

My perception of william shakespeare's "othello"

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My Perception of William Shakespeare's Othello Othello, by William Shakespeare, is perhaps not as exciting as a ravishingly sexy poster of Laurence Fishburne and Irene Jacob. Yet, with its intoxicating mix of love, sexual passion and the deadly power of jealousy, Shakespeare has created an erotic thriller based on a human emotion that people are all familiar with. It all depends on how those people receive it. There is an extraordinary fusion of characters' with different passions in this tragedy.

Every character is motivated by a different desire. Shakespeare mesmerizes the reader by manipulating his characters abilities to perceive and discern what is happening in reality. It is this misinterpretation of reality that leads to the erroneous perceptions that each character holds. After reading this tragedy, the depth of Shakespeare's characters continue to raise many questions in the minds of the reader. The way I perceive the character of Othello and what concerns me, is that Othello is able to make such a quick transition from love to hate of Desdemona.

In Act 3, Scene 3, Othello states, " If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe ' t." (lines 294-295) Yet only a couple hundred lines later he says, " I'll tear her to pieces" (line 447) and says that his mind will never change from the " tyrannous hate" (line 464) he now harbors. Does Othello make the transition just because he is so successfully manipulated by Iago? Or is there something particular about his character which makes him make this quick change? I believe that " jealousy" is too simple of a term to describe Othello. I think that Othello's rapid change from love to hate for Desdemona is fostered partly by an inferiority complex. He appears to be insecure in his love for Desdemona (as well as in his position in Venetian

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society). Othello's race and age ("Haply, for I am black . . . for I am declined into the vale of years," 3. 3. 279-282) and his position as a soldier contribute to his feelings of inadequacy. Othello admits to Desdemona that he doesn't have "those soft parts of conversation" possessed by well-bred Venetian noblemen, those to which (as a senator's daughter) she has become acclimated (3. 3. 280-281). Othello's speech (1. 3. 130-172) also conveys his feeling that Desdemona loves him for his exploits and achievements rather than for his mind. Othello apparently feels a constant responsibility to prove to Desdemona (through his heroic deeds) that he is worthy of her love. It is my opinion that Othello is a man governed by a subconscious need or impulse to believe ideas rather than reason. In believing Iago's lie, Othello apparently is controlled by his aforementioned inferiority complex his feeling that he just doesn't measure up to (young, suave, and of course, white) nobleman Michael Cassio in Desdemona's mind. Othello is more naturally predisposed to believe this "idea" rather than to engage in rational discourse in an attempt to find the real logic of the situation. It is also unclear whether or not the position of soldier and that of husband can be perceived as two separate roles. Yet the two seem inextricably intertwined. Military operations are Othello's primary priority. Othello had been a soldier since he was seven years old ("...since these arms of mine had seven years' pith..... they have us'd/ Their dearest action in the tented field" 1. 3. 83-85). So Othello was not a newcomer to the battlefield. Yet, Othello encounters a battlefield the likes of which he has never seen when he marries Desdemona and enters Venetian society the rules are different, the enemy has more cunning, and words are used for weapons. Military service and marriage are

not incompatible Othello has the potential to make a perfectly suitable husband (as well as lover) to Desdemona. Othello only self-destructs because he and his inferiority complex fall victim to the duplicitous and vengeful Iago on society's battlefield. Perhaps Othello's precipitous change from ordered general to chaotic killer occurs because he is black. Africans were starting to appear in London at the time of Shakespeare and were viewed with suspicion, to say the least. It is not inconceivable that Shakespeare exploited this popular fear of the nature of these black Africans and portrayed Othello as a vengeful savage. Is Othello a noble minority with jealousy as his single fatal flaw, or is he an over-reacher whose pride causes his ultimate downfall? I don't believe he is truly either. He is an outsider who has tried to believe he has been fully integrated in a society he really knows only tolerates him. He could hardly believe that Desdemona would love him from the beginning, and it actually makes more sense to him that she would love Cassio than that she loves him. Iago plays on this insecurity by presenting his lies as more believable than reality. Othello's flaw is that he loves Desdemona blindly and unrealistically. For that reason, Iago knows that such a naive man as Othello who loves his wife in this way can be corrupted. In Act 2, Scene 3, Iago speaks of Othello's relationship with Desdemona and joyously proclaims that Othello's "soul is so enfeather'd to her love/ That she may make, unmake, do what she list,/ Even as her appetite shall play the god/ With his weak function"(351-54). Iago is absolutely determined to pervert this man who has declared that he will deny his wife nothing. Iago is certain that Othello can be corrupted simply because of his idealistic love for Desdemona. Othello's inclination to trust Iago is easily

perceived, as I have already noted ("The Moor already changes with my poison" (3. 3. 325). Iago almost assumes here the role of a Frankenstein-kind of doctor, creating and delighting in the making of a monster. Readers' hearts respond greatly to the final breakdown of Othello's once ordered existence as he desperately clings to the one thing that seems certain to him: Iago's sincere friendship: "O brave Iago, honest and just,/ Thou hast such noble sense.." (5. 1. 31-32). In this tragedy, Othello is torn by a terrible dilemma, whether he can trust his new bride or whether he can trust his ensign. Why does he choose to trust the latter? Time after time, Othello fails to see through the machinations of Iago. Othello trusts too easily. Iago is a military man; Othello is used to dealing with men on the battlefield, men whom he must trust and, moreover, Iago has a well-known reputation for honesty. In order to disguise his deep disappointment and conceal his plans for revenge, Iago begins early in the play to reinforce his image as an honest, loyal soldier. In Act 1, Scene 2, for example, in a bit of boasting, Iago says that "in the trade of war I have slain men,/ Yet do I hold it very stuff o' th' conscience/ To do no contrived murder. I lack iniquity..." (1-3). This is an outright lie, but he has just come onstage with Othello, and he is saying this for his general's benefit, posing as the rough and ready, good-hearted soldier. In the same speech, he alludes to having had the opportunity to kill Roderigo, a man who has said evil things about Othello: "Nine or ten times/ I'd thought to have yerk'd him here under the ribs" (4-5). Clearly to me, Iago is lying about what he would actually have done, yet he wants to show that he is a loyal man of action, but one who would not kill impulsively. This, he is sure, will appeal to Othello, a professional military man. It is precisely

this sort of behavior which secures Iago's reputation for cool, controlled honesty. Othello needs to trust people; it is his nature; that is why he suffers such terrible agony when he must try to choose between the alleged honesty of Iago and the honesty of Desdemona. Desperately, Othello needs to trust his wife; in Act 3, Scene 3, he cries, "If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe 't" (278-79). This is overwhelming evidence that he does need to believe her, just as in many of his other speeches, there are similar, parallel expressions of his need to believe Iago. Basically, one of the first qualities that comes to mind when assessing a man as complex as Othello is his openness, his trustfulness. Speaking of Iago, Othello says that Iago is a man of honesty and trust; "to his conveyance I assign my wife" (1. 3. 286). Othello has no reason to distrust Iago at this point; it is evident that he also trusts his wife, since he assigns her to the care of another man. Later in the same act and scene, Barbantio suggests that Desdemona deceived him and may just as easily deceive Othello, and Othello's reply is very significant: "My life upon her faith!" (295). His faith in Desdemona is not only dramatically important for the later, tragic reversal, but significant here because of its actuality. He deeply loves and trusts his young and beautiful wife, despite the fact that he is an aging man and might be expected, normally, to be a little suspicious of, if not his wife, of other men, and he is not. In fact, Othello's "free and open nature" is the very reason that Othello is such an easy prey for Iago. Iago knows that Othello is, by nature, neither overly introspective nor overly interested in the motivations of others. This "innocence" of Othello, that is, this simple directness of character that is so dominant an element of his personality is a perception which deserves more

consideration. Particularly I would note his "innocence" early in the play, perhaps best evidenced in Act 1, Scene 3, when Othello, defending himself against Barbantio's ravings, says quietly and simply that he is "rude" (meaning "unpolished," "simple," or "unsophisticated") in his speech, and that he is not "bless'd with the soft phrase of peace" (82). Clearly, he does not try to assume a pose that might seem overly impressive, it would be unnatural for a man such as Othello. In addition to this play's being a tragedy of multiple dimensions, it is also a love story. The tale of a man who loved excessively but "lov'd not wisely" (5. 2. 346). Numerous instances of Othello's love for Desdemona have been noted. I feel that some of these lines of poetic sensitivity are being used by Shakespeare to convey to the reader Othello's perception of love and faith in Desdemona. In Act 2, Scene 1, Othello exalts, "O my soul's joy! / If after every tempest come such calms..." (186-87). Here, he evidences both the passion and potential violence of his love. And, a few lines later he says, "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy..." (191-92). This speech is beautiful and heartfelt and is clear-cut proof for the audience of his deep, sincere love for his young bride. In addition, the speech should be noted because of Shakespeare's embellishing it with the ironic overtones of death. Finally, I must deal with Othello's true flaws and, of these, perhaps the most major concern is the fact that he is able to deceive himself: Othello believes he is a man who judges by the facts. In the past, this may have been true, but after Iago has infected him with a jealousy that overpowers all reason, Othello is doomed. Even when Iago made his initial overtures suggesting Desdemona's infidelity, Othello was firmly convinced that he was not a man to be self-

deceived. In Act 3, Scene 3, Othello says, " I'll see before I'll doubt; when I doubt, prove;/ And on the proof, there is no more but this,/ Away at once with love or jealousy!" (190-92). Othello will find, tragically, that it is not as easy as he thinks to make a choice between love and jealousy. Desdemona is a complicated character. On the one hand she is a strong minded, tough young woman who decides to marry a man who's a lot older, and black. And she loves him genuinely and passionately. On the other hand she seems very weak and rather soft, why doesn't she stand up to Othello ? She is the ever-present representation of all that Othello has attained as a civilized and Christian man; in attaining her, he attains the heights from which the tragedy requires that he must fall. Othello's love for Desdemona continues and creates ever-new deceptions until the final climactic murder is accomplished. And even as he kills Desdemona, after he has decided that she must die, he deceives himself that he is killing her as a duty, as it were, not as revenge. In his words, he kills her " else she'll betray more men" (5. 2. 6). Even at the end, he does not realize his true motivation for the murder of the woman he loves. I should add that Iago's plot to make Othello jealous (and thus murderous, and thus destroy himself) is surprisingly easy, in part because Iago is a master manipulator, and in part because Othello finds him easy to believe (He was so thrilled she loved him he could hardly believe it). The plot is filled out by the fact that Iago also wants to destroy his rival for promotion, Cassio, so he makes him part of the lie; and that Iago has been exploiting Roderigo by pretending to help him, so he involves him in the plotting. The excessive vulgarity of Iago's can be found throughout the play, beginning as early as Act 1, Scene 1, when he urges Roderigo to inflame

Desdemona's father with hatred for Othello. "Make after him," he says, meaning Barbantio, "poison his delight, Proclaim him in the streets. Incense her kinsmen,/ And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,/ Plaque him with flies" (68-71). This is harsh language, indicating an openness to only evil emotions. Yet, to his general, to Othello, Iago's venomous language is even worse. Exciting Othello's imagination, he says in the "temptation scene" words that are highly effective: "Would you,.... behold her topp'd?" (395-96). He asks Othello to envision the handsome Cassio charming Othello's young bride. In this entire scene, Iago knows, instinctively, the kind of remark that will increase Othello's suspicion without giving the impression that he wishes to do so. Yet, when all is said and done, Iago fascinates me. And perhaps this is true because great evil can somehow manipulate and captivate my attention. This is certainly, a tribute to Shakespeare's genius that despite everything evil which Iago accomplishes, the playwright never lets the reader forget that Iago is a human being, not an abstraction. Iago's jealousy is similar to jealousies the readers have had, except that he is wildly jealous; his passion is ours, except that he is immoral, ruthless, and savage. Finally, Othello is black and middle aged. Desdemona is white, young and beautiful. The state of Venice needs Othello- but they don't like him. Iago needs Othello and that is why Iago hates him. So, with every character holding individual motivations and desires. Shakespeare has created his own reality, which can simply be perceived as extraordinary. Work Cited Alexander, Peter. Shakespeare. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.