

# The virtuous character of desdemona



Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as is virtue. Such is the case of the virtue of the character Desdemona, from the play *The Tragedy of Othello*, by William Shakespeare. Desdemona was shown as a low moral, virtue less female in the essay *The Character of Desdemona* by John Quincy Adams. Contrary to this, the modern reader can see that Shakespeare actually showed her to be a virtuous and loving person, whose own innocence led to her demise. Is Desdemona a virtuous character? Is there anyone who can be so self-sacrificing?

Shakespeare is careful to give her a few minor flaws- her treatment of Brabantio, her stubborn persistence about Cassio, her lie about the handkerchief- to make her realistic. But the overall character of Desdemona is of high stature, it is her very innocence that makes her a victim of circumstance. As a young Venetian woman, Desdemona has lived a sheltered life in her father's home. This sheltering gave her an innate passion for all the things that she was denied. She was denied all things that a modern day woman would be allowed to do, including the right to fall in love with someone free of social status, age or race.

She then falls in love, probably for the first time, with a man several years older than herself, from a faraway land, and of a different race. She is captivated by the man's stories and wishes she were a man so that she might also have an exciting life, the very life she was denied because of her being a woman. Knowing that her father would disapprove of her marriage to such a man, she elopes with Othello. Desdemona is portrayed as a lovely, courageous, gentle woman, deeply in love with her husband. However, she is not a perfect character but her morals, and her virtues are still there.

In the play Desdemona says to her father Brabantio, "(I, iii; 180) My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty: To you I am bound for life and education; My life and education both do learn me How to respect you; you are the lord of duty". No matter what the circumstances may be, she never stopped respecting her father. Though still she had to follow her heart. Her lover Othello says of her, " She gave me for my pains a world of sighs" (I, iii; 168) However one person in time may see an event or character, another person in another time can perceive the same to be of completely different meanings.

John Quincy Adams says that Desdemona lacks virtues and all she does is cause her father grief to his dying bed. He says that " the passion of Desdemona for Othello is unnatural, solely and exclusively because of his color. " Which if looked at by today" s standards would hold of no significance what the persons skin color is. Second he says that her elopement to him, and secret marriage with him, indicate a personal character not only very deficient in delicacy, but totally regardless of filial duty, of female modesty, and of ingenuous shame.

Third he states, " her deficiency in delicacy is discernible in her conduct and discourse throughout the play. " Altogether he thinks that she has done nothing but wrong when she ran away for her love, and that she has low morals and no virtues because she has wronged her father. In contrast to what John Quincy Adams said of the character of Desdemona, proof from the play itself states otherwise. " If virtue no delighted beauty lack, Your son-in-law is far more fair than black", John Quincy Adams uses that quote to

illustrate how the skin color love affair had shown Desdemona to be of low morals, and that she had committed an unnatural thing.

When as seen by today" s standards it is perfectly all right for two people of different races, ages, sexes, nationality and religions to be in love and to wed. Another quote from the play used by John Q. Adams is, " With the Moor, say'st thou? --Who would be a father? " that quote helps to illustrate how the father was hurt by the actions of his daughter. When in fact Desdemona meant no harm to her father, she simply wanted to do what" s right as is said by Iago, " She that was ever fair and never proud, Had tongue at will and yet was never loud... (II, i; 158).

Also shown to us by Desdemona herself is how she felt towards her father all along, again proving wrong the portrayal of her by John Q. Adams, "(I, iii; 180) My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty: To you I am bound for life and education; My life and education both do learn me How to respect you; you are the lord of duty". Desdemona was loved by many, including Othello, and rightfully so, " But that I love the gentle Desdemona" (I, ii; 24).

Even John Q. Adams is quoted saying himself in his essay, " Desdemona, ... is amiable and lovely," towards the top of his last paragraph. Even he in the end admitted to the fact that Desdemona's character is amiable, lovely, virtuous, and still retains its morals. Many people from separate time periods can look at Desdemona in different ways. The modern reader will apply the modern aspects of life to the story and look at it from that perspective, while someone like John Quincy Adams looks at it from the vision of the time period he lived in.