

Analysis of the film "othello" by oliver parker essay sample

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



Analysis of the film “ Othello” by Oliver Parker Essay Sample

The film Othello by director Oliver Parker, is based on the Shakespearean tragedy based on the insecurities of one man, being played upon leading to his undoing at the hands of the one he most trusts, ? honest Iago?. In this essay, we look at how this age old play is dealt with by the medium of film, reviewing the director? s ability to provide an effect caused by insight into the play? s mechanization and interpretation of such affected by visual mastery. This analysis focuses mainly on techniques and devices used to achieve this and their effect.

The effectiveness of Parker? s choice of actors and actresses needs to be first questioned. Cognizant of the character Othello’s empty un-reflective nature, he filled the void with sex and violence, traits embodied through actor Lawrence Fishburne’s stunning visual presence. The idea was to make the erotic relationship between Othello and Desdemona the emotional hinge of the play, and this aspect at least, was handled well by the American actor. Fishburne’s physicality and stilted American speaking of the lines make him the epitome of the alien “ other” inherent in the play? s racist nature. The casting for all of the other parts is just as creative, for example Desdemona is not portrayed as the blond-haired embodiment of innocence as has been the norm in traditional productions. Rather she is sensual and dark-haired, played by the actress, Irene Jacob. Although Shakespeare’s Othello says “ she loved me for the pains I have suffered,” this Desdemona, speaking in

heavily accented English, rather conveys the full measure of erotic chemistry that can precipitate a sudden elopement.

With this in mind, the audience already witnesses a hint of the contrasting value of the play, mirrored well and in fact improved by the film. The movie begins with the image of Othello lifting a black and white mask onto his face (the mask is appropriate? Othello? is a play about identity - both our conception of ourselves and the way we perceive others). This image is also significant of the two-faced god Janus, who is linked to Iago. The symbol is effective as it is a mask of sorrow donned, signifying that it is this? two-faced? nature that causes this tragedy.

In the opening act of the play itself, Iago's show of allegiance to the double-faced god points primarily to the doubleness of Iago himself. However, there is another aspect of Iago's allegiance to Janus which is quite evident especially in the film. This likeness is Iago's being the guardian of doorways and thresholds? a concept played on by Parker's apparent concern with entrances, doorstep hesitations and lurking by windows, in attempts to give the film a thriller effect. It is very important to notice that Iago is repeatedly stationed on a threshold, between inside and outside, often ushering the characters in and out. In the opening of the film, Iago and Roderigo are seen lurking (in the foreground) beside a door, apparently spying on Desdemona who is hurrying to some secret place to be wedded to Othello in the middle of the night. This is also apparent in Act III, scene 3, where when Othello collapses on his bed partly out of shot, the camera reveals Iago still lurking in the doorway. Shortly after, when Othello wakes up with a start in the middle

of the night, having dreamt of Desdemona and Cassio's embraces, and leaves the palace for the beach. Unexpectedly Iago appears stealthily behind him, as if he had been lurking there, and remains for a while in the doorway of the palace with his eyes on Othello before joining him on the beach.

It is believed that from standing at the entrances of houses, at the doors, Janus is considered the patron of beginning and endings. So is Iago given the role of opening and closing most of the scenes. Parker utilizes this, having Iago linger behind the characters after leaving any place he is in. This gives Iago a diabolical, supernatural effect, as he seems to appear behind and beside characters out of some dark abyss. The director makes this even more apparent with his adaption of the significance of the soot in the play, after the villain has devised his plot. The devilish Iago grasps a red hot brand and smears his hands with soot, then places his blackened hand on the lens of the camera, with the effect of a black-out, saying " So will I turn her virtue into pitch, And out of her own goodness make the net, That shall enmesh 'em all"

Thus Iago appears as the absolute master of the gaze, of seeing, hiding and showing things at will; in so doing, he controls the physical and mental movement of characters, as well as the audience whose vision he may aid or obscure at will. The soot he spreads over the " eye" of the camera also suggests the fact that the characters are overly blind. It also testifies to the fact that as the play progresses, night seems to spread over Cyprus (with literally a growing importance of night scenes) overshadowing all the characters, including the fair Desdemona, who becomes, in Othello's very

words, "begrim'd, and black." This furthermore shows Iago as film director, and most of all as god of passageways, with the impression that he steps out of the dramatic universe.

The scheming mastery possessed by Iago is excellently captured and portrayed by the visual devices and symbolic imagery used by the director to make effective his interpretation of Shakespeare's work. Very important is the use of camera focus, a device Parker liberally utilizes to make up for the scenes from the play he has omitted from the film. He particularly makes use of the technique of "rack focus", a device where one character's face is blurred while another's is in focus. This technique is used for dramatic and symbolic effect, significant for instance in the night after the fight scene where Cassio's face is highlighted and Iago's words muffle until inaudible and the view of he and Othello are unclear. This works to further emphasize Iago's God-like persona and pervasive effect. By illuminating the faces of these victims, Parker is forcing us to concentrate on the effects of his words.

Alternately Iago who is standing in the background comes progressively into focus, while the character in the foreground fades out, which produces a new backward-to-forward inversion. This is dramatized on several occasions. As fore-mentioned, in Act II, scene 3, while Iago is reporting to Othello how the fight came about, the camera repeatedly changes focal point, alternately shooting Cassio in focus, while Iago and Othello in the background blur out, and vice versa. Later in the same scene, Iago comes into focus in the far background between Cassio and Othello to signify to Cassio that he has done his utmost to temper Othello's anger. The device is again loaded with

meaning when, in the vaulted armory, Iago who is at first sitting in the background starts making insinuations to Othello, whose face is screened by swords displayed on racks.

Iago is at first out of focus, seen as much as unseen, while his initial tacit suspicions of Desdemona's apparent infidelity are shut out by Othello, yet seep through his closed ears to infect his mind. As Iago comes back into focus (before he walks over to Othello who has moved away from him at the first disclosure), one can assume that Iago's poisoned words have already made their way into Othello's thoughts. The same device will be at work at the end of the play, while Othello is reading the letter brought from Venice by Lodovico, to convey the double focus of the scene. The focus keeps shifting from Othello who is perusing the letter and Desdemona in the background who is talking with Lodovico about Cassio, showing the build-up of intensity leading to the slap.

This use of indirection and distortion of the gaze is a device utilized again by Parker, seen when the characters arrive in Cyprus, Iago observes behind him without being seen, the courteous exchange between Desdemona and Cassio reflected on the blade of his knife, uttering the words: "Very good, ay, well said, whisper: in as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio." The reflection is blurred and warped on the unpolished blade. This is very significant, as the image blurred on blade shows that Iago is unsure of the authenticity of this action, yet pounces upon it? seeing it through his blade signifying the violence he intends to create out of it. Once again his

likeness to the two-faced god is apparent as he sees everything, before him and behind him, forward and backward.

One of the most important signifiers of Othello's insanity is his obsession with images of Desdemona and Cassio having sex. These images are combined by Parker to create a flashing sequence forming one of Othello's nightmares. Whereas in the scene where Othello and Desdemona consummate their marriage, we see Othello's black hand grasp Desdemona's white one, during Othello's disturbed visions, the camera instead shows us Cassio's white hand over Desdemona's. These images are particularly tormenting for Othello as his potent love for Desdemona and insecurities about his age and race result in a sense of unworthiness. His possessiveness of Desdemona is an important pioneer to his jealousy which is predominantly sexual as he treats Desdemona's beauty as the cause which inflamed his love for her but which he also believes to have tempted Cassio, thus leading to his madness.

In conclusion, Fishburne and Jacob may not have been the ideal candidates for the portrayal of Othello and Desdemona respectfully, due to their lack of... , they have nonetheless done well with their roles for the purpose they had been granted them ? to embody an erotic screen presence, as Parker intended to re-conceive the play as a sexual thriller. Saved by the acting genius of Kenneth Branagh as Iago, as well as the devices and effective camera use previously mentioned, this production would have indeed been a disaster. Irene Jacob's sensuous Desdemona is an erotic match for Fishburne on the screen and Othello does not have to be crazed to imagine her making

love to another man, especially after Parker inserts a scene in which Othello watches Desdemona dance with Cassio, with a look of sensual pleasure in her eye. All of this makes Othello's jealousy more believable. The director embodies this passion symbolically in Desdemona's dance with fire, which she passes around first to Othello then hands to Cassius. Suggestive of a nature prone to infidelity.

In his manipulative interchanges with Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello, Parker through his screenplay fashions Iago to occasionally assume a seductive feminine demeanor, wooing them with yielding words and promises. This is predominantly shown in the scene after Othello's arrival in Cyprus where the celebration of the Turkish fleet's destruction has become a drunken orgy. In a cart rocking above them the camera reveals, without being overly graphic, that a couple is having intercourse while below a gleeful Iago embraces Roderigo and deviously sets him on to further machinations. This apparent nature is also implied in the body language between Fishburne and Branagh suggesting dominance-submission, sadism-masochism. Thus, this possibly suggested aspect of homosexual attraction being the power behind Iago's evil actions, by Shakespeare in the play, is also embodied into Parker's film.

With his fallbacks caused by omission of scenes and lines, Othello's lack of a significant fall from innocence, no defining tragic moment, and Fishburne's offer of nothing more than his physical presence; Parker hoped that sexual passion would bring emotional coherence to a play that has puzzled Shakespeare critics for two centuries. What however managed to save him from complete disaster, was his excellent use of symbolism inherent in the

chess pieces (black king representing Othello, White queen as Desdemona and white knight as Cassio) held in and tossed out of Iago's hand, as well as other fore-mentioned symbols (such as the mask) and brilliant use of film's perks (camera focus-point and devices).