

## ***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

### Act 5 Scene 2

- **Setting** is significant
  - = **symbolic** – the place that only days earlier represented the union of O and D in the consummation of their marriage and the *fruits* (i.e. happiness) this implies – now will turn into a place of death and despair
  - = **creates an atmosphere of claustrophobia**, particularly when all of the characters are assembled here – feeling that there is no escape
  - = setting reflects the **key theme of the clash between private and public** in the play – what should be the most intimate place for the private relationship between O and D becomes a stage for a public drama
- Othello's **opening soliloquy** – reveals the **state of mind of the tragic protagonist** and **builds tension towards the climax of the tragedy**
  - **Repetition** of *it is the cause*
    - = probably refers to D's 'crime' of adultery – as O refuses to name it in front of the *chaste stars*
    - = could also refer to his jealousy
    - = repetition suggests that O attempts to justify his intention to kill D
  - **Words that connote purity** are used by O
    - *chaste stars / whiter skins of hers than snow / monumental alabaster / the light*
    - = reveal that he is still enchanted by her beauty
    - = also suggest that O believes that, in death, he can restore D to her former honour and virtue
    - Reference to *alabaster* – implies that O is resolved, already views D as dead as this material was often used to build statues and monuments for the dead
  - *Put out the light, and then put out the light*
    - = likens D to light that must be quenched
    - **IRONY** – in Elizabethan times, the light was often viewed as a symbol of reason – however: O's reasoning is false
  - O still seems to fight a mental battle and is torn between his love for D and his conviction that he must kill her
    - *Dost almost persuade Justice to break her sword* – O equates himself with Justice in this **image** and suggests that he is almost tempted to alter his course
    - *One more, one more!* – he **repeatedly** kisses D, a clear sign of his love and devotion to her
    - *I will kill thee and love thee after* – **contradictory image** that implies that O still yearns to love D
    - = **heightens the impact of the tragedy**
      - O comes so close to changing his mind
      - Audience keeps getting glimpses of the O who was capable of boundless love whom they admired

- = increases the pity we feel that a man who could have been great falls to disgrace
- IMPORTANT: **Change of tone** – O seems no longer racked by pangs of jealousy, but speaks in a calm, resolved way and employs some of the poetic language he used at the start of the play
- Last conversation between O and D – **full of pathos and tragedy**
  - D's first line – *Will you come to bed, my lord?* – reveals her naivety as she still hopes that Othello has calmed down and will now join her in bed
  - O and D **finish each other's lines** – **cruel irony**
    - = this device was used earlier (e.g. Act 2 Scene 1) to express their mutual love and union – now it connotes the destruction of their love and has become a **distorted version of the earlier happiness**
    - = this device has also repeatedly been used in conversations between O and I – this moment reminds the audience that I has taken D's place in O's trust and that he is responsible for the destruction of their love
  - Full of **religious language**
    - *Have you prayed tonight? / I would not kill thy soul / Amen, with all my heart! / Sweet soul / Take heed of perjury*
    - = ironic – Othello emphasises his Christian values, yet his killing of his wife that is about to happen is an un-Christian act
- **Indirect stage directions** for an actor playing Othello when D describes him:
  - *When you role your eyes so* – reminder of O's madness?
  - *Why gnaw you so your nether lip?*
    - = O struggles to keep his feelings under control
    - = reminder of O's animalistic, savage side – **verb gnaw** is usually employed to describe an animal
  - *Some bloody passion shakes your very frame* – O's whole body reveals his difficulties to keep his jealousy and anger in check
- O – calls his plan to kill D *the strong conception that I do groan withal*
  - = employs **birth imagery** that suggests the plan is about to become reality as Othello already metaphorically groans with the pains of labour
  - = **fitting imagery** – Iago earlier referred to his plan for revenge as being *engendered* and called it a *monstrous birth* – now this 'creation' is about to come to life in Othello's murdering of his wife
- HOWEVER: When D realises that Cassio's supposed death removes her last hope of being able to prove her innocence, O loses his composure and slips back into the **violent and crude language** that has become so typical of him
  - **Repeatedly** calls D *strumpet*
  - Misreads her tears – they are for her lost love, but he reads them as *Weep'st thou for him to my face?*
  - O swiftly kills her without giving her any chances to explain herself or even to pray

- O's words *It is too late* just before smothering her
  - = literally mean that her time is up
  - = take on a **wider ironic significance within the tragedy** – when O realises his mistake a few moments later and understands Iago's true nature, it will indeed be too late for him to remedy his deeds
- Scene of O's killing of D on stage
  - = **a disturbing image** – a black man who forces her onto the bed, possibly kneels over her and presses her face down
    - = a **grotesque reversal and travesty** of their wedding night – O repeatedly refers to the **words** *dead* and *die* which in the Elizabethan age were also used as a term to denote an orgasm!
    - = resembles the image of a black man raping a white woman
  - Renaissance audience – would see their stereotypes towards black people confirmed and find this particularly shocking
- After the killing – O seems to be overwhelmed by the monstrosity of his deed
  - **Short, disjointed utterances and questions** reveal his shock and panic to be discovered
    - *My wife, my wife! What wife?*
    - *O insupportable! O heavy hour!*
  - **Metaphor of nature** is used to reflect O's inner state
    - *It should be now a huge eclipse of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe should yawn an alteration*
    - = O imagines the world drenched in darkness and ripped apart by an earthquake to reflect the enormity of D's death
    - = chaos in nature mirrors O's inner emotional chaos
    - **CONTEXT:** Similarity to *Macbeth* – after the king is unlawfully murdered by Macbeth, nature reflects the chaos resulting from it
- D's re-awakening and her last words – **enhance the tragedy of the scene**
  - D forgives and exonerates her husband by suggesting that she has killed herself (*Nobody; I myself*) – a sign of her undying loyalty and love that makes O's deed appear even more damnable and brutal
  - Some critics have **likened D to a Christ-like figure** – she dies for the sins of others, does not physically resist her tragic fate and forgives her killer
  - **AND** – her dying words seal **D's role as the ultimate tragic victim** in this play
    - **Use of a parallelism:** *Nobody; I myself*
    - = semi-colon sets the two words in parallel, suggests the second half of the sentence explains the first
    - = D eradicates her identity to save her husband – the ultimate image of the feminine ideal of the Renaissance
- Presentation of the character of Emilia – a brave and loyal woman
  - **Use of contrasting religious imagery** when she insults Othello for his deed
    - *The more angel she – you the blacker devil*
    - *Thou art a devil / Thou art rash as fire – she was heavenly true*

- = reminder of how far O has fallen – and she is not afraid to state this
- BUT: **Racist stereotypes infect her language**
  - *Blacker devil* – association of black people with hell and evil
  - *O dolt! As ignorant as dirt* – associates stupidity with his skin colour (*dirt*)
  - *Her most filthy bargain* – again associates his immoral behaviour with his black skin (*filthy*)
  - Returns to referring to O as *the Moor*
- **Emilia's epiphany** – she realises before O that her husband was at the heart of this disaster
  - **Repeated questions** – *My husband?* – **ambiguity in tone**
    - = could reflect her shock and disbelief
    - = could also reflect her suspicion if spoken sarcastically
  - Immediately gives up all loyalty to him and damns him
    - *May his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day*
    - *Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home* – refuses to follow his orders
  - = it seems apt that Emilia who has been repressed and betrayed by her husband is the character to uncover and unmake him by giving evidence against him – her **moment of redemption** before her tragic end
  - BUT – there is **some ambiguity** about her knowledge of Iago's plan
    - *O villainy! I thought so then*
    - Did E already have suspicions about Iago before and now regrets not uttering them? Which moment might she refer to?
- BUT – Emilia dies singing the 'Willow Song' – this aligns her with Desdemona and the maid Barbary and confirms the image that **female characters in this tragedy remain helpless victims** despite all attempts to defy the patriarchal society that surrounds them
- Othello's **moment of anagnorisis** – he realises he has fallen for Iago's lies, shouts *Precious villain!* and tries to stab him
- Othello's long speech to Gratiano – **outlines his journey and indicates that the end of the tragedy is approaching**
  - Section 1 – O as a brave warrior with military glory – *With this little arm and this good sword I have made my way through more impediments than twenty times your stop*
  - Section 2 – O as a murderer at the end of his life – *Here is my journey's end, here is my butt and very sea-mark of my utmost sail*
  - Section 3 – O being tortured in hell – *Whip me, ye devils...Roast me in sulphur!*
- BUT – contradictory
  - On one hand – O's envisioned punishment for himself suggests he takes responsibility and acknowledges his deed
  - On the other hand – O repeatedly calls on **fate** and seems to blame destiny for his actions
    - *Who can control his fate?*
    - *Ill-starred wench*

- Even Ludovico appears to suggest this when he calls O *rash and most unfortunate man*
- **References to fate** – resonate with an Elizabethan audience as they realise that **Fortune's wheel** has turned quickly
  - O has fallen from greatness to disgrace
  - Cassio has fallen from respect to dishonour but is now being lifted back to a high status by being declared governor of Cyprus
- Ludovico's entrance – Venetian law is restored
  - L represents Venice – a place of power, law and order
  - L resembles a judge as he first calls on O then on I to come forward – as if he was in a court
  - O's response – *That's he that was Othello*
    - = speaks of himself in the third person
    - = distances himself from his own identity – because he is too ashamed of his mistakes or because he wants to avoid guilt?
- Othello's final speech – ambiguous
  - A restoration of his nobility or of a self-centred, cowardly attempt to avoid punishment?
  - Does O write his own obituary – in the way he wants to be remembered? Or does he simply succumb to another illusion – this time of his own character and life?
  - BUT: O uses sophisticated, poetic language again – a reminder of his greatness and *megalopsychia* that he has lost – creates pity and tragedy
  - AND: He dies kissing D – a final image of a lost and desperate love that evokes pity
- Iago's last words
  - *I bleed, sir, but not killed* – Does he taunt Othello because one more time Iago has the upper hand and has proven invincible?
  - *Demand me nothing; what you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word*
    - = unusual for the most vocal character of the play who is clever with words
    - = a sign of his wicked evil? Even now Iago remains in control of Othello, this time not through manipulating words controversially but through silence
  - The final lines of the play are focused on Iago not Othello – a fitting end for a tragedy that had such a dominating and fascinating villain? A final sign of Iago's power over others – even when he does no longer interfere?
  - BUT – it could be argued that Iago gets his punishment
    - = his plotting is undone by the two characters who have possibly been betrayed the most by Iago – Emilia's evidence and Roderigo's letters
    - = he remains alive to see Cassio being promoted again – is this worse than death for him? This time, there is nothing he will be able to do about it!
    - = Cassio is charged with deciding the torture for Iago