

# Othello college essay



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In Shakespeare's Othello, the men are frequently seen as coxcombs. The minor male characters are presented in an exaggerated fashion, appearing almost as caricatures of vain foolish men who do not truly know themselves.

Roderigo claims to see Desdemona as "full of most blest condition", yet he is willing to plot and scheme to obtain her physically. (II. i. 271) Cassio refers to Desdemona with divinely virtuous words, yet he dismisses a woman who loves him as a "monkey". However, it is not only the minor male characters that suffer from this fatal flaw.

Of the two major male characters, neither Othello nor Iago know themselves, and it is this that leads them to their ultimate downfalls. Iago's mistaken tendency to see himself as a brilliant figure is what brings him to his downfall. The ultimate little man, Iago enjoys mocking those he torments in secret, relishing in their pain. As he schemes alone, he gloats of the fact that he is able to "make the Moor thank [him], love [him], and reward [him], for making him egregiously an ass and practicing upon his peace and quiet even to madness". (II.

ii. 330 - 333) He sees himself as an uncommonly intelligent man, often complimenting his own plans: "Work on, my medicine, work!". (IV. i. 54) Iago maintains this most erroneous self-image as he plots throughout the play.

Another of Iago's faults is his refusal to recognize his complete lack of understanding of women. Indeed, "he accepts generalization - especially generalizations about women - as true". (Neely, 1980, P 73) He appears to be comfortable enough when engaging in witty banter with Desdemona in

Act Two, but is at a complete loss when confronted with her anguish and despair in Act Four as he retreats to using simple and brief exclamations when addressing her. Instead of recognizing his nonexistent knowledge of women, Iago simply dismisses them as “villainous whores” whose “very nature will instruct [them] to” chose their sexual appetites over their morals and ethics.

He sees women as purely sexual beings, and because of this, Iago is quick to dismiss kindness and virtue among women. When Roderigo brings up Desdemona’s benevolence, Iago sweeps it aside with a curt, “virtue? A Fig!”. (A1 S3 L361) He then moves on to further degrade Desdemona in Roderigo’s mind, stating that “the wine she drinks is made of grapes”. (A2 S1 L273) Iago does not believe that women can be capable of a moral center, he does not believe in their ability to be purely just and kind. Iago’s overconfidence in his plans, lack of knowledge of women, and his adamant refusal to believe in the possibility of goodness in women betrays him. He underestimates Emilia, who possesses true goodness in her heart as she betrays the man she loves to do the right thing.

She reveals Iago’s plans and dooms him despite of her love for him. Since it was Iago himself who refused to acknowledge his limited understanding of women, and the fact that goodness truly exists, it is really his lack of self-knowledge that brought his downfall. However, as Neely (1980) states, “even protected as it is from reality, Iago’s cynicism has cracks”. (P 73) He grudgingly admits that he admires Cassio’s “daily beauty”, and that it is that particular beauty “that makes [him] ugly”. (A5 S1 L21) He aspires for Cassio’s job and attempts to relate to Cassio and Othello’s love for

Desdemona: " now I do love her too". (A2 S1 L313) Though lacking in self-knowledge, Iago has - however minutely - recognized some of his faults.

This is the reason Iago's downfall occurs from a lesser height than that of Othello. Othello, on the other hand, possesses a rigid image of himself that shatters and quickly rebuilds without a moment's pause to accept the truth.

At the beginning of the play, Othello states that he is not requesting Desdemona's presence in Cyprus " to please the palate of [his] appetite, nor to comply with heat (the young affects in [him] defunct) and proper satisfaction". (A1 S3 L297 - 299) It is as Neely discusses: " for Othello, sex is secondary".

1980, P 72) He claims that he does not " make a life of jealousy with fresh suspicions" when Iago first begins to insinuate towards the possible infidelity of Desdemona. (S3 A3 L208) As Iago builds towards the idea of Desdemona's infidelity, Othello declares that " if [he] [does] prove her haggard, though that her jesses were [his] dear heartstrings, [he'd] whistle her off and let her down the wind to prey at fortune. " He maintains that even if he does find her false, he will be able to simply let her go. As the play progresses, Othello finds the image of himself crumbling. Despite his insistence of his lack of sexual appetite, it drives him to the brink of insanity when Iago suggests that Desdemona was " naked with her friend in bed".

(A4 S1 L5) Despite his insistence of his lack of jealousy, he calls her " a subtle whore, a closet lock and key of villainous secrets" as he comes to realize her infidelity. (A4 S2 L23) Despite his insistence that he would be able to let her go if she was discovered to be unfaithful, he furiously cries that he

“ will chop her into messes! ” for “ cuckolding” him. These contradictions of words are the contradictions of a man who does not know himself. As his entire view of himself collapses, Othello cannot accept the new traits he discovers in himself. He wanders through the halls, bellowing “ farewell! Othello’s occupation is gone! “.

(A3 S3 L409) For Othello, it has always been his occupation that defines who he is. He has more than once made reference to his role as a soldier, and his cry of the disappearance of his occupation signifies that he feels he has completely lost the identity he has always thought to possess. Desdemona is the main cause of his painful self-discovery, and that is why he chooses to end her life to rebuild his self-image. “ His conflicts are resolved, his need to idealize and degrade her momentarily reconciled only when he kills her, performing a sacrifice which is also a murder. ” (Neely, 1980, P 73) He performs the murder, believing that he is on his way to inner peace once again, only to have his newly formed harmony snatched from him when he discovers Desdemona’s innocence. This too-late discovery brings Othello to the climax of his despair, and he commits suicide.

It is only because Othello’s lack of self-knowledge that he felt the need to repair his self-image. In repairing his self-image, he took the step to murder Desdemona. His discovery of her innocence after her death is what brings him to his downfall. In turn, Othello brought upon his own downfall because of his lack of self-knowledge.

Within an entire play full of men who do not know themselves, it is Iago and Othello that bring their ultimate demise through lack of self-knowledge.