

# "othello" by william shakespeare essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



William Shakespeare, probably the most influential writer in English literature, lived at the age of changes – that's why his creative heritage is so diverse – from optimistic comedies to pathological tragedies and life dramas. The tragedy "Othello" was written between 1602 and 1604 and immediately performed in the theatre. The play is known as pro-peace work, as it can be viewed as a direct response to the war between Venice and Turkey. However, the center of the play is rather interpersonal than political peace, as it depicts the basically doomed relationship between a Moor and a noble woman. The present paper argues that there are two initial factors causing such tragedy in the allegedly happy marriage; they include Othello's active membership in the military service (such enthusiastic warriors wage struggles throughout their entire lives and are likely to destroy their happiness with their own hands) and his prejudice against white women of aristocratic background, probably associated with his racial and class inferiority complex.

In order to understand the meaning of the above listed factors, it would be useful to address briefly the social and historical context of the literary work. "Othello" is attributed to the second literary period in Shakespeare's creative writing and as critics argue, it was marked with considerable frustration with Elizabeth's power that resulted in the intensification of feudal disintegration (Adamson, 1980, p. 109). With respect to the fall of the favored and time-honored polity, the playwright began to view literature as a tool of expressing his tragic experiences – that's why 'Othello' demonstrates a melancholic tone and has a pessimistic (fatal) ending, typical for Shakespearean tragedy.

With the plot concentrating on ambivalent or momentary emotions, the characters automatically move towards proving all racial biases and prejudices, existing in Elizabethan society. As one can presume, Shakespeare in his tragedy to certain degree challenges the existing societal values in order to establish humanism as a worldview and demonstrate the most undermining aspect of cross-gender relationship.

As it has already been noted, first and foremost, Othello is a soldier, or, more precisely, a warrior. From the first acts of the play, his 'occupation' influences his family life. At the beginning of the play he says: "the tyrant custom.../Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war/ My thrice-driven bed of down" (Act I, Scene I, at [www.william-shakespeare.info](http://www.william-shakespeare.info)). However, he is a bit hypocritical, as the protagonist seems to have actualized himself in the military service, which has become a synonym replacing the word "life". He might not be aware of this fact, but he is addicted to warfare, no matter whether he likes his occupation or really loathes it as a tyrannical compulsion, as he seeks to combine the other dimensions of his life (including friendship, social life and romantic relationships) with his original profession – as flexibly as possible. For instance, the majority of his friends are his mates from the army, his social life is reduced to inquiries about urban changes caused by military conflicts; finally, even the matrimony can not convince him to switch to a sedentary lifestyle. Therefore, the main character is already married to military service, which appears to have seized the greatest part of his identity.

His military career also rewards him with a number of tales and stories about war, and they in fact made him an interesting interlocutor, attractive for Desdemona. On the other hand, after the fall of Turkish power, Othello becomes almost 'unemployed', as his main function turns from active to passive defense of the city (Adamson, 1980, p. 118). Having lost the means of demonstrating his masculinity, Othello feels uneasiness and discomfort, spending increasingly more time at home, with his wife. He thinks Desdemona's interest in him will become weaker, because he is no longer able to express himself in a socially favorable way, given that his heroism has already become history. Iago skillfully manipulates his discomfort and reinforces Othello's worries and fears – he even induces an epileptic attack in the moor (Adamson, 1980, p. 119). In addition, Iago says, Cassio, Othello's spiritual teacher and good friend, has seen Othello's breakdown, causing much more embarrassment associated with a fear of becoming "feminine".

Othello in this case faces a problem of choice, because he has always identified himself as a heroic romantic lover and linked his family life with his military advancements. Having 'retired', Othello says 'farewell' not only to his military career, but also to his masculinity in general, i. e. his ambitions, spiritual strength and willpower: "Farewell the plum'd troops and big wars/ That make ambition virtue! O, farewell, /Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,/ The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear piercing fife,/ The royal banner, and all quality, / Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!" (Act III, Scene III). Clearly, Othello is completely preoccupied with his identity as a military leader, so his action after 'retirement' are aimed at self-

establishment and to proving his self-value – this is a main factor that contributed to his downfall. Other factors might be found in his relationships with Iago and Desdemona.

Iago, as a most prominent villain in the play, weaves his intrigues against Othello since the beginning – for instance, he holds that Othello has an affair with his wife, Emilia, and finally kills Emilia for her ‘unfaith’; this event becomes one of the most influential. Othello’s has always been suspicious concerning Iago, because Iago desires to destroy his marriage to Desdemona, but Iago arranges several ‘accidents’ (such as Cassio’s disgrace) which seem spontaneous and unexpected. Since Iago is Othello’s ‘colleague’, the Moor perceives him as equal, as a person of the same occupation and interests, so there is a kind of friendship, very peculiar friendship, between the two men. Othello intuitively feels Iago is deceptive and dishonest, but the Moor cannot ignore Iago’s logic and trusts his ‘soldier’s word’.

Finally, the main character’s lifelong engagement into military services has determined his methods of reasoning, which can not be referred to as analytical or logical, as contemporary soldiers were normally taught obedience to superiors’ orders as well as loyalty, whereas critical thinking skill was rather viewed as a fault. Due to the fact that Othello has made a brilliant military manager, his own ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood is to great extent limited or impaired, especially in terms of cross-gender relationships, in which he is unlikely to be experienced enough having spent his younger years in barracks.

And according to the old soldiers' stereotype, Othello believes all woman are likely to keep in secret some details of their life, i. e. considers women crafty and sometimes manipulative, whereas soldiers in his conscious are associated with purity and openness. On the one hand, he loves Desdemona, because he wooed and won her and now regards her mainly as his prize. In addition, being a racial outsider in Venice, the Moor needed to marry local woman in order to strengthen his position and increase his self-esteem. Thus, Othello's adores Desdemona since she has become his source of inspiration and raised his prestige in the Venetian society (Adamson, 1980, p. 121).

At the beginning of the work, the author indicates that no meritocratic factors come into play, when two warm hearts were uniting, since Desdemona ignores family taboos and barriers, constructed by her relatives, seeking only to stay with her beloved, even if she will need to leave her home for faraway and dangerous places: " The rites for which I love him are bereft me,/And I a heavy interim shall support/ By his dear absence. Let me go with him" (Act I, Scene III). As one can assume, the young woman is ready to sacrifice her safety and comfort and abandon her friendly environment in order to stay close to Othello, regardless of his race and profession. Hence Desdemona unconditionally relies upon Othello and even doesn't try to cast doubt on his actions, on his request for Iago's surveillance over her, in particular.

Notwithstanding Desdemona's unquestionable fidelity, Othello gradually develops a distorted vision of her deeds; it also needs to be noted that there

Shakespeare incorporates a number of symbols of blindness (as a poetic synonym of mistrust) into the work. For instance, the protagonist has darker skin, which might also be associated with the darkening of sight; moreover, the final scenes are set in the rooms carefully sealed from sunlight. As the literary work reveals, the Moor appears less confident and trustful than his spouse, due to his substantial vulnerability to social pressure; his friends, allies and rivals recommend him that the Moor let Desdemona return into her father's nest, as they really do not match each other. The facts about himself suggest the same: either as a soldier, or as a military retiree, he causes inconveniences to Desdemona; moreover, the woman from white Venetian aristocracy definitely deserves a peer rather than a person from racial minorities. Othello might believe that once upon a time his wife will realize her class "supremacy" and seek adultery or remarriage.

Although concerned about the possible dangers, Othello fails to exhibit his fears to the first person involved; he rather indirectly reveals them to Iago, his evil genius. The protagonist obviously views Desdemona's gender as a barrier to constructive communication, and more importantly - as a peril; that's why he asks Iago to look after the woman. Thus, having learned about Desdemona's 'disloyalty', the Moor, as his wife wisely notes, is obsessed with blind and harmful passion: "That death's unnatural that kills for loving./Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?/Some bloody passion shakes your very frame" (Act V, Scene II). This emotion can be interpreted in the following way: the protagonist has been long waiting for the factual

corroboration of his anxieties and thus has a distorted feeling of adverse triumph after discussing his spouse's behavior with Iago.

Expanding the theme of prejudices, it is important to note that Othello appears really embittered and frustrated with Venetian inhospitableness and racial intolerance and therefore subconsciously vents his anger and pain on the nearest and weakest creature, viewing Desdemona as a representative of hostile white community. Hence the author demonstrates the decline of the marital relationship through the disappearance of trust between the mates, and the author blames primarily Othello for his narrow-mindedness and gullibility.

As one can conclude, Othello's minority status and military identity as the most frustrating factors in his family life, as skillfully interwoven by the author so that they reinforce one another: the protagonist's narrow-mindedness, developed during the service, is put into the context of his already existing gender prejudices, resulting from poor knowledge of women, and his race, which makes him increasingly more suspicious about his environment in general and wife in particular.

#### Works cited

Adamson, J. " " Othello" as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling". In Booth, S. (ed.) *King Lear*", " *Othello*": *Indefinition and Tragedy* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.



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