the reader. This group of images in the depiction of world conditions played an important role but also reflected the flaws and weaknesses of human nature in social life. Although we have made some achievements in analyzing the commonalities and personalities of the classic miserly image to explore the latent cultural and historical connotations behind the miserly image, it is not comprehensive. It needs further analysis, collation, and summary. Therefore, I choose this topic to do some research to draw more readers' attention to the field of literature and help people more comprehensively understand the characteristics of the miserly image in China and the West.

At present, the academic community has different views on the good and evil of the two major misers. There are many reasons for this phenomenon, which can be explained from many angles. Most of the information on the Internet is analyzed from a single perspective of a single aspect. For example, Feng Xiaohui in *The Four Miserly Images in Modern European Literature*, studied the negative character of the four famous misers in ancient and modern China and briefly analyzed the negative impact of money on these four. Wang Ge in *Analysis of the Miserly Images in Chinese and Foreign Literature* explored the similarities and differences between the Chinese and Western cultures through understanding the miser images. Wang Xiaojun finds artistic light in different cultural environments in *Miser on Stage*. By reading these articles, we find there are few articles analyzing the political and economic background of the East and West in the period of creation. Still, this perspective is the main reason for this phenomenon. Therefore, through the method of comparative analysis, this paper attempts to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock from the creative environment of the work itself to the shaping of the characters, providing readers with two more vivid and three-dimensional character images.

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## 2. Portrait of Characters

Characterization in novels or plays is a common way to build characters. As we all know, the purpose of character description is to build up a character's image. It can show the character's spirit and also express the text's main idea more deeply. Therefore, a successful characterization can reproduce the characters and make the readers feel the real presence of the characters. In *The Scholars* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Wu Jingzi and Shakespeare all use various techniques to create more vivid characters.

### 2.1 Yan jiansheng

In the *Scholars*, author Wu Jingzi portrayed the character traits of Yan Jiansheng. For example, the text says, "Though I had a little land, I did not mind telling you, our family members usually felt it would be extravagant to buy pork." When he was sick, his concubine advised him to calm down and not to worry too much about the family, but he said, "My son was still small. Who else was there to see things? As long as I lived, I must manage my affairs." [Ibid:53] From what he said, although Yan Jiansheng was a miser, he was also a responsible and considerate person. He would rather let himself suffer a little than let the children suffer. In a way, we admitted that he was a good and competent father figure. When his wife was very sick, he hired many doctors to treat her. He also bought some top-quality herbs to nourish her body. Although this cost a lot of money, he never gave up taking care of his wife. When he was about to die, he held out two fingers. Just when everyone was wondering what he was worried about, only his concubine knew that there were two wicks in the oil lamp. Finally, when his concubine took out one wick, he calmly took his last breath. His behavior showed that he was an overly frugal man. But when he was confronted with something important, he did not stint his money at all. This is enough to show that Yan Jiansheng is a competent husband.

The author made the main character's image more distinct and prominent by building the character of other characters side by side. For example, Yan Jiansheng's brother, Yan Gongsheng, was accused of fraud and petty greed. When Yan Gongsheng heard that the governor was going to arrest him, he immediately left. He left a bunch of messes for Yan Jiansheng to deal with. Obviously, by comparison, Yan Jiansheng was more responsible and stable than his brother Yan Gongsheng. In addition to that, the author also compared his wife with Yan Gongsheng. Yan Gongsheng's concubine said that his wife was a generous person because she would give money to those who were oppressed. This naturally created a sharp contrast between the generosity of Yan's wife and the stinginess of Yan Jiansheng.

All the descriptions revealed that Yan Jiansheng was a person with various personalities. Some readers might see more of his kindness, while others might feel that he was so strict, but no matter what readers learn from this novel, we cannot deny the author's great skill in portraying characters.

### 2.2 Shylock

The author mainly characterized the images of Antonio and Shylock. For example, when Antonio borrowed three thousand dollars from Shylock to ease the crisis, Shylock said, "Mr. Antonio, you called me an infidel, a cutthroat dog. And spat on my Jewish garments. All for using what was my own! Now it appears you need my help. What would I say to you? Did a dog have money? Was it possible that a dog could lend 3000 ducats?" Shylock was mean because he was always sarcastic to Antonio, who used to despise him. Although Antonio was kind, as a racist, he also discriminated against Jews and Judaism. In reality, Shylock was a poor man who only wanted revenge to regain his or even his whole nation's dignity.

When Shylock met Antonio, he thought Antonio looked like a sycophantic public servant. He hated Antonio not only because he was a Christian but also because he lent money without charging interest. This caused him to suffer a considerable loss. In contrast to Antonio's selflessness, he showed greedy egotism. As a businessman, when Shylock learned that Antonio wanted to borrow money for his friend Bassanio, he carefully analyzed Antonio's situation, including his property, business, and degree of risk, which reflected his shrewdness. Shylock, as a Jew, was discriminated against by Christians. So when Shylock learned that Antonio's ship had met with misfortune, he resolutely decided to implement his revenge plan: to send Antonio to his death. With the author's delicate portrayal, Shylock became a shrewd, alert, vicious and vengeful person. Thus he portrayed such a selfish, pathetic and ruthless character as Shylock.

## 3. Portrait of Characters

Different borders have different national conditions. The two works, *The Scholars* and *The Merchant of Venice* reflect different social realities in other countries and express the authors' different thoughts and emotions. As two characters with different cultural backgrounds and upbringings, the differences between them are also noticeable. In this part of the thesis, we will analyze the differences between the two characters from the political background of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock and the economic background of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock.

### 3.1 The Political Background of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock

In *the Scholars*, Wu Jingzi set the writing in the Ming Dynasty. During that period, the Chinese imperial examination

system experienced unprecedented development. The only way to become a member of the upper echelon of the feudal hierarchy was to take the imperial examinations and obtain the appropriate official position. This way, the rulers of ancient dynasties strengthened centralized power. As a result, an ominous atmosphere began to pervade society. Many people were overwhelmed by the shadow of the imperial examination system in which the official position determined social status and self-esteem. At the beginning of chapter 5 of *The Scholars*, the author says that Yan Jiansheng was a timid and wealthy man. He was said to be timid because he helped his brother Yan Gongsheng to settle the lawsuit, even though his brother was ungrateful and left a mess for Yan Jiansheng to deal with. But according to the status of the imperial examinations at that time, Yan Jiansheng knew that his status was inferior to Yan Gongsheng's, and he was afraid of offending his elder brother during the day. Yan Jiansheng knew that he had bought his reputation as a "supervisor" with his money. He wanted to use his money reasonably to secure his place in society, not in the daily chores of life. Many readers' classification of Yan as a miser was a one-sided understanding. In Yan's view, if his troubles could be solved with money, he was willing to spend money to get rid of them. If he were an absolute miser, he might not be willing to spend so much money to save his wife. In his deep heart, this meant that Yan Jiansheng was a kind person. When Yan was bedridden, all his relatives gathered to take care of him and showed his kindness.

In *the Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare set his work in medieval Europe. In that period, Christianity tended to be the dominant religion among many. On the contrary, Judaism was rejected by society at large. Jews had no social status in the social context of the time. The story's main character, Shylock, was a socially unprivileged Jew. The Judaizers believed that God wanted all people to be righteous and merciful. In their view, God created man in his own image. All people should have the right to respect people and to be respected. But fate played a joke on them, and the Jews became the laughing stock of all people. They always lagged behind in both social occupations and human interactions. So they were forced to engage in the business of usury. Shylock was a man with a tragic fate, but his moral values were not noble. His heart was already blinded by hatred. Once he found the opportunity, he would take advantage of every possible situation to take revenge. He would not give up even if there were only a little hope. When Antonio tried to borrow money from him, he immediately devised a ruthless plan to repay Antonio for what he had done to him before. What's more, although he loves his daughter very much, he cursed her death when she betrayed him and eloped with a Christian. All these showed that hatred had made him lose his mind, or we could say it was a kind of self-protection. Shylock wanted to survive in society. As a lowly Jew, he must always act like a cold and vicious man. The environment transformed people, and the environment could also create people. The social environment of medieval Europe created a selfish, brutal, greedy, and mean man.

### 3.2 The Economic Background of Yan Jiansheng and Shylock

Yan Jiansheng was in the period of development of a feudal small-scale peasant economy. People in traditional feudal society were divided into four main social classes: scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants. In Chinese feudal society, the literati were the uppermost social class, and the merchants were the lowest. With the development of the imperial examination system, every member of society could improve their social status by taking examinations. If you could obtain a higher rank, you could obtain the title of higher social status. In reality, the landlord class as the ruling class included two social groups, landlords and scholars. Even though they both belonged to the ruling class, scholars had higher social status and could get more respect.

On the other hand, Yan Jiansheng was just an ordinary feudal landowner. His title of "Jiansheng" was something that every rich man could buy. Besides, Yan Jiansheng was also a merchant. Although he had a lot of property and was a ruling class member, he was constantly bullied by his elder brother. This result was because his elder brother had a higher official position than him. It is clear that Yan Jiansheng was intensely persecuted by the imperial examination system of his time. Through Yan's story, the author also indirectly criticizes the unreasonable education system of the Qing Dynasty.

Let's look at this article on *the Merchant of Venice* in the opposite direction. Although the stories in the text all took place in Venice, *The Merchant of Venice* was set in 16th century England. The economic system of medieval Europe was a smallholder economy. It was characterized by feudal lords who owned estates and ordered their serfs to work on their estates. All the products of labor were paid to the lord of the manor, except for the necessities that the serfs used to maintain their daily lives. Under the circumstances, we could imagine that Shylock was a Jew of lowly origin. Faced with the oppression of the aristocracy and the discrimination of the Christians, all they could do was to bear the burden. They needed to develop themselves continuously. Only by making themselves stronger could they gain power. Therefore, when Salerio asked Shylock what use he had in cutting off a pound of Antonio's flesh, Shylock said, "To bait fish with! If it fed nothing else, it would feed my revenge." This showed that when Shylock was weak, he could not do anything about the so-called fairness. He could only fight for fairness and justice from the Christians as a member of the masses of people at the bottom of society once he was strong in himself. In the end, it was rejected by the Christians and ended in failure.

Yan Jiansheng and Shylock lived in different countries. The political and economic systems in their countries were

different. They represented the interests of different social classes, respectively. The author also reflected the living conditions of different social classes through the portrayal of the characters. Whether Yan Jiansheng or Shylock, their stories told us one thing: people were always striving for higher social status.

#### 4. Similarities of Miser Images between Yan Jiansheng and Shylock

Although Yan Jiansheng and Shylock are different images created by different authors, and they live in different countries and grow up in different environments, they still have many similarities to the classic image of Miser in Chinese and foreign literary history. In this section, the author will focus on analyzing the similarities between Yan Jiansheng and Shylock.

##### 4.1 Values of Money

As a miser, Yan Jiansheng and Shylock share the same money values. On the one hand, they are extremely fascinated by wealth accumulation through unfair means. In *The Scholars*, Yan, as a landlord, had countless servants and herds of cattle and sheep. He did business all over the country. Stores earned no less than 800 silver a day. It was well known that landlords in feudal society depended on renting out land to peasants to exploit farmers to earn rent or grain. However, the landlords did not have to participate in production throughout the process. They only used the land as capital to participate in the distribution of fruits. As for Shylock, Jews accumulated wealth by lending money to others and charging high-interest rates. Their strong desire for money was revealed in their thoughts and words.

On the other hand, Yan Jiansheng and Shylock have very similar attitudes towards money. Both of them are good at accumulating money and they do not spend it easily. In *The Scholars*, Yan Jiansheng, a man with great wealth, would rather not buy a piece of pork in order to save money. Even if his son wanted to eat meat, he would only buy a little at the deli to appease him. Even when he was seriously ill and needed some maintenance products to condition himself, he was still reluctant to buy good herbs. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock always treated his daughter as a servant. He locked her in the house to help him guard his property and did not let her go out to play. He valued his money as much as his life. When he learned that his daughter had spent 80 gold coins, he said: "You stuck a dagger in me! I never saw my gold again." All this shows that Shylock is indeed a greedy, stingy man.

##### 4.2 Attitude towards Family

As a miser, Yan Jiansheng and Shylock both share the same family values. In *The Scholars*, Yan went out of his way to hire a doctor and bought many expensive herbs for his wife when she was sick. After his wife's death, he even got sick because he was too sad. When he was sick, he still spent a lot of energy managing family affairs. This reflected Yan's love for the family and his courage to take responsibility. Deep in his heart, the home still occupied an unshakable position. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock was also filled with passionate feelings about his home. He used all the love he could muster to raise his children alone. He worked hard and earned money to support his daughter. He wanted his daughter to live a rich and happy life. When he went out, this so-called "miser" would not hesitate to give the keys to his beloved daughter. What's more, when his daughter betrayed him, he was still willing to spend a lot of money to find his daughter. Even though Shylock was a greedy businessman, he still had something irreplaceable in his heart.

##### 4.3 Miserable Ending

As classic miserly figures, Yan Jiansheng and Shylock both end up miserable. In *The Scholars*, not only did Yan Jiansheng fail to gain more respect from society, but even his brother bullied him. When he met failure in changing his own fate, he hoped to change his son's fate, but he didn't know that changing his family's fate was wrong because he was too weak. Changing the fate of Yan's family alone could not change the correct understanding of the imperial examination system by people in the whole society. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock preferred to have a pound of rotten meat rather than accept the compensation of three times of gold coins. In fact, his demand was legal according to the charter of Venice. When he thought he could get a fair trial, fate once again caught up with him. In the end, Shylock lost not only all his possessions, his daughter, but also his faith.

##### 4.4 Class Consciousness

Yan Jiansheng and Shylock share a similar tragic fate, so they have similar class perceptions. In *The Scholars*, Yan Jiansheng, who traditional Confucianism influenced feudal China, lived in the Ming Dynasty. Yan Jiansheng was no exception to the rule that being a scholar is the upper echelon of society. As a miser, he was willing to spend money to buy the status of an official, which means that he is concerned about his social status. When Yan was about to die, he also talked to his relatives to let his son continue his studies and asked him to do his best to obtain a higher status. Because he didn't want his son to be despised. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is a Jew. When Christianity became dominant in Europe, the Jews carried the curse of the traitor. They were persecuted. They had no land of their own. They were victims of a low social status during a long period of oppression and discrimination.

## 5. Causes of Similarities and Differences

Economy, politics and culture are interconnected and influence each other. The economy is the basis for cultural prosperity and political progress. Politics is the centralized reflection of the economy. Culture is a reflection of the economy and politics. Multiple economic and political factors determine any culture. And all three of these factors influence a person in an unconscious way.

The economy is one of the most important factors influencing people's thoughts and behaviors. When people need money, they do their best to make money. And everyone has their own responsibilities and interests. If someone tries to offend them, they will act to protect their interests. Just like Shylock, it can only have a voice in society if it keeps developing and growing itself in the face of more powerful Christians than him.

Yan Jiansheng and Shylock both value money very much. Even though they live in different countries and experience other state systems, they suffer from the same great oppression, unequal discrimination, and cruel persecution. Therefore, they considered money as their safe harbor. Only money can provide them with enough respect. If we put ourselves in their shoes, we find their behavior is actually acceptable. Their stinginess is just a silent outburst against the unreasonable factors of society, a kind of counterattack against the long-standing oppression.

Religion is a powerful spiritual force at any time and in any country. It can provide backing and courage to helpless people. When they have to face natural disasters or difficulties, they need a moral force to help them through those difficulties. As the saying goes, a nation with faith is strong. Yan Jiansheng and Shylock are both religious people who are deeply influenced by their own religions, especially Shylock. He has been fighting for his religion all his life.

## 6. Conclusion

Yan Jiansheng was a tragic figure. His image's characteristics reflected society's reality at that time. Through this character, author Wu Jingzi satirized the corruption and backwardness of society as a whole. Yan Jiansheng is a person with a dual character. On the one hand, the author endowed him with kindness and benevolence. When his loved ones around him are in trouble, he did not hesitate to help. When his wife was sick, he would cure her no matter how expensive the herbs were. When he was about to die, he asked his relatives to help his son more. He was a good father and a good husband.

On the other hand, the author also gave him a ruthless and stingy side. His concubine wanted to become his wife when his wife was seriously ill. He agreed to the offer without considering his wife's feelings. He had it all his own way. Even when treating himself, he was unwilling to enjoy life to the extent of his final illness and death.

Shylock was also a double character. He was not just an unforgivable, greedy and selfish person but a loyal and family-loving person. He was brave enough to fight against discrimination and oppression. He used his business acumen to accumulate wealth. Of course, he also had a negative, ugly and failed side. But we should not dismiss him for this reason. We should look at him with a more comprehensive and fair perspective. We cannot condemn or change history about what happened to this Jew. We can only show our sympathy and understanding for those who have suffered and been oppressed throughout history.

"When ethnic personalities were influenced by their surroundings, they didn't just influence a blank sheet of paper, but the base that already had the mark stamped. The imprint was not the same, which made the whole effect different." Yan Jiansheng and Shylock were both products of the times they lived in. The difference between Yan Jiansheng and Shylock's stinginess was rooted in their different national character traits. They produced different effects by being portrayed by the author using different methods of expression. Most miserly people were in the social trend of the time. As their own ideas were out of step with the mainstream society, the influence and impact of the times had created their words and actions. So they shaped the image of "miserly" in people's minds together. Chinese miserliness and Western miserliness, in fact, were the reflection of the differences between Chinese and Western national cultures and its environment. Through the analysis of these characteristics, we can see the powerful influence and effect of the changing times on individual thinking and social culture and also allow us to better understand the development of China and the West in different times and environments. As modern citizens, we need to understand that everything in the world, good or bad, has its own reasons for existence, and people need to treat everything equally and rationally.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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