

## **Othello**

### **Background Information**

#### **The Source of *Othello***

Shakespeare delighted in taking old stories, adding his own particular brand of genius, and creating something new and better. He based *Othello* on a story in a collection of tales, called *Hecatonimithi*, written in 1565 by Giraldo Cinthio, an Italian. A short synopsis of the original story gives some indication of how Shakespeare merely borrowed stories and made them his own.

- The heroine, called Desdemona, falls in love with a Moor. Her family agrees reluctantly to her marriage with him, and the couple lives together in Venice for awhile.
- The Moor (given no name) is sent to command the troops in Cyprus. The Moor and Desdemona travel there together, and it's in Cyprus that the ensign (Shakespeare's Iago) plots against them.
- The ensign is in love with Desdemona. He feels that her rejection of him comes from her love of the captain (Shakespeare's Cassio). Therefore, the ensign's plot is against Desdemona, not the Moor.
- The captain loses his job when he attempts a fight with another soldier; he isn't drunk, and the character of Roderigo has no counterpart.
- The ensign steals Desdemona's handkerchief (while she is holding his child) and places it in the captain's house. The captain finds it and tries to return it to Desdemona, but he leaves quickly when he hears the Moor's voice.
- Together, the Moor and the ensign kill Desdemona by hitting her on the head with a sandbag, and then making the roof collapse to make it look like an accident. The Moor is eventually killed by a relative of Desdemona, and the ensign is tortured to death for another crime. The ensign's wife has known the story all along.

By making the Moor the center of his tragedy, Shakespeare created a character of nobility and sympathy. (The Moor in the Cinthio tale is unsympathetic.) He transformed an ugly little tale of sexual jealousy into a character study of a good man who, for all his virtue, is caught in a trap of evil and can't escape. It was Shakespeare's genius to take the stuff of melodrama and transform it into tragedy of the highest.

#### **What was a Moor?**

A Moor was a Muslim of mixed Arab and Berber descent. Berbers were North African natives who eventually accepted Arab customs and Islam after Arabs invaded North Africa in the Seventh Century A.D. The term has been used to refer in general to Muslims of North Africa and to Muslim conquerors of Spain. The word *Moor* derives from a Latin word, *Mauri*, used to name the residents of the ancient Roman province of Mauritania in North Africa. To refer to *Othello* as a "black Moor" is not to commit a redundancy, for there are white Moors as well as black Moors, the latter mostly of Sudanese origin.

#### **Racism**

In the 17th century, racism was an accepted part of public life; people of color were often thought of as "savage." Shakespeare would have encountered no societal pressures against presenting such ideas. Yet he doesn't actually portray *Othello* as inferior. Although Iago and Roderigo make him sound despicable in their disparaging first-act conversation, Shakespeare then shows *Othello* as a well-spoken and highly regarded military leader who has won the hand of an aristocratic woman. Iago's treachery is what ultimately tears him apart. Does Shakespeare mean to portray *Othello* as inferior? Or does he show *Othello*'s internalization of the harsh prejudice against him, ultimately believing himself incapable of winning Desdemona's love?

## Setting

It's not surprising that Shakespeare chose Venice as the setting of a story filled with passion, jealousy, and sexual tension. For the Elizabethans, the Italians were wicked, murderous, and of loose morals. When playwrights of the day wanted to portray wickedness, they often created Italian characters causing problems in England, or set the plays in Italy.

Venice was particularly exciting to the English. The women there were rumored to be very beautiful, and very interested in making love. Venetian men were considered hot-tempered, aggressive, and easily jealous. An Elizabethan audience watching Othello would have been highly suspicious of Desdemona and her behavior. Running off to get married behind your father's back was simply not done. Because Desdemona was Venetian, however, audiences wouldn't have been too surprised. As for Iago, he probably represented the kind of villain Elizabethans thought ran rampant throughout Italy!

One interesting note is that the name Iago is Spanish. (The Italian form is Giacomo.) Shakespeare gave his most evil character a Spanish name, probably because Spain was England's worst enemy. Italy may have been the home of romantic, exotic sin, but true evil, according to the Elizabethans, came from Spain!

## Othello's Tragic Flaw

What is it that causes Othello's downfall? Some have said that he's simply a jealous person whose jealousy of his wife gets out of hand. Others insist that jealousy is not part of his natural make-up that the emotion takes over only when Iago pushes him to the brink of insanity.

Most of the evidence in the play tends to support the latter interpretation. Othello doesn't show himself to be jealous early in the play. Manipulated by Iago's skillful lies, Othello must confront emotions he can't handle. His jealousy literally drives him mad. Anger and hate replace his wisdom and judgment, and the power of these destructive emotions leads to this sorry end.

## Themes

Three major themes of Othello are:

- appearance and reality,
- society's treatment of the outsider; and
- jealousy

## Appearance and Reality

Can we ever know the truth about a person? Is it possible to know if someone is lying to us? How can we discover what lies behind the words someone tells us?

Shakespeare was fascinated with these questions. Many of his most evil characters were thought by others in the play to be sincere and truthful. In Othello, this theme has its most potent and dramatic realization in the character of Iago. Iago fools everyone in the play into believing he's honest. No one even suspects him of treachery, until the final act when Roderigo first realizes how badly he's been fooled. In short, Iago proves that evil intentions can be masked behind a facade of honesty.

The theme emerges in other characters: Brabantio is deceived by Desdemona's reaction to Othello, assuming she fears him when she truly loves the Moor. Othello suspects that Desdemona is unfaithful, despite her innocent looks. Othello also feels he's being deceived by Cassio, whom he trusts and who appears loyal.

Emilia's exterior suggests salty indifference, but she turns against her husband and dies in defiance of Desdemona. Even Bianca, who is suspected of dishonesty, is ultimately seen as a sincere and caring woman. And Othello, considered a barbarian by many in the play, is gentle and noble until driven to near-madness by the cruel manipulations of his most trusted "friend."

The inability to judge true from false is a human dilemma that we have all faced. In Othello's case, the dilemma proves fatal. Shakespeare dramatizes the problem by showing the consequences of trusting someone whose mask of honesty is perfect, almost to the very last.

### **Society's Treatment of the Outsider**

Everyone has known the feeling of being alienated from a group, whether it's as the new kid at school, as a member of an ethnic or religious minority, or as someone who holds an unpopular opinion. Shakespeare points that problem in Othello by making his hero an outsider, one who doesn't quite belong in the society in which he lives. From the very beginning, when he's held in suspicion by a man who accuses him of seducing his daughter with mysterious charms, Othello stands apart from everyone else. As a man of another race and from another country, much of the conflict he faces is due to the reigning opinion that he doesn't quite belong.

Othello's sensitivity to the issue becomes clear when Iago uses it as proof that Desdemona couldn't be faithful to a man so foreign- such a match is "unnatural," he says. Othello's self-confidence, once so strong, is easily eroded by Iago's ability to convince him that he's inferior to the men of Venice. Shakespeare dramatizes through Othello, the tragedy of a man whose insecurities about his background, fed by public opinion, weaken his defenses and allow his worst instincts to take over.

### **Jealousy**

Othello represents how jealousy, particularly sexual jealousy, is one of the most corrupting and destructive of emotions. It is jealousy (fed by his innate sense of evil) that prompts Iago to plot Othello's downfall; jealousy, too, is the tool that Iago uses to arouse Othello's passions. Roderigo and Bianca demonstrate jealousy at various times in the play, and Emilia demonstrates that she too knows the emotion well. Only Desdemona and Cassio, the true innocents of the story, seem beyond its clutches.

Shakespeare used the theme in other plays, but nowhere else is it portrayed as quite the "green-eyed" monster it is in this play. Since it is an emotion that everyone shares, we watch its destructive influence on the characters with sympathy and horror.

- <http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xOthello.html#Moor>
- [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/tg\\_race.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/tg_race.html)
- [http://www.monmouth.com/~literature/Othello/othello\\_theme.htm](http://www.monmouth.com/~literature/Othello/othello_theme.htm)