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## Truth Issues In Othello

### Written texts show us that the truth is hidden beneath false appearances

'Some rise by sin, and others by virtue fall' – William Shakespeare. This quote is central to the themes in the play 'Othello', written by William Shakespeare in 1603. Iago is a character that rises by 'sin' due to his masterful manipulation of those around him. He is therefore used by Shakespeare to convey the idea that the truth often lies beneath false appearances, as Iago is not all that he appears to be. However, characters such as Othello are the complete opposite of Iago – Othello is an open man who wears his heart upon his sleeve. Therefore, the text shows us that the truth is only hidden beneath false appearances, to an extent.

Iago is a character whose truth is hidden beneath layer upon layer of false appearances. He has many different sides, and no character gets to see the whole truth of his character until the very end of the play. This is all in an effort to bring about the ultimate downfall of Othello. Iago is a character that does not care for anyone but himself, and therefore, has no qualms about being dishonest with those around him. The character that he is most false towards is Othello. When Roderigo questions Iago about his apparent affection towards Othello, Iago simply states 'I follow him to serve my turn upon him.' This succinctly sums up Iago's attitude towards Othello. He is loving towards Othello, pledging his allegiance to him through statements such as 'I am your own forever'. This is all in an attempt to gain Othello's trust, so that he can effectively turn Othello against himself and bring about his downfall in such a way that he will never be able to get back up. Iago's false appearance to other characters in the play is highlighted through the language he uses. When by himself or expressing his true feelings, he uses bestial and dark imagery. For example, during the monologue in which he formulates his plan to ruin Othello, Iago states 'Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to world's light'. The dark, menacing imagery created through the words used and Iago's reference to the Devil reveal his true evil nature. Up until the end of the play, Iago's false appearances are so convincing to the other characters that he is consistently referred to as 'honest Iago'. This creates a sense of dramatic irony, and highlights just how false he is. When the audience considers how Iago appears to many of the other characters in the play, he is almost too good to be true – to characters such as Othello and Desdemona, he would appear loyal and kind, and completely free of anger. Shakespeare emphasises the danger associated with basing others upon their appearances – this can often result in us making similar mistakes, considering those around us as honest, when they are in fact the opposite. He also shows the audience that those appear to good to be true often are. Iago's truth is even hidden from the audience, to an extent. During

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the play, Iago states that his anger towards Othello and Cassio are due to the fact that Cassio, who he describes as a 'creditor and debtor', got the role of Lieutenant over him. He also states that 'it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets [Othello] has done my office... I fear Cassio with my nightcap, too.' He is suggesting that his wife, Emilia, has been unfaithful to him with both Othello and Cassio. However, it is unlikely that these are his only motives, only because of the lengths he goes to. He tirelessly manipulates those around him, and even plans the murder of Cassio and Desdemona. It is more likely that jealousy towards Othello due to his high-ranking position and loving relationship with Desdemona, which is exacerbated by the fact he is black, is one of the main reasons for Iago's malice. Iago uses false appearances and hides the truth in order to gain a sense of vindication. He is so unhappy with his own situation that he feels revenge is the only way he can truly feel happy. Through Iago, Shakespeare warns the audience against the use of revenge to gain a sense of contentment, as plans such as Iago often fail. No matter how clever a person may be, weaving a web of lies is a fruitless occupation that often results in irreversible damage for all involved, especially for those in Iago's position of perpetrator. In Iago's case, he becomes doomed to a life of torture in order to repay for his sinful actions.

In many ways, the character of Othello is the opposite of Iago. Othello is a naïve, open man who does not hesitate before expressing how he feels. The truth of his feelings and thoughts lie at the surface of his appearance – they are almost never hidden. This is evident throughout the play. At the beginning, Othello's love towards Desdemona is clear as he refers to her as 'sweeting' and his 'fair warrior'. He does not try and hide his affection in the name of decency or modesty. His relationship with Desdemona brings him joy, and he is not afraid to express it. Once Iago manipulates Othello into believing that Desdemona has been unfaithful, Othello quickly goes from loving Desdemona to hating her, as he states 'I am abused, and my relief must be to loathe Desdemona'. In every scene throughout the play, the audience is fully aware of how Othello feels. When confronted with Desdemona after Iago's manipulation, Othello does not attempt to hide his anger from her, either. He is so blunt and harsh with her, that Desdemona is left asking 'Why do you speak so startingly and rash?' He does not attempt to make any secret of his anger, even though many in his position may have done so, as they attempted to figure out how to deal with the situation. Othello is not aware of such tendencies. This is likely to be due to the fact that he was raised on the battlefield, and so was not brought up with knowledge of how to act in common society. Instead, he was taught to fight for what was right, at all costs. He was raised with a strong sense of right and wrong, and this is carried over into his everyday life. His lack of knowledge of society also means that he is instilled with a certain amount of naivety. This means that Othello goes from treating Desdemona with nothing but love to referring to her as an 'impudent strumpet' and 'the cunning whore of Venice'. There is no in between for Othello, and this means that he treats Desdemona as he feels she deserves, regardless of the cost to his public image. This is emphasised when Othello strikes Desdemona, with an exclamation of 'Devil!' in front of officials from Venice. Lodovico is

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shocked, stating 'This would not be believed in Venice.' Othello has just sacrificed his good reputation, as 'the man whom passion could not shake', due to his anger. However, there is no evidence in the play of Othello being concerned about this. He is not aware of how, at times, it is important to guard one's emotions, lest they ruin others' perceptions of them. Othello is the very opposite of Iago, who carefully constructs his image so as to be able to achieve his own wicked ends. He has an 'open nature', which as Iago describes, means that he 'is as easily led by the nose as asses are'. Due to his honest and naïve nature, Othello assumes that everyone around him is just as open as he is. Therefore, he is easily manipulated by Iago, who he trusts completely. Through Othello, Shakespeare conveys to the audience the dangers associated with having too honest a nature, and expressing every thought and emotion that comes to us. This leaves a person vulnerable, and due to the cruel nature of society and people such as Iago, means that they may often be taken advantage of for the benefit of others.

Overall, in the play Othello, Shakespeare shows the audience that, to an extent, the truth of people may lie beneath false appearances. Through the character of Iago, Shakespeare is able to convey how when a person's actions are fuelled by revenge and deception, they are almost never successful. The character of Othello displays to the audience how naivety and a lack of worldly experience can often make people too open, and this can leave them vulnerable and at the mercy of others. By learning these ideas, the audience is able to gain a better understanding of human nature and ultimately of the danger that people can present to one another.

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