Among the tragedies of Shakespeare *Othello* is supreme in one quality: beauty. Much of its poetry, in imagery, perfection of phrase, and steadiness of rhythm, soaring yet firm, enchants the sensuous imagination.... The play has a rare intellectual beauty, satisfying the desire of the imagination for order and harmony between the parts and the whole. Finally, the play has intense moral beauty in its presentation in... Desdemona of a love which does not alter.—Gardner, "The Noble Moor": 169

Helen Gardner observes above that *Othello* is beautiful not only in its language but also in its structure and in the fidelity of Desdemona to Othello despite his mistreatment of her.

**Themes**

Themes of *Othello* include not only fidelity but the following:

*love*—marital, romantic, possessive (like Othello's and Brabantio's love for Desdemona, and Bianca's for Cassio), or selfless (like Desdemona's love for Othello and Emilia's for Desdemona);

*jealousy*—sexual for Othello, while for Iago it is jealousy of Cassio's military promotion and the beauty of his life, of Othello's good fortune, and of Desdemona's virtue;

*friendship*—false or perverted friendship between men like Iago and Othello, Iago and Roderigo, and Othello and Cassio, and true friendship between employer and servant as seen with Desdemona and Emilia;

*unjust revenge*—Iago's on Othello, Emilia, and Cassio, and Othello's on Desdemona;

*loyalty*—Desdemona's to Othello and Emilia's to Desdemona;

*stereotyping*—Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo stereotype Othello based on racism, religious prejudice, and xenophobia, while Iago and Othello stereotype Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca based on misogyny;

*courage*—Othello's on the battlefield, Othello and Desdemona's when eloping, Iago's to plot and lie, and Emilia's when opposing Iago and Othello to tell the truth about Desdemona's innocence;

*idealism*—Othello and Desdemona display idealism when daring to elope, as does Desdemona when championing Cassio and Emilia when doing the same for the deceased Desdemona; and

*the exotic and travel*—these are seen via setting the first act in Venice and the rest of the play in Cyprus and through starring a Moor who is featured in the title and who exoticizes himself in his speech before committing suicide at the end of the play.

Other themes include the following:

*class*—Iago resents Cassio for class reasons, and Othello marries up into the aristocracy, while Othello and Iago form an alliance...
of outcasts in race and class against the well-born Cassio and Desdemona; yet the servant Emilia is arguably the hero of the play when she stands up for her upper-class mistress to Iago and Othello;

interacial relationships—Othello is dark-skinned and Desdemona is white in a period when such a marriage would be rare and controversial;

age—Othello is middle-aged, whereas Desdemona and Cassio are young, making Othello feel less attractive than Cassio and worried about his virility;

sadism—Iago's plot is so evil that the motives he confesses cannot fully account for it, and he seems to take great joy in hurting and manipulating the other characters;

lust—Iago and Roderigo take a lustful view of women rather than a romantic view, and so does Cassio with Bianca;

a daughter's rebellion against her father—as in *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and other Shakespeare plays, a woman chooses her husband against her father's wishes, angering him;

murder—Othello of Desdemona, and Iago of Emilia and Roderigo;

suicide—Othello's, as a form of self-execution or punishment;

torture—after the play's end, Iago will be tortured, but Iago has tortured Othello mentally since Act II;

madness—Othello goes mad due to jealousy, and perhaps Iago does in sociopathy, and so does Barbary in "Willow," the song Desdemona sings about a woman whose lover betrays her;

wife abuse—Othello strikes, taunts, and eventually strangles Desdemona, but she remains loyal to him, while Emilia's bitterness toward Iago suggests he might have abused her before he murdered her when she rebelled against him;

homosocial desire—possibly that is a motive for Iago's obsession with Othello, which Iago denies;

bonds among soldiers—Othello trusts Iago because they served together in battle;

deceit—Iago is repeatedly called "honest" by many characters, but he is not, and he convinces Othello that Desdemona's seeming unfaithfulness is real, when it is not;

reputation, rivalry, and status—Iago, Cassio, and Othello are preoccupied with status and reputation, and bitterness about these helps motivate Iago's plot and Othello's mistaken revenge against Desdemona and Cassio for supposedly disgracing him;

social mobility—Othello has managed to become a general despite the prejudices against Moors that he faces, and he manages to convince the Venetian Senate that his elopement with a white aristocrat is appropriate, while Iago is frustrated because he has failed at becoming socially mobile, as Othello has done.

Some other themes include:

voyeurism—Iago convinces Othello to spy on Cassio meeting Desdemona and Cassio meeting Bianca, from which meetings Othello draws misleading conclusions, while throughout the play the audience uncomfortably watches encounters between characters that are too private and disturbing for public viewing, especially Othello's murder of Desdemona and his subsequent suicide;

self-doubt—it may be Othello's tragic flaw, since it makes him believe Iago's lies about Desdemona, for a lifetime of facing prejudices based on Othello's race, ethnicity, and religion has made Othello feel unworthy of his young, wealthy, well-born Venetian wife;

trust—Othello, Emilia, Cassio, Roderigo, and Desdemona mistakenly trust Iago, while Othello mistakenly distrusts Desdemona,
and she trusts him so much that she attempts to vindicate him for murdering her;

judgment—legal judgment is given by the Venetian Senate when it permits Othello and Desdemona's elopement, while Othello in Cyprus judges Cassio as deserving demotion until Othello is arrested for strangling Desdemona and executes himself as a kind of sentence for murder—nevertheless, personal judgment is the trait Othello lacks in believing Iago's lies rather than trusting his wife;

necrophilia—when Othello kisses Desdemona's corpse, the body of the beautiful woman is fetishized, as it will be centuries later in Edgar Allan Poe's stories and Pre-Raphaelite painting;

witchcraft—Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching Desdemona, and her name contains the word demon, as hinted when Othello later accuses her of being a devil, then executes her as though she were a witch or siren who endangers men;

monstrosity—due to racism, Brabantio mistakenly regards interracial marriage as monstrous, while Iago's plot to ruin Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is actually monstrous, as is Othello's murder of Desdemona; imagery of bestiality throughout the play expresses the theme of monstrosity.

Structure

Written in five acts, Othello is set in Venice during the first act and in Cyprus, an outpost of Venice, during the remaining acts. The first, second, and fourth acts are composed of three scenes in each act; the third act is composed of four scenes; and the final act is composed of two scenes.

The first act occurs during a single evening. Othello and Desdemona are presumably consummating their elopement during the first two scenes, when Iago and Roderigo conspire and then go to Desdemona's father's house to taunt him over his daughter's elopement with Othello. (Not all critics think Othello and Desdemona ever consummate their marriage, however.) The closing scene of the first act is set in the Venetian Senate, when Othello answers Brabantio's charges in a pseudotrial that vindicates Othello.

The second act opens in the daytime in Cyprus, to which Othello and Desdemona have sailed in separate ships, surviving a storm that drowned the Turkish fleet. From that scene until the end of the play, the action hurtles over two days and nights; this sense of speeding, telescoping time creates the audience's sense that Iago is driving Othello insane with jealousy of Desdemona and Cassio's supposed adultery. Frank Kermode argues that "the pivotal scene of the play is 3.3, which from the outset, with Iago's 'I like not that' as Cassio withdraws, to the end, when Othello has accepted the charge against Desdemona and planned her death and Cassio's, is fewer than five hundred lines long, probably less than half an hour of stage time" (173). Such speed emphasizes Othello's transformation from a calm, reasonable man into one possessed by rage and jealousy.

The third and fourth acts end with same-sex pairings that supplant the married couples of Othello and Desdemona, Iago and Emilia. The third act concludes with Iago swearing fealty to Othello in revenge on Desdemona and Cassio, and the fourth act closes with a domestic scene between Emilia and Desdemona, when the maid presents husbands' flaws from a more realistic view than the misogynistic stereotypes Iago used to manipulate Othello during the third act.

Two scenes contain songs. The first scene of the second act includes a drinking song that Iago performs, and the last scene of the fourth act includes a sad ditty sung by Desdemona about a woman whose lover betrays her. Both of those scenes also contain banter that is missing from most of the rest of the play—in 2.1, the joking talk is between Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia, and in 4.3, it is between Desdemona and Emilia.

Ironically, although Iago is the villain, he speaks the most lines in the play, including five soliloquies and two asides in the first, second, and fourth acts (1.3.374–395, 2.1.165–175 and 198, 2.1.286–312, 2.3.46–59, 2.3.336–362, and 4.1.95–105). By contrast, Othello, the hero of the play, has only two soliloquies (3.3.257–277 and 5.2.1–22). Perhaps Iago needs to have the most lines to allow him to achieve control of the other characters. Only Iago and Othello speak soliloquies, keeping the two soldiers in primary focus and eclipsing Desdemona, Cassio, and Emilia.

Style and Imagery
Though *Othello* is mostly written in poetry, the discussions between Roderigo and Iago are generally in prose, accentuating the informal, nasty content of their dialogue. Whereas Iago's cynical style suits his debased thoughts, G. Wilson Knight argues that the play's "supremely beautiful effects of style are all expressions of Othello's personal passion" (55). Knight notes the use of beautiful, unusual names in the play, such as "Anthropophagi, Ottomites, Arabian trees, 'the base Indian', the Egyptian, Palestine, Mauretania, the Sagittary, Olympus, Mandragora, Othello, Desdemona" (57). He also observes that "[t]here is no fusing of word with word, rather a careful juxtaposition of one word or image with another" (57).

Wordplay occurs in the very frequent use of the word *honest*, mostly to describe Iago misleadingly, but sometimes Desdemona and Cassio as well. The word *lie* is used as a double entendre for making love versus telling untruths (3.4.10–12 and 4.1.34–36). In his famous speech to Roderigo advising him to "Put money in thy purse" (1.3.335), Iago repeats the word *money* again and again, teaching the idle and slow-witted Roderigo to become Iago's bank. Frank Kermode also observes that *Othello* includes much hendiadys, "the habit of expansive doubling," such as "loving his own pride and purposes," "trimm'd in forms and visages of duty," "play and trifle with your reverence" and other examples during the mere "first 170 lines" of the play (168).

The meaning of the handkerchief, Othello's first gift to Desdemona (which he inherited from his mother), has often been discussed. Some critics have thought its whiteness symbolizes Desdemona's virgin purity, with the strawberries decorating it indicating her potential fertility after her marriage to Othello is consummated. The red strawberries also hint at Desdemona's blood that is spilled when Othello fails to kill her by strangulation and then presumably stabs her. Red as the color of lust and rage is suggested by the strawberries spotting the handkerchief. In 3.4.58–67, Othello implies through his mother's tale that Desdemona's handkerchief additionally symbolizes feminine power over men to civilize them through the bonds of love and trust; however, Iago's slander erodes that womanly power, as Othello's uncivilized, primal rage erupts against Desdemona.

References to Turks, the Venetians' enemies, draw attention to racial prejudice. Brabantio insultingly implies that Othello is a Turk (presumably because Moors are dark, of Muslim heritage, and from the East) when he says that letting Desdemona marry Othello would be like letting the Turks take Cyprus from Venice (1.3.205–206). Even Othello expresses prejudice against Turks when he asks, "Are we turned Turks?" (2.3.169) after the drunken Cassio attacks Montano. In his final speech, Othello refers to himself as both a Turk who deserves execution for his crime and as the executioner of that Turk (5.2.347–352). Harold C. Goddard contends that the frequent allusions to Turks in *Othello* set up Iago as the real Turk, though Othello may look like one (80–81).

Light and darkness, along with black and white, are repeatedly contrasted to question their stereotypical moral and racial associations. The play opens in the darkness of night, and most of its important scenes occur then. Iago says he will turn Desdemona's "virtue into pitch" (2.3.360) by making her kind efforts to help Cassio make her seem lascivious. When Othello speaks of murdering Desdemona during his soliloquy, he says, "Put out the light" (5.2.7) and then sadly ponders that he will not be able to relight her spirit once he kills her. Repeatedly, Othello is called a Moor, even by his wife, reminding the audience of his derided nationality and complexion. However, the Duke sees that "If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.284–285).

Deceived by Iago, Othello feels the disgrace of becoming a cuckold has made his reputation "begrimed and black" like his skin (3.3.384); here he buys into European culture's racist blurring of dark colors with moral and physical ugliness. He is labeled "damned" by Brabantio (1.2.62), who insults him by mentioning his "sooty bosom" (1.2.69). Iago says women are "devils being offended" (2.1.110). Othello is dubbed a "blacker devil" by Emilia (5.2.130) after he repeatedly labels Desdemona one (3.3.475, 3.4.42, and 4.1.35). Emilia also calls Othello Desdemona's "most filthy bargain" (5.2.154), after labeling her an "angel" (5.2.129). Emilia says Othello is "ignorant as dirt" (5.2.131), confusing his mistaken sinful act with his racial darkness. After Othello finds he murdered Desdemona wrongly, since she was innocent, he says, "Whip me, ye devils" (5.2.274) and calls Iago a "demi-devil" (5.2.297). Othello then praises Desdemona as a "pearl" (5.2.343). Iago labels Othello "an old black ram" who "is tuppins" Desdemona, a "white ewe" (1.1.85).

Disturbing animal imagery such as that of ram and ewe is common in the play, especially in the mouth of Iago. Iago brags that he will make Othello into an ass who is easily led (1.3.393) and driven mad (2.1.309). He similarly pictures his plot against Cassio in terms of a "web" to ensare "a fly," implying that Iago is the spider (2.1.166). Warning Othello (surprisingly enough), Iago compares jealousy to "a green-eyed monster" (3.3.166). Even Desdemona uses animal imagery when she says of Othello, as though he were an animal, "I'll watch him tame" (3.3.23). Cassio says that drinking too much has made him and the other soldiers into "beasts" (2.3.290), which is what Iago manages to turn Othello into when he murders Desdemona. Iago's language transforms human feelings into base, bestial urges—love into lust, trustfulness into foolish gullibility, and so on, as when Iago conjures false
pictures of Cassio committing adultery with Desdemona through images of goats, wolves, and monkeys in heat (3.3.400). Through such imagery, Iago transfers his disgusting view of the world onto Othello.

Othello then begins to use animal imagery, as when he says, "A horned man's a monster and a beast" (4.1.64), referring to cuckold. Othello paints his love for Desdemona as defiled in calling it "a cistern for fouled toads" (4.2.63). Tainted by Iago's lies, Othello calls Desdemona "a lewd minx" (3.3.473) and "a fitchew," or stinky cat (4.1.146); Othello also describes women as "delicate creatures" full of "appetites" that husbands cannot control (3.3.268). Even Cassio, who is courteous toward upper-class women like Desdemona, mocks his lower-class lover Bianca (whom Iago labels a prostitute) by referring to her hopes of marrying Cassio as "the monkey's own giving out" (4.1.129). The language of prejudice, whether of sexism or racism, uses animal imagery to dehumanize the object of prejudice. This can be seen from the first scene of the play, when Iago inflames Brabantio's racism by comparing Othello to various animals, including a "Barbary horse" (1.1.107). When Othello himself says, "I'll tear her to pieces" (3.3.427), the audience knows that Iago has managed to dehumanize the noble general, making him into a brute.

Animal imagery plays a role in Othello's debate over what is natural and unnatural. In the play's second and third scene, Brabantio argues that Desdemona's attachment to a husband so unlike her in race, age, nationality, and background is unnatural. Iago uses this argument to convince Roderigo and Othello that it is natural for Desdemona to cheat with Cassio, who is her like in age, race, and class. Othello echoes Iago's thinking with the phrase "nature erring from itself" (3.3.227).

"Throughout the play imagery of wind and weather is played against imagery of confinement," A. D. Nuttall observes (279). At the start of Act II, Othello and Desdemona survive the stormy sea, then enter the fortress at Cyprus. The stormy sea of 2.1, I believe, anticipates the mental storm Iago creates in Othello in Act III through activating his jealousy, thus causing seizures. Othello's emotional tempest crests when he kills Desdemona and himself in Act V.

Othello ties imagery of the ocean into that of freedom versus confinement when he says,

But that I do love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumspection and confine
For the sea's worth.

(1.2.25–28)

Similarly, Othello later says Desdemona's fidelity would have been worth more than a jewel the size of the earth (5.2.140); this recalls Desdemona saying in 4.3 that she would not sell her chastity to give her husband all the riches in the world.

Slavery is another motif related to the imagery of confinement. Brabantio contends that Othello used witchcraft on Desdemona (1.3.168), in a kind of erotic enslavement. Othello says he once was sold into slavery (1.3.137). Iago ends up enslaving Othello with lies that confirm Othello's worries about his attractiveness to Desdemona, and Iago enslaves Roderigo by appealing to his lust for Desdemona.

Imagery of poison lets the audience see the corrupting effect of Iago's lies on Othello, as when Iago says the "Moor already changes with my poison" (3.3.322). Iago pours "pestilence into his ear" (2.3.355), poisoning Othello through slandering his wife. With irony, Iago brags of his cruelly effective gossip: "My med'cine works!" (4.1.46). At the play's end, Lodovico reacts to the bed containing the dead Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia by saying the "object poisons sight" (5.2.360). Lodovico here reminds the audience that Iago caused these deaths, while moving the imagery of poison from the mouth and ear to the eye.

Iago makes Cassio seem effeminate when he calls him a "spinster" (1.1.21), implies he is too pretty (1.1.17), and speaks of Cassio's "prattle" (1.1.24). Much as Cassio is put into feminine dress in a metaphorical sense, gender reversal cloaks Desdemona in military imagery. Othello calls her "fair warrior" (2.1.179), while Iago names her "our great captain's captain" (1.3.393) and states that "Our general's wife is now the general" (2.3.314). This military language suggests Desdemona is an unnatural threat to Othello's traditional supremacy as a husband and general. Iago feeds on Othello's fear of being ruled by his wife, making her seem monstrously bossy in her attempt to intercede for Cassio with her husband.

In contrast with this, Desdemona is earlier seen as property by her father, when Brabantio calls Othello a thief for stealing his
daughter (1.1.75). From a more liberal stance than Brabantio's, Othello initially regards Desdemona as "free and bounteous to her mind" (1.3.260), before Iago corrupts Othello's view of her, making her seem like a possession contaminated by male lovers.

Further Information


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