
Othello and Three Main Questions Asked in the Play

As William Shakespeare's only truly Aristotelian tragedy, Othello has no subplot or comic relief, and, when originally performed, had little spectacle in the way of the set or action. The absence of these distractions leave the themes of the play defined and apparent. The story of Othello's fall from grace can show the audience three main ideas, how jealousy has disastrous consequences, how innocence is little protection against these consequences, and how revenge can harm those who seek it. These themes are shown through the characterization and action.

Othello shows the audience the detrimental effects of jealousy through the actions of Othello himself. He is jealous of his lieutenant, Cassio, because Othello has been led to believe that his wife, Desdemona, is having an affair with Cassio, thus making him incredibly jealous. This jealousy creates a breach of trust between Othello and his once loyal lieutenant. Othello wishes to kill Cassio and uses devious methods in order to gain information from Cassio. In Act 4 Scene 1, Othello hides while Iago pretends to talk to Cassio about Desdemona and then the two plot Cassio's murder. However, destruction of loyalty is only one of the horrid results of envy, as Shakespeare shows his audience. Othello's raging jealousy eventually inhibits his clear thinking. Through his manipulation, Iago causes Othello's uncontrollable emotions, and thereby rules Othello's actions. At one point, he becomes so consumed with his emotions that he goes into a seizure. It is almost Othello's own fault that Iago has such an easy time manipulating him, because Othello never seeks another character's story or opinion on Iago's information. Iago states, "I told him what I thought, and told no more than what he found himself was apt and true," (Act 5, Scene 2). Othello gets all his information and proof from Iago's suggestions and even goes so far as to dub him "honest Iago," an irony and outright misplacement of trust that eventually costs Othello his life and the life of his wife. He kills Desdemona without ever hearing her side of the story. This shows that Othello's jealousy created distrust and loss of rational thinking, which led to murder.

Throughout the play, Desdemona evolves as the unsuspecting ingénue, the ultimate victim who is unjustly punished. Through her, Shakespeare shows his audience that innocence is no protection against evil. Even in his anger with her, Othello calls Desdemona "a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!" (Act 4, Scene 1). She is often associated with the color white, in contrast to Othello's association with black, as Iago proclaims to Desdemona's father, "an old, black ram is tugging your white ewe," (Act 1, Scene 1). Purity and innocence are often symbolized through the color white. She is not guilty of Othello and Iago's accusations, as Emilia told Othello, "O, she was heavenly true!" (Act 5, Scene 2). Therefore, Desdemona is portrayed as pure and innocent. Nevertheless, in spite of her righteousness, she is still

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murdered by Othello in the end for the crimes that she did not do, as Emilia shows Othello, "?thou hast killed the sweetest innocent that e'er did lift up eye," (Act 5, Scene 2). Even as she dies, she tries to remove Othello from the blame, for when asked who has hurt her, she replies, "Nobody. I myself. Farewell," (Act 5, Scene 2).

Both of the main male characters in Othello seek revenge for their "wrongs," and, through their fate, Shakespeare shows how revenge bounces back to hurt those who seek it. Iago, who feels he's much better qualified, is offended by Othello's appointment of Cassio as his lieutenant instead of himself. Therefore, he seeks his revenge by manipulating Othello into thinking that Cassio is having a romantic relationship with Desdemona. Iago eventually gains the lieutenant status he had wished for, but the play doesn't stop there. Iago's plan becomes more complicated and begins to get out of his control as other, unexpected factors come into play, such as the handkerchief and Othello's murder plot for Cassio and Desdemona. Ironically, the woman Iago least expected and always underestimated, his wife, Emilia, unveils his plot, "You have done well, that men must lay their murders on your neck," (Act 5 Scene 2). He is stabbed by Othello and loses everything for which he worked. Othello also seeks revenge on his wife for her supposed disloyalty. In doing so, he kills her. When Emilia shows him his mistake, he stabs himself and dies beside his slain wife, "No way but this, killing myself, to die upon a kiss," (Act 5, Scene 2). Both Othello and Iago are punished for their vengeful plots in the end.

In sum, Shakespeare's Othello has three major themes intertwined into the fabric of the play; jealousy has horrible consequences, innocence is no protection against evil, and revenge hurts those who seek it. These themes are taught through Othello's character flaw and his resulting downfall.

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