

# Reflection on leavis reading of othello

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There is no doubt that when Professor F. R. Leavis discusses Shakespeare's Othello as a tale of self-destruction, and not of simple manipulation that he is indeed correct. The story of Othello is pivotal on the flaw of character embodied in the antagonist, and it can be recognised by any audience that is his selfishness, lack of self-knowledge, pride and egotistical nature that is the most obvious cause for his downfall. In his article Leavis first describes the opinion of fellow critic, Bradley, as one which is hugely flawed. Bradley believes that the story is a tragedy because of a good and noble man's undoing by a foreign, intellectual and cunning villain (that is Iago). Othello is to be seen as a "nearly faultless hero whose strength and virtue are turned against him", and that he and Desdemona had "every chance of happiness". Leavis comes back at this idea by reminding the audience that "Othello is the chief personage-the chief personage that in such a sense that the tragedy may fairly be said to be Othello's character. Iago is the subordinate and merely ancillary". Evidence from other sources and personal evaluations also hold up this theory. When reading the story, it is obvious that Othello has massive flaws in his character. His willingness to accept Iago's very iffy evidence, show that he is prone to jealousy and is hugely mistrusting. When Iago subtly asks questions about the integrity of his officer Cassio, the logical response would be for Othello to ignore the implications and directly investigate any accusations brought to the table by his adviser. Instead Othello, enraged by the suggestion, is willing to accept circumstantial, falsified and non conclusive evidence, probably directly against the training he would have received in his time in the military. This flaw is not therefore one inflicted by his environment (he was shown how to investigate properly),

but one that is internalised, and entirely his fault. The weakness of Othello's character means that it can be fairly concluded that even without Iago's involvement, Othello would have self-destructed in the end anyway. Other situations separate to manipulation also have the possibility of receiving a familiar reaction from what we can now see as an unstable protagonist, leaving the idea of Iago as a master manipulator and sole villain as an incomplete and incorrect illustration. Iago plays an almost minor role in convincing Othello of what he already subconsciously believes. In act 3 scene 3 Iago simply inquires as to whether Cassio is an honest man. This question, to anyone not swayed by a previously existing sentiment of jealousy, would be innocent and unprovocative. To Othello, however, it raises a whole new wealth of undertones and accusations. Had Iago not prompted his wrath, someone else's comments to the unstable character would certainly have unravelled the precious love he had for Desdemona. Other critics support this reading of Shakespeare's play; including Andrew Prelusky who highlights the idea that "A tragic hero, according to Aristotle, also must go from fortune to misfortune". Othello cannot be a tragic hero therefore, because even in the beginning of the story he is in possession of the flaws which eventually destroy him. The second opinion demonstrated by Leavis is that the fact that Othello never learns from his down falling intensifies the tragic nature of the story. Even in his soliloquy addressing the audience Othello requests that people remember him as a man who "loved well but not wisely, who was not prone to jealousy". This announcement baffles the audience as Othello's actions have just proved the opposite he is a man who loved incompletely and badly, and who gave in to jealousy at the first

inclination of its presence. It is clear to anyone reading the story that Othello is the opposite of what he claims to be, and that lack of self-revelation, or understanding means that the story cannot come to a satisfying end. There is no lesson learnt, no regret turning to transformation, we are left with a frustrated pity, for the tragic man does not understand himself any better than he did at the beginning of the tale. The third point made by Leavis is that Othello never really loved Desdemona. This is a more difficult question to answer as love can come in various forms. It is Leavis's opinion that Othello never loved Desdemona as she was only an object of satisfaction; he appreciated her sympathy and selflessness, but never actually loved her as such. Leavis sights Othello's speech near the end, where he says " she is gone and I'm abused". This statement does demonstrate that Othello feels like he is the victim in the situation, rather than his dead wife. I find that while this evaluation, in whole is a fairly accurate representation of the love between Desdemona and Othello, I'm not convinced entirely by it. For Othello, love has only come in the form of pity, as a moor he has always been treated badly; it's almost reasonable that he mistake love for appreciation when Desdemona cares for him. I think for both of them it may have been love at the start, but as Othello begins to self-destruct with jealousy, the dynamic between them changed, and he ceased to love her. These are the three opinions displayed by Leavis in his critical reading of Othello. As an independent audience member, I would agree with all 3 of his points concerning Othello's downfall, tragic nature of his story and his non-existent love for Desdemona. These themes are also supported by the independent

evaluation done by Andrew Prelusky, showing how “ Othello" is indeed a story of “ a most unfortunate man".