

Shakespeare: Critical essay on Othello's jealousy

Bonnie Greer puts Othello in his place - at the centre of the play - and argues that it is his jealousy, not Iago's hatred, that is the real tragedy.

Many people have asked why this great play, one of Shakespeare's masterpieces, is named after a character who, by the end of it, is almost roaring with anger, pain and revenge. Some people even say that Othello should be named Iago. After all, isn't it Iago who gets things going by suggesting that Desdemona, Othello's young wife, is unfaithful to him? Isn't Iago the one creating all the mayhem, engineering disaster after disaster? Doesn't Othello just react to this? Why is it named after him? We can discover that answer through the play's five act structure.

Although Shakespeare did not create his five act structure himself, by dividing the main character's development into five parts, we can begin to see the shape of the action. Dramatic action does not always mean something happening on stage, sword fights, brawls, deaths for instance. Dramatic action takes place both within the characters and in the audience. The audience undergoes change as a result of watching the play and it is the changes which take place in the main character's personality which make the play move forward. This unfolding of character, and the events that are caused by it, is action in the drama.

There is a particular trait, usually quite simple but overwhelming, that makes this happen. This is called the 'tragic flaw'. The 'tragic flaw' causes in us, the audience, what the Greeks called 'catharsis' - a kind of feeling within. This feeling not only helps us to identify with the character, but actually to experience the same emotion itself. That is one reason why drama and the theatre are so important. Othello lives because it exposes something within us, something that we cannot - or do not want to - face. Through this play we face it and deal with it.

In Act 1, Scene 1, we are in Venice where we meet Iago, Othello's trusted lieutenant. Iago is unhappy about being passed over by Michael Cassio for the top job. Iago goes back and forth about his feelings, or appears to. At the end of the day, he says: 'we cannot all be masters.'

Roderigo, another loser, is upset, too, but about something totally different. Othello is involved with the most beautiful girl in town: Desdemona. Desdemona is young, beautiful - and white. Othello is older - and black. Iago and Roderigo make obscene jokes about this: 'you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse' - 'your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs'.

But then finally Iago says it: 'I hate the Moor.' Shakespeare never tells us exactly why Iago hates Othello. In our journalistic age we demand precise answers. Many have been given through the ages: sexual jealousy, racism, and so on. But the truth is that we don't know. This is one of the clues as to why the play is called Othello. Through the play, we will come to know Othello, come to know exactly who he is.

In Act 1, Scene 2, Othello appears, a man of dignity and a great soldier. He has been summoned by the Duke on urgent business. But suddenly Brabantio, Desdemona's father appears. In Act 1 Scene 1 Iago has said to him that '... an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe'. Here Shakespeare balances out the very public job that Othello has to do with the agitation amongst the Venetians over his private life.

However, Othello triumphs over the raving father by sheer dignity. Brabantio accuses this great man of bewitching his daughter: 'thou hast enchanted her...' This is the only way that Brabantio can make sense of his daughter loving a black man. He soon discovers that this is not the case.

In Act 1 Scene 3 the Duke gives us the full glory of his black general: Othello is the victor of many battles and the Duke needs him in Cyprus. Othello is ready and willing, but Brabantio demands some explanation of how his daughter came to love him.

Now we begin to see why some of Shakespeare's most exquisite verse has been given to Othello. In the speech beginning 'Her father lov'd me, oft invited me...' Othello tells us that Desdemona fell in love - with his soul. Before us now is not just a great general, but a man of emotion, of vulnerability, of grace and fragility, a man with a beautiful soul. Remember the Othello we discover here. This is the key to what follows.

Desdemona is a young, inexperienced girl, but she knows her own heart. She tells everyone as best she can what has made her love the black man who, to many, is the enemy within. Brabantio gives in, but warns Othello that if Desdemona has deceived her own father by marrying without his permission, she will deceive him, too.

Once again, Iago tells us that he hates Othello, but we already know that. That never changes. In a play, a character who never changes, no matter how powerful that character is, is not the main focus. It is Othello who is changing. What we want to see now is whether Othello and Desdemona can survive Iago's hate.

In Act 2, Scene 1 we meet the handsome Michael Cassio, Othello's right-hand man. He obviously finds Othello's new bride attractive. Desdemona is very touchy-feely and takes Cassio's hand. He blushes. Iago notices how kind-hearted she is. Now he sees a loop-hole, a way to destroy the man he hates.

Othello, now governor of Cyprus, stops a night brawl involving Cassio (Act 2 Scene 3). Again, we see the man's wisdom, but also his potential for violence: 'Though he had twinn'd with me, both at birth,/Shall lose me ...' Desdemona intervenes on behalf of Cassio, demonstrating her kind heart. For her sake, Othello lets him off the hook. He loves her so much that he says without her 'chaos is come again.' This is the first hint that something is not well inside Othello. Suddenly, the man who has everything has a secret: what is this chaos that he mentions? What possible effect could it have?

Act 3 is the climax of the five act structure. In Act 3 the plot shifts from the public - Othello's job in Cyprus - to the private: his marriage.

It is within his marriage that the play exposes the fatal flaw, the chink in the armour. Othello has gone through life, won battles, won great office, won the love of a beautiful, young woman - but has never known himself. In Act 3 Scene 3 he asks Iago: 'Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?' Iago lies. Othello believes him.

Desdemona takes it upon herself to ask a favour for Cassio. Othello is suspicious but gives in. He can't deny her anything, but he wonders what's going on ... Iago begins to plant things in his mind, things about the more handsome, the more virile Cassio.

We watch as the mighty edifice that was Othello begins to crumble. Iago whispers in his ear: 'O, beware, my lord, jealousy; / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on.' Jealousy is the fatal flaw, jealousy is the 'chaos come again.' Jealousy: something so simple, something within Othello himself that he has never faced. Jealousy is destroying him. It is this trait of his nature that undermines his life. Not racism, although that plays a part. Not the unmotivated hatred of Iago, although that is involved, too. It is that which is part of the man himself. No one would have guessed, no one would have known that such a great, noble human being could allow jealousy to undermine him. We wouldn't have guessed it, either. The last two acts are the unravelling of the mind of Othello.

Othello is a much richer, more complex play than I have detailed here, but its heart lies within the inner framework of its main character. Finally, when jealousy has destroyed everything he has worked for, everything he has loved, and finally himself, Othello asks that the state remember the service he has given it. But it is too late. Othello, the black man considered by some to be the enemy within, discovers that he is his own enemy.

In Othello, Shakespeare lifts us above the ordinary socio-political facts and presents us with a universal drama for all time, the story of us all: the weakness inherent within every human being.

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