

# Othello

[Literature](#), [Character](#)



Othello By: CMB 1. To analyze the structural development of Othello, consider Othello's autobiographical speeches in act 1, scene 3. Explain how Othello's portrait of himself and his cultural background might have contributed to his manipulation of Iago. Answer: Based on Othello's autobiographical speeches in act 1, scene 3, it shows that Othello has no knowledge of his own to counter this insider's generalizations about Venetian wives. He knows nothing of Venice apart from the few months' residence during which his courtship took place. A soldier since boyhood, he is unused to any peacetime society. Although he is a Venetian by association and allegiance, whatever he knows of the customs and assumptions of Venice is learned, not instinctive. At line 81 he apologizes because rude am I in my speech and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace. In this line, he sees his limitation because he has been engaged in the business of war from the time he was a little boy until now, when he is in his middle age. Look at the way he expresses this span of time — since these arms of mine had seven years' pith till now some nine moons wasted. He speaks of his youth as if he were a tree that grows for seven years, adding a ring to the core, or pith, with each year's growth. This language is highly poetic in its own unique way, not like the formal rhetoric of gentlemen like Roderigo. He has spent his life dealing with military matters and feels ill-equipped to discuss life outside the army. It is this perceived cultural deprivation and lack of sophistication that Iago will take advantage of. If Iago, a native, says Venetian women are habitually unfaithful, it must be so. According to Paul Robeson, who compared the Moor's insecurity to what an American soldier in the occupying army in Japan might feel in courting a Japanese woman, he

said that an American soldier was totally ignorant of the culture and its customs and has no basis on which to disbelieve the advice offered him. Othello's warrior-past thus contributed to his manipulation of Iago. He is decisive, as a good commander must be. He does not hesitate in doubt and when resolved must act. There is also a gap between Othello's years of exclusively masculine experience in the "tented field" and Desdemona's sheltered Venetian girlhood that even the most loving marriage can hardly bridge. He is black, she is white. He is middle-aged, she is young. It shows that the marriage of Desdemona and Othello is like a union of opposites. But then, we can say that neither this disparity in age nor Othello's unfamiliarity with Venice is in the story in which Shakespeare based his play. It seems that Shakespeare was directing our attention to the tragic vulnerability of love itself. Desdemona's devotion is total while Othello's love may be based in part on her mirroring back to him his best self. It is based on the speeches of Othello in act one, scene 3. ("She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" [1. 3. 193-94], he has clearly invested his life in their new relationship. Each is dependent on the other, yet each is necessarily separated in isolated selfhood. I could also say that somehow narcissism, which is a personality disorder characterized by the patient's overestimation of his or her own appearance and abilities and an excessive need for admiration and self-dramatization that are too apparent in the Moor have also contributed a lot in his manipulation of Iago. His social insecurity renders him open to Iago's insinuations. 2. Analyze the images of women in Othello from the viewpoint of gender and class. What role do the women fulfil in the patriarchal system? What position do they

occupy in Venetian society? Do not overlook Cassio's treatment of Desdemona and Bianca as well as the various images of women with which Iago entertains his audience in act 2, scene 1. Answer: Throughout history, the role of women has been heavily debated. Women need to struggle for the rights they have today, even if some of us may still question if women really do have the same rights as a man but then we can see that women have earned their place in society today. In Shakespeare's Othello, there are three women playing a vital role in understanding the role of women. Only one of the women in this play survives. All the women have no separate identity within the play; all three are married or associated with a male character. Bianca is the mistress of Cassio, Emilia is married to Iago and Desdemona is married with Othello. According to the time that the play was written in and the general hierarchy within Venetian society men hold all the power and women are considered to be of low intellect. Each woman represents a different social level, Desdemona being the highest and Bianca being of the lowest. Bianca does not appear in the play as much as the other female characters yet her presence is key to the death of Desdemona as well as other play themes. Iago often refers to her as a prostitute, "A house wife that by selling her desires, Buys herself bread and clothes". She has fallen in love with Cassio, yet he does not speak of his returned affection for her due to his desire for status, and her social standing would affect this dramatically. Iago's wife and Desdemona's lady is Emilia. It was she who supplied the handkerchief of Desdemona to Iago. In the play, she does not question Iago too much when she gives him the handkerchief. This illustrates female ability to trust in the play. She also remains ignorant of the entire plot

until the end, when her life comes to an abrupt ending, at the hands of her husband, Iago. She has many honorable qualities such as her honesty in addition to her loyalty towards Desdemona. Iago does not treat her like his wife until he requires something; this shows this marriage was purely one in order to gain status among peers. Throughout the play Desdemona is a symbol of innocence and helplessness. She has a tendency to be sympathetic towards other people's situations, like Cassio. This also further inspired Othello's jealousy when Iago pointed out they were speaking in privacy. She has a loyalty to her husband in all aspects of life, whether it is mental or physical. This would have meant that she would not have lied to Othello about losing the handkerchief, which she did so as not to hurt his feelings. However Othello sees this as an attempt to deceive him and conceal the alleged truth about her affair with Cassio. Even her final words, indicate that she blames her death on herself, and not her jealous husband. In the patriarchal system, we can see that obedience and silence were very much part of the patriarchal conception of femininity. In the play, we can see that women are required to be silent and obedient to their husbands. They are not given the power to argue and question their will. Desdemona when she is married, she slips into the role of the submissive wife. Obedient to Othello's every command, she says to Emilia - after Othello tells her "Get you to bed on the instant" - 'we must not now displease him'. At this point Desdemona becomes more of a stereotype, her identity disappearing as Othello's jealousy becomes more defined. Her identity diminishes until she fits into the stereotype of the silent woman. In Othello, there is a pervasive notion of woman as property, prized indeed but more as object than as a

person. This indicates one aspect of a deep-seated sexual pathology in Venice. The Venetian value system of acquiring and possessing is clear in the frequency of commercial images in the play's language, including other literal and metaphoric "jewels" that implicate Iago and even Othello. When Iago repeatedly advises "put money in thy purse", Roderigo is persuaded he can win Desdemona with jewels. Good name is a jewel, Iago assures Othello and therefore can be stolen. We can also see in the play a psychological web that ensnares men and women alike. In the last scene, Emilia vows to speak in spite of men — "Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (5. 2. 262-63). But before she can, Iago stabs her into silence. Othello tries to sum up his life before ending it, but his moving picture of "one that loved not wisely, but too well" is incomplete. In that same speech he likens Desdemona to "a pearl richer than all his tribe," still caught in the Venetian economy of worth. Othello stops his own self-analysis with his sword, and Iago, still alive, refuses explanation: "What you know, you know./ From this time forth I never will speak a word. During Shakespeare's lifetime women were only seen as objects. If Shakespeare were alive today he would be very surprised to see how far women have come. Women are no longer just objects used to fulfil the pleasures of men, but women have become much more. They have become devoted wives, loving mothers and whatever else their imaginations allow them to think up.

3. Consider the extent to which the settings of the play suggest a symbolic contrast between the social and political orders of Venice and Cyprus. To what extent do these symbolic settings reflect psychological changes in Othello? Answer: Othello takes place in Venice (in northern Italy) and Cyprus

(an island in the eastern Mediterranean about forty miles south of present-day Turkey). The time is between 1489 and 1571. It is interesting to note that Venice is the setting for both major Shakespeare plays dealing in part with racial prejudice, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. As one of the world's leading sea powers, Venice was the center of commercialism and materialism while Cyprus—as a strategically located island which yielded substantial harvests of olives, grapes and various grains—was much prized throughout its history. Assyrians, Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, and Byzantines all fought over and occupied it. England's King Richard I, the Lion-Hearted, conquered Cyprus in 1191 but later ceded it to the French. Venice seized the island in 1489 and in 1571 the Ottoman Turks brought Cyprus under its control. Based on these descriptions of Venice and Cyprus, we can see a type culture and society arising in the two places. Venice, being a center of commercialism and materialism, therefore, corruption and conflict arising from avarice, social status, and fierce competition while Cyprus, an island with a high value due to its harvests thus, many countries are fighting over to occupy it, we can see a society where people are having a simple life in a farmhouse and so, competition and social status is not really a great deal in the society. The type of society where *Othello* took place has contributed a lot to psychological changes in the play. The play's hero as well as its villain may thus be implicated in the disaster that befalls the marriage. From a different perspective, we can see psychological dimensions to this tragedy, a tragedy in which social forces have determining power beyond merely individual drives and deficiencies. It is in the Venetian society that labels *Othello* and *Iago* inferior, *Iago* for being far down in the social

hierarchy and Othello for being foreign and dark-skinned. The tragedy evolves from and reacts to a particular society, which is dramatized for us first in Venice itself and then, uncertainly maintained in Cyprus. Venetian society is in many ways attractive, embellished by graceful accomplishments like Desdemona's singing, playing, and dancing (3. 3. 216), sustained by a civil order one can take for granted. Brabantio disbelieves those who claim he has been robbed: " This is Venice. My house is not a grange [i. e., a farmhouse]" (1. 1. 119). Act 1, scene 3 shows us a rational government whose officers deliberate carefully under pressure, hear evidence judiciously. If the senators do justice to the alien Moor who has married a senator's daughter, they are motivated less by fairness than by their desperate need for General Othello to stop the Turkish " theft" of their possession, Cyprus. Iago's story (discourse) works, not because he is cunning, but because his lies perfectly mirror the presumptions, assumptions, and prejudices of a Venetian culture that sees blacks as exotic, inferior to whites, ignorant, barbaric, and prone to revert to type. Othello moves from being a colonized subject existing on the terms of white Venetian society and trying to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way until he occupies his position. Even Othello resigns himself to this perception of himself because he is engulfed by the overpowering ideology of Venice's political, economic, and cultural elite---a society that uses him for his prowess as a general, yet is unwilling to include him as a member in good standing of its " in-crowd." According to Sinfield, Othello kills himself because he cannot reconcile his barbaric nature (by Venetian standards) with the ideal of the " civilized" man Venice purports to



produce. (Remember, Othello himself tragically believes the prevailing ideology of the Venetian state he serves like a magnificent... slave.) These psychological changes happened to Othello are thus the result of the type of culture and society arising in the settings of the play.

4. Analyze the images of women that Desdemona uses in act 1, scene 3, lines 185-88, and in act 4, scene 3, lines 25-32. To what extent do these images help Desdemona justify her actions and communicate her feelings and emotions? How effective is Desdemona's use of language in both passages? Answer: In act 1, scene 3, we can see that Desdemona displays some traces of self-assertion. In her choosing of Othello as her husband, she exercises her own desire, subverting the female role of passivity within the patriarch, and marries him without parental consent. This is a rather courageous act of will, which could have resulted in much strife. However, she handles the situation with cleverness and a manipulation which outwits the male judges who listen to her. When her father questions her about her marriage she answers forcefully, first pacifying him and then justifying her disobedience on the very grounds of patriarchal obedience and duty. In her following speeches: "My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. / To you I am bound, for life and education.../ You are the lord of my duty/ I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband, and so much duty as my mother showed to you preferring you before her father. / So much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord. ", it shows that Desdemona by her cleverness thus appears obedient in her disobedience. Desdemona answers her father when he attempts to exert authority as a dominating parent and an intimidating member of the city's power elite. He asks her, " Do you

perceive in all this noble company [intimidation], / Where most you owe your obedience [domination]?" She cleverly uses the inevitably embedded conflict and dissidence that are hidden within the social orders that control her. By doing so, Desdemona wrests some control from her father and from the political structure of Venice. She answers that she owes her allegiance to her husband (Othello), just as her own mother owes her allegiance to her husband (Brabantio), Desdemona's father (1. 3. 179-89)! The subtle defiance works because she expertly exploits the potential for dissidence within the ideology produced by and for the social structures in which she was born, lives, and will die. Shakespeare shows Desdemona's behavior in her relationship with Othello before the marriage to be slightly manipulative also. For Desdemona tells Othello in a very suggestive way after she has fallen in love with him, as Othello himself relates — " if I had a friend that love [me] / I should but teach him how to tell your story,/ And that would woo [me]. " In act 4, scene 3 which is during the time she is married she slips into the role of the submissive wife. Obedient to Othello's every command, she says to Emilia- after Othello tells her, " Get you to bed on the instant" — " we must not now displease him". At this point Desdemona becomes more of a stereotype, her identity disappearing as Othello's jealousy becomes more defined. Her identity diminishes until she fits into the stereotype of the silent woman. Othello denies her right to a voice when he said " Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,/ Made to write ' whore' upon? " In there we can see obedience and silence were very much part of the patriarchal conception of femininity. In act 4, scene 3, tragically, Desdemona is apparently aware of her imminent death. She, not Othello, asks Emilia to put her

wedding sheets on the bed, and she asks Emilia to bury her in these sheets should she die first. The last time we see Desdemona before she awakens to find Othello standing over her with murder in his eyes, she sings a song she learned from her mother's maid: " She was in love; and he proved mad / And did forsake her. She had a song of willow. / . . . / And she died singing it. That song tonight / Will not go from my mind" (IV. iii. 27—30). Like the audience, Desdemona seems able only to watch as her husband is driven insane with jealousy. Though she maintains to the end that she is " guiltless, "

Desdemona also forgives her husband (V. ii. 133). In these passages used by Desdemona we can clearly see her forgiveness of Othello and thus may help the audience to forgive him as well. REFERENCES " Othello". Sparksnotes.

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treatment female characters in the tragedies Hamlet, Othello and Antony and Cleopatra. ph. .