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jockinmens Professor Doody English 113 December 9, 2011 Shakespeare's Othello: Love, Infidelity and Loss Throughout Shakespeare's great works of classic literature, he often takes the sacred institutions of marriage, and corrupts it by allowing its passion-filled symbolism to create the seeds of its own destruction. Whether this is a result of Shakespeare's own experiences or just a generally negative view of the custom and its ever-present importance to the people involved, his fascination with this basic human rite is never fully known. However, what is clear is that Shakespeare took great pains to detail the shortcomings of marriage in many of his works, and makes it especially important as the main theme of his play Othello. In this play, Shakespeare is able to blend concrete symbolism with abstract romantic thought, and creates a tale in which a handkerchief becomes a powerful complex symbol highlighting the themes of love, infidelity and loss. The basic symbol of the handkerchief is as a token of love. The handkerchief was the original marriage gift that Othello gives to Desdemona, a representation of his love that Desdemona cherishes. The fact that the handkerchief had strawberries sown directly onto the symbol adds to the motif of love. Strawberries are regarded even today as fruit of love, and are given as gifts on such days as Valentine's day dipped in chocolate. Harry This gift also causes the handkerchief to be a direct representation of the marriage that they have, as the first and most important gift it represents the marriage directly marriage and honesty The symbolic meaning of the handkerchief to Othello represents the sacredness of the sexual act in marriage, which signifies the pledge of love between Othello and Desdemona. This is why Iago convinces his wife to steal it from Desdemona

— he knows that it has a lot of sentimental value and that Othello will be angry when he finds out his wife no longer has it. of the illusion of infidelity in Othello and his wife Desdemona's marriage; however and more importantly, its symbolic significance is crucial to Othello's downfall as it reflects the disintegration of his being and therefore portrays him as the tragic hero. According to Boose, " Othello is a play about marriage, memorially the most ritualized and symbolized of all human acts, " which demonstrates that the handkerchief is a " presentational image" that expresses issues of marriage and honesty. Because of the embroidered handkerchief's significance, the author symbolizes the strawberries on the handkerchief as the virgin blood from Othello and Desdemona's wedding-bed sheets, the emblem of the symbolic act of love and devotion to each other (Boose 264). Basically, the handkerchief is a mini-version of the wedding bed-sheets that Desdemona carries around to prove her love for Othello. But the powerful meaning of the handkerchief to Othello is soon degraded. Iago has the lack of sensitivity and ability to degrade the value and meaning of the handkerchief, which shows that Iago's thoughts and motives shine through. Othello clearly emphasizes how important the handkerchief is to him as he talks about the origins of the handkerchief as demonstrated in Act III Scene IV, " That handkerchief did an Egyptian to my mother give... while she kept it ' t would make her amiable and subdue my father entirely to her love; but if she lost it or made a gift of it, my father's eye should hold her loathed..." (3. 4. 53-54; 56-60). However, this is not the only version he tells. After he murders Desdemona in Act V Scene II, Othello states the reason why he committed this act as shown that " she did gratify his amorous works,

with the recognizance and pledge of love, which I first gave her; I saw it in his hand, it was a handkerchief; an antique token my father gave my mother" (5. 2. 219-223). Therefore, because of the handkerchief's symbolic significance, Othello's way of thinking of what the handkerchief represents to him evidently lead him to become the tragic hero. In relation to the handkerchief's symbolic meaning to Othello, he deals with the loss of the handkerchief and relates it to the illusionary loss of Desdemona's faithfulness. In Act III Scene III, the loss of the handkerchief deteriorates Othello's psyche because Iago associates Cassio's possession of the handkerchief with the physical Desdemona and how "Cassio's ownership of the token must mean that Cassio possessed the virginal Desdemona it symbolizes" (Boose 273). Also, the loss of the handkerchief and how it has been reproduced and passed around degrades the value and the sacredness of the token to Othello because "the embroidery of the handkerchief is most frequently referred to as the 'work'" (Boose 270). The handkerchief is at the ultimate degradation when Bianca is in possession of it because she reiterates the term in reference in linking the embroidery to a sexual act when she says, "I must take out the whole work, a likely piece of work, and you should find it in your chamber, and not know who left it there!" (4. 1. 146-148). The "work" clearly describes sacredness of the holy act and as the pledge of love, both of which Bianca does not possess due to her occupation as a prostitute. Thus, Othello coping with the loss of the handkerchief corrupts his stable mentality and he therefore mistakenly doubts Desdemona's fidelity. Now that Othello is finally won over to Iago's interpretation of Desdemona's alleged deceitfulness, his complete mental

collapse is not far away. Othello's jealousy gradually changes his perspective, actions, and language; however, his obsession with the loss of the handkerchief destructs his strength to think clearly which consequently leads to his suspicion of Desdemona's infidelity. Othello's vow with Iago reflects the disintegration of his being because he basically made a pact with the Devil. Iago is able to manipulate the handkerchief so that Othello comes to see it as a symbol of Desdemona herself and to be able to convert it into evidence of her infidelity as demonstrated in "I have use for it... I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin and let him find it. Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ" (3. 3. 321-325). Once Othello perceives this, he experiences extreme turmoil, which disrupts the notions of Desdemona's faithfulness that Othello has steadfastly held to be true and casts doubt over his purist view of Desdemona and shows his growing paranoia and mental instability that eventually evolves into pure insanity when Othello himself plans to kill Desdemona based on the false evidence Iago has planned. In due course, the error in the actions Othello has committed which leads to his downfall portray him as the tragic hero. Unfortunately, Othello is responsible for the actions he has unconsciously committed; but more importantly, it exposes flaws in Othello's character such as his failure to accept who he is racially and his doubt of Desdemona truly loving him which dramatizes the way actions are directed by attitudes, fears, and delusions that rule the subconscious than by evident facts. Throughout many of Shakespeare's works such as Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet, a presentational image is often present that has a symbolic value which contributes to the play as a whole. While a handkerchief can be just a

simple cloth, it served as a major factor in Shakespeare's Othello. Even though these plays were written over four hundred years ago, it appears to be that the situations in Shakespeare's works often relate to some of the things people experience in modern society. More importantly, if Othello had not placed the importance of what the handkerchief represents to him, he may not have suffered such a great loss.