

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

OTHELLO

A CRITICAL STUDY



“Unlike Shakespeare’s other great tragedies, ‘Othello’ is a play where evil lurks in the hearts of men not within the workings of supernatural forces. The tragic hero’s faults lie wholly within his undeveloped sense of self.

Leyasmeyer

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INTRODUCTION



This module requires students to explore and evaluate a specific text and its reception in a range of contexts. It develops students' understanding of questions of textual integrity. Students explore the ideas expressed in their prescribed text through analysing its construction, content and language. They examine how particular features of the text contribute to textual integrity.

They research others' perspectives of the text and test these against their own understanding and interpretations of the text. Students discuss and evaluate the ways in which the set work has been read, received and valued in historical and other contexts. They extrapolate from this study of a particular text to explore questions of textual integrity and significance.

Students develop a range of interpretive and analytical compositions that relate to the study of their specific text. These compositions may be realised in a variety of forms and media.

English Stage 6 Prescriptions, -Board of Studies

Key Elements

Prescribed Text

"Othello" is the most intimate of Shakespeare's tragedies. It is based on a short Italian novel in which a Moor is brought to destruction by the plotting of his ensign, or standard-bearer, who is jealous because he has fallen in love with his master's beautiful wife. Shakespeare made striking changes to the story; he removed the simple motivation – Iago is not in love with Desdemona. Instead, he is in love with the power he exercises through his plotting.

Shakespeare added historical texture to the tale by locating the action at the time of the Turkish threat to the Venetian outpost of Cyprus. The play thus embraces the superpower rivalry of the Islamic and Christian empires in the 16th century Mediterranean, except that the Ottoman fleet is dispersed without a fight and Othello is 'turned Turk' through the machinations of Iago. Shakespeare suggests that the threat to Christian civility comes not from an alien power but from the enemy within.

Tragedy

Our study of Shakespeare's Othello will require an acknowledgement of its place within the larger tradition of Aristotelian tragedy.

The centerpiece of Greek philosopher Aristotle's key text Poetics is his examination of tragedy:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions.

Framework

Throughout our critical study, we will consider the following aspects of the tragic hero's journey:

- the sensitivities of position and power
- the struggle to maintain dignity in a hostile universe



Othello, the Moor of Venice (1604)

Background to the Play

Chronologically following Hamlet and preceding King Lear and Macbeth, Othello, the Moor of Venice ranks among Shakespeare's four major tragedies. It has been widely popular for centuries. Verdi turned it into a memorable opera, movies were based on it, and always it has engaged both emotionally and intellectually audiences everywhere. Great actors: Edmund Kean, Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Laurence Fishburne played Othello and the role marked the peak of their brilliant careers on stage or screen. In our own time, the play continues to reverberate with a multiplicity of echoes: from the relevant imperative of grasping the complexity of cultural diversity, to the exploration of the meaning of racial interrelations and, above all, to seeking an understanding of the essence of love, its strength and vulnerability and how it defines and unites us all as human.

The source of inspiration for the play is a sweeping tale of passion and murderous jealousy told in a 1566 Venetian novella by Giovani Batista Giraldi Cinthio. Shakespeare's reworking of the plot reveals with stunning psychological depth, devastating tragic inevitability and compelling poetic depth the mysterious power and fragility of love, as well as the destructive demons of doubt and suspicion that can be so effectively triggered by a manipulative villain.

In the play, purity of heart is pitted against evil ambitions, genuine candor and trust are assailed and destroyed by treacherous deception. The agony at the centre of the tragedy is captured in a nutshell when Othello admits to Desdemona that "when I love thee not / Chaos is come again." This is a tragedy of love misunderstood, trust misplaced, honesty besmeared and lives ruined by blatant lies and denigrating fabrications. Shakespeare's tragic cautionary tale offers a supreme warning against jealousy, "the green eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on."

Venice in the sixteenth century was a powerful city-state, important to Europe as a commercial centre and to the whole of Christendom as protector of the Christian faith against the Turkish infidels. Venetian society is orderly, law-abiding, and formal. Cyprus, the setting for the rest of the play, is far less secure. The island had belonged to Venice for more than a hundred years when, about 1570, the Turks began to attack it. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus led to the famous sea-battle of Lepanto in 1571; and although Shakespeare's play was written thirty years after this, his courtly audience in 1604 would have been recently reminded of the battle by a poem on the subject written by their new monarch, James I



OTHELLO

The play's protagonist and hero. A Christian Moor and general of the armies of Venice, Othello is an eloquent and physically powerful figure, a superb military commander and respected by all those around him. He possesses a "free and open nature," which his ensign, Iago, uses to twist into a powerful and destructive jealousy.



IAGO

Othello's ensign, and the villain of the play. Iago is twenty-eight years old. While his ostensible reason for desiring Othello's demise is that he has been passed over for promotion to lieutenant, Iago's motivations are never very clearly expressed and seem to originate in an obsessive, almost aesthetic delight in manipulation and destruction.



DESDEMONA

The daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio. Desdemona and Othello are secretly married before the play begins. While appearing stereotypically pure and meek, Desdemona is also determined and self-possessed. She is equally capable of defending her marriage, jesting bawdily with Iago, and responding with dignity to Othello's incomprehensible jealousy.



CASSIO

Othello's lieutenant. Cassio is a young and inexperienced soldier whose high position is much resented by Iago. Devoted to Othello, Cassio is ashamed after being involved in a drunken brawl on Cyprus, losing his honour and position. Iago uses Cassio's youth, good looks, and friendship with Desdemona to play on Othello's insecurities about Desdemona's fidelity.



RODERIGO

A jealous suitor of Desdemona. Young, rich, and foolish; Roderigo hires Iago to help him win Desdemona's hand. Iago views Roderigo as little more than a source of income. Repeatedly frustrated as Othello marries Desdemona and then takes her to Cyprus, Roderigo becomes desperate enough to help Iago attempt to kill Cassio after Iago points out that Cassio is another potential rival for Desdemona.



EMILIA

Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant. A cynical, worldly woman, she is distrustful of her wayward husband but desperate for his attention. Despite her attachment to Desdemona, Emilia steals Desdemona's handkerchief, a wedding gift from Othello, and gives it to Iago to gain his approval.



BRABANTIO

Desdemona's father, a friend of Othello, who feels betrayed when Othello marries his daughter in secret. Brabantio is convinced that Othello has bewitched his daughter to make her fall in love with him. His efforts to have Othello punished by the Venetian Senate are thwarted by the news of the Turkish attack on Cyprus and by the public admission by Desdemona of her honest love for Othello.



LODVICIO

One of Brabantio's kinsmen and cousin to Desdemona, Lodovico acts as a messenger from Venice to Cyprus. He arrives in Cyprus in Act 4 with letters announcing that Othello has been replaced by Cassio as governor and becomes the voice of authority at the end of the play.



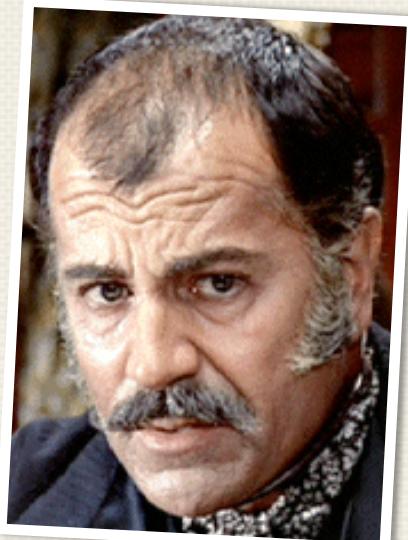
BIANCA

A courtesan, or prostitute, in Cyprus. Bianca's favorite customer is Cassio, who teases her with promises of marriage. Bianca plays an unwitting role in Iago's deception of Othello by being the recipient of Desdemona's missing handkerchief.



THE DUKE

The official authority in Venice. His primary role within the play is to adjudicate the dispute between Othello and Brabantio in Act I, and then to send Othello to Cyprus to defend the island against the Turkish invasion. He fatefully agrees to allow Desdemona's unusual request, for a Venetian woman, to accompany her husband Othello to the war.



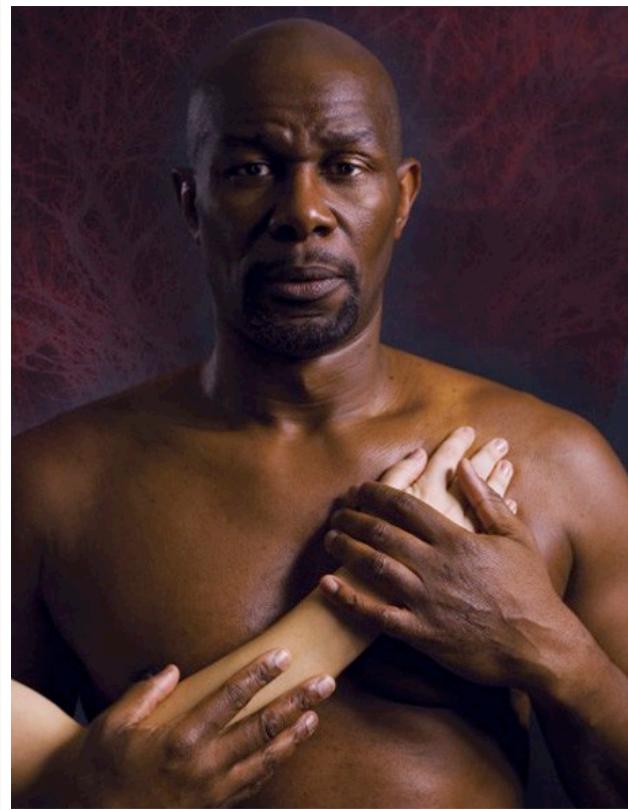
MONTANO

The governor of Cyprus before Othello. We see him first in Act II as he recounts the status of the war and awaits the Venetian ships. Montano becomes caught in Iago's web of intrigue when he is tricked by Iago into confronting the drunk Cassio and is subsequently wounded.

Othello - Character Analysis

Othello

Shakespeare, in his major work, has a special gift of creating characters about whom no last, definite, and final word can be expressed. There always exists some area of "ambiguity" - the possibility of two meanings, even of multiple meanings. The sensitive reader is left to "ponder"; he experiences the same reaction to a Shakespearean character as he does to people in real life; certain things he definitely knows about them other aspects of the person are left mysterious, shadowed, about which he can only surmise. Characters in a Shakespeare play, like real people, may not completely know themselves; they may have subconscious urges, unexamined attitudes, improvised reactions to new situations.



Shakespeare is able to catch this aspect of real experience. His characters have a great degree of "fluidity"; and this is true just as much of a comparatively straightforward character such as Othello as that of a complex, introverted character such as Hamlet.

First, then; let us consider what we know about Othello:

1. He has been a successful professional soldier, a condottiere of the type well known to Italian Renaissance history. The small, but often powerful, Italian city-states frequently engaged free-lance generals, with their own private armies, to do their fighting for them on a contractual basis. Their own citizens preferred to pursue trade and the arts. Venice, in the historical period of Othello, was one of the richest states in Europe, its power out of all measure to its geographical size. It had gained its preeminence by roughly corresponding to a great "free port" for the Mediterranean. Traders had confidence that their contracts would be legally enforceable there; that Venetian law, in these respects, was tolerant and international in viewpoint. Shylock, the Merchant of Venice; suffered in certain respects, but there was no impediment to pursuing his business and having recourse to law for the enforcing of his contracts. Nor does the Venetian republic hesitate to place Othello, whom we assure to be a Negro, though some maintain he is an Arab in (any event, a man of quite different racial background from that of the Venetians), in supreme command of its armies. What is a little unusual about Othello's appointment is that he is placed in command of Venetians, with Cassio, a Venetian general, second-in-command. There is no mention anywhere in the play of contracted mercenaries. Othello tells us himself that his entire experience has been military. He has

Othello - Character Analysis

2. lived in camps, engaging in the arts of war, since he was a boy of seven. The only part of the great world that he knows is that which pertains to broils and battles. He has traveled extensively in distant and mysterious regions, including those of the "Cannibals" and the "Anthropophago." He had once been taken prisoner and sold into slavery, but had managed to escape. He has loved the "pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!"



He loves its color and glitter – the plumed troops, the neighing steed, the spirit-stirring drum, Othello takes his part in a definite historical setting. The Aldus Shakespeare states: "The island of Cyprus became subject to the republic of Venice in 1471. After this time, the only attempt ever made upon the island by the Turks was under Selim the Second, in 1570. It was then invaded by a powerful force, and conquered in 1571. We learn from the play that there was a junction of the Turkish fleet at Rhodes for the invasion of Cyprus; that is first sailed towards Cyprus, then

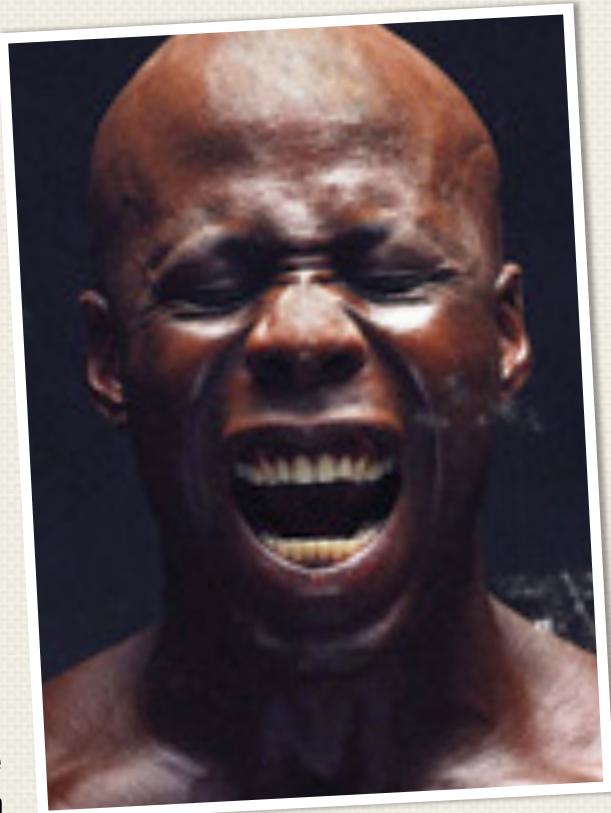
went to Rhodes, there met another squadron, and then resumed its course to Cyprus. These are historical facts, and took place when Mustapha, Selim's general, attacked Cyprus, in May, 1570; which is therefore the true period of then action."

3. The second important fact we know about Othello is that he possesses a "public image" of great dignity (regardless of whether, as some critics maintain, he is inwardly insecure). The Venetian senate unanimously approved of him ("all in all sufficient"). Even Brabantio, who is later to have a bitter quarrel with him, invited him often to his own home. When Brabantio cannot effectively prevent Othello's marriage, he still shows respect and appreciation for Othello ("I here do give thee that with all my heart ... "). Far from bragging and telling "fantastical lies," as Iago alleges to Roderigo, Othello tells the simple truth without being apologetic or conceited. When Brabantio begins to proceed against him, Othello is unimpressed. He knows that his own services to the "signiory" will "out-tongue his complaints." He is a man of royal ancestry as well as a man who has proved himself by his own achievements. He married Desdemona because he loved her, and refuses to be evasive in regard to Brabantio. "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly." When his followers and those of Brabantio are about to get into a bloody conflict, Othello, with a word of command that is also courteous, quiets

Othello - Character Analysis

4. both sides: "Good signior, you shall more command years / Than with your weapons." Before the senate, he recounts the details of his life factually, yet eloquently. His arguments are indisputable, and no one holds what he has done against him. Even the Duke who is presiding, says, "I think this tale would win my daughter, too." He is placed in charge of the war against the Turks. In no way excited or embarrassed by what has occurred, Othello, firmly though ceremoniously, demands that the State arrange suitable accommodation for his wife and proper servants. Obviously, Othello is a person conscious of his own worth. He does not have to be aggressive, "push himself" because of any inferiority complex. He has the maturity required to recognize the legitimate rights and feelings of others. Under normal circumstances, he never degrades anyone. Though he may be a man with a "round, unvarnish'd tale," he has the qualities of a good diplomat, in the higher and more sincere sense of that word.

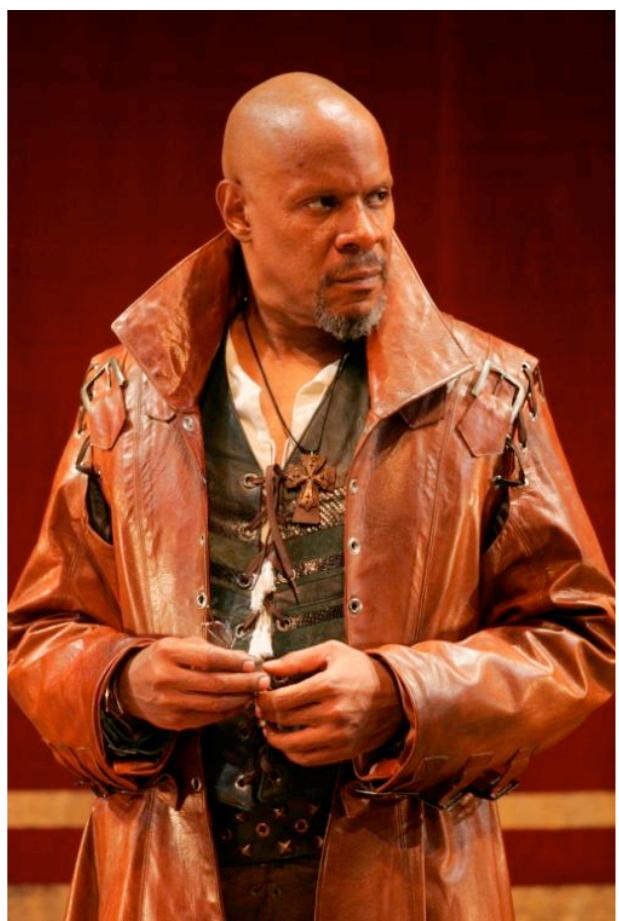
5. Another obvious fact about Othello is that he is a "Moor." The full title of the play reads: The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice. The term "Moor" has been in dispute. Coleridge asks, can we imagine Shakespeare "so utterly ignorant as to make a barbarous Negro plead royal birth, a Schlegel, on the other hand, pursuing the "noble savage" interpretation of Othello, observes "what a fortunate mistake that the Moor, under which name a baptized Saracen of the northern coast of Africa was unquestionably meant in the novel, has been made by Shakespeare, in every respect, a Negro!" A. C. Bradley argues with reference to Coleridge, who had maintained that it would show a lack of balance on the part of Desdemona to fall in love with a Negro, that this was just what Brabantio was alleging! Bradley will not go so far as to say that Shakespeare imagined him as a Negro and not as a Moor, "for that might imply that he distinguished Negroes and Moors precisely as we do but what appears to me nearly certain is that he imagined Othello as a black man, and not as a light-brown one." Marvin Rosenberg observes in The Masks of Othello: "Probably Burbage played Othello black, rather than tawny, for this was the theater tradition that survived unbroken-as Shakespearean traditions usually did, unless an important social or theatrical development intervened-until widespread Negro slavery. Othello changed to "tawny" in the 1800s to free the role from the unfortunate connotations borne by that growing social evil, and to preserve the vision of a gallant, high-hearted man whose lineage, though, is



Othello - Character Analysis

no way inferior to that of his hosts, nor is thought so by them. His apartness is a badge, not a shame." Othello's color was meant to have romantic associations. Shakespeare was still close to the medieval tradition where in most delineations of "The Adoration of the Magi" a black man

is presented as one of the Kings. He is quite removed from the impact of Puritan Christianity which tended to put certain nationalities and races "outside the pale."



6. Another obvious fact about Othello is that he is, and was meant to be, a romantic figure. Iago may regard him as a "wheeling and extravagant stranger of here and everywhere," but his adventurous and traveled background stirred the Venetian senate. He brings suggestions of a mysterious non European world, of the Egyptian sibyl who had given his mother the strange handkerchief: "there's magic in the web of it." Two hundred years of the Sibyl's life went into the making of it, "dyed in mummy which the skilful / Conserv'd of maiden's hearts." Othello's public image of discipline and self-control has, in contrast to his adventurous and mysterious background, a special romantic appeal of its own; it is something quite outside ordinary experience. Iago himself is shocked by Othello's anger, because it is so unexpected. "Can he be angry?" he asks. He has seen the cannon "puff" Othello's brother from his very arm, and he has remained absolutely cool.

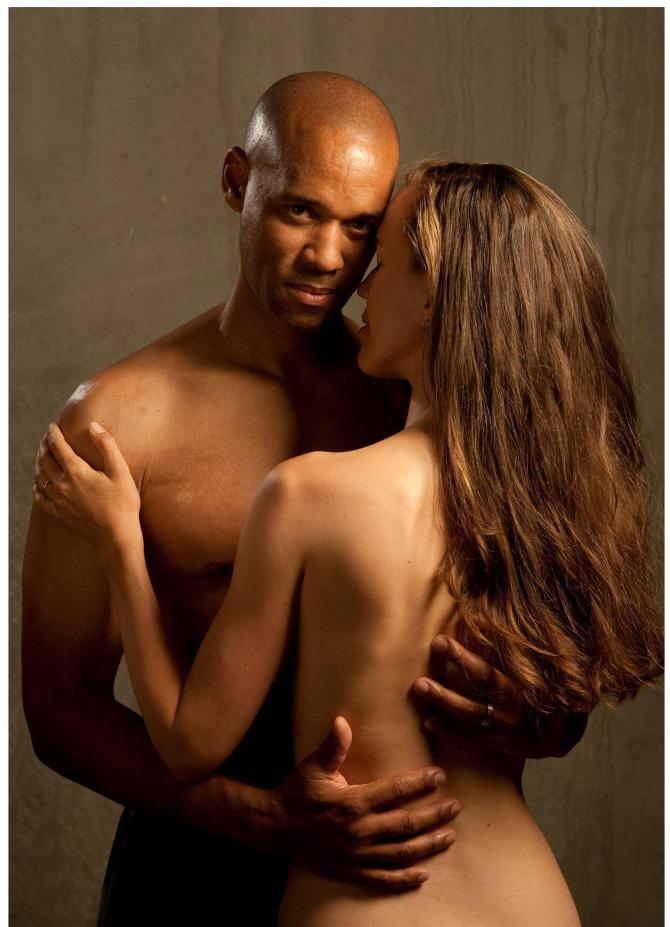
Adventure, excitement, racial uniqueness, cool head, and cool decision combine to make this romantic image.

7. It is also clear that Othello's romantic background and his difference in race create certain disadvantages that become important in the action of the play. Shakespeare is not writing a "problem" play about the marriage of a Negro and a "white" woman. In fact, the play is so universally human that for long intervals we completely forget about the difference in race. But Iago scores a decisive point by insinuating that Othello really knows very little about Venice and Venetian women. Othello overtly refers to the fact that he is not a "chamberer" intimate with the niceties and intrigues of social life: "for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have ... "

Othello - Character Analysis

We now come to examine those major points about Othello that are ambiguous:

1. What is the nature of Othello's love for Desdemona? Robert B. Heilman in *Magic in the Webs Action and Language in Othello* sees in the play a contest between Othello's vow of love and Iago's "wits" (intellect). "Thou know'st," Iago says, "we work by wit, and not by witchcraft" Dr. Heilman comments: "Wit and witchcraft: in this antithesis is the symbolic structure, or the thematic form, of Othello. By witchcraft, of course, Iago means conjuring and spells to induce desired actions and states of being. But as a whole the play dramatically develops another meaning of witchcraft and forces upon us an awareness of that meaning: witchcraft is a metaphor for love. The 'magic in the web' of the handkerchief, as Othello calls it, extends into the fiber of the whole drama. Love is a magic bringer of harmony between those who are widely different (Othello and Desdemona), and it can be a magic transformer of personality; its ultimate power is fittingly marked by the miracles of Desdemona's voice speaking from beyond life, pronouncing forgiveness to the Othello who has murdered her. Such events lie outside the realm of 'wit'-of the reason, cunning, and wisdom on which Iago rests - and this wit must be hostile to them." Thus is an articulately sensitive expression of a point of view common in modern criticism: that Othello falls from a great intuitive faith into a complicated rationalizing in which he becomes the easy victim of Iago's "wits." Why should such a fall take place, unless there was some pre-existing weakness in the quality of his love? Such critics as G. R. Elliott and F. R. Leavis have emphasized a strain of egoism in Othello (which may constitute his "tragic flaw," as we shall discuss later). He certainly fails to trust his own intuition in an acute moment of crisis, though it was the same intuition that had led to his unconventional and romantic marriage, "to be free and bounteous to her mind." When Iago has started to poison his mind, Othello catches a glimpse of Desdemona, and exclaims, "if she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! / I'll not believe 't." That was the right intuition which Othello failed to maintain because, these critics argue, his love was far from being perfected. Of course, viewing the other side of the picture, we have to admit that Othello pays a disproportionate, even a monstrous, price for his lack of



Othello - Character Analysis

perfection. After all, in normal life, a man, as husband and father, grows and deepens in the knowledge of love. If absolute selflessness were a prerequisite to marriage, would anyone qualify? The play indicates pretty clearly that Othello's marriage would have been happy and successful if Othello had not fallen into the hands of so skilled a manipulator as Iago.

2. We now come specifically to the question of the "tragic flaw" in Othello. According to the tradition of tragedy, the tragic hero must not be an entirely good man, or one who is completely evil, but, rather, a man who on the whole is good but contributes to his own destruction by some moral weakness. The reason for this lies in the emotions that tragedy is meant to excite in the audience. They are "pity" and "fear." If an entirely good man is destroyed, we do not feel pity but indignation with the universe. If an evil man comes to an evil end, we have no feelings in the matter whatever. We think that he got his "just deserts." But we pity the man who, having contributed in some way to his disaster, meets with a punishment out of all proportion to what he has done. "Fear" arises from our anxiety for the character as the play unfolds: We hope against hope that he will succeed in getting out of his difficulty. And, after the disaster is final, we fear for ourselves. For if an Othello, with all his great qualities and achievements, receives such a blow, what might the rest of us expect from life? One critic, Hazelton Spencer, actually cannot locate a tragic flaw in Othello. "Critics have searched for a tragic flaw in Othello, something to justify his miserable end, on the theory that to present the fall of an innocent man is, as Aristotle holds, incapable of arousing and purifying the emotions of pity and fear. Pity is uppermost in this tragedy, all the more because, humanly speaking, Othello is blameless. He is set before us, in his first appearances, as noble and calm. In his dying speech he describes himself as 'one not easily jealous,' and that is clearly the expression that Shakespeare wishes to leave. Othello is a noble man, and the play is not a study of the passion of jealousy. Why, then, does the magnanimous hero fail so wretchedly?" This critic takes the view that it is Othello's business in this play to be deceived, and leaves it more or less at that. Consequently, he finds the play more pathetic than tragic. Rosenberg in *The Masks of Othello* extends the concept of tragic flaw much more widely than does Aristotle. In effect, he says, to be human is to have a tragic flaw. True, Othello is one of the finest, one of the noblest of men. "But to be the best of men is still to be frail, to be subject to vanity, pride, insecurity, credulity, and the other marks of mortality. So Othello is no sugar hero of romance. He errs terribly. But the artistic design does not require from him an early "sin to bring on retribution; his tragic flaw is that he is human."



Character Analysis - Iago



Iago

Everyone is agreed that Iago is an outstanding study in whatever the word "evil" connotes. Some would argue that it is a more effective study than that of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Both Iago and Satan are skilled deceivers, accomplished liars, experts in applied psychology, in the manipulation of the innocent. While theologically it might be maintained that Satan creates more havoc, waste, and suffering than Iago, it is long range, rather than immediate, generalized, rather than specifically personal. Shakespeare's situation creates much more horror. Milton also could have created much more horror, if he had violated Scripture, and showed Adam killing Eve in jealous rage! Behind Satan's action is a clear motive, however unwarranted. To cause Adam to sin is part of a master plan of the war on heaven, the course of which the devils had debated in detail. Behind Iago's actions are only the workings of his own dark mind. Several schools of thought have developed to account for them. One finds Iago humanly explicable—at least in part. This school accepts at least several claims that Iago makes at their face value. For example, Iago had a just grievance in being passed over for promotion in favor of Cassio, that Othello had had actual relations with Iago's wife, and so on. Another school more plausibly brings the apparatus of modern psychiatry and psychoanalysis to bear on the probing of Iago's mind. Some, like A. C. Bradley, find Iago's behavior explicable enough without taking Iago at face value or bringing modern psychological studies to bear. Some follow the "motiveless malignity" tradition of Coleridge. Others resort to identifying Iago with "Satanism" or just regarding him as a dramatic prop, an impetus to action. In the case of Iago, the list of what we know without question about him is comparatively brief. Besides these things, and the over-all conviction that he is evil as anyone can be, nearly everything else that is said about him must fall within the label of "ambiguous."

Character Analysis - Iago

As in the case of Othello, we shall start with the facts we know. First, we must realize that it is difficult to distinguish fact from fiction in what Iago says. As A. C. Bradley puts it, "One must constantly remember not to believe a syllable that Iago utters on any subject, including himself, until one has tested his statement by comparing it with known facts and with other statements of his own or other people, and by considering whether he had in the particular circumstances any reason for telling a lie or telling the truth." We know that Iago is "his Moorship's Ancient." We can rely on his statement that he applied for the higher position of Lieutenant-General, but

not for his account of the qualifications of Cassio, or the reasons for the rejections of Iago's application. We can reasonably infer, from Shakespeare's sources (though not from any explicit statement in the play), that he is handsome, superficially attractive ("a man of the most handsome person ... very dear to the Moor ... he cloaked with proud and valorous speech ... the villainy of his soul with such art that he was to all outward show another Hector or Achilles"), a man of about



twenty-eight years of age. In the play itself, he expresses, in exchange with others, sharp and bantering wit. He has successfully and deliberately created an image of his own straightforwardness and trustworthiness. "Honest" is practically his first name. He is married to Emilia, who is the "lady-in-waiting" to Desdemona. A. C. Bradley suspects that Iago did not have an aristocratic background, and that his wife is "almost in the relation of a servant to Desdemona." The play really makes nothing clear on this point. Desdemona is sufficiently important socially to have an "aristocratic" lady-in-waiting in her train, which we can reasonably suppose is limited in number because of the military conditions under which Desdemona was permitted to go to the front in Cyprus with Othello. In any event, Iago's public-image is geared to that of the "soldier" rather than to that of the "gentleman." We can take as his true views Iago's contemptuous comments on others Roderigo is a "snipe" only to be used for "sport and profit"; the Moor is to be led by the nose like a jackass; and so on. More difficult to assess are Iago's expressions of genuine admiration ("The Moor ... is of a constant, loving, noble nature"; Desdemona is "fram'd as fruitful / As the free elements"). We can subscribe to the theory that Iago actually recognizes goodness, truth, beauty in an objective way, and the consciously rejects them:

"So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all".

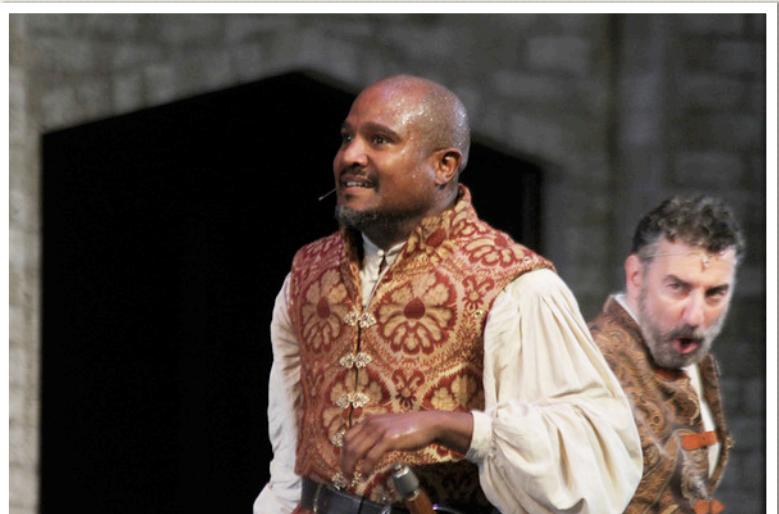
But it is also possible that Iago performs "chorus" functions. Some of his comments are

Character Analysis - Iago

detached and universal, not necessarily in his proper dramatic person as Iago. Neither, of course, of these interpretations is necessarily inconsistent with the other. We also know that Iago is a killer, that he hates Othello, but his motivations are "ambiguous." We have now come to the end of the list of what we know for certain.

The ambiguity surrounding Iago.

1. One school of critics is prepared to accept Iago's allegation that Othello has committed adultery with Iago's wife, Emilia. Actually, Iago says "I know not if't be true; / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as for a surety." Later in the play he voices a similar suspicion about Cassio: "For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too ... " Yet at no point in the play does Iago express any indignation about his wife. He kills her in the last act, but for quite different reasons—she is confirming the evidence against him. Might not Shakespeare's point be that malice comes first, a shaky rationalization afterwards? Once Iago hates Othello, is he prepared to believe any hatred-bearing fantasy against him? To the acceptance of Othello's adultery is sometimes added the assumption that Cassio was preferred over Iago for the appointment to the lieutenancy because Cassio had been the "go-between" in Othello's wooing of Desdemona (there is certainly no statement to this effect in the play). As one critic puts it, "once outer motivations for Iago are accepted, he can be seen as a relatively decent man plunging for the first time into wickedness " But both the text and the test of the theater itself are against this point of view.
2. Interpretations of Iago in the light of modern psychological analysis are more fruitful. He is "sick," "disturbed," a "vindictive neurotic." Believing in the supremacy of the will and of the intelligence, with scarcely any ability really to "relate" to people, he sees them merely as objects he must compulsively exploit. He is not neurotic in the way it might be argued that Milton's Satan is. He is not seeking for public and cosmic glory. But like Satan, he is seeking absolute mastery. The words of Clara Thompson in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* apply well to Iago: "The neurotic loses in the process [i.e. that of seeking absolute mastery] his interest in truth, a loss that among others accounts for his difficulty in distinguishing between genuine feelings, beliefs, striving, and their artificial equivalents (unconscious pretenses). The emphasis shifts from being to appearing." The neurotic "must develop a system of private values which determines what to like and accept in himself, what to be proud of. But this system of



Character Analysis - Iago

3. values must by necessity also determine what to reject, to abhor, to be ashamed of, to despise, to hate. Pride and self-hate belong inseparably together; they are two expressions of the same process." Rosenberg in The Masks of Othello quotes Karen Horney's Neurosis and Human Growth much to the same effect: "Love, compassion, considerateness-all human ties-are felt as restraints on the path to sinister glory ... he must prove his own worth to himself." Such analysis supports, rather than opposes, William Hazlitt's remark that "raga is an amateur of tragedy in real life" and the argument of A. C. Bradley that raga's sense of superiority wanted satisfaction.



4. Bradley has undertaken in Shakespearean Tragedy to show that Iago's character is quite explicable. While Bradley does not go in for psychological

terminology, his analysis is in itself basically psychological though always in reference to actual events in the text. Bradley emphasizes raga's enormous self-control allied to his belief that absolute egoism is the only rational and proper attitude, and that conscience or honor of any kind of regard for others is an absurdity. Bradley does not consider raga ambitious; he is not envious in the sense that competitors outrun him. He is only highly competitive (and dangerous without scruples) when his sense of superiority is wounded. He does not care for Emilia, but, on the other hand, he becomes furious at the thought of another man "getting the better of him." Bradley argues that raga does not love evil for evil's sake, but he does regard goodness as stupid. Goodness weakens his satisfaction with himself, "and disturb his faith that egoism is the right and proper thing." Bradley cannot find any passion in Iago, neither of ambition nor of hatred. As good a summary as any of Bradley's detailed position lies in these words: "raga stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices-such as ingratitude and cruelty which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect."

Character Analysis - Iago

A more recent critic, Marvin Rosenberg, who believes that Iago is perfectly understandable in terms of neurosis, elaborates an insight in quite an opposite direction to that of Bradley. He makes an important distinction between the Iago in dialogue with other people and the Iago of the soliloquies. The latter, he says, reveals a "raging torment." "Far from being passionless, this inner Iago is one of great fury of passion, the more furious because so much feeling has been smothered when he is with people."

5. Coleridge actually leans to the "Satanism" view of Iago, for, in his opinion, Iago is "next to devil, and only not quite devil." But he is one of the first major critics to suggest that it is rather pointless to seek human reasons for Iago's behavior. Elmer Edgar Stoll thinks that we should regard Iago as a necessary "impetus" to the dramatic action, and not try to prod him rationalistically. He is the villain by dramatic necessity, and would have been so accepted by the Elizabethan playgoer. Hazelton Spencer has argued that Iago has to be accepted in terms of centuries of English stage-villainy. He belongs to the tradition of the devil of medieval history plays, of Judas, of the bad angels, of the Vice of the morality plays. These did not receive or require "any accounting for." The trouble about this point of view is that most readers of Shakespeare find Iago far too absorbing to leave him on this level. He seems to cry out for explanations!



6. We come, lastly, to various religious or quasi-religious interpretations of Iago. Most religiously minded people have been brought up in a Socratic interpretation of evil. If a man has the proper knowledge, he will seek the good. No man can deliberately seek evil, though he may actually pursue evil under the mistaken impression that it is the good. Though man by his nature seeks the good, he may be misled into seeking a "mistaken" good. "Evil, be thou my good" is considered a Satanic principle rather than a human possibility. Of course, the possibility has to be recognized (certainly in medieval and Renaissance literature) that sin and intellectual degeneration to some extent correlate. This is the situation present in Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and in Milton's Satan. The more they fall into evil, the less capable are they of making realistic judgments, though, ironically, they become more cocksure of themselves. A man may not start out by choosing evil for its own sake, but, by degrees and increasing involvement in sin, his judgment becomes impaired so that he fails to distinguish between good and evil. Goodness may challenge, disturb, embarrass, and be overtly

Character Analysis - Iago

rejected. Iago goes pretty far along the Satanic route when he thinks of using Desdemona's goodness as the "net that shall enmesh them all." This would seem to be a statement that could not be relegated to his "chorus" function. Of course, we get into a difficult problem of words if we maintain that a man who hates goodness is really insane. It is hard to set up a firm definition of insanity; such definitions depend upon social convention to a great degree. On the surface, Iago seems sane enough. But one aspect of mental illness permits unimpeded use of the intellect while a man's emotional life is in ruins. This is pretty much Iago's position.

7. An important school of Shakespearean critics finds religious symbolism in all Shakespeare's great works. Paul Siegel in "Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise" has interpreted Othello against a background of Christian theology. Iago has something of the function of Judas. Robert Heilman also sees Iago functioning as the enemy of salvation. "His most far-reaching method is to seduce others philosophically, to woo them from assumptions in which their salvation might lie (faith in the spiritual quality of others), to baser assumptions that will destroy them. Iago the moral agent is akin to Iago the philosopher there is a common element in stealing purses, stealing good names, and stealing ideas needed for survival."



Study Questions

Act 1

1. How is the world of Venice presented by Shakespeare in the first act?
2. How are interactions of the central characters (Iago, Othello, and Desdemona) presented to the audience?
3. How are these interactions complicated by the fact that Othello is a Moor and that Desdemona is a young woman?
4. What sort of person is Iago, as he appears in Act I?
5. What reasons does Iago give for hating Othello? Do these reason's give justification for Iago's treachery in Act 1?
6. What is Iago's relationship with Roderigo?
7. Compare the difference in language use between Othello and Iago. What might be the significance of the difference?

Act 2

8. What sort of person is Cassio? What happens to him, and how does Iago plan to use the situation in his plan against Othello?
9. What more do we learn about the nature of Iago in Act 2? What is the effect of having him share his thoughts and plans with us through his soliloquies?
10. Pay attention to the language used in Iago's soliloquies. What sorts of descriptive language does he use and how does it contribute to the picture of Iago that Shakespeare is drawing?

Act 3

11. At the beginning of 3.3 Othello is completely in love with Desdemona. By the end of that scene, 480 lines later, Othello is ready to murder her for having an affair with Cassio. How has this situation changed so quickly?
12. How does Iago plant the idea of Desdemona's infidelity in Othello's mind, and how does he make it grow?
13. What sort of person is Emilia, and what seems to be the nature of her relationship with her husband Iago?
14. How does Desdemona's handkerchief come into play within the relationship between Emilia and Iago?

Act 4

15. How does the handkerchief function in Act 4?
16. Why is the handkerchief so important to Othello?
17. How does Othello change during Act 4? What is the effect of his public humiliation of

Study Questions

- Desdemona by slapping her?
18. What is the nature of the relationship between Emilia and Desdemona?
 19. How effective is Shakespeare in portraying this private world of women in Act 4 Sc. 3.

Act 5

20. How does Othello approach the killing of Desdemona? What does he think he is doing, and why?
21. What is the effect of having Emilia play such an important role after the murder? Why is she now standing up to Othello and her husband? What is her reward?
22. Does Othello justify his killing of Desdemona? What is he doing in his last long speech?
23. Why is this play a tragedy?

Discussion Questions

- A. Choose one section from Act 1 or 2 that encapsulates your view of Othello's character.
- B. Read Iago's "put money in thy purse" speech and explain what you believe to be Iago's motivations and philosophy. How does his technique in handling Roderigo differ from his technique in handling Othello and Cassio?
- C. How do Othello, Cassio, and Iago talk and feel about women? Refer to specific speeches as evidence of your view.
- D. How do Desdemona and Emilia talk and feel about men? Refer to specific speeches as evidence of your view.
- E. Find several occasions when chance and coincidence are involved in the plot. How important are these to the development of the plot?
- F. Though most of the play is written in blank verse, some passages are written in rhymed iambic pentameter couplets and others are in prose. Can you suggest any reasons for Shakespeare's use of different forms at different times? What speeches are particularly memorable or effective?
- G. How is it that such a noble character as Othello proves himself to be so frail by the end of the play?

Shakespearean Tragedy

Introduction

- Usually, there is only one tragic hero
- The so-called "Love Tragedies" are exceptions to the rule

Shakespeare's tragedies are, for the most part, stories of one person, the "hero," or at most two, to include the "heroine." Only the Love Tragedies, Romeo and Juliet; Antony and Cleopatra, are exceptions to this pattern. In these plays, the heroine is as much at the center of action as the hero. The rest of the tragedies, including Macbeth, have single stars, so the tragic story is concerned primarily with one person.

The Tragic Hero and the Tragic Story

- The tragic story leads up to, and includes, the death of the hero
- The suffering and calamity are exceptional
- They befall a conspicuous, person
- They are themselves of a striking kind
- They are, as a rule, unexpected
- They are, as a rule, contrasted with previous happiness and/or glory



On the one hand, whatever may be true of tragedies elsewhere, no play that ends with the hero alive is, in the full Shakespearean sense, a tragedy. On the other hand, the story also depicts the troubled part of the hero's life which precedes and leads up to his death. It is, in fact, essentially a tale of suffering and calamity, conducting the hero to death.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes will be men of rank, and the calamities that befall them will be unusual and exceptionally disastrous in themselves. The hero falls unexpectedly from a high place, a place of glory, or honor, or joy, and as a consequence, we feel awe at the depths to which he is suddenly plunged. Thus, the catastrophe will be of monumental proportions. A tale, for example, of a man slowly worn to death by disease, poverty, little cares, sordid vices, petty persecutions, however piteous, would not be tragic in the Shakespearean sense of the word. Such exceptional suffering and calamity, then, affecting the hero, and generally extending far beyond him, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe, are essential ingredients in tragedy, and the chief sources of the tragic emotions, and especially of pity.

Shakespearean Tragedy

Only Great Men Qualify As Tragic Heroes

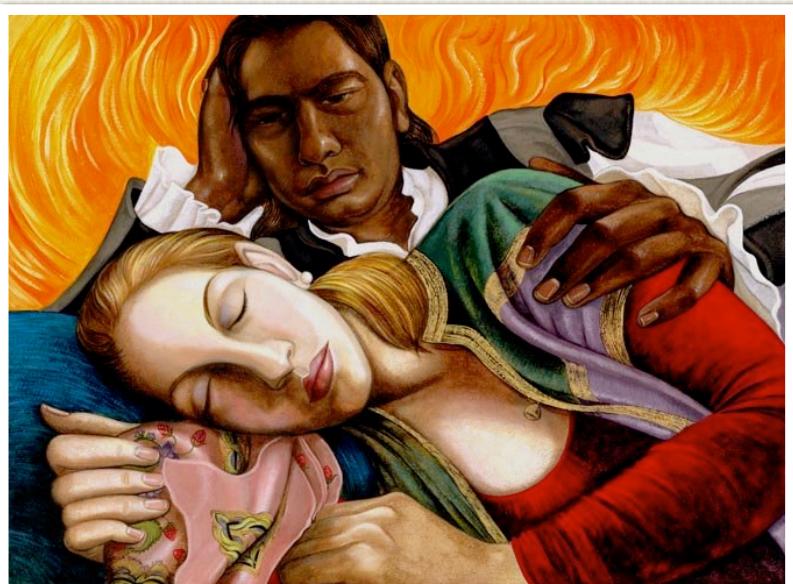
- Peasants, merely because they're human beings, do not inspire pity and fear as great men do
- A Shakespearean tragedy, then, may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of great estate.

The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse, we say, are the same in a peasant and a prince. But not to insist that they cannot be so when the prince is really a prince, when the story of a prince, or the general, has a greatness and dignity of its own, is a mistake. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man and the omnipotence, perhaps the caprice, of Fate or Fortune, which no tale of private life could possibly rival. Such feelings are constantly invoked by Shakespeare's tragedies

To this point, then, we can extend the definition of Shakespearean tragedy to "a story of exceptional calamity, leading to the death of a man of high estate." That's adequate for now. Clearly, there is much more to it than that.

Tragedy, Human Flaws and Responsibility

- The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent
- The calamities of tragedy proceed mainly from actions, and those, the actions of men
- Shakespeare's tragic heroes are responsible for the catastrophe of their falls.



We see a number of human beings placed in certain situations, and from their relationships, certain actions arise. These actions cause other actions, until this series of interconnected deeds leads to complications and an apparently inevitable catastrophe.

The Effect of such a series on the imagination is to make us regard the sufferings that accompany it, and the catastrophe in which it ends, not only or chiefly as something which happens to the persons concerned, but equally as something which is caused by them. This at least may be said of the principal persons, and among them, of the hero, who always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes.

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The centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, of flawed perceptions, and human frailty for which the hero is ultimately responsible. In Shakespeare, the hero recognizes his own responsibility for the catastrophe that befalls him too late to prevent his death.

The Abnormal, the Supernatural and Fortune

Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of mind: insanity, somnambulism, hallucinations

- Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural: ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge
- Shakespeare, in most of the tragedies, allows "chance" in some form to influence some of the action

These three elements in the action are subordinate, while the dominant factor consists in deeds that issue from character.

The Abnormal Conditions of mind are never introduced as the origin of any deeds of any dramatic moment. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking has no influence whatsoever on the events that follow it. Macbeth did not murder Duncan because he saw a dagger in the air; he saw a dagger in the air because he was about to murder Duncan. Lear's insanity, like Ophelia's, is not the cause of a tragic conflict, but the result of a tragic conflict.

The Supernatural Elements cannot, in most cases, be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. It does contribute to the action, but it's always placed in the closest relation with character. It gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence: to the half-formed thought or the horrified memory of guilt in Macbeth, to suspicion in Hamlet, to the stifled workings of conscience in Richard III.

Finally, the Operation of Chance or Accident, or Fortune, or Fate; what you will, is a fact, and a prominent fact of life. That men may start a course of events but can neither calculate nor control it, is a tragic fact. Shakespeare may use accident to make us feel this. But, we must remember that any large use of accident in the tragic sequence would certainly weaken, if not destroy, the sense of the causal connection of character, deed, and catastrophe. Shakespeare uses it sparingly, when the action already seems nearly inevitable: When Romeo never got Friar Lawrence's letter, or when Juliet didn't wake up a minute sooner, for example, or when Desdemona lost her handkerchief at exactly the fatal moment. You would do better to watch for



HAMLET IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS FATHER'S GHOST.
Exit, Hamlet, O Exit!—
If thou didst ever thy dear father love,—

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what appear to be accidents that actually are connected to flaws of character or in behavior, and which are not, therefore, in the full sense, accidents. It is therefore inherent in Shakespearean tragedy that the tragic hero or protagonist is responsible through his own behavior or action, for the exceptional nature of the catastrophe itself. So tragedy is:

- a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of high estate, AND
- a story of human actions, producing exceptional calamity in the death of such a man.

As you might suspect, the action of the protagonist/tragic hero is most often motivated by external and internal conflicts, that lead to complications from which further conflicts arise; all in a kind of snowballing effect, driving the action toward a tragic resolution.

Tragic Conflict - External

- Usually there are two persons, of whom the hero is one OR,
- Two Parties or Groups, one of which the hero leads OR,
- The passions, tendencies, ideas, principles, forces which animate these persons or groups.

In Richard II, for example, we have the King on one side and Henry Bolingbroke on the other. In Macbeth, we have the hero, Macbeth, and the heroine, Lady Macbeth, opposed to the representatives of Duncan, Malcolm, and Macduff. In all these cases, the great majority of the Dramatis Personae fall without difficulty into two antagonistic groups, and the conflict between these two groups ends with the defeat of the hero.



External conflict will be there, but there is more to it than that. The type of tragedy in which an undivided soul is opposed to a hostile force is not the Shakespearean type. But, we must also be aware of the internal conflicts the hero tries to deal with, while hostile forces begin to surround him, and eventually overwhelm him.

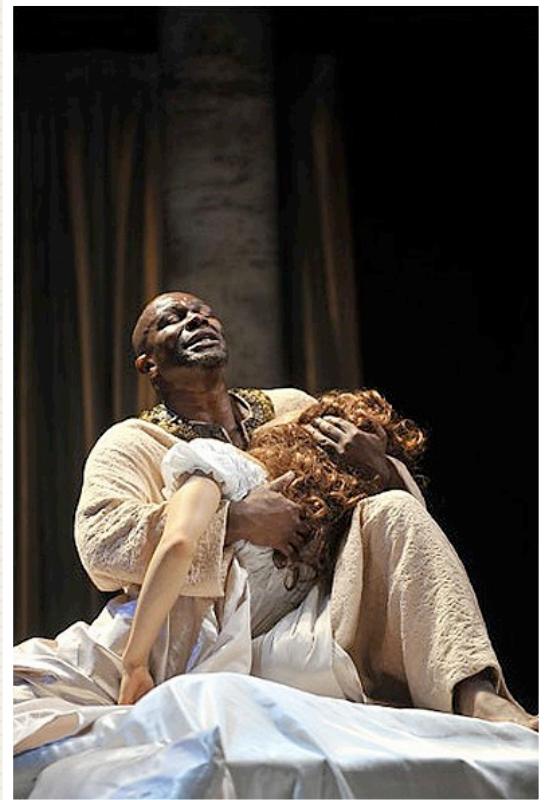
Shakespearean Tragedy

Tragic conflict – Internal

- Shakespeare's tragic hero, though he pursues his fated way, is, at some point, torn by an inward struggle
- A comparison of the earlier and later tragedies shows this struggle is most emphasized in the later tragedies
- The conception of outer and inner struggle includes the action of "spiritual forces."

Whatever forces act in the human spirit, whether good or evil, whether personal passion or impersonal principle: doubts, desires, scruples or ideas. Whatever can animate, shake, possess, and drive a man's soul these are, the "spiritual forces" generating the internal turmoil for the hero.

Treasonous ambition collides in Macbeth with loyalty, the laws of hospitality, patriotism in Macduff and Malcolm; this is the outer conflict. But these same forces collide in the soul of Macbeth as well; here is the inner conflict. It is a combination of the pressures of the external and internal struggles or conflicts that make Shakespearean tragedy. All of this leads us to expand our definition of the tragic hero / protagonist.



Common Qualities of the Hero Protagonist

- Tragic heroes are exceptional beings: this is the fundamental trait
- Tragic heroes contribute to their own destruction by acts in which we see a flaw in their character, or, by tragic error
- The difficulty is that the audience must desire the defeat/destruction of the tragic hero, but this in itself does not constitute tragic feeling

Being of high estate is not everything. The tragic hero's nature is also exceptional, and generally raises him in some respect much above the average level of humanity. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are made of the stuff we find in ourselves and within the persons who surround him. But, by an intensification of the life that they share with others, they are raised above them; and the greatest are raised so far that, if we fully realize all that is implied in

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their words and actions, we become conscious that in real life we have scarcely known anyone resembling them.

The have a fatal gift that carries with it a touch of greatness, a fierce determination and fixed ideas. When nobility of mind, or genius, or immense force are included to the mix, we realize the full power and reach of the soul, and the conflict with which it engages acquires that magnitude that stirs not only sympathy and pity, but admiration, terror, and awe.

The tragic flaw often takes the form of obsession. In the circumstances where we see the hero placed, this tragic trait, which is also his greatness, is fatal to him. To meet these circumstances, something is required which a smaller man might have given, but which the hero cannot give. He errs, by action or omission; and his error, joining with other causes, brings on his ruin.



This fatal imperfection or error is of differing kinds and degrees. At one extreme stands the excess and hastiness of Romeo, which scarcely diminishes our regard for him. At the other extreme is the murderous ambition of Richard III. In most cases, the tragic error involves no conscious breach of right; in some (Brutus and Othello), it is accompanied by a full conviction of right. Only Richard III and Macbeth do what they themselves know to be villainous. So why are we affected by such villains? Shakespeare gives Richard a power and audacity that excite astonishment and a courage that extorts admiration. He gives to Macbeth a similar, though less

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extra-ordinary greatness, and adds to it a conscience so terrifying in its warnings and so maddening in its reproaches that the spectacle of inward torment compels a horrified sympathy and awe which balance at the least, the desire for the hero's ruin.

- Shakespeare's tragic heroes need not be "good," though they generally are good
- Shakespeare's tragic heroes project that man is not small or contemptible, no matter how much of a villain he becomes
- Shakespeare's tragic heroes illustrate the center of the tragic impression: the sense of waste
- Shakespeare's tragic heroes live for what seems to be a type of the mystery of the whole world.

Shakespeare tragic heroes don't need to be good but it is necessary that the tragic hero should have so much of greatness that in his error and-fall, we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature. Hence, in the first place, a Shakespearean tragedy is never depressing. No one ever closes the book with the feeling that man is a poor, mean creature. Man may be wretched, and he may be awful, but he is not small. His lot may be heart-rending and mysterious, but it is not contemptible.

Connected to the sense of greatness is a sense of waste. With Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity and fear that are stirred by the tragic story (Aristotelian requirements of tragedy) unite with a profound sense of sadness and mystery which is due to this impression of waste. With Hamlet, we say, "What a piece of work is man", so much more beautiful and so much 'more terrible than we knew. And from this comes the mystery, the existential question Lear would also come to understand so well:

"Why should man be so, if this beauty and greatness only tortures itself and throws itself away?"

The mystery of the world resides in tragedy. Everywhere, from the crushed rocks beneath our feet to the soul of man, we see power, intelligence, life and glory which astound us and seem to call for admiration. And everywhere, we see men perishing, devouring one another, and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end. Tragedy is the typical form of this mystery because the greatness of soul that it shows oppressed, conflicting, and destroyed is the highest existence in our minds. It forces the mystery upon us and it makes us realize the worth of that which is wasted. Such waste of potential greatness, nobility of soul, of humanity is truly the tragedy of human existence. Out of all of this, a tragic pattern emerges.

The Tragic Pattern

- A Man of High Estate
- A Flaw in Character
- Intrusion of Time and a Sense of Urgency
- Misreadings and Rationalisations
- Murder, Exile, or Alienation of Enemies and Allies
- Gradual Isolation of the Tragic Hero
- Enemies Mobilise against the Tragic Hero
- Hero Recognizes his Tragic Flaw too late
- Last Courageous Attempt to Restore Honour
- Audiences Recognizes Hero's Potential for Greatness

In Shakespearean tragedy, we will be dealing with a man of high estate: a king, a prince, a general, etc. Normally, we will hear about him from others before he makes an entrance in the play. Often, this is where we are given the first impression of the greatness of the tragic hero through the eyes of others. Within the first two acts or so, we will become aware of a driving force within the hero that is almost, if not entirely, obsessive in nature. We will also witness the nature of the inner torment he goes through as he follows his obsession. We see both Macbeth's potential for greatness and his obsessive ambition; we see both Othello's greatness as a general and human being and his naive, trusting nature that so easily becomes twisted into an obsessive jealousy by Iago. As the inner and outer conflicts the hero faces as he pursues his course intensify, we see time becoming more and more important.

A sense of urgency develops with the plot and the conflict that not only creates tension, but also creates the effect of a kind of steam-rolling inevitability regarding the hero's fall that he has put into motion himself. The pace and urgency generally pick up significantly in the third act.

Contributing to and furthering the obsession and the control of the tragic flaw are misreadings, supernatural suggestion, and accident or chance. Things happen a split second too late: the hero operates on what he believes to be the case rather than what he actually knows to be the case. Soon they are one and the same thing to him. As the flaw and the misreadings continue, new conflicts and complications arise which bring about the death or gradual alienation of all forms of support for the hero, so that by the end, he must face the opposing forces and the responsibility for his actions alone. What we see during this process of alienation and isolation is suffering, sleeplessness, rage, confusion, hallucination, and violence.

The internal conflicts intensify to an almost unbearable pitch. At some point in the fifth Act, the opposing forces will begin to mobilize against the hero to bring the tragedy to its conclusion. Often the hero is confronted by an enemy in the fifth act who has some reason to seek his death (Macduff in *Macbeth*, for example). At about this point in the play, the hero will realize the error (often a misreading of people/events) that is bringing about his fall. Knowing that he alone is to blame, he alone has erred, and accepting it is absolutely necessary in Shakespearean tragedy, and is called Tragic Recognition. Tragic recognition inevitably takes place when there is no chance/time to correct the error: it is too late. Once recognition occurs,

The Tragic Pattern

death speedily follows. Usually, the hero will provide us with a particularly moving display of courage or at least nobility of heart (as in Macbeth or King Lear). With this kind of display, we are left with the feeling that indeed Macbeth was a monster who should have been destroyed, accompanied by a kind of melancholy recognition on our parts that he also had greatness in him: nobility, strength, courage. If only those qualities could have been re-directed, if only he hadn't made those mistakes. In the end the audience feels, "good, he's gone-- but what a waste"!

Tragic Structure

As a Shakespearean tragedy represents a conflict that ends in catastrophe, any such tragedy can be divided into four parts:

1. Exposition
 2. Development – Rising Action
 3. Development – Falling Action
 4. Resolution
1. **Exposition.** This first part sets forth or expounds the situation or state of affairs, out of which the conflict arises. Thus, exposition is the task of the first act and often part or most of the second act. Here we are made aware of the general setting, the persons; character traits, problems of the play, the conflicts or potential conflicts. Usually, by the time the second act is completed, we know what the overriding problem of the play is, what the major conflict is and who the players in the conflict are, who our protagonist or tragic hero is, and often what seems to be his tragic flaw is already in place.
 2. **Development – Rising Action.** This second part of the structure deals with a definite beginning, the growth and nature of the conflict, and forms the bulk of the play, comprising the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th acts, usually part of the 1st act, and part of the 5th act. This division unveils the developing complications arising from the conflicts as the problem intensifies. Time and a sense of urgency become increasingly important as the speed of the action increases. A sense of inevitability begins to advance as we watch the tragic hero alienating his allies and closest supporters, until he is all alone and with his back to the wall in the 5th act.
 3. **Development – Falling Action.** Usually, from Act 2 onwards, we see the action rising, with the tragic hero powerful, advancing, scattering the opposition until, late in the 4th act, when a reversal of the situation starts taking place. Opposing forces begin to

The Tragic Pattern

4. openly resist and to make plans for the removal of the tragic hero, and the hero's power is obviously declining as the opposition's power advances.
5. **Tragic Resolution.** In the final acts, then, the opposition reaches its full strength and defeats/destroys the isolated, weakened hero. This is where Tragic Recognition takes place, and the final scenes of the play are normally such that we become aware again of the greatness of the soul that has just been dispatched. Macbeth is dead; Hamlet is dead; Lear is dead: and though we can see the justice of it, the usual feeling of satisfaction at the death of a tyrant or killer (an Iago, for example) is conspicuously lacking,

A.C. Bradley. Shakespearean Tragedy.



Glossary of Terms

Blank Verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter: a line of five iambs. Blank verse is the most common of English poetic meters. The popularity of blank verse is due to its flexibility and relative closeness to spoken English.

Characterisation: the way in which a writer creates characters so as to attract or repel our sympathy. Different kinds of literature have certain conventions of characterisation. In Jacobean drama there were many stock dramatic types whose characteristics were familiar to the audience.

Dramatic Irony: a feature of many plays: it occurs when the development of the plot allows the audience to possess more information about what is happening than some of the characters themselves have. Iago is the source of much of the dramatic irony in Othello, informing the audience of his intentions. Characters may also speak in a dramatically ironic way, saying something that points to events to come without understanding the significance of their words

Feminism: is, broadly speaking, a political movement claiming political and economic equality of women with men. Feminist criticism and scholarship seek to explore or expose the masculine bias in texts and challenge traditional ideas about them, constructing and then offering a feminine perspective on works of art. Since the late 1960s feminist theories about literature and language, and feminist interpretations of texts have multiplied enormously.

Figurative Language: any form of expression or grammar that deviates from the plainest expression of meaning is designated a "figure of speech". Departures into more decorative language are further defined by a large number of terms. Metaphor is probably the figure of speech that most clearly characterises literary language: hence 'figurative language' can specifically refer to metaphorical language as well as to language abounding in other figures of speech.

Hegemony Leadership: the state that rules others, or the dominance of one state over others.

Hubris: the self-indulgent confidence that causes a tragic hero to ignore the decrees, laws and warnings of the gods, and therefore defy them to bring about his or her downfall.

Glossary of Terms

Irony: irony consists of saying one thing while you mean another (many of Iago's speeches to his victims include examples of irony of this kind). However, not all ironical statements in literature are as easily discerned or understood; the patterns of irony – of situation, character, structure and vocabulary; in Othello need careful unraveling. In certain cases the context will make clear the true meaning intended, but sometimes the writer will have to rely on the reader sharing values and knowledge in order for his or her meaning to be understood. Ironic literature characteristically presents a variety of possible points of view about its subject matter.

Machiavel: the Machiavel was a villainous stock character in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, so called after the Florentine writer Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), author of *The Prince* (written 1513), a book of political advice to rulers that recommended the need under certain circumstances to lie to the populace for their own good and to preserve power. Machiavels are practiced liars and cruel political opportunists, who 'delight in their own manipulative evil. Iago is one of the most sophisticated Machiavellian villains in Jacobean drama

New Historicist: the new historicism refers to the work of a loose affiliation of critics who discuss literary works in terms of their historical contexts. In particular, they seek to study literature as part of a wider cultural history, exploring the relationship of literature to society.

Oxymoron: a figure of speech in which contradictory terms are brought together in what is at first sight an impossible combination. There are a number of examples in Othello e.g. Cassio is said to be 'damn'd in a fair wife' (I.1.21), Iago speaks of 'honest knaves' (I.1.49) and also informs us 'I am not what I am' (I.1.65). It seems particularly appropriate that oxymoron is a feature of Iago's speech since he is a white devil.

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Freud developed the theory of psychoanalysis as a means of curing neuroses in his patients. The concepts of psychoanalysis were expanded by Freud and his followers as a means of understanding human behavior, and culture generally. Literature and the creative process always figured largely in his accounts of the human mind, as both example and inspiration: he asserted that many of his ideas had been anticipated in great literary works, and the terms he devised for his concepts (such as the Oedipus complex), illustrate his reliance on literary models. Critics who adopt a psychoanalytical approach explore the psychological conflicts in texts, seeking to uncover the latent content and psychological realities that underlie the work of art; they are looking at symbolism and hidden meanings.

Vice: the a figure in morality plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who tempts humankind in a half-comic, half-unpleasant manner. Many critics argue that Iago is modeled on this stock character.

“Othello”

Social and Psychological Observations

- His blackness is often disputed - African or Arab? There is evidence to suggest that Shakespeare knew significantly more black Africans than Moors. Even though Iago calls Othello a 'Barbary (Arabic) horse and claims that after they marry he and Desdemona will return to Mauritania, the Moorish homeland, historical evidence has proven to be much more reliable than the perpetually untruthful Iago.
- Although Africa is a continent of varied landscapes and differing languages, most Africans tended to share certain basic social characteristics - there was no transcontinental political unity, but black African societies were structured around relatively fixed customs and practices, transmitted from generation to generation. Such cultural practices included:
 - The power of social custom, reinforced by the inexorable pressure of kin, maintained order.
 - Individualism in thought or action was seen as cold, if not downright hostile
 - All the sacred, unsolvable matters of life were dealt with not by personal decisions but by magic
 - Witchcraft accounted for occurrences that were 'unaccountable and adverse' as well as fortunate coincidences.
 - Magic was probably the most effective means of social control
- Traditional cultures being, by definition, group-oriented, means that someone born into such a social setting adheres to and depends on the group for both social and inner psychological stability. Deprived of the group, the individual will inevitably lack many basic resources, especially those for dealing with adverse circumstances.
- This is important for understanding Othello, who was born and raised in a traditional society; he also claims to be of royal descent. Kidnapped, enslaved, he literally fought his way to ascendancy, ending as a valued, powerful general in the hired service of the Venetian state. Along the way he became a believing and practicing Christian, and acquired much of the manners and ways of the Christian West.



“Othello”

Social and Psychological Observations

- The Othello we see in Act 1 is strong, forceful, contained - an admirable, profoundly functional commanding officer, and it seems that as long as he continues to follow his military path, he is secure and will likely continue to be successful. This world is all male, rough and perpetually isolated from the non-traditional world of sophisticated, westernized Venice, which is of course, for Shakespeare, the world of early Jacobean England and cosmopolitan London.
- When we meet Othello he is newly married and about to take on domestic involvements that he has never before had to face - for a time he is excited and sustained by this, but after he breaks up the drunken fight, the world begins to roll away from Othello.
- In Act 3, sc 4, Othello talks at length about the magical powers of his handkerchief. When Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief, Othello replies, 'That is a fault'. Once magic has been set into motion Othello knows in his bones how desperately powerful and how powerfully real the consequences are. Although he is a genuine Christian, he cannot help sensing Desdemona's unfaithfulness would destroy the very fabric of his existence. By the end of the scene, his inner collapse is well under way.
- Remember that, for Shakespeare and his audience, 'perdition' was more than mere ruin or destruction. It evoked the ultimate threat of final ruin, the eternal incarceration of the human spirit in hell. In Renaissance England, damnation had a terrible and universally known significance, and Othello's steep descent is clearly hell-bound: 'Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur' and 'Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire' reveal this. The devils he invokes to 'whip me' are not meant to be metaphorical.
- When Othello next appears at the start of Act 4, we see him fully ensnared in Iago's web, engaged in an elaborate discussion of the entirely imaginary details' of Desdemona's entirely imaginary adultery with Cassio.
- Othello is doomed because he lacks the reserves and the strategic knowledge to deal with forces that, in the end, emerge out of his own being. The ending of the play presents some of the saddest, most pitiful moments of human destruction in literature.



Critical Perspectives

The Character of Othello

Below you'll find a selection of quotes regarding the character of Othello by characters within the play, actors, directors, authors, critics and scholars.

Characters in the Play

- I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege. (Othello, I, ii)
Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it / Without a prompter. (Othello, I, ii)
- She loved me for the dangers I have passed / And I loved her that she did pity them. (Othello, I, iii)
- I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate ... (Desdemona, I, iii)
- The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are. (Iago, I, iii)
- For I have served him, and the man commands / Like a full soldier. (Montano, II, i)
Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy / To follow still the changes of the moon/ With fresh suspicions? (Othello, III, iii)
- " my noble Moor / is true of mind and made of no such baseness / as jealous creatures are ... (Desdemona, III, iv)
- Is not this man jealous? (Emilia, III,iv)
- I will be found most cunning in my patience / But - dost thou hear? - most bloody. (Othello, IV, i)
- Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature / Whom passion could not shake? .. (Lodovico, IV, i)



The Character of Othello

- ... speak of me as I am ... I ... one that loved not wisely, but too well; / ... one not easily jealous but being wrought, / Perplexed to the extreme ... (Othello, V, ii)

Actors

Although a soldier of fortune, Othello was descended from a royal race, of which honor, however, he never boasted skilled as he was in the art of war, he was simple and ingenious in other relations, believing everybody honest who appeared so.

Tommaso Salvini, 1875



Shakespeare presents a noble man of singleness of purpose and simplicity with a mind as direct as a straight line. He is important to the State but the fact that he is a Moor incites the envy of little-minded people. Desdemona loves him, he marries her, then the seed of suspicion is sown. The fact that he is an alien among white people makes his mind work more quickly. He feels dishonor more deeply. His color heightens the tragedy.

Paul Robeson, 1930

man. But the statue is flawed: Shakespeare gives him one fissure. The fissure cracks and the statue breaks. He is too jealous: the fault is self-deception. He's the greatest exponent of self-deception there's ever been.

Laurence Olivier, 1986

Every modern, white actor, taking on Othello, feels obliged to explain why he's not playing him black, which was surely Shakespeare's intention, when the unspoken reason is that to "black up" is as disgusting these days as a "nigger" minstrel show.

Ian McKellen, 1986

He was revered in his own world where there was no racism. He has no sense of inferiority as the Western black man sometimes has.

James Earl Jones, 1993

There is nobility in him.

Laurence Fishburne, 1996

The Character of Othello

Once you get to Act III, scene iii, it's like being caught up in an huge surf. You are pounded by experiences and overwhelming feelings that oscillate violently. Sometimes within one sentence I go from passion and adoration to the most extreme expressions of loathing and self-hatred I've ever had to try to get close to.

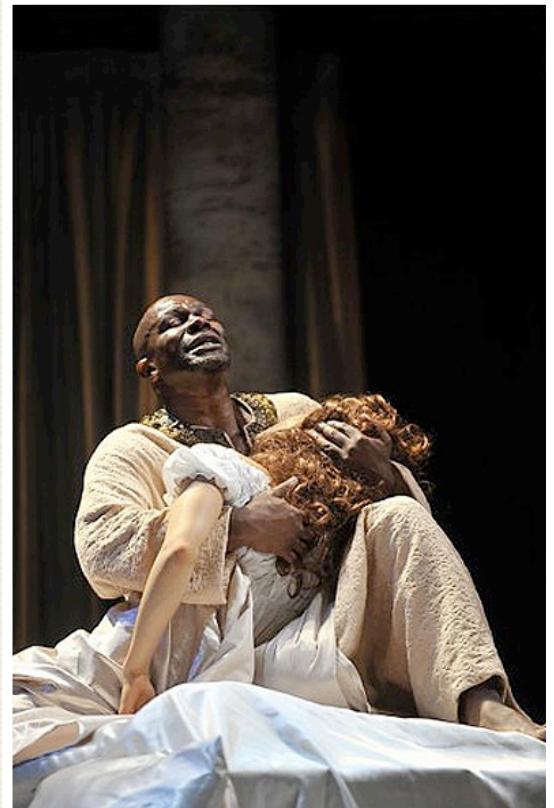
Patrick Stewart, 1997

Othello behaves as he does because he is a black man responding to racism, not giving pretext to it.

Hugh Quarshie, 1998

In some respects Othello is an Everyman. He just got married. He succumbs to sexual jealousy as many of us do - white, black, whatever. And things happen. That's what's so contemporary about it. Yeah, he does go from A to, like, Z. But if you really look at it, and you take the political correctness out of it, this is a man who's trying to deal with something that he just doesn't have the facilities for. He's trying to get a grasp on it, and in the process it explodes.

John Douglas Thompson, 2003



Directors

In Othello's part not a single scene is irrelevant as regards the whole mountain of the hero's growing passion He was intensely happy with Desdemona ... the height of love and passion Can one bid farewell at once to this bliss ... [and] can one live on without it?

Konstantin Stanislavski, 1930

The difference in race between Othello and every other character in the play is, indeed, the heart of the matter. This is the cause of Othello's terrible vulnerability on which Iago fastens so pitilessly; because of this, the conduct of which Desdemona is accused seems to Othello only too horribly possible ...

Margaret Webster, 1943

The important thing is not to accept him at his own valuation. Try to look at him objectively. He isn't just a righteous man who's been wronged. He's a man too proud to think he could ever be capable of anything as base as jealousy. When he learns that he can be jealous, his character changes. The knowledge destroys him and he goes berserk.

Jolm Dexter, 1964

The Character of Othello



What I did go for very strongly is that [Othello] has to be emotionally very vulnerable I wanted to make his fear of her loss the greatest motivating factor. ... I think there's a great vulnerability, humanity and warmth, despite the fact that he's saying he must loathe her. [in Act III, iii] He can't see another option; in the first flush of extreme emotion it's very difficult to see your way clear.

Sam Mendes, 1997

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

Shakespeare hath artfully introduced his Desdemona soliciting favours for Cassio of her husband, as the means of inflaming, not only Othello's jealousy, but his rage, to the highest pitch of madness ... We find the unfortunate Moor less able to command his passion on this occasion, than when he beheld his valued present to his wife in the hands of his supposed rival.

Henry Fielding, 1749

Othello must not be conceived as a negro, but a high and chivalrous Moorish chief Jealousy does not strike me as the point in his passion; I take it to be rather an agony that the creature, whom he had believed angelic, with whom he had garnered up his heart, and whom he could not help still loving, should be proved impure and worthless There is no ferocity in Othello; his mind is majestic and composed. He deliberately determines to die.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1822

He is great, he is dignified, he is majestic, he soars above all heads, he has as an escort bravery, battle, the braying of trumpets, the banner of war, renown, glory; he is radiant with twenty victories, he is studded with stars, this Othello: but he is black. And thus how soon, when jealous, the hero becomes monster, the black becomes the negro!

Victor Hugo, 1864

... for all his dignity and massive calm (and he has greater dignity than any other of Shakespeare's men), he is by nature full of the most vehement passion.

A. C. Bradley, 1904

I was ... impressed by the volley & volume & tumble of [Othello's] words ...

Virginia Woolf, 1928

The Character of Othello

Othello, in his magnanimous ways, is egotistic A habit of self-approving self-dramatization is an essential element in Othello's make-up, and remains so to the very end.

F. R. Leavis, 1937

Iago's report of Cassio's dream ... leaves Othello to answer his own questions ... [At the end he] learns nothing, remains in defiance, and is damned. He cannot think why he did what he did, or realize what was wrong.

W. H. Auden, 1947

The more violently Desdemona becomes engrossed by love, the more of a slut she seems to Othello; a past, present, or future slut. The more she desires, the better she loves, the more readily Othello believes that she can, or has betrayed him.

Jan Kott, 1964

Othello's Moorishness, far from being a special and separable issue, matters only in so far as it is part of a much larger and deeper one: ... the distinction, which the action constantly leads us to consider and reconsider, between the given, indissoluble facts, and the more open and changeable areas of people's lives Are the feelings we cannot help having really "fated" to us? And in what sense are we free or able to do anything about them? All these perennial questions lie at the heart of the play, and it is in terms of these larger issues that Othello's color (and his temperament and his past) are best considered.

Jane Adamson, 1980

[His] identity depends on a constant performance ... of his story, a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture.

Stephen Greenblatt, 1980

Othello's conflict regarding women is ... profound, and the other men's solutions are not open to him. Because of his marriage and his integrity, he cannot, like Roderigo, assert Desdemona's chastity and corruptibility simultaneously Othello's shifts from the idealization of women to their degradation are "extravagant and wheeling" (I,i). Iago is the catalyst, but Othello's idealistic love ... needs some realistic grounding in the facts of sex.

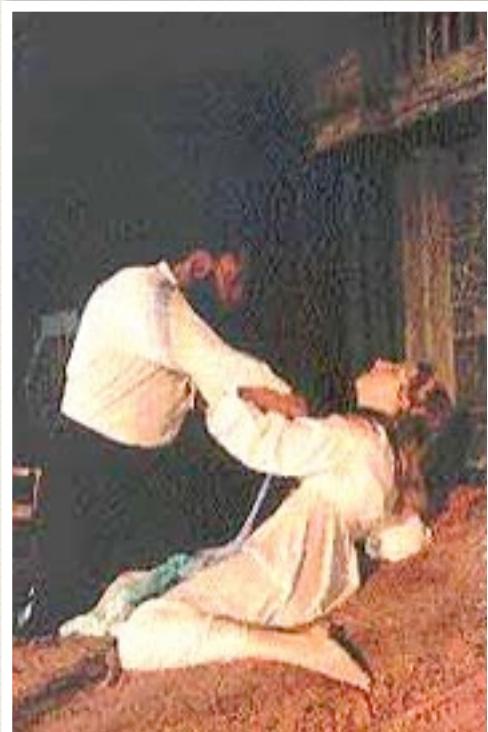
Carol Thomas Neely, 1985



The Character of Othello

... however far [Othello] believes Iago's tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he knows them to be false. This is registered in the rapidity with which he is brought to the truth with no further real evidence ... Shall we say that he recognizes the truth too late? The fact is that he recognizes it when he is ready to, as one alone can; in this case, when its burden is dead.

Stanley Cavell, 1987



Critical Perspectives

The Character of Iago



Characters within the play:

- I am not what I am. (Iago, I, i)
- Though in the trade of war I have slain men; Yet do I hold it very stuff o'th' conscience; To do no contrived murder. (Iago, I, ii)
- A man he is of honesty and trust. (Othello, I, iii)
- ... I am nothing if not critical. (Iago, II, i)
- Honest Iago, that look'st dead with grieving, ; Speak: who began this? On thy love I charge thee. (Othello, II, iii)
- And what's he then that says I play the villain? ; When this advice is free I give and honest... (Iago, II, iii)

The Character of Iago

- When devils will the blackest sins put on; They do suggest at first with heavenly shows; As I do now. (Iago, II, iii)
- I warrant it grieves my husband; As if the cause were his. (Emilia, III, iii)
- "it is my nature's plague; To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy; Shapes faults that are not..." (Iago, III, iii)
- [Cassio] hath a daily beauty in his life; That makes me ugly ... (Iago, V. i)

Actors

- ... underlying sickness of the mind, the immemorial hatred of life, the secret isolation of impotence under the soldier's muscles, the flabby solitude gnawing at the groins, the eye's untiring calculation.

Micheal MacLiammoir, 1976



- There he is, the bugger, sitting on [Othello's] shoulder and quietly winking at the audience.

Laurence Olivier, 1986

- [He's not] evil incarnate, [but] part of the soldierly world ... and it's from there that his strengths and weaknesses come.

Ian McKellen, 1989

Directors

- There are two persons in Iago: the one whom people perceive as the other, his real self. The first is pleasant enough, simple and good-natured; the second evil and repulsive. The mask he wears is so deceiving that everyone, to a certain extent even his own wife, is taken in and believes Iago to be the most loyal ... of men.

Konstantin Stanislavski, 1930

- ... Iago is not evil but wickedly unsatisfiable and cannot tolerate the presence of anything beautiful, happy, or balanced. He can experience satisfaction only when everything

The Character of Iago

around him that is possibly beautiful is made ugly, when something that is satisfied is made restless.

Jonathan Miller, 1986

- He creates disorder, disrupts harmony, essentially deconstructs creation and reverses its progress of evolution and enlightenment, back to hell and Chaos again.

Laird Williamson, 1993

- I think Iago has a fascination with Othello that is not homosexual, but the fascination of a different race, a different physical type, a different mind, a different sexual drive. I don't think he's in love with Othello, but I think that weirdly, as he destroys him, as he becomes closer to him both physically and emotionally, and begins to understand how he



ticks, it sort of turns him on. It's a power trip, and that can be very sexual. ... The problem is that Iago specifies so many different reasons for doing what he does. I think he does it for all those reasons, but that doesn't amount to the real reason. I don't think we'll ever really know. The evil, if you like, is compounded of specifics. Character flaws, vulnerability, loss, desperation, ambition, lack of promotion, the flaws in him, which he's probably intelligent enough to realize. It's three dimensional and complex beyond my understanding.

Sam Mendes, 1997

- In our production, Iago was seen as somebody ... who was on the cusp of being too old to be chosen as Othello's lieutenant. ... This became doubly worse in the military encampment of Cyprus - an enclosed world filled with competitive men who know that you were passed over for a younger man. We made it a constant source of injured pride for Iago.

Kent Thompson, 2000

The Character of Iago

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

- Iago near Othello is the precipice near the landslip. 'This way!' he says in a low voice. The snare advises blindness.

Victor Hugo, 1864

- ... Shakespeare's greatest villains, Iago among them, have always a touch of conscience. You see the conscience working - therein lies one of Shakespeare's pre-emинencies.

Lord Alfred Tennyson, 1883



- Believe me, Shakespeare met Iago in his own life, saw portions and aspects of him on every hand throughout his manhood, encountered him piecemeal, as it were, on his daily path, till one fine day, when he thoroughly felt and understood what malignant cleverness and baseness can effect, he melted down all these fragments, and out of them cast this figure He is not the principle of evil, not an old fashioned, stupid devil; nor a Miltonic devil, who talks cynicism, makes himself indispensable, and is generally in the right. Neither has he the magnificently foolhardy wickedness of a Caesar Borgia, who lives his life in open defiance and reckless atrocity. Iago has no other aim than his own advantage.

George Brandes, 1898

The Character of Iago

- In Iago we have, I think, a very remarkable portrait by Shakespeare of the villain as an inverted saint, a saint manqué On the surface, nothing might seem less probable. Yet Shakespeare was surely right in suggesting this, because the saint and the villain have very similar psychologies. In both, ethics and aesthetics become almost the same thing. There is a similar detachment and similar freedom in both with respect to human relations, an absence of the usual scruples and motivations that govern or trouble most living.

W. H. Auden, 1947



- He is not subservient to the interests of the men in power who employ him, he says; he can stand up for himself, as they do.

William Empson, 1951

- Says Iago: The world consists of villains and fools; of those who devour and those who are devoured. People are like animals; they copulate and eat each other. The weak do not deserve pity, they are just as abominable, only more stupid than the strong. The world is vile.

Jan Kot!, 1964

- The ultimate motive for his hatred of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is his denial of the values they affirm, his fixed opposition to the virtues they represent. It is the hatred of Satan for the sanctity of Adam and Eve, the hatred of being forced to recognize a virtue he cannot share and constantly desires. ...At the close of the play, when he has corrupted Othello's mind, destroyed both him and Desdemona, when, for them, Paradise has been lost, Iago is dragged away to the tortures that are his element. He does not die, ... he is to linger in pain...

Leah Scragg, 1968

- To all but Roderigo, of course, Iago presents himself as incapable of improvisation, except in the limited and seemingly benign form of banter and jig Yet like Jonson's Mosca, Iago is fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims, to lead them by the nose like asses, to possess their labor without their ever being capable of grasping the relation in which they are enmeshed.

Stephen Greenblatt, 1980

Critical Perspectives

The Character of Desdemona

Characters within the play:

- That I did love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence and scorn of fortunes / May trumpet to the world. (Desdemona, I, iii)



- The divine Desdemona She that I spake of, our great captain's captain ... (Cassio, II, i)
- I am not merry, but do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise. (Desdemona, II, i)
- ... She's full of most blest condition. (Roderigo, II, i)
- She's a most exquisite lady Indeed she's a most fresh and delicate creature She is indeed perfection. (Cassio, II, iii)

- She ... holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested. (Iago, II, iii)
- She did deceive her father, marrying you, I And when she seemed to shake, and fear your looks, I She loved them most. (Iago, III, iii)
- " to see how he prizes the foolish woman your wife! (Iago, IV, i)
- I am a child to chiding. (Desdemona, IV, ii)
- Has she forsook so many noble matches, I Her father, and her country, and her friends, I To be called whore? (Emilia, IV, ii)

The Character of Desdemona

- O, thou weed I Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet I That the senses ache at thee ... (Othello, IV, ii)
- The sweetest innocent that e'er did lift up eye. (Emilia, V, ii)

Actors

- To me she was in all things worthy to be a hero's bride and deserving the highest love, reverence, and gratitude from the noble Moor. 'Gentle' she was, no doubt (the strong are naturally gentle).

Helen Faucit, 1886



- ... Desdemona's unconventionality is ignored. She is not at all prim and demure; on the contrary, she is genially expressive, the kind of woman who being devoid of coquetry behaves as she feels.

Ellen Terry, circa 1900

Directors

- One must not forget that Desdemona is not in the least like the girl [sometimes] portrayed on stage. More often than not she is shown as a diffident and timid Ophelia. Desdemona is not Ophelia. She is resolute, courageous, and resists the orthodox type of marriage prescribed by tradition.

Konstantin Stanislavski, 1930

The Character of Desdemona

- Desdemona made a very specific decision to marry this man. It seems to me extraordinary for someone, even now, to creep out of the house at ten o'clock at night and go down the road and marry a large black general without her father knowing.

Sam Mendes, 1997



- "there is a great challenge in casting a Desdemona. I chose not to cast somebody who was 22 or 23 I wasn't looking for someone who was a young girl simply carried away by romance and passion.

Kent Thompson, 2000

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

- her helplessness only makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute.

A. C. Bradley, 1904

- Desdemona is a young schoolgirl who wants above all to be a grownup She's never done anything, she wants to do something, and she overdoes it.

W. H. Auden, 1947

- In Desdemona alone do the heart and the hand go together: she is what she seems to be. Ironically, she alone is accused of pretending to be what she is not. Her very openness and honesty make her suspect in a world where few men are what they appear, and her chastity is inevitably brought into question in a world where every other major character is in some degree touched with sexual corruption

Alvin Kernan, 1963

The Character of Desdemona

- Of all Shakespeare female characters she is the most sensuous. More silent than Juliet or Ophelia she seems absorbed in herself. " From the very first night Desdemona felt herself a lover and wife. Eroticism was her vocation and joy: eroticism and love, eroticism and Othello are one in the same.

Jan Kott, 1964

- The most important causes of Desdemona's powerlessness lie within herself. She idealizes Othello and cannot recognize that he is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. She tells Emilia that her 'noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are.' Evidently surprised, Emilia asks if he is not jealous, and Desdemona replies as though the suggestion were preposterous: 'Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him'.

Shirley Nelson Garner, 1976

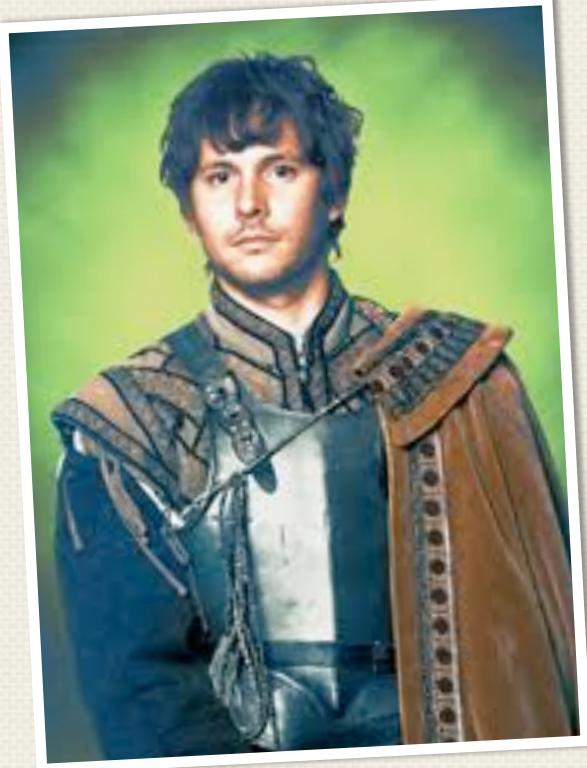


Critical Perspectives

The Character of Cassio

Characters from the play:

- A great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, ... That never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows / More than a spinster ... (Iago, I, i)
- A knave very voluble, no further consonable that in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming, for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection. (Iago, II, i)
- Cassio hath a daily beauty in his life ... (Iago, V, i)



Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

- Cassio is brave, benevolent and honest, ruined only by his want of stubbornness to resist an insidious invitation.

Samuel Johnson, 1868

- He's a ladies man, not a seducer, but he's better at holding wool in the drawing room than being in a bar room where he's ill at ease - women shouldn't be there, anyway. He wants to be authoritative and one of the boys, but when in trouble, he runs to the ladies. How right that he should be the one to be quarrelsome when he gets in tight, a characteristic of a person who has hidden resentments.

W. H. Auden, 1947

Critical Perspectives

The Character of Emilia



Characters from the play:

- Do not learn of him Emilia, though he be your husband. (Desdemona, II, ii)
- I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall. (Emilia, IV, iii)
- Let them all / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak. (Emilia, V, ii)

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

- Emilia in this play is a perfect portrait from common life, a masterpiece in the Flemish style; and though not necessary as a contrast, it cannot be but that the thorough vulgarity, the loose principles of this plebeian woman, united to a high degree of spirit, energetic feeling, strong sense, and low cunning, serve to place in brighter relief the exquisite refinement, the moral grace, the unblemished truth, and the soft submission of Desdemona.

Anna Brownell Jameson, 1832

- The virtue of Emilia is such as we often find worn loosely, but not cast off, easy to commit small crimes, but quickened and alarmed by atrocious villainies.

Samuel Johnson, 1868

- You'd expect Emilia to know Iago best - yet she gives him the handkerchief. She is stupid. She thinks men are all crazy anyway, that you must put up with them or they'll make a fuss. Anything for a quiet life.

W. H. Auden, 1947

Critical Perspectives

The Character of Roderigo

Characters from the play:

- What should I do? I confess it is my shame.to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue to amend it. (Roderigo, I, iii)
- ... This young quat ... (Iago, V, i)



Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars:

- Roderigo's suspicious credulity, and impatient submission to the cheats which he sees practiced upon him, and which by persuasion he suffers to be repeated, exhibit a strong picture of a weak mind betrayed by unlawful desires to a false friend.

Samuel Johnson, 1868

- Roderigo is the stupidest of the men whom Iago deals with, but he is the one who destroys Iago. Roderigo is neither handsome nor bright, and he is envious of those who are, but he does have one asset - money. He is the type who buys what he wants with money, including sleeping with lots of girls. He won't love anyone, however, because he is unattractive and afraid he won't be loved back. He may, though, care for Desdemona a little. He wants to be Cassio and Iago.

W.H.Auden, 1947

Critical Perspectives

Short Commentaries on the Play

- The beauties of this play impress themselves so strongly upon the attention of the reader, that they can draw no aid from critical illustration. The fiery openness of Othello, magnanimous, artless, and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge; the cool malignity of Iago, silent in his resentment, subtle in his designs, and studious at once of his interest and his vengeance; the soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit, and conscious of innocence, her artless perseverance in her suit, and her slowness to suspect that she can be suspected, are such proofs of Shakespeare's skill in human nature, as, I suppose, it is vain to seek in any modern writer.

Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 1765

- Iago near Othello is the precipice near the landslip. "This way!" he says in a low voice. The snare advises blindness Falsehood serves as a blind man's dog to jealousy Desdemona dies, stifled by the pillow upon which the first kiss was given, and which receives the last sigh.

Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, 1864

- Othello comes before us, dark and grand, with a light upon him from the sun where he was born; but no longer young, and now grave, self-controlled, steeled by the experience of countless perils, hardships and vicissitudes, at once simple and stately in bearing and in speech, a great man naturally modest but fully conscious of his worth, proud of his services to the state, un-awed by dignitaries and un-elated by honours, secure, it would seem, against all dangers from without and all rebellion from within Othello's nature is all of one piece. His trust, where he trusts, is absolute. Hesitation is almost impossible to him. He is extremely self-reliant, and decides and acts instantaneously. If stirred to indignation, as "in Aleppo once", he answers with one lightning stroke. Love, if he loves, must be to him the heaven where either he must live or bear no life. If such a passion as jealousy seizes him, it will swell into a well-nigh uncontrollable flood. He will press for immediate conviction or immediate relief. ... He stirs, I believe, in

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most readers a passion of mingled love and pity, which they feel for no hero in Shakespeare.

A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904

- In Shakespeare's most compact and painful tragedy Iago is the artisan of an intrigue that first alienates and then destroys a pair of wedded lovers, in an action fraught with the pathos that attends the loss of noble love and noble life. Labels ... adhere only to surfaces and mock us with superficiality when we try to apply them to Shakespeare's depths. We detect the type with which he begins but lose it in the unique creation with which he ends. Applied to Iago, the Machiavellian label, while supplying some prefatory enlightenment, is too general to carry us very far into the moral meaning of his role.

Bernard Spivak, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, 1958

- The Shakespearean tragic hero, as everybody knows, is an exaggeration. His individual accent will vary with his personality, but there is always a residue of hyperbole. This, it would seem, is for Shakespeare the authentic tragic music, mark of a world where a man's reach must always exceed his grip and everything costs not less than everything [Othello speaks:] "Nay, had she been true,! If heaven would make me such another world! Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,! I'd not have sold her for it." ... Othello's foil of course is Iago, about whose imagery and speech there hangs ... a constructed air, an ingenious, hyperconscious generalizing air. ... Yet Iago's poison does not work more powerfully through his images than through a corrosive habit of abstraction applied in those unique relations of love and faith where abstraction is most irrelevant and most destructive.

Maynard Mack, *Some Observations on the Construction of the Tragedies*, 1961

- If we strip Othello of romantic varnish, of everything that is opera and melodrama, the tragedy of jealousy and the tragedy of betrayed confidence become a dispute between Othello and Iago: the dispute on the nature of the world.... What is the ultimate purpose of the few brief moments that pass between birth and death? Like Richard III, Iago sets in motion the mechanism of vileness, envy, and stupidity, and, like Richard, he will be

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destroyed. He has destroyed all around him, and himself. In the last scene Iago is silent. Why should he talk? Othello kills Desdemona in order to save the moral order, to restore love and faith. He kills Desdemona to be able to forgive her; so that the accounts be settled and the world returned to its equilibrium. Othello desperately wants to save the meaning of life, of his life, perhaps even the meaning of the world.

Jan Katt, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 1964.

- Though Shakespeare does not give Desdemona center stage with Othello, ... he does not keep her in the wings for most of the play. She is often present so that we must witness her joy, fear, bewilderment, and pain. The calamity that happens to Desdemona matters because we see how it affects her and Othello as well. The meaning of the tragedy depends, then, on a clear vision of her character and experience as well as those of Othello and Iago. Desdemona shows courage and a capacity for risk in choosing Othello, for it puts her in an extreme position, cutting her off from her father and countrymen. Her willingness to risk the censure of her father and society is some measure of her capacity for love as she marries somebody from a vastly different culture. Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello never understand the way the world fosters their misperceptions. We must watch as Othello is reduced from a heroic general, with dignity, assurance, and power to a raging, jealous husband and murderer, out of control and duped by Iago. We see Desdemona lose her energy, vitality, and courage for living to become fearful and passive. Both suffer the pains of deception, real or supposed loss of love, final powerlessness, and death. Tragedy never allows its protagonists to escape suffering and death, but it often graces them with the knowledge of life, without which they cannot have lived in the fullest sense.

Shirley Nelson Gamer, "Shakespeare's Desdemona". *Shakespeare Studies* 9, 1976

- It is surely not surprising that Shakespeare, the dramatist whose sympathy for the despised alien upsets the balance of the otherwise "unrealistic" *The Merchant of Venice* should want to create a play about a kind of black man not yet seen on the English stage; a black man whose humanity is eroded by the cunning and racism of whites. In *Othello*, then, Shakespeare presents his Elizabethan audience with a series of propositions which serve

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to reverse or disturb their settled notions of black people. A Christian African is pitted against a diabolical white, a startling reversal of the norm. An honorable and self-restrained African is also pitted against a sensual, debased white who lusts after his wife, again a reversal. Othello, proud of his services to the State, and committed to the State's religion, falsely believes that he is an accepted part of that society, and that marriage into that society would be tolerated. Shakespeare raises questions about blackness and whiteness without fully resolving them. Whatever his intentions may have been, we have to take seriously the significance of Othello's race in our interpretation of the play.

Ruth Cowhig, Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of
Shakespeare's Othello, 1985

- The collapse of Othello is augmented in dignity and poignancy when we gain our full awareness of Iago's achieved negativity, war everlasting. No critic needs judge Othello to be stupid, for Othello does not incarnate war, being as he is a sane and honorable warrior. He is peculiarly vulnerable to Iago precisely because Iago is his standard-bearer, the protector of his colors and reputation in battle, pledge to die rather than allow the colors to be taken Othello, within his occupation's limits, has the greatness of the tragic hero. Iago breaks down those limits from within, from war's own camp, and so Othello has no chance. Had the attack come from the world outside war's dominion, Othello could have maintained some coherence, and gone down in the name of the purity of arms. Shakespeare, courting a poetics of pain, could not allow his hero this consolation.

Harold Bloom, Introduction to William Shakespeare's Othello. Modern Critical Interpretations, 1987

Extended Critical Response

Love, Trust & Destruction in a Murky World

Prof. Archibald Leyasmeyer. 1993

Of Shakespeare's thirty eight plays only three have extended titles. Twelfth Night, in the spirit of revelry offers us an alternate title: or, What You Will. Two plays have subtitles: The Tragedy O/ Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and The Tragedy a/ Othello, the Moor a/Venice. In both cases we are given a triple identification of the tragic protagonist: name, geographical place, and status. Ironically, despite all the information, finally both remain mysteriously enigmatic characters, as do their worlds. It is worth noting that Othello was Shakespeare's next tragedy after Hamlet, and that both plays share strikingly similar thematic elements, patterns of imagery, and linkages. In both we have (actual or metaphoric) poisoning, an infected world, an abused and eventually dead innocent young woman, and the title character concerned about his future reputation. "O God, Horatio, what a wounded name," says the dying Hamlet, "shall I leave behind me!" "Absent thee from felicity a while," he adds, "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story." Othello too has a story to worry about. "I pray you," he asks at the end of the play, "When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate / Nor set down in malice "

Geography is rarely neutral, and Venice makes for a powerful, exotic, fascinating setting. "This is Venice," Brabantio emphasizes early in the play. Since the times of the Crusades, Venice was a dominant trading center, a place of fabulous wealth and great influence. In 1203 Venice, which provided ships and supplies to the Crusaders, persuaded them to attack the Byzantine Empire first, in 1204 Constantinople was conquered, the Empire divided, and Venice gained dramatically. Eventually it became an independent Republic, a "free state," practicing religious tolerance, distancing itself from the religious controversies, permitting the expression of just about any ideas and views, attracting an impressive variety of artists, creative talents and dazzling beauties. Shakespeare's contemporaries considered Venice fabulous, powerful, corrupt and devious, atheistic, lustful and immoral, dangerous, and attractive, a fascinating gateway to the exotic lands beyond. An elegant place of seductions, passions,

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plotting, poisoning, murder.

Through the years, from the fourteenth century on, Venice also became identified as the defender of the Christian faith against the Turks. This, of course, is the intense public concern introduced early in the play. "Valiant Othello," says the Duke at the emotional night Senate meeting, "we must straight employ you / against the general enemy Ottoman." (I,iii) In the fourteenth century Osman I led the Turkish nation, and his followers and successors became known as the Ottoman Turks. In 1453 the Turks conquered Constantinople, and in the sixteenth century they were the most powerful presence in Europe, very expansionistic. During the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566), the Turks even besieged Vienna. Cyprus, the setting for most of Othello, became a dramatic place of conflict between the two great powers of Venice and the Turks. As perceived throughout Europe, it was not so much a conflict between two nations as between the forces of Christendom and the "infidels," the forces of darkness.

In 1570, when Shakespeare was 6 years old, the Turks invaded Cyprus, greatly troubling Christian Europe. Cyprus, a Venetian possession, was seen as a civilized, Christian outpost, indeed, Venus' island of love, now threatened and overcome by the brutal Turks. Venice initiated the formation of a Christian consortium, led by Venice, the Pope, and Philip II of Spain. In 1571 the huge Christian fleet moved toward Cyprus, met the Turkish fleet in an area north of Cyprus, near Lepanto, and the world's last great galley battle took place. Some 500 ships were involved, some 60,000 soldiers, plus the many thousands of poor galley rowers. It was a famous Christian victory, celebrated throughout Europe.

But for Shakespeare's audiences the sea battle at Lepanto was much more than a famous story about a distant place. Seventeen years later, in 1588, Philip II took his victorious fleet and launched the Armada against another outpost at the edge of Europe - England. As we know, a great storm wiped out the Spanish forces and gave England a victory that was widely interpreted as an indication of God's special protection and favor.

But in 1573; having rearmed, the Turks again conquered Cyprus and then ruled it till the end of the nineteenth century. Thus at the time Othello was written, 1603-4, the victory over the Turks at Lepanto was a treasured memory, the "infidel" threat

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was seen as both real and immediate, and, as the "Epilogue" to Shakespeare's Henry V vindicates, great victories are soon threatened by great disasters. Shakespeare writes two plays set in Venice - Othello and The Merchant of Venice - and both are about dramatically visible outsiders to this powerful city ruled for centuries by a few great families through the Senate, the Signory. One is Shylock, the Jewish money lender from the ghetto, of a different religion; the other the Moor from across the seas, and of a different skin color, an extravagant and dazzling stranger, who is a hired servant of the Venetian state. Very few in Shakespeare's audiences would ever have met either a Jew or a Moor, but probably would readily view them as stereotypical villains. In plays as in life, being different is often perceived as being dangerous.

While Moor was an imprecise broad term and could include all kinds of Northern Africans, in general usage it meant blacks, and for Elizabethans blacks represented darkness, danger, and the demonic. Blacks were associated with the sons of Cham, the rejected sinful son of Noah. In medieval illustrations devils are shown with black faces. A considerable body of existing literature depicted blacks as passionate, barbaric, savage. They were not Christians but heathens, at a time when this distinction meant far more than it does today. The very language negatively characterized them: white carried all kinds of positive associations while black had seriously negative ones. In 1560 Queen Elizabeth even ordered that all "negars and blackamoors," of which there could not have been many, be expelled from England. So it should not be surprising that in plays of this period blacks are stage villains.

Othello is deliberately a racially charged play, and interpreters who minimize or deny Othello's blackness - at times almost desperately and frantically, and often for very suspect reasons - seem to me to diminish it. For this play Shakespeare wants a black Othello in Venice. Aesthetically, thematically, dramatically, logically, the play requires him to be black. He himself claims his blackness very directly: "I am black ..." (III,iii). Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio establish the early attitudes in the play, and they, of course, readily work with the existing prejudices, from Iago's "old black ram," to

Roderigo's "thick lips" and Brabantio's "sooty bosom." And then Shakespeare brings on his black Othello, and instead of a stage villain we see a majestic, assured, wise, virtuous, eloquent, splendid individual, almost out of the world of

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legends, myth, or exotic dreams. He is a noble hero, a great warrior, a Christian, selected to defend Venice, Cyprus and the Christian faith against the infidel Turks. Even Iago admits "that for their souls I Another of his fathom [ability] they have none I To lead their business." (I,i)

In his last extended speech, the glorious "Soft you, a word or two before you go," Othello requests, "Speak of me as I am." He then even provides some descriptions and assessments of his own. "Speak of me as I am." Indeed. A Moor of noble blood. An adventurer. A great general. A lover. A poet. The outsider, and the murderer. Cassio's last comment is "he was great of heart."

But in Act IV Othello strikes Desdemona, and Lodovico exclaims, "My lord, this would not be believed in Venice, I Though I should swear I saw't." In a few moments he questions, Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature which passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue The shot of accident nor dart of chance could neither graze nor pierce? Iago's cryptic response: "He is much changed." (IV,i)

Indeed, the entire play is a complex tapestry of ambiguities, uncertainties, changes -' observed, reported, promised. "It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor," notes Iago. "She must change for youth." (I,iii) "Are we turned Turks," Othello demands of the drunken soldiers. "O God," moans the disgraced Cassio, "that we should with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause transform ourselves into beasts!" "I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." (U,iii) "Exchange me for a goat" is Othello's demand, (IU,iii) and soon Desdemona states, "My lord is not my lord." (III,iv) Close to the end of the play Lodovico enters, asking, "Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?" and Othello responds, "That's he that was Othello; Here I am." (V,ii) Indeed, the unfolding tragedy has confirmed Iago's assertion, "He is much changed." What is constant? What is true and what is false? Which reports are to be believed? How is one to know? Which is the enemy? The Turks are drowned, but the honest friend, who tells us early on, "I am not what I am," remains close by, the true alien, whispering lies in the ear. "So will I tum her virtue into pitch," (II,iii) he has promised. In his growing despair Othello cries out, "she had eyes, and chose me," (III, iii) but Iago suggests that that was then, but this is now.

Brabantio's ironic last lines are "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceived her father, and may thee." (I,iii) A character's final exit lines often

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resonate with multiple significances. This warning from the deeply hurt father, of course, is never confirmed in reality, but it does echo in Othello's mind. "I'll see before I doubt," he asserts, but then sadly enough the doubts all too quickly overwhelm him. He demands, "give me the ocular proof," (III,iii) but we know already how readily the eyes mislead and lie. The "honest" Iago is dramatically false. And the supposedly suspect stage black is the exotically, seductively, splendidly noble Othello. He speaks, and the Duke remarks, "I think this tale would win my daughter too." (I,iii) Iago though, not surprisingly, smirks "with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies." (II,i) Brabantio in his pain cries, "O thou foul thief... thou hast enchanted her. ... in chains of magic." Why else would she run "to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou"? It had to be "foul charms" or "drugs or minerals." Dark, lustful things. (I,ii) And then in the Senate scene Desdemona makes a dramatic entrance to declare simply "I love the Moor," and "to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." (I,iii) There is no other magic than that of love and admiration and affection. As Othello arrives in Cyprus and sees Desdemona he speaks passionately, "It gives me wonder great as my content / To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!" "If .were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy ..." (II,i) One thinks of Shakespeare's glorious Sonnet "IIII!" 16:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
o no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose wOlth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his sickle's compass come,
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be enor and upon me proved
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

During the second night on Cyprus Othello murders Desdemona, claiming "That

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she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed," (V,ii) which translates roughly into an "act of shame" every two minutes-continuously.

Many of Shakespeare's major villains - Richard III, Edmund, Iago - are strikingly theatrical creatures, daring playwrights, directors, performers. Iago, the street-smart hustler, does the "life ain't fair to a good man" routine. He sets up the "let's torment the old man" business - "poison his delight," "incense her kinsmen," "Plague him with flies." Roderigo says "I'll call aloud," and Iago coaches him to do it with "dire yell / As when, by night and negligence, the fire / Is spied in populous cities," and then demonstrates the "terrible summons" by shouting, "What, ho, Brabantio! Thieves! Thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!" While Brabantio talks of witchcraft, Shakespeare enchants and entraps us. We are intrigued by the typical comic confusion, sucked in by the mystery and intrigue of things. "If ever I did dream / Of such a matter." (II,i) We are a long time finding out what it is. Othello's adventures and travels fascinate not just Desdemona and the Duke but us too. At first we take pleasure in Iago's promises of revenge ("I follow him to serve my tum upon him"), his nasty energy, and most definitely his fascinating playing with highly emotional erotic and taboo elements. "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe." Once heard, it is impossible not to think of these striking, seductive bestial images, not to feel the lustfulness in them. Our imaginations have been engaged, just as Othello's will be later in the play. We sometimes forget that events in plays are written for the audience, not the characters. Ifago is to seduce Othello's mind, Shakespeare first wants him to entrap us. Iago opens the play, he is the chorus, the director, the commentator, the interpreter. It is impossible for us to look at things for long without being aware of the coloring that Iago brings. "I'll be at thy elbow," Iago tells Roderigo, and he stands at ours as well. He always seems to be nearby, while Othello becomes distanced, ever more the outsider. This play operates extensively in the theater of the mind, and while eventually it turns into an erotic nightmare, at the beginning it is seductively fascinating. "When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows," says Iago, "As I do now." (U,iii)

Shakespeare's tragedies often start with the endings of comedies. The old king is dead, long live the new king, and Hamlet gives us the celebration of a royal marriage and promising new beginnings. Unfortunately the ghost of the old king

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haunts the castle and troubles young Hamlet, and the tragedy is on. Macbeth wins a great victory, is richly rewarded, and a royal celebration for him and his wife takes place. Unfortunately, they kill old king Duncan, and the tragedy is on. In Othello, the old man is dismissed, Desdemona and Othello are married, the visible Turkish threat is eliminated. "Our wars are done," says Othello, "the Turks are drowned." (II,i) The Herald announces "the celebration of his nuptial." (II,ii) Unfortunately Othello's trust is in Iago who closes Act I with a dramatic image:

The Moor is of a free and open nature

That thinks men honest that seem to be so;

And will as tenderly be led by th' nose

As asses are ...

Through Act II, scene ii of Othello we have a Prologue which ends with the comedic conclusion of the celebration of marriage. Then Iago takes over. Acts II through V, Othello is set upon the rack and "practiced upon." In Act II Cassio is brought down. In Act III Othello is destroyed as his mind is invaded. In Act IV, "Othello shall go mad." (IV, i) And in Act V the killing starts.

The Prologue gives us an intensely dramatic situation, at the center of which stands Othello. Iago maligns him, Brabantio accuses him, Cassio and the Senators seek him for an emergency night meeting, officers draw swords to arrest him ("Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them"), and Desdemona leaves her father to marry him. The language sings with an almost antique elegance. First time he is named, the Duke calls him "Valiant Othello." (I,iii) Desdemona enters with magical timing and before the full Senate speaks with eloquence and assurance: "That I love the Moor to live with him ... trumpet to the world." (I,iii) The Turkish attack on Cyprus "is a business of some heat," (I,ii) a national emergency, but the meeting of the Signiority comes to a halt as Brabantio presents his case and the Duke hears Othello and Desdemona speak. Their love has visible intensity, magnitude, and significance. And then the Turkish threat is over, and the Herald proclaims "full liberty" to the thousands of soldiers to engage in "feasting."

But this early part of the play also has an unsettling dark undertone. Venice is a world full of threats - fire, thieves, seducers, enchanters, bands of men with swords, dark rumors, reports of the Turks. Symbolically enough, we get Brabantio's cry for illumination: "Light, I say! Light!" (I,i) In Act V, of course, we will

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have Othello musing, "Put out the light, and then put out the light." (V,ii) The marriage might be a marvelous, daring, love match, but we all too readily dismiss, I think, Brabantio as a familiar comic character. His complaints are valid. Desdemona does violate Elizabethan codes of behaviour, and so does Othello. Brabantio, after all is his friend and host ("Her father loved me, oft invited me"). Their love might be romantically pleasing, but it is also obviously surprising. Brabantio is amazed that "she, in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, everything," might fall "in love with what she feared to look at." (I,iii) "Tis unnatural- "Against all rules of nature." Very soon Iago is to use this same argument to persuade Othello that Desdemona simply could not be true for long.

Brabantio states
my particular grief
Is of so floodgate and o'erbearing nature
That it engluts and swallows other sorrows,
And it is still itself. (I ,iii)

He speaks the same grief that Othello will later in the play. At the beginning we see a father in anguish, betrayed by Desdemona, and we smile; at the end a husband in anguish, believing himself to be betrayed, when in fact Desdemona has been most true. The father disowns his daughter and soon dies; he the husband kills his wife and soon himself as well. In both cases it is Iago that "informs" them of their having been betrayed.

At the end of the Signior scene Othello asks the Duke, "So please your grace, my ensign; / A man he is of honesty and trust, / To his conveyance I assign my wife." (I,iii) By now we know Iago well; Othello obviously does not. 'Tis a bad and ominous choice. "My life upon her faith!" declares Othello in response to Brabantio's suggestion that Desdemona could deceive him. Then, "Honest Iago, / My Desdemona must I leave to thee." (I,iii) Iago is ready. He will destroy all three - Desdemona, faithfulness, Othello himself - and we will watch. Entranced!

This process of destruction is obviously far too complex to be adequately discussed in this essay, and so I only provide a few comments suggesting some of the approaches I would take.

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The play offers a tension between the love and harmony that transcend barriers of all kinds - the love of the young Desdemona reaching out to the much older, black stranger, a marriage of true minds overcoming censorious fathers, Senate elders, social conventions - and the chaos that confronts us everywhere, here in the play, from the essentially comic opening scene to the larger chaos of warfare, of sea and which eventually becomes pervasive, as we gaze on the destroyed and dead lovers.

Iago not only hates and despises beauty, honor, goodness, nobility, trust, faith, wherever they may appear, he also needs to deny and destroy them. Othello and Desdemona emerge as beautiful, glorious, romantic figures, almost from an exotic fairy tale setting, and Iago's darkness is repelled. "I have told thee often, and I retell thee again and again; I hate the Moor," emphasizes Iago. (I,iii) The reasons do not matter. He can make up as many as he needs, but no one believes them, least of all himself. The point is that the hate must lead to insult, torment, corruption, destruction: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." Cassio? "He hath a daily beauty in his life That makes me ugly He must die." (V,i) In Iago's world all beautiful things must die. As his disciple Roderigo notes, "'Tis but a man gone." Happens every day.

"What profane wretch art thou?" Brabantio demands of Iago, who shouts in the night vivid and nasty descriptions of Desdemona's and Othello's lovemaking. From the beginning of the play, Iago, this "profane wretch" has the power to define things and therefore to distort and falsify them. What he says might be comic, but it is certainly brutal, intended not so much to inform as to drive Brabantio crazy - "poison his delight." Is what Iago says true? No, but even if it were, the act of love has been translated into an erotic, animalistic, fascinating and repulsive image. For Iago the realm of love is merely lust in action, and as we know from Sonnet #129, lust in action is "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame,"

... perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait

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On purpose laid to make the taker mad

"It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor," Iago tells Roderigo - and us - early in the play. (I,iii) "It was a violent commencement in her ... The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts [a sweet fruit] shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida [a bitter laxative] ... when she is sated with his body ... a frail vow ... an erring barbarian ... supersubtle Venetian ... thou shalt enjoy her." Brabantio fears witchcraft, dark magic; Iago sees only the physicality of ugly lust. To him, Desdemona's "supersubtle Venetian" love is merely a violent physical reaction. Othello the barbarian will eagerly feed on the sweet (and forbidden) fruits and then purge, and her body and lust will be glutted.

The first day on Cyprus Iago "the playwright" creates another vivid scene for Roderigo's theater of the mind, now with a new player. "I must tell thee this: Desdemona is directly in love with him [Cassio]." (II,i). "Why, 'tis not possible," even stupid Roderigo perceives. "When the blood is made dull with the act of sport," argues Iago, "there should be a game to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite.... her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge [vomit]...." Roderigo sees between Cassio and Desdemona only "courtesy." "Lechery!" cries Iago. "They met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together." All that is needed now is the "main exercise, th' incorporate conclusion" Most of the words Iago uses are still familiar to us today, but in general usage many of them have lost a particular nasty, vulgar quality. Even so, the very images he provides - gorging, excreting, vomiting, gorging again on new and newly gamey game - stand in stark contrast to the romantic nobility of love we have seen in Othello's and Desdemona's marriage. And it is not merely a matter of ignoring love to focus on sexuality; he makes even sexuality crude, repulsive, grotesque. This is no longer lustfulness or lechery, only a repugnant awareness of physical activities. Cassio banters with Desdemona and kisses his three fingers, an Italian gesture of a courtier. Iago, no courtier himself, mutters to himself, "Yet again your fingers to your lips? Would they were clyster pipes for your sake!" (II,i) Clyster pipes are enema tubes. Iago's excremental vision does not even need an audience to operate.

So how does this creature of the dark shadows succeed in destroying the noble Othello? The account of Othello is not a documentary, and we should not expect

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a certain consistent logic in dark and oppressive nightmares. Still, some things can be noted. The honest Iago has provided trusted service before, and he repeatedly emphasizes his concern as a friend. ("I would not have your free and noble nature ... be abused." "My lord, you know I love you." To which Othello replies, "I know thou'rt full of love and honesty.") Iago has incredible luck, as with the handkerchief, the lovers' symbol of faith and trust. Iago is uncommonly shrewd in perceiving needs and vulnerabilities, and he uses brilliantly perverted logic. Brabantio claimed three times that his daughter's falling in love with the black foreigner clearly violated "all rules of nature." Iago, who used racial taunts to bait Brabantio, now, more subtly, uses racial insinuations to awaken Othello's uncertainty.

She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most. (III,iii)

Othello simply agrees, "And so she did." Iago presses on with "She that so young could give out such a seeming," "a will most rank," "thoughts un-natural" He all but calls her a lustful slut daring to enjoy the forbidden fruit. But then, she is a Venetian woman, Iago reminds Othello, a Senator's daughter, and Venice, as we know, is full of all kinds of courtesans. "I know our country disposition well," Iago declares, implying that Othello does not, and

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but kept unknown. (III,iii)

It is not long before Othello, the great general, gives the two worst orders of his life: "be sure thou prove my love a whore!" and "Make me to see't!" (III,iii) Iago leaps at both commands with genuine eagerness. It is a destructive pornographer's dream assignment. In the opening scene he made Brabantio see and feel and howl, now he will do the same for Othello.

And so we get vapors of dungeons and the smells of cheap peepshows, grotesque images and tantalizing glimpses. Iago controls the language and through it the imagination. Desdemona "to be naked with her friend in bed / An

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hour or more, not meaning any harm ... " (IV,i) Once planted, this kind of thing tends to stick in the mind. We have insinuations, suggestions, interpretations, until the echoes echo in the mind and images burn in the brain. "I lay with Cassio lately," Iago begins,

There are a kind of men so loose of soul
That in their sleep will mutter their affairs.
One of this kind is Cassio.
In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!'
And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry 'O sweet creature!' Then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o'er my thigh,
And sigh, and kiss (III,iii)

Instead of wondering why Iago permitted all of this to happen, Othello can only gasp, 'O, monstrous! monstrous!' Iago, of course, nastily adds, "Nay, this was but his dream." Robert Ornstein effectively describes Iago's method as one that "seeks to hypnotize the mind by the sinuous weavings of obscene suggestion and image." Iago's own observation: "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear." (II,iii) As in Hamlet, poison in the ear kills, the infection spreads, and the very atmosphere becomes poisoned. Othello is great of heart and imagination, and Iago easily makes him see and feel. Soon he rages using Iago's dark, painfully fascinating, repulsive language, full of erotic obsessions and animalistic images. "I had been happy if the general camp," he declares, "Pioneers [trench diggers] and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known." (III,iii) The entire army, "tasting" Desdemona's body. We have only dark lust, a piece of meat covered with black clouds of summer flies.

Iago is a brilliant playwright who tantalizes with suggestions, insinuations, glimpses of the forbidden, then pulls back and makes Othello himself complete the scene by questioning and interpreting. "What doest thou say?" "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" "Who is 't you mean?" "What dost thou say, Iago?" "Why of thy thought, Iago?" "Discernest thou aught in that?" "Is he not honest?" "What dost thou think?" "What didst not like?" "What dost thou mean?" "Why,

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why is this?" This sustained questioning not only undercuts and erodes his natural faith but also makes him a co-creator of these images. They become his own.

Most productions of Shakespeare's plays minimize their eroticism, typically taming powerful material. Because women's parts in Shakespeare's day were played by boy actors, lovers on stage tend to do relatively little physically; they talk. Maybe in our age of explicit sex, we have lost some awareness of the eroticism of language, but I think it essential to recognize the intense, innocent sensuality of Desdemona. Othello is powerfully emotional, and not just in Iago's dark terms. Desdemona loves Othello spiritually, but she certainly also loves him physically. In front of the whole Venetian Senate she dramatically declares that she does not intend to wait for Othello's return. She wants the full rites of marriage - now. "Let me go with him." (I,iii) Othello assures the Senate that he would never "your serious and great business scant," but talks of passion. What women follow armies into battle? Especially battles against the notoriously cruel Turks? A few wives, maybe. Camp followers. And a fascinating, enchanting, amorous young woman, a Venetian Senator's daughter, who dares to abandon her father, impulsively marry an exotic adventurer, of another race and background, to follow him anywhere, even across the sea to Cyprus and the Turkish wars.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are destroyed because of the evil they commit. Othello and Desdemona are destroyed because the intensity of their love and affection made them so vulnerable. Once Iago starts to invade Othello's mind, love, the greatest of things, becomes the dark destroyer.

Demonic possession of any kind is terrible to observe, almost impossible to analyze. In this play Iago finally becomes the true alien, invading Othello's very being. One of the most disturbing lines in the play is Othello's simple declaration: "I am bound to thee forever." (III,iii) Later in the scene the awful linkage is consecrated in a dark mockery of the marriage ceremony. Othello kneels, then speaks, "Now, by yond marble heaven, In the due reverence of a sacred vow I here engage my words." Iago tells him, "Do not rise yet," then kneels alongside Othello. "Witness, you ever-burning lights above," Iago continues:

You elements that clip [enfold] us round about,

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Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart
To wronged Othello's service! Let him command,
And to obey shall be in me remorse,
What bloody business ever.

They rise together. "I greet thy love," declares Othello. Then Iago, "I am your own forever." (III,iii) This, I believe, is the most frightening line in the play.

"I will chop her into messes," Othello now muses. The white wedding sheets seem "a cistern for foul toads I To knot and gender in." Looking at Cassio, "O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to." (IV,i) "How shall I murder him, Iago?" "I would have him nine years a-killing!" (IV,i) As Lodovico asks a few minutes later, "Is this the noble Moor?"

The Bridegroom has turned into the deadly Iceman, ready to do the priestly sacrifice. Justice requires it, or "else she'll betray more men." "I will kill thee, I And love thee after," frozen in death like a figure on the Grecian Urn, past passion, past temptation. The light will be put out, the rose plucked. Othello kisses the sleeping Desdemona, then, "O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade I Justice to break her sword." He remains a truer lover to the end than he ever knows.

We are struck by the incomprehensibleness of it all at the end. The Turks seem to constitute the great national threat at the beginning of the play, but it is the honest Venetian Christian, with the white skin, not out there somewhere, but here, always nearby, who is the alien monster. Othello, the legendary warrior, in his rage attempts to kill him, twice, but is unable to do so. "I bleed, sir, but not killed," Iago mocks him. (V,ii) We remember the promise: "I am your own forever." "Why?" demands Othello. "Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?" "Demand me nothing," Iago replies. "What you know, you know." The rest is silence. The mystery of evil has no easy or ready explanation.

Camus has written, "if the world were clear, art would not exist. Art helps us to pierce the opacity of the world." But bad art simplifies and tames, while important art questions, challenges complexity and mystery, enlarges our vision and perception. Bad art would probably inform us about Iago's sad childhood.

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Shakespeare's Iago simply tells us, "What you know, you know." The mystery of the unknowable remains. Hamlet is full of seeming, appearing, whispers in the night. For Duncan, "Macbeth's castle seems so fair, but it is a place of foul murder when the king falls asleep. Lear has three daughters, and he cannot identify the true one.

In Othello the black stranger is noble and great of heart, while the supposedly honest Iago is monstrously foul. Venetian women are supposed to be lustfully unfaithful, but Desdemona is constant till death, full of faith, forgiveness and love. How is one to know? How to establish?

Both Hamlet and Othello are told of terrible wrongs that have been committed. Othello responds with easy belief, and then finds that he is responsible for a horrible wrong. Hamlet doubts and probes and questions, and finds that the killing continues, of the guilty and innocent alike. It's in the nature of tragedy. How to test or trust? Lear stages a public theatre to prove love, and tragically fails. Othello sets out to prove faithfulness, demands "ocular proof" and, just as tragically, fails. Of course, love and faithfulness cannot be proved (nor bought); when found, they are freely given and must be accepted on trust.

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