

How far do we see
different attitudes to
love presented in
othello



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Othello has always been seen as a play that has love as its primary focus. Indeed, almost every main character, not just Othello and Desdemona, is somehow involved in a love affair. Not everyone treats love the same way, however.

In a play that has so many strikingly different characters, it is thus natural for us to see an accordingly vast range of conceptions of love. In the next few paragraphs, I will attempt to uncover what these various attitudes to love are, hence in the process illustrate the variety that exists in the play. In many instances, characters come very close to expressing their love in a way that is similar to that by the poets following the Petrarchan tradition. The best example of this is, of course, when Cassio engages in a paean of praise for Desdemona the moment he arrives in Cyprus (Act II, Sc. 1).

To him, she is to be equated with the gods and heavens - "the divine Desdemona". Even nature, usually thought to be the most powerful, is simply inferior compared to her: "Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds...As having sense of beauty [Desdemona's], do omit / Their mortal natures". Indeed, the language he uses to describe her is extravagant and excessive - "our great captain's captain", having a sustained appearance of hyperboles which shows his exaltation of and admiration for her.

To him, her physicality is immaculate: She "paragons description and wild fame", "excels the quirks of blazoning pens" and hence "tire[s] the ingener". In here, he sees himself as artist who is so overwhelmed by the perfection of her physique that it is simply impossible for him to capture it on

canvas or paper. Othello also takes this view of Desdemona when the end of the play is nearing (V, 2). He calls her a “cunning’st pattern of excelling nature” and goes a step further by using typical Petrarchan tropes to assert her chastity – “whiter skin of hers than snow” and “smooth as monumental alabaster”. It is clear then that at times both characters see love as expressing their admiration for the infinite and sacrosanct beauty of the woman, whom to them is a symbol of perfection – “She is indeed perfection.” (Cassio in II, 3) Cassio and Othello are not the only Petrarchan lovers in the play. There is also Roderigo, but he is slightly different from them in that he seems to see his love as suffering – because he cannot obtain Desdemona – rather than simply an admiration for her. It is still Petrarchan but not quite how the other two characters see love. He tells Iago that he will “incontinently drown myself” since from the moment he is in love with Desdemona, “to live is torment” and that “death is our physician” (I, 3). From here, it becomes obvious that he also uses hyperboles so typical of Petrarchan love poetry, making him look pathetic and helpless because of his love for Desdemona.

Moving away from the Petrarchan tradition, there are also times when love is glorified just as war is and that they are seen as just different facets of the same whole. Such an attitude to love is most evident as Othello’s. To him, the process of wooing Desdemona is in fact a simple telling of “the story of my life” which consists of his adventures as a general (I, 3). To see his courtship of Desdemona in this way immediately elevates his love for her, not just by portraying it to be a pure engagement of souls and minds and hence on an entirely spiritual level, but also by making the nobility of his

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adventures and his occupation as the foundation of their love for each other - " She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I loved her that she did pity them. " Even Desdemona herself supports this view of love when she requests that she follows Othello to Cyprus since " if I be left behind.

.. and he go to the war...

The rites for which I love him are bereft me". In fact, it is not just that war gives rise to love but that the reverse is also true, so that war and love reinforce each other reciprocally. After Iago's first insinuations at Desdemona's falseness, Othello makes his famous speech in which he bids farewell to all the different glorious elements of war - " the plumed troop", " the neighing steed", " the shrill trump", " the spiritstirring drum", " the earpiercing fife", " the royal banner" (III, 3). The fact that he pays elaborate attention to all these details shows just how much he resents the loss of the glory of war and hence how Desdemona's love for him is such an essential thing for his respected position as soldier. Ultimately, it is not so much war itself that is gone with the loss of love than its nobility and the honour it brings - " Farewell..

.. all quality, / Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war! " But Othello is not the only person who thinks of love as valiant and war-like. Cassio, in his praise for Desdemona, also subscribes to this view (II, 1). True it is clearly Petrarchan, yet when he refers to Desdemona as " our great captain's captain" or as " the riches of the ship" or brings her into relation with the storm - " Tempests themselves.

.. do omit / Their mortal natures, letting go safely by / The divine

Desdemona", it is also clear that he sees her in connection with adventures of the sea. Both Othello and Cassio are key characters who think of love and war as one.

A similarly predominant but diametrically opposed view of love in the play is the idea of it degraded to merely lust. Of course, the only person most famous for asserting this view is Iago. He refers to Othello's and Desdemona's elopement as "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I, 1). The fact that Othello is a "ram" and Desdemona an "ewe" does not just reduce their love to merely a fulfillment of animalistic desires, but also puts them at the bottom of the Great Chain of Being, therefore condemning the affair altogether. Moreover, any arguments that he makes about the relationships between Cassio, Desdemona and Othello are all full of the assumption that love is but carnal.

He predicts that Othello's and Desdemona's love for each other will in time break down because they would be sick of each other's bodies: "It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor... when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice"; "nor he [Othello] his to her..."

The food that to him now... shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coliquintida" (I, 3).

Similarly, he claims that it must be that Desdemona is in love with Cassio because she is in need of sex, something which Othello is assumed not to be

able to give to her: " Desdemona is directly in love with him [Cassio]...Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil?..

. very nature will... compel her to some second choice" (II, 1).

Indeed, Iago equates finding a sex partner as finding a lover. Even his own relationship with his wife is given similar treatment. He talks about " her tongue she oft bestows on me" (II, 1), emphasising only on the physical. When Emilia says " I have a thing for you", his immediate reply is " A thing for me? It is a common thing-", in which " thing" obviously refers to the female genitalia (III, 3).

Arguably, Iago displays no affection to Emilia at all. He shoos her away the moment she helps him fulfil his want of getting Desdemona's handkerchief and calls her " foolish". All in all, Iago's skepticism of human nature has consequently made him reduce the concept of love to one that is totally devoid of feeling and entirely made of lust, summed up when he says " our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion [a subset]" to Roderigo (I, 3). The men's notions of love aside, love to the main women means both a personal and complete devotion to the partner. For example, it is obvious that Desdemona has a very clear sense of duty to Othello.

She speaks of how she " perceive[s] here a divided duty", one to her father " for life and education" but the other to Othello for her love (I, 3). Even Emilia - arguably the most feminist character in the play - subscribes to this idea of love as when she refers to herself as " nothing but to please his fantasy" (III, 3). Indeed, Desdemona even defines herself in terms of the love she has for <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-do-we-see-different-attitudes-to-love-presented-in-othello/>

Othello. When Othello asks her demandingly “ what art thou? “, she replies to him not “ Desdemona”, not “ a girl”, not a “ Venetian lady”, but “ Your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife” (IV, 2).

It is, therefore, clear how much her love for Othello has taken over her sense of identity. Naturally, she also takes the character of her husband in full, accepting any defects he has - “ even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns... have grace and favour in them” (IV, 3).

All in all, a transcendental quality can be imputed to the two women’s devotion. Desdemona exclaims that “ his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love” (IV, 2). Up till now, an examination of what the characters in Othello have to say about love in general, their own and others’ love affairs in particular and how they treat their own love has shown that there exists a vast range of viewpoints, from Petrarchan to devotion to lust to war-like, and that there are even different nuances to Petrarchan love. But this is true only as far as we take the analysis at face value: If one would to look closely at the different viewpoints again, one would find that there exists striking similarities amongst them. By thinking of love as Petrarchan, as merely lust or of it in connection with adventure, the main men in Othello are in fact just asserting different forms of the same view: that of a dissociation of love from sex.

Love, in their eyes, must be a lofty and romantic affair that can only belong to the nobility and the valiant. Sex, on the other hand, is a basic sport, sometimes immoral, and is to be despised and hidden for it. The corollary is

that the woman whom is in relation to either cannot be seen in association to the other. The evidence from which all these are evident is overwhelming.

Iago's attempts to put images of Desdemona having sex into Othello's head (IV, 1) is a clear illustration of what happens when Othello tries to conceive of Desdemona as both love and sex - it is impossible for him. The moment Iago uses the words " Lie... With her, on her, what you will", he lapses into a speech full of short jerky phrases ending with exclamation marks which suggest confusion, disturbance and his inability to make sense of the situation (eg.

" Lie with her! ' Zounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief-confessions-handkerchief! "). Indeed, the subject is so explosive to Othello that it takes over even his control of his physical body, culminating in a seizure which Iago revels in. Cassio shares the same divided view of Desdemona. He keeps on rejecting Iago's insinuations about Desdemona's sexuality (II, 3): When Iago says she's " full of game" (a suggestion of her sexuality), Cassio replies that " she's a most fresh and delicate creature" (no suggestion of sexuality); when he goes on to say that her eyes are " a parley to provocation [a sexual incitement]", Cassio agrees that they are " inviting" but " yet methinks right modest" (non-sexual).

Sex, then, is reserved only for Bianca, who is a " caitiff", a " monkey", a " fitchew" (IV, 1), and is used and degraded for it. Likewise, Roderigo rejects Iago's suggestions of Desdemona's inconstancy and her sexual affair with Cassio - "'tis not possible", defending that the " paddl[ing] with the palm of his hand" must be of " but courtesy" and that she can only be " full of most

blest condition" (II, 1). The only slight exception is Iago himself, to whom love as conceived by the rest of the men does not even exist. But conceiving of love as merely a fulfillment of physical desires does not in any case exclude him from having the men's shared view of love as never sex and sex as never love. It is interesting because all the women share an entirely opposite view from the men. To them then, love is not a romantic, idealised affair so much as sex is not something to be hidden and looked down upon.

They are not to be separated and are to be taken as parts of the same whole. This is obvious when Desdemona speaks of being true to Othello as "preserv[ing] this vessel [her body] for my lord" (IV, 2). Indeed, it is possible to argue that when she requests Emilia to "lay on my bed my wedding sheets" after Othello's confrontation with her on her supposed adultery (IV, 2), the agenda she has in mind is to consummate their marriage - which they have seemingly not done - to win him back. Her love for Othello, then, is inclusive of the physical.

Likewise, while Cassio sees Bianca as only for sex, it is both sex and love that she reserves for him. The anxiety evident from her response to Cassio getting injured and fainting (eg. O my dear Cassio, my sweet Cassio! O Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!) proves that she truly loves him (V, 1). Another look at the play as a whole reveals that the overarching similarity amongst men and amongst women and the difference between them as groups is no accident. In creating such a clear divide between men and women in terms of how they see love, Shakespeare presents in Othello what can be referred to best as a bipolar world¹ - there is an ideological and hardly reconcilable

conflict between the two genders. Indeed, it is not just how both sides see love that is wholly different, but their entire world-views.

The verse that the men tend to speak is much more colourful and poetic than the women. Best examples come from the beginning of the storm scene (II, 1), in which a masculine atmosphere is most evident. For example, just a single description of the storm itself is full of imagery - "foaming shore", "surge, with high and monstrous mane" and "cast water on the burning bear". This quality of their language sure highlights an idealistic and colourful view of the world. On the other hand, the women tend to speak in a language that is much more down-to-earth. For example, when Othello calls Desdemona "my fair warrior", her reply is a simple un-poetic "my dear Othello" (II, 1).

The domestic scene (IV, 3), in which a feminine atmosphere is most evident, in contrast with the masculine scene, corroborates this notion: There is hardly the kind of colourful language used by the men; there is instead a serious discussion on the existence of inconstant women. All these are in line with the difference between the two genders in terms of their notions of love, the women's view of love and sex being more practical and balanced. In addition, the irreconcilability of the conflict is shown by the tragedy itself, since one of its roots lies in the misunderstanding between Othello, the man, and Desdemona, the woman. The idea of a bipolar world amongst the characters, then, brings forward one of Shakespeare's most powerful comments about men and women - that they are essentially different and that mankind must work to find a way to reconcile this difference.

To go even further, Shakespeare's highlighting of the difference between the two genders also reveals his slightly feminist stance. In portraying the women as much more balanced and realistic, he is in fact holding them in high regard. That is why he has revealed their infinite devotion to their husbands (as proven in paragraph 6) and why he has presented the men in contemptible light - they are chauvinistic, expecting their wives to be devoted to them yet never speaking of a clear devotion back (eg. Iago cites the apparent affair between Othello and his wife as the motivation for his plot; Othello's downfall can be attributed to the fact that he cannot accept the idea of Desdemona cuckolding him, amongst other reasons); they are murderous (Othello, Iago, Roderigo all attempt murder); their idealism can sometimes be described as foolish and empty (especially when it becomes Petrarchan poetry). In summary, a detailed study of the attitudes to love in Othello has revealed a multitude of different views. On closer look, however, there is overwhelming similarity amongst the men's views and amongst the women's views, and that they form a conflict with each other.

A further examination of the play as a whole shows that this conflict does not just exist in terms of love but in very much everything else. This conflict, summed up best by using the idea of a bipolar world, highlights the difficult difference amongst men and women and puts across some of Shakespeare's feminist comments. All in all, perhaps the most significant insight that can be taken away about Othello is its amazing balance between a dramatic plot that is exceptionally focused thematically (it is mostly about love) and a vast potential for interpretation (yet it can lead to ideas about gender difference and inequality).