

# Role of desdemona



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

If any character in Othello embodies goodness, it is Desdemona. In simple terms, she appears to be the antithesis of all the evil and malice that is represented by Iago. Yet she is not a completely 'flat' character - Shakespeare gives to her certain characteristics and human qualities that result in her being a far deeper and more interesting character. Much of the interest in her is owing to the fact that each character in the plot appears to have his/her own impression and opinion of her, and that, in some cases - not the least Othello himself - this impression is altered as the play unfolds. It would be natural to think that her own father, Brabantio, would have the truest and most accurate opinion of Desdemona. However, it would be equally natural to think that a father would have a rose-tinted impression, his vision coloured by love for his daughter. The latter is the case with Brabantio. He describes Desdemona as 'unhappy girl', which is rather ironic given that she has just married the man of her choice. Brabantio sees her as 'a maiden never bold,/Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion/Blushed at herself'.

Although he claims that she is so modest that she would blush at her own passion and desires, he may well here be indicating unwittingly the strength of these hitherto suppressed desires. Brabantio regards his daughter as an innocent child, who has been stolen by a "lascivious" Othello, the "foul thief" who "hast enchanted her". He believes that "she is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted/By spells and medicines". This view is similar to that apparently held by Iago - although who can say what Iago really thought?

He describes Desdemona as the innocent party and Othello as the “Barbary horse”, the devil incarnate, the “old black ram (that)/Is tugging your white ewe”. Closely linked with Desdemona’s innocence – that is with her moral fairness – is her physical fairness, described elegantly in Cassio’s courteous verse as “a maid/That paragons description and wild fame,/One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,/And in th’essential vesture of creation/Does tire the ingener”. Even in the light of Cassio’s tendency to speak with copious amounts of hyperbole, Desdemona’s beauty is undeniable.

Ironically, it is her beauty and the praise she receives for it that eventually leads to her tragic downfall. However, Desdemona’s character is deeper than her skin-deep beauty and innocence. Shakespeare gives her a far more human form, a form that allows her to be wooed by the warlike Othello, whose life had been dominated by “all quality,/Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war”. She appears not to be the innocent girl, blushing at the thought of such marital activity, but rather “she’d come again (I. . . back from her domestic chores), and with a greedy ear/Devour up my discourse”. By the very fact that she is prepared against the wishes of her father to elope with a soldier – and, moreover, a black soldier – one can see that she is not simply the “white ewe” that Brabantio sees. In fact, Brabantio even comes to realise Desdemona’s potential for independent action when he warns prophetically, “Look at her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see,/She has deceived her father, and may thee”.

This less flat image, this image of a mature young lady who can act on her own initiative, is further reinforced when she shows herself quite capable of presenting herself in the council chamber before the Duke and all the

assembled senators, and speaking up for herself in a direct and yet still elegant manner. She shows a great sense of duty and respect towards the two men in her life. She sees her "noble father" as "the lord of duty" to whom is "bound for life and education". She goes on to say that she is required to follow her late mother's example and place her husband above her father.

Therefore, she "may profess (her faith)/Due to the Moor my lord". An indication of the faith she inspires in people, not least in Othello, is given in the Moor's highly ironic words, "My life upon her faith". Yet, in contrast to these ideas that Desdemona's character is one of honesty and clearness, her reputation is constantly being undermined by the sordid allegations of Iago. This master of manipulation and malice attempts to instill in the mind of Roderigo the impression that Desdemona is simply a common prostitute who will quickly tire of the Moor and make herself available for Roderigo.

Iago persuades his companion to "put money in thy purse" by convincing him that "it cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor... She must change for youth. When she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice". Iago also manages to create a false impression of Desdemona in the mind of Othello, convincing him that she is a "lewd minx", the "Devil" and the "cunning whore of Venice". It is this description (and misconception) that causes Othello to murder his wife.

However Desdemona's deathbed bearing, actions and words reveal her true character. Her sense of confusion is apparent; she does not understand why Othello has turned on her in the way he has: "I understand the fury in your

words,/But not the words". This, perhaps, demonstrates that she is still the innocent ewe of her father's eye, unprepared for life as a soldier's wife. In addition to being innocent in the sense of being naive, Desdemona is undoubtedly innocent in the sense of being blameless. Her death is not her fault; as her dying words maintain, " A guiltless death I die".

This demonstrates how Shakespeare intended her character to be that of the embodiment of goodness. This is re-enforced in the very last words she speaks. When asked by Emilia who it was who had murdered her, Desdemona replies, " Nobody, I myself. Farewell. /Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell! ". These two lines encompass the characteristics that make up Desdemona: innocence, naivete, a slowness to blame others and a readiness to accept her death as being the result of her own (imagined, non-existent) faults.