

To what extent do you
believe that othello is
an honourable
murderer



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Honour is defined as the evaluation of a person's social status as judged by that individual's community. To be put simply, Margaret Visser observes that in an honour-based society " a person is what he or she is in the eyes of other people.

" To argue whether Othello's murder of Desdemona was indeed intended to be portrayed as honourable in motive, the reactions of the other characters and the social context of the play must be taken into account. The extent to which the quote can be agreed with will therefore have changed over time as the context has altered. The pivotal quote " Why, anything; an honourable murderer, if you will, for nought I did in hate, but all in honour. " could be interpreted in two ways.

Firstly, if taken as Othello's justification to his crime, the audience are likely to lose any sympathy they have for the character. This is because it contradicts the rage Othello portrays just before he smothers Desdemona; he shows her no mercy when she begs to postpone her death with ' Down, strumpet! ' and ' It is too late'. As the truth has been revealed by this point, this interpretation could present Othello as a stubborn man, unwilling to take any blame - qualities that are less than honourable. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as Othello's use of bitter irony. He is aware of how Iago has manipulated him so the ' honour' he talks of could actually be a criticism of himself and not a justification.

In this aspect, he acknowledges his own mistake in being too quick to judge and easy to manipulate because of the importance he placed on public perception, reputation and honour. He could be said to question what it

actually means to be 'honourable' and recognizes that his actions 'nought I did in hate, but all in honour' had a selfish motive. If the audience are to believe this, then more sympathy can be found for Othello as it hints at regret and remorse, finally realising that reputation, a major theme in the play, is not the be all and end all. I think that this reading is more solid, as it is reinforced by the quote 'that's he that was Othello? I am here'. Othello questions who he is and by addressing himself in the third person he is on the verge of disowning himself.

Although this interpretation does not necessarily paint him as an honourable murderer, it certainly detracts from the immoral presentation of the first interpretation. If we are to judge Othello's honour within the context of the play, it is important to consider the concept of a 'cuckold'. A cuckold is a man whose wife has been unfaithful and in Shakespeare's time, cuckolded men were thought to grow horns when their wives cheated on them. This metaphor can be seen when Othello tells Desdemona 'I have a pain upon my forehead, here', a reference to the horns of a cuckold. He also refers to the concept more explicitly with 'even then this forked plague is fated to us' which creates imagery of horns. Othello attributes his apparent cuckold status to the duties that take him away from home, calling it 'the plague of great ones'.

His importance in social standing is what keeps him from spending more time with Desdemona which is why, he thinks, she has cheated. More importantly, it is this standing which could be said to cause his drastic actions. In context, a 'cuckold' would be collectively humiliated by his peers and was a great embarrassment. Because Othello is a self confessed
<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-do-you-believe-that-othello-is-an-honourable-murderer/>

foreigner and a black man, he places so much importance on his reputation and the public position he has acquired. To be seen as a cuckold would ruin all of this, meaning he has further to fall which further exacerbates Desdemona's apparent betrayal.

Because of this, it could be argued that contextually his murder of Desdemona is honourable because as his cheating wife she has cuckolded him. Despite this, the other characters reactions show that in their eyes, Othello has not acted honourably. Lodovico refers to him as a 'rash and most unfortunate man' and Emilia reacts passionately, albeit biased, with 'O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!'. The aftermath of Desdemona's death becomes a rush of events, full of tension and quick paced after the long build up of manipulation.

Because of this quick revelation of the truth, the characters reaction to Othello's crime seem somewhat insignificant in contrast to their feelings on the 'villainous' Iago. Lodovico still addresses Othello as 'sir' which suggests that there is still some respect however he is stripped of his 'power and command' and is to remain confined until 'the nature of your fault be known to the Venetian state'. This quote shows how the perception of Othello has changed from that of a valiant warrior back to a 'foreigner', and outsider of the Venetian society. Having his position and status stripped from him and the fear of this is arguably the influencing factor to most of his disillusioned decisions and ironically they have led to just that.

How the characters would have responded had Desdemona indeed be untrue is a matter unto itself. If Othello had been of Venetian descent and not of a

different race to his peers it may well be argued that his honour amongst the other characters would have remained. Othello's vehement desire to be punished, rather than run away from the consequences of his actions as Iago does, acts in his favour. Othello not only feels that he deserves not just punishment, but torture: 'Whip me, ye devils' and, 'blow me about in the winds, roast me in sulphur, wash me down in steep-gulfs of liquid fire! .

He recognises that his actions were wrong and feels that he deserves to suffer the torments of hell for killing Desdemona. It could be depicted that these lines prove that Othello already knows that he is damned, and his despair, 'Let it all go', could also be interpreted as resigned to his hellish fate. Because of this, it is fair to say that he doesn't actually perceive himself as honourable in this instance, supporting the alternative interpretation of the honourable murderer quote. The need to be punished shows that Othello finally recognises his wife's honour.

When we realise Othello has "another weapon in this chamber," we know that he will use it on himself, and inflict the punishment he deserves in an act of an honourable suicide. Some critics have put forward that the way in which Othello is so easily swayed by Iago lowers his honour. In a critical study it is quoted 'Othello sees evil where it does not exist, in Desdemona, and only too late in Iago who truly embodies it. This lack of perception, while it may make Othello more sympathetic as a fallible human being, perhaps diminishes his tragic stature'.

I can agree with this argument in that although this flaw makes his character more relatable, an audience could lose sympathy for him because of his bad

judgement and failures. Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello as a flawed character actually detracts from the honour that we see in him. The complete reversal of attitude, from that of seeing his wife as a 'gentle mistress' to a 'devil' and 'subtle whore' with only so much as mere suggestion from Iago and listening in to half conversations. The ease at which Othello is turned raises question about his insecurities and, along with the trance he falls into and the breakdown of language such as 'handkerchief! Confessions! Handkerchief!' hints at mental instability. These characteristics all suggest motives that are less than honourable. Before Iago's manipulation begins to transform Othello's character, he is generally viewed as an honourable character.

In Desdemona's speech about her love for Othello in the beginning of the play, she says 'I saw Othello's visage in my mind, and to his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate'. She fell in love with Othello because of his honour and, because of his equal love for her, he will want to maintain this honour. It could be argued that the ease of Iago's manipulation is at least partly because of this fact. Othello is so absorbed with being perfect and honourable for Desdemona that he is on edge about protecting his reputation.

At Iago's hints he becomes desperate for some way to redeem himself from the curse of a cuckold and, ironically, murders Desdemona. Cassio also refers to Othello's 'honour'. When he asks Desdemona to intervene on his behalf, he describes Othello as a man 'whom I with all the office of my heart entirely honour'. Although Cassio may be saying this in order to help get his job back, he is sincere.

<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-do-you-believe-that-othello-is-an-honourable-murderer/>

He never doubts that Othello was justified in firing him and does truly honour him. After Othello commits suicide, Cassio says 'this did I fear, but thought he had no weapon, for he was great of heart', showing regret that Othello is dead. 'Great of heart' is taken to mean high-spirited, however it could be read as full of love in which Cassio seemingly agrees that Othello is an honourable murderer as he acted out of love. Overall, it is clear to the audience that Othello is viewed as an honourable man before the murder. The extent to which he is still viewed as honourable after his crime is somewhat clouded by the characters discovery of the villainous nature of Iago but it is fair to say that their perception of Othello has been greatly altered.

This means that contextually, Othello was probably not an 'honourable murderer', although there are other factors such as his race and 'outsider' status to be taken into consideration. In my opinion, although his remorse acts in his favour, I do not believe that Othello is an honourable murderer. The ease of his manipulation and little to no attempt of finding the truth makes it hard for an audience to see him as an honourable character. Even though the murder of Desdemona was unjust, I would still argue that to some extent Othello could be described as an honourable murderer, simply for his suicide which, in the manner of an eye for an eye, seems fair punishment.