

The following excerpt is for use in preparing for quizzes, discussion board posts, and response papers for this semester only.

OTHELLO, THE MOOR OF VENICE

William Shakespeare

Othello is one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. It's somewhat flawed in that it's difficult to believe that a man with as much military experience as Othello—a black general in the service of Venice—would be so gullible, or even that his ensign Iago would be so perverse, without adequate reason. Othello's naiveté, coupled with his passion and his descents into anger and rage, bring about his downfall.

Yet, perhaps it isn't fair to fault Shakespeare for such flaws because he had to write quickly—a play or two a year. It's amazing he could accomplish so much in a world of quill pens and ink, in an era when travel was slow and European civilization was just emerging from an age of little progress and a general lack of learning. It's also amazing when we consider that, in addition to being a playwright, Shakespeare was a theatre shareholder and an actor. He had a vast store of knowledge of human nature that he put to use in his plays, as well as a masterful command of language and poetic imagery.

Othello is an affecting play, in part, no doubt, because the protagonist so well fits Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero—a man of great virtue, but with a tragic flaw. One thing that makes the character of Othello interesting is his contradictory nature—on the surface a simple man, trusting and believing in human nature's basic good, yet a man with deep currents...

Othello is used to taking orders from the high command, perhaps divorcing his feelings from these orders to accomplish what he must. Certainly, this carries into his own life, into the direct way he has of approaching solutions to his problems. Although descended from royalty, he is the opposite of a sophisticate, and his marriage is outside his realm of experience. A general rather than a ladies' man, he has lived his life in camps and campaigns and knows little of women.

Iago, on the other hand, is cynical, distrustful, and willing to see the worst in humanity. An encounter between men such as Othello

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Figure 5.5

A scene from the 1930 London production of *Othello*, starring American actor Paul Robeson (center) in the title role.

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and Iago is bound to result in conflict, if for no other reason than that Iago, by nature, will bait and try to best others.

Someone like Iago undoubtedly would have difficulty understanding Othello's simplicity in outlook. So, too, would Othello—used to the straightforward life where things *are* what they seem—be incredulous were he able to catch a glimpse of Iago's soul. Most likely in a child's world Iago would be the taunter, the one on the playground who gets two others to fight for his own amusement. He is a manipulator, filled with the sense of his own power over those less devious than he. He's amoral or sociopathic in not caring whom he destroys, including his wife Emilia.

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Iago has somewhat of a reason to manipulate, to gain what satisfaction he will. Yet the situation certainly does not call for such extreme revenge. Indeed, his manipulation goes beyond that, becoming a game. He agitates, incites, and pits one man against another. Then he steps back in gleeful anticipation of what will occur.

Othello and Desdemona are ill-matched in background, though at first she probably didn't realize the extent of their differences or else felt they didn't matter. He obviously felt the same way. Often viewed as the "perfect young woman of breeding," in fact, she is not. She knew what she wanted, went after it aggressively as only she knew how, and gained it, for there is this account of the courtship:

OTH: Her father loved me, oft invited me,
Still⁴ questioned me the story of my life
From year, to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I have passed.
I ran it through, even from my boyish days
To the very moment that he bade me tell it.
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,⁵
Of moving accidents⁶ by flood and field,
Of hairbreadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,⁷
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,
and portance⁸ in my travels' history.
Wherein of the antres vast and deserts idle,⁹
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
It was my hint¹⁰ to speak—such was the process.
And of the cannibals that each other eat,
The anthropophagi,¹¹ and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline.
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse. Which I observing,

⁴ always

⁵ accidents

⁶ occurrences

⁷ assault on a city

⁸ bearing

⁹ vast caves and worthless deserts

¹⁰ occasion

¹¹ cannibals

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Took once a pliant¹² hour and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,¹³
Whereof by parcels¹⁴ she had something heard,
But not intently. I did consent,
And often did beguile her¹⁵ of her tears
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
That my youth suffered. My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
That Heaven had made her¹⁶ such a man. She thanked me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.
She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used.

Toward the end, Desdemona isn't so different from Othello in her bewilderment and her simplicity, in being unable to accept or understand her husband's doubt of her and his jealousy. She *is* as Othello believes all others to be—one who can be trusted, who would never deceive or lie or cheat. Doing such for her own gains simply would never enter her mind.

Othello unwittingly evokes the spirit of evil in Iago, a young Venetian and Othello's ensign, when he passes over him in choosing Michael Cassio as his lieutenant. This gives Iago the perfect excuse to indulge his evil nature in bringing about Othello's downfall. He takes great satisfaction in hiding his intentions behind a frank and open mien, so that to others he appears the "honest Iago." Othello, an unsuspecting man, plays easily into Iago's hands.

Othello has long spun tales of his adventurous past, his battles, and his campaigns for the pleasure of the Venetian senator Brabantio and his daughter Desdemona. Because of "the dangers" he "has pass'd," she has grown to love him and he to love her. So they marry in secret.

Iago tells Brabantio of the elopement. Embittered at Othello's "spells and medicine" in stealing away his daughter, Brabantio appeals to the

¹² suitable

¹³ tell at length

¹⁴ parts or portions

¹⁵ draw from her

¹⁶ for her

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Duke of Venice to intervene. Instead, he is told that Othello is being sent to Cyprus to stave off an invasion by a Turkish fleet.

Desdemona not only refuses to give up Othello, but insists on accompanying him to Cyprus:

DES: That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.¹⁷
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honors and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace,¹⁸ and he go to the war,
The rites which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

Shortly thereafter, Brabantio sows what turn out to be the first seeds of doubt about Desdemona in Othello's mind—words Iago calls up in his perversity in manipulating Othello:

BRA: Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

Roderigo, a former suitor whom Desdemona has rejected, tells Iago that he wishes to drown himself, since, "It is silliness to live when to live is torment." Iago tells him that Desdemona soon will be "sated" with Othello's body and "find the error of her choice." He persuades Roderigo to accompany him in escorting Desdemona to Cyprus, the idea already in his mind to use Roderigo as a pawn.

A storm off the coast of Cyprus delays those arriving from Venice, but also drives away the Turkish fleet, leaving Othello, the new governor, to order a celebration. To see that it doesn't get out of hand, he names Cassio officer of the guard. Cassio and Desdemona's chance greeting gives Iago the idea of plotting to make Othello believe that Desdemona and Cassio have made love. Thus he gets Cassio drunk, pushes Roderigo into picking a quarrel with him and wakes up Othello, who, of course, reduces Cassio in rank. As part of the plot, Iago convinces Cassio to beg Desdemona to intercede on his behalf.

Thus Desdemona promises:

¹⁷ That I . . . lord: My love for the Moor is publicly shown in the way I have violently taken my fortunes in my hands; my heart has become a soldier like my husband.

¹⁸ a useless creature that lives in luxury

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Do not doubt¹⁹ that. Before Emilia here
I give thee warrant of thy place.²⁰ Assure thee,
If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
To the last article. My lord shall never rest.
I'll watch him tame²¹ and talk him out of patients,
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift.²²
I'll intermingle every thing he does
With Cassio's suit. Therefore be merry, Cassio,
For thy solicitor shall rather die
Than give thy cause away.

At this point Othello and Iago enter, and Cassio leaves, not wanting to be discovered talking with Desdemona:

IAGO: Ha! I like not that.

OTH: What dost thou say?

IAGO: Nothing, my lord. Or if—I know not what.

OTH: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

IAGO: Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot think it,
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing you coming.

OTH: I do believe 'twas he.

DES: How now, my lord!

I have been talking with a suitor here,
A man that languishes in your displeasure.

OTH: Who is 't you mean?

DES: Why, your Lieutenant, Cassio. Good, my lord.

If I have any grace or power to move you,
His present reconciliation take.²³

For if he be not one that truly loves you,
That errs in ignorance and not in cunning,²⁴
I'll have no judgment in an honest face.
I prithee call him back.

¹⁹ fear

²⁰ I guarantee you will be restored to your position.

²¹ as wild hawks are tamed by not letting them sleep

²² place of confession and absolution

²³ accept his apology and forgive him

²⁴ not knowingly

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She continues to plead with Othello to restore Cassio to his former rank. After she leaves, Iago furthers his treachery. Pretending reluctance even to hint at impropriety, he says, "I speak not yet of proof. Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio. Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure."

Othello tells Iago, "I do not think but Desdemona's honest." And then a few lines later: "And yet, how nature erring from itself—"

Othello has begun to doubt and so demands proof of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago has repeatedly asked his wife, Desdemona's lady in waiting, to steal a handkerchief that Othello gave to Desdemona early in their courtship. Emilia has refused to do so. But then Desdemona loses the handkerchief. Emilia finds it and gives it to her husband.

IAGO: I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of Holy Writ. This may do something.
The Moor already changes with my poison.

In a moment, Othello enters:

OTH: Ha! Ha! False to me?

IAGO: Why, how now, General! No more of that.

OTH: Avaunt!²⁵ Be gone! Thou hast set me on the rack.²⁶
I swear 'tis better to be much abused
Than but to know 't a little.

IAGO: How now, my lord!

OTH: What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?
O saw 't now, thought it not, it harmed not me.
I slept the next night well, was free and merry.
I found not Casio's kisses on her lips.
He that is robbed, not wanting²⁷ what is stol'n,
Let him not know 't and he's not robbed at all.

IAGO: I am sorry to hear this.

OTH: I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioneers²⁸ and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. Oh, now forever
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!

²⁵ Be off!

²⁶ in torment

²⁷ missing

²⁸ pioneers, meaning the lowest type of soldier

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Othello tells Iago:

If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more, abandon all remorse.²⁹
On horror's head horrors accumulate,
Do deeds to make Heaven weep, all earth amazed,
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that.

After pretending hurt at Othello's words, Iago tells him:

I do not like the office.
But sith I am entered in this cause so far:
Pricked³⁰ to 't by foolish honesty and love,
I will go on. I lay with Cassio lately,
And being troubled with a raging tooth,
I could not sleep.
There are a kind of men so loose of soul
That in their sleeps will mutter their affairs.
One of this kind is Cassio.
In sleep I heard him say "Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves."
And then, sir, would he gripe³¹ and wring my hand,
Cry, "O sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips. Then laid his leg
Over my thigh, and sighed and kissed, and then
Cried "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!"

OTH: O, monstrous! Monstrous!

Iago protests that it is but a dream:

IAGO: Nay, but be wise. Yet we see nothing done.
She may be honest yet. Tell me but this:
Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief
Spotted³² with strawberries, in your wife's hand?

OTH: I gave her such a one, 'twas my first gift.

IAGO: I know not that. But such a handkerchief—
I am sure it was your wife's—did I today
See Cassio wipe his beard with.

²⁹ pity

³⁰ spurred

³¹ grip

³² patterned

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Later Othello demands that Desdemona show him the handkerchief. When she cannot, he's convinced of her guilt and swears an oath of vengeance upon her and Cassio.

To convince Othello still further of his wife's guilt, Iago arranges for him to overhear Cassio deriding Bianca, yet apparently alluding to Desdemona. Utterly convinced now, Othello takes Iago's suggestion that he strangle Desdemona and Iago murder Cassio. In the meantime, Lodovico arrives with letters from the duke recalling Othello to Venice and appointing Cassio his successor in Cyprus. Desdemona tells Lodovico "an unkind breach" has "fall'n between" Cassio and Othello:

A most unhappy one. I would do much
To atone³³ them, for the love I bear Cassio.

OTH: Fire and brimstone!

DES: My lord?

OTH: Are you wise?³⁴

DES: What, is he angry?

LOD: Maybe the letter moved him,
For, as I think, they do command him home,
Deputing Cassio in his government.³⁵

DES: By my troth, I am glad on 't.

OTH: Indeed!

DES: My lord?

OTH: I am glad to see you mad.

DES: Why, sweet Othello?

OTH: Devil! (*Striking her*)

DES: I have not deserved this.

LOD: My lord, this would not be believed in Venice.
Though I should swear I saw 't. 'Tis very much.³⁶
Make her amends, she weeps.

OTH: O devil, devil!

If the earth could teem with a woman's tears,
Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile.
Out of my sight.

DES: I will not stay to offend you. (*Going*)

³³ reconcile

³⁴ Are you wise in saying you love Cassio?

³⁵ in his place as governor

³⁶ This is too much.

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Emilia speaks of Desdemona's innocence, yet Othello refuses to believe her. Later, he openly accuses Desdemona of being a "strumpet," a "whore." After he leaves, Emilia returns with Iago.

DES: O good Iago,
What shall I do to win my lord again?
Good friend, go to him, for, by this light of Heaven,
I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel.
If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,
Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense
Delighted them in any other form,
Or that I do not yet, and never did,
And ever will, though he do shake me off
To beggarly divorcement, love him dearly,
Comfort forswear³⁷ me! Unkindness may do much,
And his unkindness may defeat³⁸ my life,
But never taint my love. I cannot say "whore,"
It doth abhor me now I speak the word
To do the act this might the addition³⁹ earn
Not the world's mass of vanity⁴⁰ could make me.

Shortly afterward, Iago convinces Roderigo to waylay and kill Cassio. In the final scene of Act IV, Desdemona, apparently sensing something of what will happen, sings to herself a song of a "poor soul" "sighing by a sycamore tree." Then she dismisses Emilia, telling her that not "for the whole world" would she "abuse" her husband in the manner he accused her.

As Act V opens, Iago has placed Roderigo in a position to await Cassio in order to kill him. He then reveals the depths of his amorality.

IAGO: I have rubbed this young quat⁴¹ almost to the sense.⁴²
And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio,
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,
He calls me to a restitution large⁴³
Of gold and jewels that I bobbed⁴⁴ from him
As gifts to Desdemona.

³⁷ repudiate

³⁸ destroy

³⁹ title

⁴⁰ riches

⁴¹ pimple

⁴² to the quick

⁴³ full

⁴⁴ cheated

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It must not be. If Cassio do remain,
He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly,¹⁵ and besides, the Moor
May unfold me to him. There stand I in much peril.
No, he must die. Be 't so. I hear him coming.

Roderigo attacks Cassio, who draws his own sword. He stabs Roderigo. Iago then stabs Cassio, whose cry for help brings Lodovico and Gratiano, Brabantio's brother. To keep hidden what he has done, Iago stabs Roderigo as if he is killing Cassio's assailant. When Bianca hears the cries and comes to investigate, Iago, ever seeking ways to divert attention from his own evil deeds, tries to implicate her in the matter.

The wounded Cassio is borne off as Bianca protests her innocence.

The next scene occurs in the castle. Desdemona is asleep as Othello enters.

DES: Who's there? Othello?

OTH: Aye, Desdemona.

DES: Will you come to bed, my lord?

OTH: Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?

DES: Aye, my lord.

OTH: If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to Heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.

DES: Alas, my lord, what may you mean by that?

OTH: Well, do it, and be brief. I will walk by.
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.
No, Heaven forbid! I would not kill thy soul.¹⁶

DES: Talk you of killing?

OTH: Aye, I do.

DES: Then Heaven have mercy on me!

OTH: Amen, with all my heart!

DES: If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.

OTH: Hum!

DES: And yet I fear you, for you are fatal¹⁷ then
When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not,
Since guiltiness I know not, but yet I feel I fear.

¹⁵ Iago is admitting that he has not Cassio's social graces.

¹⁶ He will not condemn her to hell, which is just the opposite of what Hamlet wants to do to his uncle, the king.

¹⁷ deadly

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OTH: Think on thy sins.

DES: They are loves I bear to you.

OTH: Aye, and for that thou diest.

DES: That death's unnatural that kills for loving. Alas,
why gnaw you so your nether lip?
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame.
These are portents,⁴⁸ but yet I hope, I hope,
They do not point on me.

OTH: Peace, and be still!

DES: I will so. What's the matter?

OTH: That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio.

DES: No, by my life and soul!
Send for the man, and ask him.

OTH: Sweet soul, take heed,
Take heed of perjury, thou art on thy deathbed.

DES: Aye, but not yet to die.

OTH: Yes, presently.
Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin,
For to deny each article with oath
Cannot remove nor choke the strong conception⁴⁹
That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.

DES: Then Lord have mercy on me!

OTH: I say amen.

DES: And have you mercy too! I never did
Offend you in my life, never loved Cassio
But with such general warranty⁵⁰ of Heaven
As I might love. I never gave him token.

OTH: By Heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand.
O perjured woman! Thou dost stone⁵¹ my heart,
And makest me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.
I saw the handkerchief.

DES: He found it, then,
I never gave it him. Send for him hither.
Let him confess a truth.

⁴⁸ signs foretelling disaster

⁴⁹ thought

⁵⁰ permission

⁵¹ turn to stone

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OTH: He has confessed.
DES: What, my lord?
OTH: That he hath used thee.
DES: How? Unlawfully?
OTH: Aye.
DES: He will not say so.
OTH: No, his mouth is stopped.
Honest Iago hath ta'en order for 't.
DES: Oh, my fear interprets! What, is he dead?
OTH: Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
Had stomach for them all.
DES: Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone!
OTH: Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?
DES: Oh, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
OTH: Down, strumpet!
DES: Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!
OTH: Nay, if you strive—
DES: But half an hour!
OTH: Being done, there is no pause.
DES: But while I say one prayer!
OTH: It is too late.
(*He stifles her.*)

Emilia enters to find Desdemona dying and again tells Othello she was innocent. Othello replies that it was Emilia's husband who told him of Desdemona and Cassio. Iago admits he told Othello "what I thought, and told no more than what he found himself was apt and true." In the meantime, others, hearing Emilia's cries, rush to the bedroom. One of them is Gratiano, Desdemona's uncle, who says Othello and Desdemona's marriage killed Brabantio.

OTH: 'Tis pitiful, but yet Iago knows
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame
A thousand times committed. Cassio confessed it.
And she did gratify his amorous works
With that recognizance⁵² and pledge of love
Which I first gave her, I saw it in his hand.

⁵² token

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It was a handkerchief, an antique token
My father gave my mother.

EMIL: Oh, Heaven! Oh, heavenly powers!

IAGO: 'Zounds! Hold your peace.

EMIL: 'Twill out, 'twill out. I peace!

No, I will speak as liberal as the north.⁵³
Let Heaven and men and devils, let them all
All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.

IAGO: Be wise, and get you home.

EMIL: I will not.

(Iago offers to stab Emilia)

GRA: Fie!

Your sword upon a woman!

EMIL: O thou dull Moor! That handkerchief thou speak'st of
I found by fortune and did give my husband,
For often with a solemn earnestness,
More than indeed belong to such a trifle,
He begged of me to steal it.

Calling his wife a "villainous whore," Iago stabs and kills her. Now Othello begins to realize that Desdemona indeed was innocent. Further proof of Iago's role in all of this is a letter found on Roderigo's body. Othello attacks and stabs Iago, but fails to kill him.

LOD: You must forsake this room, and go with us.

Your power and your command is taken off,
And Cassio rules in Cyprus. For this slave,
If there be any cunning cruelty
That can torment him much and hold him long
It shall be his. You shall close prisoner rest
Till that the nature of your fault be known
To the Venetian state. Come, bring away.

OTH: Soft you,⁵⁴ a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know 't.
No more of that, I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well,

⁵³ as freely as the north wind, which is loud and bitter

⁵⁴ wait awhile

Cassady, Marsh. *Theatre: An Introduction*. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997. Print.

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The Theatre of Elizabethan England

Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme, of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe—of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced⁵⁵ the state
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him, thus.

"I kissed thee ere I killed thee," Othello says. "No way but this, killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

⁵⁵ insulted