

Compare the
characterisations in
my last duchess and
othello's soliloquy



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In both the soliloquy in Othello and in 'My Last Duchess' we see a dominance in the male character and a certain power within this over the women mentioned. Throughout the soliloquy Othello is addressing a sleeping Desdemona and the fact that she is in this setting (the bed chamber) and in such a situation gives him another level of power over her as she is faced with a certain vulnerability and lack of control over the events to come, while it also suggests an innocence in Desdemona's character contrasting greatly with Othello's. Similarly in 'My Last Duchess' we get arguably a larger sense of male dominance in the poem, with Browning using language and form to show this. The metaphor 'Notice Neptune though, Taming a sea-horse' suggests that the Duke is very much like Neptune in controlling the Duchess and has the arrogance that Neptune has while she is being controlled.

It could possibly also be a metaphor for his future wife, much like the Duchess she will need to be controlled and obedient, and ultimately treat him like a God, which again links with the Neptune metaphor further. A further way Browning presents the Duke as a powerful, controlling man is the fact that he has been killed (ultimately by himself) and now all that stands in her memory is her portrait, which only he and selected others can see. This shows that even though she has been murdered and is no longer with him he still controls her; who sees her and when she is seen which to the viewer suggests that he has power over her both in life and death, however could possibly be interpreted in the sense that he couldn't fully get the satisfaction of completely controlling her in life but now in death that satisfaction is fulfilled, she is now the 'object' that he always wanted but never fully got

when she was alive. To the Duke the portrait is not a celebration of her beauty but an object and commodity to show his power.

The fact that there is an internal audience gives a further dominant voice for the Duke; he is speaking to a specific person and is engaging that person overall giving him the power without interruption. While we do see a clear authority in the Duke in 'My Last Duchess' there is, in my opinion another side to him shown through form, structure and even language to a certain extent. The fact that the poem is a dramatic monologue written in rhyming couplets gives a contrast in the Duke's behaviour and perception; the stressed beat further reinforces the fact that the Duke is a very ruling character however the unstressed beat suggests the opposite, that there is an element of vulnerability in his traits and a certain insecurity that he feels. We see a certain sense of paranoia when he tells the audience of Fra Pandolf and his fear of the Duchess' 'flirtatious' behaviour, the fact that she was 'too easily impressed; she liked whate'er she looked on' showed that possibly she was not a 'trophy wife' and she did play him by being courted by many men, however alternatively it could be interpreted that the Duke is trying to justify his actions and perhaps get redemption for his past actions.

This is very similar of the character of Othello, throughout the soliloquy we feel a build up of confusion and worry that he is in fact maybe doing the wrong thing, almost as if he knows inside that she is innocent of the crimes she has been accused of. The use of the word 'chaste' on line 2 suggests that perhaps he has doubts of Desdemona's felony, showing almost a less forceful side to Othello, and a weaker inside begins to emerge, one which is unsure. The confusion in Othello's character particularly emerges through <https://assignbuster.com/compare-the-characterisations-in-my-last-duchess-and-othellos-soliloquy/>

the language used in the soliloquy, although it begins with Othello trying to justify his actions and save his eternal soul from hell, his doubt progresses as he realises he still loves Desdemona. He uses natural imagery to describe her suggesting that he knows deep down of her innocence and light plays an important role in giving the audience that impression, through structure and language throughout.

The constant repetition of 'light' in the soliloquy suggests its importance, and through language the audience gauges light to be a metaphor for Desdemona; she is the light of his life. The reference to 'put out the light' gives the impression that by putting out the light, Othello would be 'putting out' Desdemona and therefore putting out the light in his life - nothing else in his life would be good anymore. This could also be received that by putting out the life he will be in constant darkness; to hide himself away and damning himself to hell for his villainy. This is similar with 'My Last Duchess' in the sense that audiences at the time would see both pieces as highlighting the stereotypes of women at the time they were written. Comparing the Duchess in 'My Last Duchess' and Desdemona in Othello's soliloquy we see a very similar stereotype being portrayed of the women in a very similar time period.

We see both women being portrayed in a very promiscuous manner, however we see a difference in the two as in many ways the Duchess is less innocent than Desdemona; although we do not know the background of 'My Last Duchess' the Duke has clearly seen the felony of the Duchess through his own eyes and hasn't taken someone else's word for it. He has witnessed that 'her looks went everywhere' suggesting that he genuinely thought of <https://assignbuster.com/compare-the-characterisations-in-my-last-duchess-and-othellos-soliloquy/>

her as committing adultery but as the audience knows of no proof of this his actions cannot be justified; we see him as a cold hearted murderer.

Contrasting with this, although we know Iago played on the stereotypes of women at the time to get his revenge on Othello, there is very much less of an acknowledgement of it in the soliloquy, perhaps again proving that Othello believes her innocence. It is stated that Othello feels he must kill her 'else she'll betray more men' which shows although he knows not of what she has done he has based his decision upon the stereotypes of women at the time and the influences of this.

As an audience in the present we almost have a different reaction to the two pieces as we see them very much based around the idea of feminism which will have been different to the perception when they were originally written making both relatively trivial. Since Eve in the Garden of Eden gave into temptation and seduced Adam women had always been given a negative stereotype which I think both texts play on. Both pieces of writing emphasize the jealousy and revenge that can be felt after a manipulation of events. This makes the two very similar as the male characters both result to murder after the stereotypes of women at the time become apparent in their situations. However, in 'My Last Dutchess', without any prior background to the Duke and Duchess we never find out whether the murder was justifiable or not or whether the Duke was just a corrupt, angry man. Without this background of characters the audience struggles to sympathise as much with both the Duke and Duchess in comparison with the pity we feel for Othello and Desdemona for the reason that we do not know what happened between the couple before hand and their personal situation is unknown.

The Duchess has no voice throughout the poem, which could be interpreted as a metaphor of women at the time, and this form makes us sympathise with her in this sense. This is similar of both 'My Last Duchess' and the soliloquy in Othello, both are shown through the males eyes which links back to what I have said previously, both are very voyeuristic and show the male dominance and the misogynism of the time; there was a hatred and fear of unfaithful women which led to the murder of both women. Language in 'My Last Duchess' also shows the jealousy of the Duke, with form and structure playing a big part in this also. The fact that there is almost a 'list' of the sins the Duchess has committed shows the build up of anger that the Duke feels towards her shows how form is important in the poem but the language used from around line 15 to line 32 further reinforces this - he is jealous of the attention given to the Duchess but also of the lack of attention given to him by her, due to her being 'too easily impressed' by other men and therefore not himself but without knowing whether the murder is justifiable the audience is forced to see the Duke as a cold-hearted murderer. Although both men kill their women due to fear of unfaithfulness, a main contrast in the Duke and Othello is their feelings about their women. We know from further in the play that Othello gets very heated and kills Desdemona out of passion; jealous, vengeful passion, but is still out of love. He says 'I will kill thee And love thee after' showing that he almost loves her so much that he has to kill her as he can't stand seeing her in the way he is seeing her anymore. He feels if he kills her he will no longer have any worries and no more jealousy. The fact that this is juxtaposed ('I will kill thee') shows that what began as appearance and stereotypes being opposite

of reality ended reversed; Othello is now physically black inside and out. However, the fact that he says 'and love thee after' shows that he is still killing her out of love, although admittedly not a tender love it is still out of love and passion. Throughout the soliloquy we get the impression that Othello is still in love with Desdemona and by using natural imagery as a metaphor and to describe her further reinforces this.

By saying he will 'not shed her blood nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow' we get the impression firstly that in his eyes she is still perfect, by describing her skin as 'snow' we get a sense of purity and innocence from Desdemona even from his eyes, and by saying he will not 'shed her blood nor scar' it shows to the audience that he does not want to hurt her, nor ruin the beauty that she has; he wants her to stay the pure beauty that he fell in love with. However in 'My Last Duchess' we do not see this murder out of love, but out of paranoia and jealousy. By describing her as 'a wonder now' it is suggested that the Duke prefers his Duchess in death, now that she can be entirely objectified by him and he has ultimate power over her which he didn't before.