

# What is the importance of setting and geography in william shakespeare's 'othello...

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Themes such as jealousy, deception and passion interwoven through the text of 'Othello' make the story riveting. But before we can understand why events take place and characters motivations' it is important to analyse the geographical arena in which the story of Othello and the moral struggles of the characters are brought to life. By including real locations, which Elizabethans would have heard of, the play appears to be more realistic. 'Othello' is reasonably geographically accurate and this helps to make the play, with its unlikely events, seem more plausible.

'Othello' begins, in Act One, in Venice, the flourishing heart of civilised and refined behaviour but moves from here to the hostile climes of Cyprus where conflict begins to develop. We are taken from a location where Brabantio is shocked to hear of law breaking and stealing happening "What, tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice, my house is not a grange" to a place with an unstable political standing. Cyprus is ultimately unable to hold the culture and society of Venice within its realms, hence why the personalities of the noble well-bred characters break down in Cyprus.

In addition to the movement from Venice to Cyprus, 'Othello' gradually moves from scenes taking place outside to inside. We begin in a bustling street in Venice and end up in a confined space of a bedchamber/bed. This movement from large open areas to small confined spaces is a clever dramatic technique that draws the audience in by creating a sense of claustrophobia. These gradual transitions throughout the course of the play reflect Othello's behaviour. At the beginning we observe a gentleman with an active life who has many interests, especially in his military capacity as a

general. However, by the end of the play he is obsessed and consumed with the untrue belief that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio.

In Shakespearean times the locations used in plays tended to have specific symbolic meaning. The absence of scenery in Elizabethan theatre meant that there was no need to recreate physical characteristics. People of the time didn't go to these far away distant lands so the accuracy of distance, time and appearance weren't importance – in effect, this gave Shakespeare an artistic licence. However, compared to his earlier plays he did make an effort to make 'Othello' geographically accurate. An Italian novella 'The Story of Desdemonia of Venice and The Moorish Captain' by Giraldi Cinthio is the source of the outline of the plot of 'Othello'. Because this tale was short Shakespeare used the geographical detail we see present in 'Othello' to give the story more depth and make it longer.

Aristotle's unities of place, time and action are also known as 'the unities', in terms of the three principles of dramatic composition. The idea is that a play should consist of one related series of actions, which all occur in one day and take place in one location. Although 'Othello' begins in Venice and moves to Cyprus, the second half of the play all takes place in the same location in Cyprus and the main action in the play occurs in one day (in fact, the play in its entirety takes place over 2 days). This assists the immediacy of the drama – the action takes place in a small place, with little time creating a sense of urgency, speed and making the events fast-paced.

Shakespeare chose to set the beginning of 'Othello' in Italy because anything associated with Italy was held in high regard by Elizabethans. Italy was seen as superior in all aspects of life from its architecture and engineering to religion, clothing and artists.

Using Italy as a setting allowed Shakespeare to take advantage of its exotic and fashionable reputation and suspend the disbelief of the audience.

Because the action does not take place in surroundings the audience would be familiar with it seems almost surreal. Being aware of a wide world at the start of the play helps to increase the intensity as the tension of the story rises, coming to a climax at the bedchamber scene – by the end of the play the audience and characters have their outside world blocked out and it is of unimportance. This also helped to increase the scale and sweep of Shakespeare's storytelling by including the outside world. This is quite ironic considering Othello is a domestic tragedy and ultimately the only importance is the immediate surroundings of Othello and Desdemona's bedchamber.

Choosing to set 'Othello' in Italy also allowed Shakespeare to incorporate the idea of Machiavellian characters. Machiavelli was a 16th century philosopher who wrote a book in 1513 called 'The Prince'. He said ruthless self-interest, ruling by force and unethical methods to gain power should be used by people. These principles obviously link in with Iago's selfish ideas. Setting 'Othello' in Italy obviously meant that some characters could be Italian and therefore more likely to have Machiavellian (which has come to mean villainous) characteristics. Of course, Iago is an Italian and a Machiavellian!

Venice was a powerful and wealthy city-state in the early 17th century. The inhabitants of it were seen as elegant but decadent. Shakespeare uses the setting of Venice as a tool to enhance the characterisation of Othello. Othello is not Venetian and this makes him feel and appear as an outsider. He feels conscious of the fact that he may not be able to understand the subtleties of Venetian culture, this leads to him feeling uncomfortable and defensive. Although Othello is not at ease he is still viewed favourably by the Duke of Venice " If virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black". This shows that Othello has an excellent reputation according to the high standards of Venetian culture. This is highlighted when he is trusted with the defence of Cyprus from the Turks. Although this is only on a professional basis. One of Othello's major downfalls is that he lets his passions overrule his head - he does when he is Othello the moor but not when he is Othello the general.

Sexual liberation and freedom were prominent in Venice at the time ' Othello' was written - which seems quite contradictory as the characters in ' Othello', even the Venetian's, seem unable to tolerate a black and white couple! Iago uses the idea of sexual awareness in Venice to plant ideas into Othello's mind. In the late 16th century Venetian wives were dressed well in expensive clothing but unfortunately the outfits courtesans wore to attract men were similar to the fashion of well-bred Venetian women. Iago draws this parallel for Othello " In Venice they do let God see the pranks they dare not show their husbands." Iago knows that Desdemona is Venetian and plays on this. He makes Othello think that Desdemona could be like all other

Venetian women. Othello becomes increasingly aware of the city's sexual reputation and insults Desdemona " I took you for that cunning whore of Venice that married with Othello." From the virtuous Desdemona in Cyprus she is labelling as a common housewife when they arrive in Cyprus.

Shakespeare clearly researched Venice but knew little about the geography of Cyprus. The main reason the main body of action in ' Othello' is in Cyprus is so that Venetian interests in the island may be protected and defended from the Turks. Because Cyprus is in a state of military readiness and in need of defence this provided Shakespeare with a much more suitable place, than the civilised Venice, for the dramatic tension and events about to take place with Othello, Iago and Desdemona.

The Venetian's attempt to take their own society and standards to Cyprus but they are unsuccessful. This allows Iago to take advantage of the instability and contribute towards people losing their self-control. Cyprus is not a stable enough environment for the high class Venetian's.

The military conflict between Venice and Cyprus, the social conflict between the Venetian's and Turks and the moral conflict between civilisation and barbarity reflect Othello's psychological conflict at the end of the play when he wrestles with his own thoughts and takes an epileptic fit.

Revenge tragedies are a specific type of literature, which ' Othello' can also be categorised as. They are typically set in Italy because it allows the author to present seemingly sophisticated worldly characters that frequently turn out to be the villains (like Iago). It also allows the writer to include

Machiavellian associations, include power and passion, which adds to heightening the tension of certain scenes. Other revenge tragedies include 'The Revengers Tragedy' by Cyril Turner and 'Spanish Tragedy' by Thomas Kyd.

'Othello' is a Christian morality play because heaven and hell are almost referred to as real places. This helps to create a contrast between the holiness of Christians and the barbaric Turks and Berbers. However, Iago is an Italian Christian and is not by any means a saintly, pure character.

The geographical references in the play help to show that Othello is well travelled and experienced in the different ways of the world – even if he may not be able to adapt to these different cultures. For the audience of the time it provides a more believable reason as to why Desdemona would fall in love with him (Elizabethans would not have believed she could love him for his looks but it would seem more acceptable for his interesting, vibrant personality and tales of his travels).

Othello's has intense feelings of 'otherness' which contribute towards his eventual breakdown and is caused by geographically rooted differences between him and the other characters. Othello is from the Barbary Coast so because of his physical difference and dark complexion he looks like the enemy – he appears more as Arab than Venetian. Also, Berbers were typically thought to be barbaric. People like Othello as long as he sticks to his station as a general but then when tries to integrate with their culture (i. e. when he marries Desdemona) they do not agree with it and can't see past

the fact he is a black Berber. In a similar vein to Othello's looking like the enemy, Iago is named after the patron saint of Spain. England and Spain had conflict enemy at the time of the plays writing.