

# Pride comes before the fall

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Pride Comes Before the Fall Shakespeare created a hero, racial outcast, army superior, lover and murderer all wrapped up into one complex character: Othello. As one first begins to read this play, it seems that Othello is a truly noble character. Interestingly enough, with further reading and studying, one begins to doubt this nobility and speculate if his motives are guided by his love for others or his love for himself. Even though it is hard to see at first, the true nature of Othello's character is actually quite self-centered. Throughout Othello there are several occurrences where it is shown that the character Othello is very much about himself. In fact, one of the reasons Iago's manipulation works so well is because he assaults Othello's public reputation and identity. Othello finds great pride within himself and his actions of his past and present. Othello is convinced that nobody can touch him. When Iago tries to convince Othello that Brabantio could ruin Othello's marriage, Othello says, " Let him do his worst. The services I have done for the Venetian government will count for more than his complaints will. No one knows this yet — and I don't like to brag, but I come from a royal family, and I'm as noble as the woman I've married. " (1. 2. 17 — 22) Othello sincerely believes that this powerful man cannot touch him because of his pride within himself. It's interesting to note that Othello makes sure that it is known he is equal in stature to his new wife. His self-centered nature won't allow him to be with someone who is above him. Othello's reputation and social status mean everything to him, and nothing, not even his marriage and so-called love for Desdemona, is an exception to that. Part of Othello's self-centeredness is only being associated with those who are his social equals. The first hint at the true nature of his love for

Desdemona comes in Act 1, Scene 3. As Othello describes how he and Desdemona came to be married, he says, Her eyes would fill with tears at the bad things I went through in my younger years. When my stories were done, she'd sign and tell me how strangely wonderful and sad my life had been. She said she wished she hadn't heard it, but she also wished there was a man like me for her. She thanked me and told me that if a friends of mine had a story like mine to tell, she'd fall in love with him. I took the hint and spoke to her. She said she loved me for the dangers I'd survived, and I loved her for feeling such strong emotions about me. (1. 3. 155-169) Instead of describing Desdemona's characteristics, beauty and how she won his heart, it seems Othello is only focused on how deeply she loves him. She feeds his pride and the only reason he loves her is because she loves him as much as he loves himself. " The one Othello loves " too well" isn't Desdemona — it's himself. Jealousy is an intensely self-centered emotion, and Othello spends much of the play obsessed with how Desdemona has hurt him and trying to get back at her for it. He's obsessed with his feelings, the way that her cheating reflects on him. " (Schmoop) He doesn't mention once hearing stories about her life or her dreams or desires, he only cares that she admires all of his accomplishments and actions. Othello's self-centered love comes from his obvious struggle with perfectionism. He views Desdemona as a reflection of his own character, and once her character is questioned, he feels his own will be ruined. He becomes angry at this connection of her character and his own. He laments, " Goodbye to the horses and the trumpets and the drums, the flute and the splendid banners, and all those proud displays and pageantry of war! And you deadly cannons that roar like

thunderbolts thrown by the gods, goodbye! Othello's career is over. " (3. 3 356-365) He is not saddened because he adores Desdemona and she broke his heart. No, he is upset because she is threatening everything Othello has built for himself up to this point. Othello defines himself by what he does, and Desdemona is taking that away from him. He only focuses on himself and the implications that this means for him, not her. This perfectionistic nature comes from Othello's life-long attempt to fit into a society where he is inevitably the outsider. " Othello, as a black converted Christian recently married to a white woman, ultimately suffers from his inability to completely assimilate into a community that deems him a racial outsider. " (LaBlanc) It is shown in the play that Othello wrestles with this inability to belong in Venetian society and starts believing Desdemona wants nothing to do with him because of his flaws. He says, " Maybe because I'm black, and I don't have nice manners like courtiers do, or because I'm getting old" (3. 3. 267-268) He is questioning what it is about himself that caused Desdemona to act the way he assumes she did. Othello's obsession with outward appearance seems to be contrasted with his obvious distrust of appearances as well. " Acknowledging that sexual jealousy is the principal subject of the drama, one nevertheless contends that it is actually a device Shakespeare employed to emphasize an epistemological theme associated with Othello's paradoxical reliance on and distrust of appearances. " (LaBlanc) Othello seems conflicted when it comes to his feelings about appearances. Sometimes he connects outward appearance to the inward person and other times he acts like who you are on the outside can be the complete opposite of who you really are. While Iago is filling Othello's mind with jealous

thoughts, Othello states, " If you say my wife is beautiful, eats well, loves good company, speaks freely, sings, plays music, and dances well, you're not making me jealous. When a woman is virtuous, talents like these just make her better. "(3. 3. 188-190) In this passage, he is making the connection between a woman's outward talents and her inner character. He at first refuses Iago's idea of Desdemona cheating on him because he believes her perfect outward actions reflect her inner perfect character. Further on in the story, we see Othello's view changes somewhat. After Iago finally convinces Othello that Desdemona is, in fact, sleeping around, Othello yells, " Damn her, the wicked whore! Oh, damn her, damn her! Come away with me. I'm going inside to think up some way to kill that beautiful devil. " (3. 3. 482-485) Now, Othello calls her a beautiful devil, implying that on the outside she has beauty but that doesn't connect with her horrible inner character. " He (Othello) turns Petrarchan imagery against Desdemona--" O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?" (Othello, 4. 2. 69)--praising and damning her simultaneously. His conflicts are resolved, his needs to idealize and degrade her to maintain their love intact are momentarily reconciled only when he kills her, performing a sacrifice which is also a murder. "(Neely) Othello seems to have abandoned his thought that one is wholly good or wholly bad and that it reflects in your character. He now seems to have taken the belief that one thing can appear one way and act another depending on the circumstance. This duality found in Othello's belief of appearances mirrors the duality of his character. Othello, obviously, is quite self-centered and cares about nothing except his own reputation and appearance. It's quite interesting to note that the character given at the beginning of the play is

someone entirely different at the end. This shift is described as: When we live with him through the first two Acts, we live... with a grave and noble character... All men honour his integrity, his skill in war, his ability in governing men, his self-governance, his temperate nature, a ruler of men who rules himself...-a man then not liable to give his trust rashly, to act on mere suspicion, without inquiry, to be ignorant of the evil which is in men. Yet this is the vast improbability which Shakespeare creates for him....He places his unquestioning trust...in a young man of twenty-eight, whom, in spite of interest made for him, he has put in a lower position than his lieutenant, Cassio. It never occurs to him that he may have angered Iago.... He listens to his first innuendoes against his wife without one symptom of distrust in the man who makes them; he believes even in that foul dream which Iago invents. He attributes to her, on the mere hearsay evidence of Iago, coarse and common lustfulness, revolting appetite. He turns his young wife...into a common harlot; and his belief in Iago is so unshaken that he slays Desdemona. Nothing, given Othello's character in the first two Acts, can be more improbable. (Brooke) This shift in character is quite interesting in regards to Othello's self-obsession. Not only is his love for Desdemona self-centered, but his love for Iago is quite self-centered as well. Before Iago has anything to offer Othello, Othello could care less about him. It is not until after Iago feeds into Othello's obsession with himself does Othello give Iago charge over his wife and eventually Cassio's position. This shows that Othello is willing to change his own character depending on which one he benefits from. His strong, temperate character from the beginning was what helped him move forward in his career as a soldier and leader. His distrustful,

manipulative behavior towards the end was because it helped him move forward in his jealous vengeance. All of Othello's actions are based on himself, and what benefits he will receive. Because of his perfectionistic nature and spending his whole life trying to be viewed as a racial equal, he has nothing else but himself to turn to for strength. This self-obsession and dependence on self continues throughout the entire play until the very end. After Iago's final persuasion, Othello snaps. Othello's desire for perfectionism and social stability lead him down the pathway to his demise. " The plot ironically emphasizes that his desire for certainty renders him most subject to chance, operating on the most trivial levels, as well as to Iago's malevolent manipulation of it. The extent to which his desire for certainty is life denying appears when he consummates his marriage to Desdemona on their death bed. "(Stockholder) This final act of complete selfishness brings a climatic ending to the progression of Othello's self-centered character. Throughout the play, Othello simply disposes those in his life who threaten his reputation. He kills Desdemona just like he fired Cassio from his position after getting drunk. Cheating and drunkenness are two things Othello cannot have around him to destroy his reputation. In his own sick obsession with perfectionism, he was easily manipulated into killing his wife, who at the beginning he considered his equal in status. Ironically, as Desdemona's reputation diminishes in Othello's eyes, Othello's reputation diminishes in the readers eyes. Whereas Desdemona does everything out of love for others, Othello only cares for himself. When Othello realizes he has been manipulated by Iago and he has killed Desdemona for no reason, he still clings to his pride. Refusing to admit he did wrong, Othello instead claims he

did it out of honor. He says, " Say anything. Call me an honorable murderer if you like. I did nothing out of hate, only out of honor. " (5. 2. 306-308) Until the very end, Othello clings to the only thing he finds strength in; his pride. He is convinced that hatred and jealousy were not what led him to perform that heinous act, but it was merely his honorable nature that committed the deed to protect himself. From beginning to end of Othello there are many examples of Othello's selfish behavior. At first, this self-centeredness is what builds his success, but by the conclusion, it leads to his utter ruin. His belief that his reputation is the only one that matters, not only hurt himself, but all of those who loved him. Othello's life is a true reminder that pride comes before the fall, and sometimes, it brings others down with you. Works Cited

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