Othello Study Guide

Othello by William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Othello is unique among Shakespeare's great tragedies. Unlike *Hamlet, King Lear,* and *Macbeth,* which are set against a backdrop of affairs of state and which reverberate with suggestions of universal human concerns, *Othello* is set in a private world and focuses on the passions and personal lives of its major figures. Indeed, it has often been described as a "tragedy of character"; Othello's swift descent into jealousy and rage and Iago's dazzling display of villainy have long fascinated students and critics of the play. The relationship between these characters is another unusual feature of *Othello.* With two such prominent characters so closely associated, determining which is the central figure in the play and which bears the greater responsibility for the tragedy is difficult. Written in 1604, *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's most highly concentrated, tightly constructed tragedies, with no subplots and little humor to relieve the tension. Although he adapted the plot of his play from the sixteenth-century Italian dramatist and novelist Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi,* Shakespeare related almost *every* incident directly to the development of Iago's schemes and Othello's escalating fears. This structure heightens the tragedy's *omi* nous mood and makes the threat to both Desdemona's innocence and the love she and Othello share more terrifying. Although narrow in scope, *Othello,* with its intimate domestic setting, is widely regarded as the most moving of Shakespeare's great tragedies.

Author Biography

William Shakespeare's life was a source of mystery and controversy among scholars of English literature. What little was known of his life was gleaned from documentary evidence and writings of his contemporaries. Shakespeare himself left no writings concerning his personal life and thus remained a frustrating enigma for biographers and critics alike.

Shakespeare was born to parents Mary and John Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Church records show that he was baptized on April 26, 1564; from this, scholars extrapolate that he was born several days earlier, and so April 23, 1564, is the traditional dating of his birth.

Shakespeare's father was a glover and was active in town government. That John Shakespeare's fortunes began to decline in about 1576 suggested to some scholars that the family may have been Catholic or had Catholic sympathies at a time when membership in the Church of England was required for any kind of social or financial standing.

It was assumed that Shakespeare attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have learned Latin and studied the classics in depth, although little was known of his young life. In November 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. Hathaway was eight years his senior and was pregnant with their first child at the time of their marriage. The couple had three children: Susanna, born in 1583, and the twins, Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585.

At this point, Shakespeare disappeared from records known as of 2004. Then he reappeared in 1592 in theatrical circles in London. Both Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe referred to Shakespeare in print. In 1593, poems by Shakespeare appeared in print. In all, Shakespeare composed some 154 sonnets during these early years.

In 1594, Shakespeare, along with Richard Burbage (perhaps the greatest actor of the day) and six other actors, formed the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting troupe. Over the next five years, Shakespeare both acted with the company and wrote plays for them. He was remarkably prolific, writing primarily comedies and histories during this period, with the exception of the tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595.

In 1599, Shakespeare and his troupe began building the Globe Theater. In addition, around this time, Shakespeare began writing his great tragedies, including *Othello*. Some critics have suggested that this tragic turn was precipitated by the death of his son Hamnet and his father in a short space of time. Although these deaths were recorded in documents, there was no hard evidence, as of the early 2000s, linking Shakespeare's change in writing to the events.

The first probable performance of *Othello* was in 1601 and 1602 and continued to be performed regularly in the following years. Shakespeare's last recorded stage

appearance was in a play by Ben Jonson in 1603. After this date, he seemed to have devoted himself solely to writing. By 1611, twentieth-century biographers surmised he was living again in Stratford. In March 1616, Shakespeare changed his will, perhaps in anticipation of his own death. On his fifty-second birthday, April 23, 1616, Shakespeare died in Stratford.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The play opens in Venice, Italy, at night. Iago, General Othello's ensign, and Roderigo, who is in love with Desdemona, are on the street outside of the home of Brabantio, Desdemona's father. Iago tells Roderigo of his hatred for Othello, primarily because Othello has promoted Michael Cassio ahead of Iago. They call out to Brabantio, telling him in crude language that his daughter is having a sexual encounter with Othello. Brabantio, enraged, goes with his servants to find the couple. Meanwhile, Iago goes to Othello to warn him of Brabantio's anger.

In the next scene, the duke and the senators discuss the Turkish threat on Cyprus. Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo, all enter and Brabantio levels his charges against Othello. Othello replies that he has not stolen Desdemona but has rather legally married her, although without her father's consent. Desdemona is sent for, and when she arrives, she concurs with Othello's summary of their relationship. The duke recognizes their marriage and tells Othello that he must go to Cyprus to defend against the Turks. Othello asks that his wife accompany him, and Desdemona says that she wants to go with him as well.

The act closes with an exchange between Iago and Roderigo. Iago says that Othello will soon change his mind and that Iago will help Roderigo win Desdemona. After Roderigo's exit, Iago reveals to the audience how much he hates Othello and Cassio and that he plans to ruin both of them.

Act 2

Act 2 opens in Cyprus in a storm. The Turks have lost their entire fleet in the tempest. Ultimately, all the characters arrive in Cyprus, and Othello and Desdemona are lovingly reunited. Iago hatches his plot with Roderigo and instructs Roderigo to make Cassio angry this evening after Iago makes Cassio drunk.

In the next scene, Othello leaves to celebrate his nuptials with Desdemona. After Othello's departure, Iago manages to get Cassio to drink more than he should. As a consequence, when angered by Roderigo, Cassio gets into a fight with him and ends up seriously injuring the Cypriot governor Montano. Othello is called from his chambers to resolve the crisis. Othello is very angry and dismisses Cassio as an officer.

Cassio is distraught and bares his soul to Iago, whom he thinks is his friend. Iago sets his second scheme in motion by instructing Cassio to try to get back into Othello's favor through Desdemona.

Act 3

As this act opens, Emilia speaks to Cassio and tells him she will work on his behalf with Desdemona. Then, Cassio speaks to Desdemona himself. Cassio leaves quickly when he sees Othello and Iago approaching. Iago makes an oblique comment about how he does not like seeing Cassio speaking with Desdemona. This begins to work on Othello and marks the beginning of his deterioration through jealousy. Desdemona and Othello make up, and Othello repeats his great love for her. However, Desdemona, through her unwitting support of Cassio to Othello, contributes to his growing jealousy. After Desdemona and Emilia exit, Iago goes to work on Othello again, suggesting that Cassio and Desdemona have betrayed Othello. He reminds Othello that Desdemona deceived her father when she married him, suggesting that Desdemona is not what she seems to be.

When Iago exits, Othello in a soliloquy contemplates what he will do if he finds that Desdemona has betrayed him, yet when Desdemona and Emilia come on stage, he says that he will not believe she is untrue. They exit together, but Desdemona drops her handkerchief accidentally.

Emilia picks up the handkerchief, saying that her husband has asked her to take it for him. She gives it to Iago then leaves the stage. Iago then says that he will leave the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings to be used as evidence against him. Othello returns, and Iago works on him further, finally convincing him that Desdemona has been unfaithful. He tells Othello that he has seen her handkerchief in Cassio's possession. Othello vows to have Desdemona put to death.

When Desdemona enters, Othello asks her for the handkerchief. Desdemona is unable to produce it, and Othello takes this as evidence of her betrayal. Othello exits, angry.

Act 4

In Act 4, Iago continues to torment Othello with innuendo and suggestions of Desdemona's dishonesty. Othello has a fit of epilepsy. When he recovers he sees Cassio and Iago speaking about Bianca, who arrives with the handkerchief that Cassio has given her. Othello recognizes it as Desdemona's handkerchief and thus resolves to kill both Cassio and Desdemona.

Emissaries from Venice arrive and observe Othello's cruelty to Desdemona. They question Iago about Othello's sanity, and Iago implies that Othello is if not mad, certainly dangerous.

In the next scene, Othello interrogates Emilia concerning Desdemona's fidelity. He is clearly growing more distraught by the moment. Desdemona describes the drastic change in her husband to Iago and Emilia. After the women exit, Roderigo enters and accuses Iago of playing false with him. Iago makes up a story that convinces Roderigo that he should kill Cassio.

Act 4 closes with Desdemona in her bedchamber, having been sent there with Emilia by Othello. There is a grim sense of foreboding over the scene.

Act 5

As the act opens, Roderigo seriously wounds Cassio. Iago appears to save Cassio and implicates Roderigo to Ludovico, and Roderigo is killed. In the next scene, Othello is in the bedroom with Desdemona as he prepares to kill her. Desdemona protests her innocence, but Othello does not believe her. He kills her by smothering her with a pillow. Emilia comes to the room; Desdemona revives for just a moment to tell Emilia that she has killed herself and then she dies. Othello tells Emilia that he has killed her and says that Desdemona was false. Emilia contradicts him and offers proof that it was Iago who plotted against the pair. Iago threatens Emilia with his sword as she testifies against him, but he is stopped by Desdemona's uncle, Gratiano, and placed under arrest. Othello finally understands that he has killed the innocent Desdemona and asks why Iago has treated him thus. Iago refuses to respond. Othello begs for Cassio's forgiveness. Ludovico produces a letter from Roderigo that reveals the whole plan. There being no recourse, Othello kills himself with his own knife.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The scene opens with Roderigo and Iago discussing the marriage of Othello to Desdemona. Roderigo is unhappy about the marriage because he loves Desdemona, and Iago is angry because Othello picked Cassio as his lieutenant instead of picking Iago. Iago sneers that Cassio's military experience is all talk. Iago decides he will pretend to be a faithful servant to Othello in order to use him to promote his own interests.

Roderigo suggests they tell Brabantio, Desdemona's father, about the marriage. They think it will upset him. Together, they go to the window of Brabantio and wake him with loud calls. When Brabantio realizes that it's Roderigo calling, he tells him to go away; Desdemona is not for him. In response, Roderigo and Iago tell Brabantio that his daughter has married Othello. He doesn't believe them at first, but then discovers she is not in her bed.

Iago leaves, telling Roderigo to bring the search party to the inn, where he will be with Othello. Brabantio emerges, shouting for Roderigo to help him capture Desdemona and Othello. He suggests that it would have been better if Roderigo had married her.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Roderigo and Iago both have reasons to dislike Othello. Roderigo was interested in having Desdemona for himself; Iago is upset with Othello for choosing Cassio over him. They plan revenge against Othello for these grievances, and their first step is to tell Desdemona's father about the situation.

These two men are rough, coarse and not very subtle. They make several references to the animalistic nature of sex, especially because Othello is a "Moor," a black man. Certainly, in Shakespeare's time, racism was at least as common as it is in our era, and it was probably viewed as unthinkable for a black man and a white woman to be together. They compare Othello to "an old black ram," and Desdemona to a "white ewe." They know this will infuriate Brabantio.

Iago says he will be at the inn, pretending to be a true servant of Othello while really intending to betray the man. Roderigo is like a pawn in Iago's game, spurred on by his own jealousy.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Iago and Othello enter, discussing business. Iago pretends he is not a man who likes to kill others. They discuss Othello's marriage, and Othello speaks of his great love for Desdemona, claiming there is nothing for which he would be willing to give her up. As they are talking, some messengers from the duke arrive to summon Othello to a matter of business. Cassio, one of the messengers, asks Iago why Othello is at the inn. Iago responds that Othello is married, but before he can name Othello's bride, Othello reenters the room.

Just as they are about to leave, Brabantio, Roderigo, and some other men arrive to arrest Othello. Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching Desdemona into marrying him. Othello is very well spoken and patient during all of this, reminding Brabantio that the duke has summoned him and probably has summoned Brabantio. Therefore, they leave to go to the duke's house. Brabantio ends the scene by declaring that the senate will surely agree with him that he has been wronged.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Iago is a great pretender, suggesting that he doesn't like killing, even in battle. However, Othello trusts him at this point. Othello appears to be very different from the descriptions of him provided by Iago and Roderigo in Scene 1. Othello speaks and acts with honor, dignity, and patience. He is obviously in love with Desdemona, as well as devoted in his service of the duke. Even when threatened with imprisonment by Brabantio, Othello remains courteous, restrained, and even friendly. Brabantio, on the other hand, appears to overreact to the situation, especially in accusing Othello of bewitching his daughter. The theme of bewitchment could likely accompany the issue of racism. By this point, the audience or reader should realize that Othello is a man of stature and honor, while Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio are not.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

The duke and some of the senators enter, discussing the Turkish fleet they have spotted and its destination. It appears the Turks are heading to Cyprus. Othello, Brabantio, Iago, Roderigo, and others enter. The duke orders Othello to leave at once to fight the Ottomans. The duke then notices Brabantio, who recounts his accusations against Othello, namely that he used witchcraft to coerce Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, into marriage. The duke asks to hear Othello's side of the story. They decide to hear Desdemona's version as well.

While messengers are sent to bring Desdemona to the duke, Othello tells how it was that he and Desdemona came to be together. Apparently, Brabantio invited Othello into his home and listened heartily to Othello's tales of his adventures. Desdemona also listened, whenever she could steal away from her household duties. Therefore, they spent many hours talking and falling in love.

Desdemona arrives and acknowledges that she freely married Othello and owes him all the duty a wife owes her husband. At this point, Brabantio wants nothing more to do with her. He bemoans her decision and expresses gladness that he has no more children, lest he should have to "hang clogs" on them to prevent their running away like Desdemona. Brabantio, finished with wasting everyone's time, suggests that everyone get back to the business of state. The duke again orders Othello to travel to Cyprus to fight. Othello requests housing and allowance for Desdemona, who pleads to be sent to Cyprus as well so that she can be with her husband. It is settled that Othello will leave at once and Iago will later come to Cyprus with Desdemona, who will be attended by his own wife, Emilia.

Roderigo and Iago are left alone on stage. Roderigo is obviously upset by the turn of events. He had hoped Desdemona would be his, and now he declares that he wants to drown himself. Iago tells him to stop talking nonsense. He convinces Roderigo that Desdemona will soon tire of Othello, or vice versa. Reassured, Roderigo exits, leaving Iago alone on stage.

Iago plots his revenge. He picks Cassio, a good guy, as his pawn. Iago plans to tell Othello that Cassio is after his wife. He believes Othello will be easily swayed into believing this claim.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

This scene serves to complete the setup of Act 1. The duke needs to send Othello away to fight a war. As a result, Desdemona will be separated from him long enough for Iago to put his plan into action. Brabantio's ridiculous claims of witchcraft are proven wrong, and at first, one might wonder what the point was. However, it serves the plot that he

should renounce his daughter; otherwise, she might stay with him while Othello is off fighting. This would not allow Iago an opportunity to convince Othello of her infidelity. Furthermore, Brabantio's accusations also create a chance for Desdemona to reveal her true feelings and her strong love for Othello.

The lines are clearly drawn in the sand by the end of Act 1. Othello is an honorable man who loves his wife, and his wife returns his affection. The duke is reasonable and good. Roderigo is a misguided and jealous suitor, who follows Iago blindly. Iago is the most evil, conniving one of all.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Montano, the governor of Cyprus, enters with some gentlemen. He speaks about storms at sea. He wants to know if the Turks have been harmed or if Cyprus is still in danger. One of the gentlemen tells him that the Turks' ship has indeed been ruined. He also reports that the ship from Venice (the one on which Othello is supposed to arrive) has endured much damage. He informs Montano that Cassio has come ashore, but that there is no sign yet of Othello. Montano praises Othello and prays for his safety.

Cassio enters. He is very worried about Othello, whom he has not seen since the ship was wrecked. Cries of "a sail, a sail" give Cassio hope, and he sends a man to see who has come. Montano asks Cassio whether Othello is now married, and Cassio tells him yes. In fact, Cassio explains, Othello is married to a woman so wonderful a poet cannot find words to describe her. The man returns and relates that the ship carrying Iago has arrived, and Cassio says the name of Desdemona. Montano asks who that is, and Cassio tells him it is Othello's wife.

Desdemona enters, and Cassio praises her lavishly. She asks about her husband. Cassio tells her he has hope that Othello will survive. He then greets Iago and his wife, Emilia. Cassio gives Emilia a kiss, clearly letting Iago know that it's just an expression of his good manners, and that he doesn't wish to offend. Iago responds by making fun of his wife's talkative nature, and goes so far as to suggest that she has been unfaithful to him.

Desdemona, to distract herself from her worry about her husband, chides Iago and asks what praise he would give of her. Iago issues some vague alehouse clichés, and she pushes for something better. He goes on to describe his idea of a perfect woman: she has an opinion, but doesn't speak it; she is rich, but doesn't spend lavishly; she ignores things that offend her; she ignores other men; and she stays home to tend the children and the household accounts.

Desdemona thinks this is a rather mean way to view a woman, and she asks Cassio his opinion. As she and Cassio talk, Iago watches them. In an aside to the audience, he comments on Cassio's doting treatment of Desdemona, which he says will serve his own wicked purposes well.

Finally, Othello arrives. He and Desdemona embrace. He is very happy to have reached shore, and he is doubly happy to find that she has arrived ahead of him when she was supposed to be following after. In another aside, Iago acknowledges that Othello and Desdemona are "fine tun'd now," but he will fill their lives with discord soon enough. Othello tells everyone to go to the castle to revive themselves. He informs Desdemona that she will love the friendly people of Cyprus.

Everyone leaves except Iago and Roderigo. Iago puts thoughts into Roderigo's head about how Cassio seems to love Desdemona and how she appears to love him back. He tells Roderigo that he is sure she will tire of Othello and Cassio will be there to take advantage of it. Roderigo is skeptical; he doesn't see Desdemona acting that way. Nevertheless, Iago convinces him it is true. Iago tells Roderigo he will make sure Roderigo is on the watch guard that night. He instructs Roderigo to find a way to anger Cassio, so that Iago can begin to discredit him in the eyes of Montano and others in Cyprus. Roderigo agrees to do this and exits.

Iago is now left alone on stage. He speaks about how sure he is that Cassio really does love Desdemona, and he even thinks it possible Desdemona might love him. He knows, however, that Othello is a true and dear husband to her. Iago hates Othello so much that it evidently gnaws at him. Clearly, Iago is bent on bringing Othello to a state of jealousy powerful enough to render him mad.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

As with many of Shakespeare's other tragedies, this play is character driven, meaning that the entire plot revolves around the characters and the choices they make. In other words, characters, rather than events, drive the plot. In this play, Shakespeare sets up the blissful marriage of Othello and Desdemona, two perfectly noble and honorable people, who seem to be so obviously in love. It appears nothing can destroy them. However, Iago will try. He hates them with so much venom that he will stoop to anything to wreak his revenge. Starting from this initial premise, everything that occurs in the play will be driven by the motivations and actions of Iago and the other main characters.

Along with the characters, it is important to remember some of the major themes. There is a nearly constant contrast of white and black going on in the dialogue. This, of course, echoes the contrast between the dark-skinned Othello and the fair Desdemona. Shakespeare is perhaps trying to tell the audience something about racism, marriage, and trust.

One also has to consider Iago's views of women, which probably weren't all that odd for the time. In Shakespeare's day, as well as in the period in which the play is set, women were not considered full-fledged people in the way that they are today. Even so, Iago doesn't even seem to think a woman merits any opinion or courtesy. This will be important later, when we see how little he concerns himself with Desdemona's fate.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

In this very short scene, a messenger appears to announce that Othello has declared mass feasting and revelry in celebration of the victory against the Turks, and also in honor of his marriage to Desdemona.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The decision to have such a short scene is an interesting one. Perhaps Shakespeare meant it to be an ironic statement about how short-lived the feasting and celebrating will be once Iago's plan comes to fruition.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

The scene starts with Othello setting Cassio and Iago to the watch and then leaving with Desdemona. Cassio and Iago discuss what a lovely woman she is, with Cassio fairly admitting that he finds her desirable. Iago urges Cassio to have some wine. Cassio refuses, saying that he doesn't hold his alcohol well, and that he has already had enough for one night. Still, Iago persists until Cassio gives in.

While Cassio is offstage, Iago addresses the audience. He intends, he says, to make Cassio look bad in the eyes of the people of Cyprus, especially Montano. Cassio returns in the company with Montano and some gentlemen. Cassio has obviously been drinking a lot. Iago sings some drinking songs. Cassio first declares and then reiterates that he is not drunk. He exits, and Iago entreats the men to get to their posts. While he has the chance alone with Montano, Iago suggests that being drunk is not an infrequent occurrence with Cassio. Montano thinks they should mention this to Othello, and Iago feigns concern for Cassio's welfare.

In a moment, Cassio returns in pursuit of Roderigo, clearly upset with the man. Montano stops him, and they fight. Iago tells Roderigo to go and spread the news around town that Cassio is mutinous. Soon a bell rings a warning, and Othello appears with several soldiers. Othello chides Montano and the others for turning into the Turks: in other words, killing one another. Othello first asks Iago what has happened, who pretends to not to know how it started. Cassio is silent on the matter as well. Montano is also vague about the origins of the brawl.

Finally, Iago appears to give in and tells Othello how he and Montano had been talking when Cassio and Roderigo came in squalling. Iago claims that he tried to keep Roderigo from waking the whole city and causing alarm. He says he does not want to injure the name of Cassio, even though he mentions the name at least six times.

Othello is so offended by Cassio's supposed actions that he renounces his first officer immediately. Desdemona is awakened by all the noise, but Othello adoringly escorts her back to bed. He has some men attend to the injured Montano and puts Iago in charge of restoring order.

Cassio hysterically cries that he and his reputation are lost. He declares what is left of himself to be "bestial." However, Iago, playing the good friend, tells him not to worry: Othello is just mad right now; he will surely soften, and then Cassio will have his position back. Cassio is ashamed for having been so drunk. Iago asks him if he remembers what offense Roderigo committed to make him so mad, and Cassio says he can't remember from being so drunk.

Iago again appears to comfort him, saying that all men get drunk sometimes. Iago suggests Cassio appeal to Desdemona, who has Othello's heart. Cassio agrees that this is a good strategy; he will talk to her in the morning. Iago addresses the audience again, feigning offense at being called a villain when he has offered Cassio such good advice. He knows that once Cassio entreats Desdemona, and she in turn entreats Othello, the seed will be planted for Othello's jealousy.

Roderigo reappears. He and Iago have a brief conversation, then Iago is again left alone on stage. He reminds himself to have his wife mention Cassio's plight to Desdemona; afterward, he will speak to Othello of infidelity.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

In many Shakespearean tragedies, the villain is allowed to triumph because everyone trusts him. He can skillfully appear beguiling, friendly, helpful, and sorry to bring news of misery to others. This describes Iago perfectly. It is apparently very easy for the other characters to trust him; after all, he decidedly appears in all ways to be the most trustworthy man around, and he always has his wits about him. He also swears repeatedly that he does not want to discredit Cassio, even though he really does. Those who consult Iago for advice and comfort always receive whatever they think they want, but remain unaware they are really advancing Iago's malicious purposes. In this way, it is easy for Iago to sway everyone to do as he wishes.

Iago has a high level of self-awareness. He is not unconscious of his villainy. Yet, on more than one occasion, he seems to try to rationalize his actions, claiming to himself and the audience that he is really helping out others. At the end of this scene, he even claims he is no villain: after all, he is giving Cassio good advice to seek Desdemona's assistance in restoring himself to Othello's good graces. Perhaps there is some part of the sociopath's mind that attempts to rationalize its evil. Alternatively, perhaps it is horrible to admit to oneself one's truly evil nature; therefore, someone like Iago must attempt to cast his actions in a good light in order to live with himself.

Another theme that occurs throughout this play is that of man's animal nature. In Act 1, Iago describes Othello and Desdemona's love in terms of bestial sex. In this scene, Cassio compares his fallen state to becoming a beast.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Cassio brings in some musicians, perhaps to cheer himself. Othello's clown comes in and makes some rude comments about their music. Once the clown has sent the musicians away, Cassio pleads for him to ask Desdemona for a little time to talk.

Iago enters after the clown goes off. Cassio asks him if he might entreat Emilia to put in a good word for him with Desdemona. Iago sends Emilia out to Cassio. Emilia tells Cassio that Othello and Desdemona are already discussing the matter, and that Desdemona is pleading Cassio's case. She says Othello is torn: on one hand, he thinks he has been humiliated by Cassio's drunken ruckus; on the other hand, he truly loves Cassio and would have him back in a moment. Cassio begs Emilia to secure him some time alone with Desdemona to talk with her further. Emilia promises she will.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Cassio is the main figure in this scene. His mistaken trust in Iago is the most tragic event so far. He even goes so far as to say about Iago, "I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest." The problem is that Cassio cannot bear to be out of favor with Othello. Iago skillfully manipulates and capitalizes on that emotion, with tragic results. Indeed, tragedy is often either forged or derived from strong emotions, such as pride. If Cassio viewed his association with Othello as merely a business acquaintance, the loss of his job would mean little emotionally to him. However, because he is deeply tied to Othello and personally invested in their relationship, he is the perfect tool for Iago to wield in the implementation of his revenge. Cassio seems desperate to see Desdemona alone, and Iago encourages this. Of course, we know it's all for Iago's own purposes, but Cassio believes it is his best recourse.

The clown is often considered an unnecessary character in this play. His function in this scene is certainly not essential. He contributes a slight amount of levity through his remarks about the musicians, and perhaps Shakespeare slips in the limited comic relief for his audience's enjoyment. After all, Shakespeare had to make a living; even within a tragedy, humor was often an effective way for him to succeed with the populace.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

This scene, another short one, involves Othello giving Iago some papers to deliver to the senate while he examines the fortifications.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

The main effect of this scene is to get Othello out of the way so that Cassio can be alone with Desdemona. Of course, Iago is there to make sure his plan proceeds smoothly.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

The scene opens with Desdemona talking to Cassio; she is reassuring him that she will do everything she can to repair his reputation in Othello's eyes. She, like others before her, calls Iago an "honest fellow." She assures Cassio that she will make every moment of Othello's life all about Cassio.

Othello and Iago enter, which makes Cassio nervous. He insists on leaving. Even though Desdemona tries to encourage him to stay, he cannot make himself do it. When Iago sees Cassio rushing off, he cleverly initiates the process of planting doubt into Othello's mind. When Othello asks if that was Cassio leaving, Iago says he can't imagine why Cassio would be stealing away in such a guilty fashion.

Desdemona greets Othello and tells him she was just visiting with someone, namely Cassio. She begs Othello to call Cassio back, but Othello says it is not the time now. She asks when he will, pressing Othello to name the time and day. She reminds him that Cassio was the one who often sent messages from Othello to her when she and Othello were courting. How can he turn his back on so true a friend, she wonders. Desdemona reminds him that even when she spoke ill of Othello during their wooing stage, Cassio always stood up for him, and so played a big part in endearing her to Othello. She persists in asking why he won't bring Cassio back.

Worn down by her constant pleas, Othello finally says to let him come when he will. But Desdemona will not have it. He spoke too grudgingly for it to be heartfelt. She wants it to be truly said from his heart. He tells her to do whatever she wants, if she will just leave him alone.

As she leaves, Othello comments how much he loves her. He does not yet suspect her of infidelity. However, Iago now speaks up, asking questions about Cassio. He seems suspicious, and Othello asks what he is thinking. Iago feigns to be afraid to speak openly for fear of damaging Cassio's reputation. Othello can clearly see that something is on Iago's mind, so he presses the point. He thinks monstrous, hideous thoughts must be in Iago's mind if they cannot be spoken. They speak for a long while of honesty, love, and loyalty.

Othello asks Iago again to tell him what's on his mind, saying he will not believe anything without proof anyhow. Finally, Iago, appearing to give in, tells Othello to watch out for his wife with Cassio. He reiterates that he has no proof, only that he has observed that Desdemona is good at deceiving. She tricked her father when she married Othello, for example. After he puts this bee in Othello's bonnet, Iago acts sorry for upsetting Othello. However, Othello continues to insist that Iago's comments do not bother him. Iago slyly works in hints about Desdemona's ostensible unfaithfulness even while appearing to worry that he has said too much and is disturbing Othello.

Othello tells Iago to keep a watch on Desdemona, and to report back to him if he sees anything suspicious or spots any proof of her wantonness. Immediately, Othello begins to doubt Desdemona, wondering why he ever got married in the first place. Iago returns to say a few more comments to raise Othello's ire and suspicions. He cautions Othello not to believe her guilty until he brings proof. Othello states that he will maintain control of himself.

Left to himself, Othello ponders the honesty and wisdom he believes Iago possesses. Then the agonizing doubts about Desdemona's fidelity return. He wonders if Desdemona might find him inferior to other gallant gentlemen because he is black, or because he is a little bit older. He bitterly curses marriage. Desdemona returns with Emilia, chiding Othello for being late to a dinner with the islanders. He uses a headache as an excuse for his lateness. Desdemona takes out her handkerchief to offer him some comfort, and he pushes it away. It drops to the ground, and they go in to dinner.

Emilia takes advantage of the situation. She picks up the handkerchief from the floor, recognizing it as the first gift Othello ever presented to Desdemona. Iago has been encouraging her to find some way to take it from Desdemona. She doesn't know why he wants it, but she is sure he will be happy with her for getting it. Iago sees her, they talk, and he snatches the handkerchief from her. She asks him why he needs it, and he tells her to mind her own business. She says that if it's not important, then she should give it back, because Desdemona will be distraught if she finds it gone. He orders her to leave.

On stage alone, Iago decides that he will use the handkerchief to activate more than Othello's mere suspicions: he will incriminate Cassio and Desdemona more explicitly by planting the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings. He comments that trivial items such as a handkerchief can offer a jealous husband as much "proof" as if a sacred document proclaimed the accusations true. He knows that Othello's jealousy and hot temper have been aroused by the poisonous seeds of doubt Iago has already planted. Therefore, he believes that Othello will most certainly accept a handkerchief in Cassio's possession as proof of both Cassio's and Desdemona's treachery.

Othello enters, complaining that he was much happier when he was free of jealous doubts. Even if his wife were unfaithful, he says, he would rather not know about it. Essentially, Othello argues that ignorance is bliss. He even goes so far as to say that he'd have no problem if she were sleeping with all the soldiers as long as he didn't know about it. He declares that he is nothing now.

Iago reacts predictably, and Othello grabs him by the throat, telling Iago that he better have proof beyond any doubt. He wants to have his suspicions confirmed with his own eyes. Iago obsequiously says that he himself will never love since it causes so much misery, which softens Othello. He then more calmly tells Iago that he demands proof, as he is too confused to know what to think otherwise. Iago asks him if he really wants to actually catch Desdemona and Cassio in the act; Othello finds this idea so horrible that he curses.

Iago then plants his next shameless seed. He tells Othello that he had to share a bed with Cassio recently, and he claims that Cassio talked in his sleep about Desdemona. In fact, Iago says, Cassio actually started kissing Iago and trying to hold him, thinking that he was Desdemona! Othello is horrified by this, but Iago backs off, reassuring him that it was just a dream and doesn't prove that anything has truly occurred. However, Othello's mind is already poisoned, and he says that it will add to the proof along with other things.

Iago warns him to be patient, since they have not witnessed anything for sure yet. Then he nudges Othello a little more by bringing up the handkerchief. He tells Othello that he recently saw Cassio wiping his beard with it. This convinces Othello without further doubt that his wife has indeed slept with Cassio. He vows to see Cassio and Desdemona dead. Iago promises to help him. Othello says Iago is now his lieutenant, and Iago says, "I am your own forever."

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

There is much irony in this scene. Although Iago is often referred to as honest, the audience well knows that he is the most deceitful villain in the city. The characters' love for one another, or lack of it, adds other ironic twists. For example, Desdemona and Cassio, who do truly love Othello, are made out to be the villains; in contrast, Iago, who bitterly hates Othello, is the character Othello holds dearest throughout most of the play. The effective use of irony within a tragedy can perfectly illustrate the human capacity for deception. Although the reader or audience may wonder how Othello is unable to discern Iago's true colors, the fact is that nearly everybody has probably been deceived by a person they trusted, at least once.

The ultimate irony is that Othello demands real proof: not just circumstantial evidence, but something he can actually see with his own eyes to prove beyond all doubt that Desdemona has been unfaithful. However, when it comes right down to it, he is swayed by very little. Othello is decidedly convinced of Desdemona's guilt as soon as he hears two things: Cassio's fictitious dream about Desdemona (courtesy of Iago), and Iago's lie about seeing Cassio with Desdemona's handkerchief. The tragedy here is that Othello doesn't stick to his original ideals: obviously, he is ready to be convinced despite his demands of proof. If he would only have the patience that Iago pretends to implore him to have, he would have time to get to the real truth. But apparently, as the scene reveals, the real truth is not what is most important to Othello: other passions, such as pride, jealousy, and insecurity, appear to be driving him. Indeed, there is much about passion in this scene, passion that cannot be controlled.

Modern audiences may wonder how someone could go from being so wholeheartedly in love and thinking his wife perfect to turning so jealous that he is ready to kill her. Shakespeare's answer might be that jealousy, like a virus, propagates itself. Once a jealous thought is planted, it uses everything it sees to support its hypothesis. Hence, Othello's passionate love is turned nearly instantly to passionate hatred. Iago has done his work; now he need only sit back and watch it all play out.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Desdemona asks the clown where Cassio is lodging. After giving her the runaround with some puns, he finally goes to retrieve Cassio. As she is waiting, Desdemona wonders aloud to Emilia where her handkerchief might have gone. In a bit of foreshadowing, she says it's a good thing that Othello isn't the jealous type; after all, he might think something amiss if she doesn't have that special gift. Emilia queries her about his temperament; ironically, Desdemona says he is not of that humor (prone to jealousy).

Othello enters. She greets him warmly, but he takes her hand and makes comments alluding to her wanton behavior. She does not follow his meaning, but tells him that she awaits Cassio, and that now is the perfect time for Othello to forgive him. Othello pretends to have watery eyes and asks for her handkerchief. When she offers him one, he says he wants the special one he gave her. She replies that she does not have it with her. The audience can see that she doesn't want him to know it is lost, while he doesn't want her to know that he thinks it is lost. He tells her a story claiming that the handkerchief is magical, and she becomes upset. He insists she go and get it to prove to him it is not lost. She tries to change the subject by focusing on Cassio's dilemma.

Othello leaves in a fury, and Emilia remarks that he certainly seems jealous. Desdemona tells her that she has never seen him like this before. Iago then enters with Cassio, who is still very hopeful that Desdemona will be able to sway Othello's feelings toward him. Desdemona tells him that although she is doing everything she can, Othello seems out of sorts at the moment; she implores Cassio to have patience. Upon hearing that Othello is angry, Iago perks up and says he will go to Othello, on the pretense of calming him down.

Desdemona is worried, but tries to rationalize Othello's behavior by his distraction with affairs of state. She also thinks it might be that he has already fallen out of love with her and does not care for her anymore. Again ironically, the one thing of which she is sure is that she has given him no cause to be jealous. Emilia explains that jealousy does not need cause; it feeds upon itself. Desdemona tells Cassio to wait a while and she will see if she can bring Othello back.

Meanwhile, Bianca enters. Cassio is surprised to see her, and she is surprised to see him with a lady's handkerchief. She immediately jumps to the wrong conclusion that he has another woman. He assures her that he does not, and he asks her to please take the handkerchief to get a copy of the design. She does not want to leave him so soon, but he insists that her presence will not help his cause with Othello. She submits.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

Jealousy is the central theme of this scene. At first, Desdemona claims to Emilia that Othello has not a jealous bone in his body. However, as Othello questions her about the handkerchief, she begins to perceive a man who differs from the one she thought she married. She does not understand how Othello can possibly be jealous, for she loves him and knows she has done nothing wrong. The theme is later reiterated with gender roles reversed, when Bianca is momentarily jealous of Cassio.

The story Othello tells Desdemona about the handkerchief is also interesting. It could be fabricated to elicit a reaction from her so that he can accuse her of infidelity, or it could be true. Perhaps his mother did give it to him, and perhaps it is infused with magic (witchcraft?) to make one's lover be true. Perhaps that is why he gave it to Desdemona in the first place. Maybe Othello had already been worried that Desdemona would someday leave him, even before Iago's sinister machinations. Maybe this explains why he is so upset over the lost handkerchief and believes it to be certain proof that she has been with Cassio. If any of this is so, then it's not just Iago's poisoned words that generate Othello's jealousy; Othello himself originally created it. In this case, it could be possible that Othello would have thought Desdemona unfaithful as soon as she lost the handkerchief, even if Iago had never set up his plot. Of course, all this is speculation supported by Shakespeare's rich, challenging text, which is partially what makes Shakespeare such a fascinating author to study in the first place.

Although Iago doesn't know anything about the handkerchief story, he is still eager to use the handkerchief to fan the flames of jealousy smoldering inside Othello. While Desdemona is beginning to think Othello really believes ill of her, Cassio still has no idea about anything that is going on. In fact, he doesn't know whose handkerchief he has, or what he should do with it. He is the most innocent of all.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

Othello and Iago discuss the straying handkerchief and the sins it might imply. Iago casually mentions the idea of Desdemona being naked in bed with Cassio, then backpedals in his very next breath. Othello says that the missing handkerchief is insufficient proof of guilt. Iago then pretends that he actually overheard Cassio boast of his escapades with Desdemona. This comment succeeds in working Othello into such a state that he enters a sort of trance. It's almost as though he's truly bewitched, poisoned by Iago's words.

Cassio enters. Iago informs him that something is not quite right with Othello, but that if they let it run its course, he will be fine. He urges Cassio to leave, but to come back shortly to talk. When Othello emerges from his trance, Iago brings up the subject of infidelity immediately. Othello is undone by the idea of being a cuckold, a man whose wife cheats on him. However, Iago asserts that almost every man alive is a cuckold, and that women are wily.

Iago then tells Othello that Cassio will be back soon, and that if Othello will hide, Iago will get Cassio to speak about his affair with Desdemona. He reminds Othello to be patient and not to let his passions compel him to do something rash. Othello agrees. Before Cassio reenters, Iago addresses the audience, saying he will trick Othello by getting Cassio to talk about Bianca; Othello will thinks that he is talking about Desdemona.

When Cassio comes in, Iago executes this plan with precision. When Cassio laughs at the idea of marrying Bianca, whom he calls a prostitute, Othello thinks he is laughing about being with Desdemona the prostitute. Othello continues to use his imagination to fill in any blanks in the conversation. Next, Bianca enters; she is angry at Cassio for giving her the handkerchief. She tells him to give it to a woman of easy virtue. Then she invites him to dinner. She leaves, and Cassio goes out after her.

Othello is furious that his precious gift to Desdemona has seemingly passed from her hands, to Cassio's, and then to Bianca's, who is a person of lower class and questionable morals. However, he softens for a moment, remembering how fine a woman Desdemona is. Iago tells him he must give up thinking like that, and Othello hardens his heart. The next instant, he wavers again, recalling all the wonderful attributes she possesses. As before, Iago stirs up Othello's fiery, jealous passions.

Finally, Othello arrives at the point where he is actually ready to kill Desdemona. He asks Iago for poison. However, Iago suggests that it would be so much better if Othello were to strangle her in the very bed she has defiled. Iago also says that he will take care of Cassio himself. No sooner have they agreed on this than Desdemona enters with Lodovico, a kinsman of her father. He brings Othello a letter from the duke. While

Othello reads it, Desdemona talks with Lodovico about the rift between Othello and Cassio. Everything she says seems to make Othello fume, but Lodovico rationalizes Othello's response by saying it must be something in the letter that upsets him. Othello gets so mad he slaps Desdemona, to the astonishment of everyone there. He tells her to get out, and she turns to go. Lodovico calls her an obedient lady and asks Othello to summon her back. Othello rants about her ability to turn and weep. Then he remarks about the orders he has received from the duke to return home. Cassio will govern in his place.

After Desdemona leaves and Othello exits, Lodovico asks if Othello is okay; after all, his manner seems very different than usual. Iago slyly insinuates that Othello might be mad, but avoids saying so directly. Instead, he suggests that Lodovico observe Othello on his own.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

To his credit, Othello does not arrive at his fatal conclusions about Desdemona easily. He both wishes and strives to keep loving her beauty, wit, and musical ability. Iago must constantly press him toward anger until Othello is blindly jealous and infuriated. Ironically, Iago seems to be bewitching Othello with his twisted words, which is reminiscent of Act 1, when Desdemona's father thought Othello must have bewitched her into marrying him.

Iago is a perfectly two-faced villain. He pretends to comfort Othello while simultaneously filling Othello's head and imagination with unbelievable ideas: Desdemona naked in bed with Cassio, Cassio talking about how he was with her, and so on. Iago further maintains his illusion by feigning care for Othello whenever others are around; indeed, he nearly dotes on the man and pretends to be protecting him whenever others want to know what's going on with his odd behavior. Iago also puts down women for seeming what they are not (virtuous); of course, it is Iago more than anyone else who seems what he is not. He is an immensely accomplished user of others for his own ends.

Even though the title of the work is *Othello*, Iago plays a far bigger role in the play and is the one responsible for Othello's downfall in the end. Iago is a far more complex and enigmatic character than any of the others.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Othello and Emilia are talking. He asks her if she has seen Desdemona with Cassio, or if she has left her mistress's side. She says she has not. She declares Desdemona to be a pure and faithful wife. Othello tells her to bring Desdemona to him. When Desdemona comes in, Othello finally accuses her outright of being unfaithful. She says over and over that she has been nothing but loyal to her husband. Othello clearly does not believe her. He leaves, ordering Emilia to stay with Desdemona.

The ladies discuss what just happened. Desdemona is stricken that her husband thinks her unfaithful. She tries to think of a way to assure him that her heart is entirely with him. She asks Emilia to make up her bed with her wedding sheets. Then she requests that Emilia call in Iago. She and Emilia explain to Iago how Othello has accused his wife of infidelity. Desdemona asks Iago if he knows why Othello is acting this way, and Iago tries to convince her that it's merely matters of state that have him behaving so strangely. They are then called to dinner.

Roderigo appears, angry with Iago for wasting his money and not arranging anything between him and Desdemona. Iago calms him down and convinces Roderigo to help him kill Cassio, thereby clearing the way for Roderigo to have a chance with Desdemona.

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

Othello is treading on shaky ground now. He accuses Desdemona of betraying him, but he does not listen to what she says in response. She protests that she is his and his alone, yet he will not believe her. In fact, he believes Iago before his own wife. Clearly, his jealousy has darkened his mind and hardened his heart.

Iago, as always, assumes a different face with Desdemona in person than he does behind her back. In this scene, he pretends to reassure her that all will be okay. Perhaps he really does want to persuade her that the situation will fix itself; this would ensure that she will not flee or take some other course of action that might foil his plan.

Roderigo enters the picture again. He complains that he went broke paying Iago to fix him up with Desdemona, and now he has nothing to show for it. Like any good villain, Iago thinks quickly on his feet. He is able to manipulate the situation to advance his motives, getting Roderigo to help him kill Cassio. By making Roderigo do his dirty work, Iago will be able to claim that Roderigo killed Cassio while Iago was trying to save him.

Act 4, Scene 3

Act 4, Scene 3 Summary

After dinner, Othello, Lodovico, Desdemona and Emilia go for a walk. Othello and Lodovico keep walking; Othello tells Desdemona to go to bed and dismiss Emilia. The remainder of the scene is between Desdemona and Emilia. Eager to avoid angering Othello, Desdemona does as he says. Emilia says she wishes Desdemona had never met Othello, and Desdemona doubts her choice of a husband as well. She relays the story of one of her mother's maids, who was disappointed in love. The maid sang a song called "Willow." Desdemona sings it now while Emilia helps ready her for bed.

Desdemona asks Emilia if there really are women who cheat on their husbands. Emilia tells her that there are, and that she would do the same if the benefits were worth it. Not for rings or linens, she says, but maybe for a rise of fortune. Desdemona says that she would not for the entire world; Emilia says that for the entire world, she would.

Emilia delivers a long speech about how it is the husbands' faults when their wives fall, because husbands cheat, and so teach their wives to do it. Desdemona says she uses the bad conduct of others not as an excuse to behave badly herself, but as a lesson to learn how to behave better.

Act 4, Scene 3 Analysis

This is a touching scene between women. Desdemona seems to know that her happy marriage is over. She may even sense that Othello is so furious he wants to kill her. However, she is innocent; in fact, she is so naive, she cannot even fathom that women really do cheat on their husbands. Emilia's long speech at the end of the scene attempts to convey the hard reality of the world, but also seems to make a joke out of it, perhaps in an attempt to lift Desdemona's spirits. In blaming husbands for the grief that arises in marriages, Emilia's speech also foreshadows the tragic events to come that will be engendered by Othello's insane jealousy. Iago and Othello have certainly brought grief to their own marriages; soon, they will bring even greater sorrow.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

Iago and Roderigo prepare to ambush Cassio. Iago hides, reassuring Roderigo that he will help out if Roderigo can't finish the job. In an aside, Iago tells the audience that no matter what, he hopes to benefit from this messy situation. Whether Roderigo kills Cassio or vice versa (or, even better, if they kill one another), Iago will be happy.

Cassio enters; Roderigo tries to stab him, but misses. Cassio then draws on Roderigo and wounds him. Iago wounds Cassio in turn, and then disappears. Othello arrives on the scene, sees that Iago has done as he promised, and thinks Cassio is dead. This bolsters his resolve to see to Desdemona, and he exits.

Lodovico and Gratiano enter, hearing the cries of both wounded men, but they aren't sure what to do. They are worried they are being tricked. Iago shows up acting as though he just heard the cries and came to see what is going on. He pretends to care for the wounded Cassio, and when he hears Roderigo cry out, he stabs him, pretending not to know who it is. However, Roderigo, who knows the score now, curses Iago as he dies.

The three men tend to Cassio as Bianca enters, becoming somewhat overwrought at the sight of Cassio's wounds. Iago asks Cassio if he knows the man who wounded him, and Cassio says he does not. Cassio's and Roderigo's bodies are carried out. Then Iago turns upon Bianca, implying to Lodovico and Gratiano that she might have something to do with this.

Emilia enters, and they fill her in on the events. All suspicion seems cast upon Bianca, who protests that she is innocent of both murder and love. Iago takes her into custody and sends Emilia to inform Othello and Desdemona about what has happened. The scene ends with Iago stating that the events of this night will either greatly please or destroy him.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

Cassio is still alive. This will become very important, for Cassio has some knowledge that could be dangerous to Iago. Roderigo has been a minor irritant to Iago, who is now rid of him for good. To save his own neck, Iago preys upon Bianca and designates her as the scapegoat, knowing that her questionable reputation will make her an easy person to blame.

However, Iago also acknowledges his awareness that the wheels of fortune have been set in motion; now, not even he can control the outcome. He is, for the first time, less cocky about his power and revenge, and more resigned to whatever might happen.

Act 5, Scene 2

Act 5, Scene 2 Summary

Othello stands at Desdemona's bedside. As she sleeps, he bends down and kisses her several times. He almost loses his resolve to kill her. When she wakes up, he asks her if she has prayed and if there are any sins she needs to confess. He doesn't want to kill an unprepared spirit. She realizes he intends to kill her, and she begs for her life.

He asks her about the handkerchief: did she give it to Cassio? She says no. She states that she never loved Cassio but with the kind of love a Christian ought to have for another. Othello says he saw the handkerchief in Cassio's hand, and she responds that he must have found it because she did not give it to him.

Othello reveals that Cassio is dead. (Of course, Othello merely thinks this is the case.). Desdemona begs for mercy, but Othello strangles her. While he is still in the process of murdering Desdemona, Emilia knocks on the door. Othello isn't quite sure whether he should let Emilia in; after all, she'll want to talk to his wife. It then dawns on him that his wife is dead; he has no wife. Instantly, he is torn by remorse. He thinks an eclipse and an earthquake should mark the death of so wonderful a woman.

Othello lets Emilia in, and she tells him about Roderigo being killed. Othello doesn't quite understand, as he thinks both Roderigo and Cassio are dead; Emilia tells him that Cassio lives. Just then, Desdemona cries out as she is dying. Emilia rushes to her and asks who has committed this crime. Even then, in her moment of death, Desdemona demonstrates her enduring faithfulness and loyalty by refusing to betray Othello; she says she killed herself.

Othello confesses to Emilia that it was he who killed Desdemona. Emilia, stunned, cannot understand why. Othello tells her that Desdemona was false to him, and that it was Iago who told him so. Emilia cannot believe her husband told Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful. Once the truth begins to sink in, Emilia is determined to see justice done. She calls out for help.

Montano, Gratiano, Iago, and a host of others burst in. Emilia confronts Iago with what Othello has told her. Iago does not deny that he said these things to Othello. Emilia is furious and hysterical: how could her own husband be so horrible a villain? In response, Iago grows increasingly impatient with her.

Othello admits to everyone that he did kill Desdemona, but that Iago proved she had been intimate with Cassio. He raises the issue of the handkerchief, which makes Emilia even more distressed. She informs them all how she found the handkerchief and gave it to Iago herself. Iago kills Emilia and runs out. Most of the characters on stage hurry to apprehend him.

Othello and the dying Emilia are left alone. He cannot believe what he has done. Emilia sings the "Willow" song and tells Othello how much his wife loved him. Then she dies. Othello finds another sword, then calls to Gratiano to let him out. Gratiano is not sure what to do. Othello tells him not to worry, because he does not plan to use the weapon on Gratiano. Othello cries out in agony: how horrible must he be to have killed his own wife!

The assembly returns with Iago in captivity. Othello wounds Iago, but does not kill him. Iago sneers, but Othello tells him that to live is more painful than to die. Lodovico asks Othello if he conspired with Iago to kill Cassio. Othello says he did. Cassio, shocked, cannot believe this. He does not understand why Othello would want to kill him. Lodovico reveals a letter that was found on Roderigo's body; it describes some of the details of Iago's plot.

Othello finally asks Cassio how he came to have Desdemona's handkerchief, and Cassio tells that him he found it in his room. They find another letter containing instructions from Iago, telling Roderigo how to behave toward Cassio and get him cast out of Othello's service. Lodovico installs Cassio as the ruler of Cyprus and begins to take Iago and Othello away. However, before they go, Othello wants to say a few words. He tells them all to spread the truth of what he did. After his speech, he stabs himself and dies.

In the end, Cassio holds responsibility for deciding Iago's sentence and fate. Gratiano inherits Othello's fortunes.

Act 5, Scene 2 Analysis

One wonders how Othello can kiss his wife and still intend to kill her. The answer Othello might give in the moment is that an archaic code of honor demands it. However, right up to the end, Othello has ample opportunities to discover the truth. Sadly, when Desdemona vehemently proclaims her innocence, he refuses to believe her.

Emilia shows how brave she is when she is willing to put her life on the line in defense of her mistress. She boldly and heroically honors the wronged Desdemona rather than her own husband, Iago. Of course, Iago has done little to deserves Emilia's respect and honor: unlike Desdemona, he never treats her well or exhibits any affection toward her.

Cassio ends up as the governor who will determine what punishment Iago faces for his many crimes. This is ironic, given that Iago initially undertook his course of action because he enviously coveted Cassio's promotion to lieutenant. Also ironic is the fact that many innocent people are dead in the end, while Iago remains alive. He's a relentlessly successful con artist who manages always to land on his feet. Surely, he will be punished severely; nonetheless, he lives, while all those who truly loved have died. Such is the real tragedy of *Othello*.

Characters

Attendants:

Othello and Desdemona are characters of some stature in the communities of both Venice and Cyprus. In their public appearances throughout the play, they are often accompanied by attendants.

Bianca:

Bianca is a courtezan, a prostitute, in Cyprus. She falls in love with Cassio and pursues him, an unexpected turn of events given the callousness and lack of affection usually associated with her profession, Iago is aware that Cassio is not as affectionate toward Bianca ashe is toward him, and he takes advantage of the one-sided relationship. On the pretext that he is questioning Cassio about Desdemona, Iago really questions Cassio about Bianca. He does this in order to increase Othello's jealousy, as the latter stands of to the side unable to hear but able to see Cassio's cavalier and mocking attitude. When Cassio finds the handkerchief belonging to" Othello and planted in his quarters by Iago, he gives ito Bianca that she might remove its valuable stitching. This fortunate event lends itself to Iago's plan since it increases Othello's hatred of Cassio, who seem ingly equates Desdemona with a common prostitute.

Brabantio:

Brabantio is Desdemona's father. He is a magnifico, a prominent citizen and landowner in Venice. When the play opens, Brabantio's house hold is being disrupted by Iago and Roderigo, who are crying out to Brabantio that he has been robbed. Brabantio says, "What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; / My house is not a grange" (Li. 105-06). He. believes he is safely within the civilized society of Venice, not on the dangerous and uncivilized fringe of that society. When Iago cries that Brabantio's daughter is at that moment sleeping with the Moor Othello, he appeals to Brabantio's racial prejudices. When Brabantio recognizes Roderigo, he reminds him that he has prohibited Roderigo from pursuing Desdemona as a suitor. Moments later, Brabantio first reveals his racial prejudice when he tells Roderigo, "O would you had had her! / Some one way, some another" (Li. 175-76). He would prefer anyone to Othello as his daughter's husband, even the unsavory Roderigo. Brabantio cannot believe Desdemona has freely selected Othello. When Roderigo escorts him to the place where Othello is, Brabantio draws his sword and is ready to fight with the Moor. He accuses Othello of having used spells and charms to seduce and steal his daughter. He makes the same claim to the Venetian senate, arguing that Othello has certainly used witchcraft to win his daughter. In Brabantio's eyes, Desdemona is a maiden so modest that it is unthinkable for her "To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (I.iii.98). When Othello explains that Desdemona was initially fascinated by Othello's tales of exotic adventures, eventually

falling in love with him, Brabantio misses the irony. He shared that fascination himself, inviting Othello into his home so that Othello might entertain Brabantio and his guests with the tales of his daring exploits. When Brabantio hears Desdemona support Othello's story, he gives up his appeal. He never sanctions the marriage of his daughter to Othello and leaves uttering his total disapproval.

Cassio:

Cassio is chosen over Iago to be Othello's lieutenant. According to Iago, Cassio is "a great arithmetician" (I.i.19), one "That never set a squadron in the field" (I.i.22). Cassio knows battle only from books, unlike Iago who has had a good deal of experience in combat. Cassio is apparently a handsome man, and the ladies are attracted to him. But Cassio also has his weaknesses. When Iago tries to get him to have a drink in celebration of the Turks' defeat and Othello's marriage, Cassio says, "I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking" (II.iii.33). Cassio is the perfect dupe for Iago. Cassio is attrac tive, and this fact encourages Othello's belief in Iago's suggestion that Desdemona desires Cassio. Cassio's inability to drink also gives Iago another weapon in his plan to abuse both Cassio and Othello. Cassio represents the class privilege of which Iago is so envious and resentful. It rankles Iago that Cassio seems to have bought into the idea that he is socially superior. When they are drinking together, Cassio tells Iago that "the lieutenant is to be sav'd before the ancient" (II.iii.109). Cassio is perhaps referring to a commonplace for maintaining military order, but the implication is that Cassio is superior by virtue of his title alone. Again, when Othello disgraces Cassio by scolding him in public and stripping him of his rank for neglecting his watch and brawling with Montano, Cassio laments most the loss of his reputation. In his great desire to regain that reputation, he plays right into the hands of Iago who suggests that Cassio appeal to Desdemona to intervene with Othello for restoring his rank. For Iago, through whose eyes the audience gets its only sense of Cassio's character, Cassio is all reputation and title with no real substance. Iago refers to ' One Michael Cassio, a Florentine" (I.i.20) while a gentleman in Cyprus refers to "A Veronesa; Michael Cassio" (II.i.26). Perhaps Cassio has no inner qualities that identify who and what he is, only his titles. Even so, he ends up in charge of the Venetian troops in Cyprus.

Clown:

In a comic interlude that temporarily breaks the building tension, the clown appears and speaks to a group of musicians who have been directed by Cassio to play outside the quarters of Desdemona and Othello. The clown tells the musicians they sound nasal, alluding to the nasal damage done in advanced cases of syphilis. The clown also engages in some low-brow humor involving a "tale" and a "wind instrument" (III.i.10). The clown appears again in III.iv, punning evasively in response to Desdemona's simple inquiry as to whether or not the clown knows where Cassio lives.

Desdemona:

Desdemona is the daughter of Brabantio, a man of some reputation in Venice. As such, she is part of the upper class of Venetian society. Apparently, she has many suitors vying for her hand in marriage, but she freely chooses to marry Othello, a decision which greatly upsets Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo. She testifies before the Venetian senate that the story Othello has told about their mutual attraction is true. In that story, Othello recounts how he was invited to Brabantio's home to tell of his journeys to foreign places. Being forced to leave the room on frequent errands for her father and his guests, Desdemona was unable to hear the full account of Othello's exploits in those foreign places. But she was intrigued, and on another occasion Othello told her his story in full. Othello tells the duke and the senators, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (I.iii. 167-68). Despite what her father and Iago might think, Desdemona does seem to love Othello truly, and, despite Othello's jealous suspicions, she is faithful to him until the end.

In one sense, though, Desdemona presents a contradiction, some critics have argued. After Othello accuses her of being unfaithful, she asks Emilia, "Wouldst thou do such a deed for al the world?" (IV.iii.63) Emilia responds realistically that she would not be unfaithful for a trifle, buthe world is a big place. While Desdemona's question reveals her innocence, her past actions have shown her to be capable of some level of deception: she secretly elopes with a man of whom her father greatly disapproves. She explains to Brabantio that she has only transferred her love and allegiance from father to husband, just as her mother had done. While many audiences do not judge Desdemona too harsh ly for this, many critics maintain that through these actions, Desdemona demonstrates the capacity to deceive men. It is this perceived capacity that Iago exploits most aggressively. He virtually seals Desdemona's fate when he tells Othello,

She did deceive her father, marrying you,
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
She lov'd them most.
(III.iii.206-08)

As he contemplates killing Desdemona, Othel lo echoes Iago's words, "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.i.6). For Iago and Othello, Desdemona can only be totally pure when she can no longer experience desire, when men no longer need to fear that that desire will betray them□in death.

Desdemona has been described by some critics as a Christlike figure. Like the love Christ extends to humankind, Desdemona's love for Othello is freely given and need not be defended by reasoned explanations. Othello's great failing is that he does not simply accept Desdemona's love, but finds reasons to think himself unworthy of her. He gives in to Iago's suggestions that Desdemona could not freely love one who was so different from her in "clime, complexion, and degree" (III.iii.23). After Othello has killed Desdemona, Emilia asks who has done such a deed. Desdemona revives and says,

"Nobody; I myself. Farewell! / Commend me to my kind lord" (V.ii. 124-25), echoing the unselfishness and forgiveness of Christ's dying words on the cross.

Duke of Venice:

See Venice

Emilia:

Emilia is Iago's wife. She travels to Cyprus with her husband and acts as a waiting woman to Desdemona. When Emilia and Iago arrive in Cyprus, we get some sense of the relationship between Emilia and her husband. Cassio greets Emilia with a kiss, and Iago says,

Sir, would she give you so much of her lips
As of her tongue she oft bestows on me,
You would have enough.
(II.i. 100-02)

Emilia is a strong-willed woman who apparently will not suffer her husband to abuse her. She tries to please Iago by recovering for him the handkerchief dropped by Desdemona, unknowing ly contributing to Desdemona's death. But when she understands what Iago has done and why he has so often asked her to steal that handkerchief, she exposes him and will not be silenced even when he commands her-to "hold [her] peace" (V.ii.218). Emilia is the only character whom Iago cannot totally manipulate.

The play offers other evidence of Emilia's strong-willed and independent nature. After Othello has struck Desdemona and humiliated her in public, Emilia explains to Iago what has happened. She says that, undoubtedly, some knave has slandered Desdemona to make Othello jealous, an absurd accusation similar to Iago's own accusation that Emilia has been unfaithful with the Moor (IV.ii.14547). Emilia later explains to Desdemona that some women do cheat on their husbands and are justified in doing so if their husbands have cheated on them. She is a woman who believes that men and women experience the same passions and desires. Near the end of the play, Emilia will not be silenced in her efforts to bring Desdemona's killers to justice. She even defies Othello in his efforts to physically intimidate her. She says, "I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives" (V.ii. 165-66). In the end, Iago can only silence Emilia by stabbing her to death.

Gentlemen (of Cyprus):

When the play switches location to Cyprus, two gentlemen talk to Montano, the governor there, about the raging storm tossing the Turkish fleet. A third gentleman enters and announces that the storm has scattered the Turkish fleet, causing the Turks

to abandon their intended invasion of Cyprus. He also reports that a Venetian ship has been wrecked and that Cassio worries the ship might have been the one carrying Othello. The second of the first two gentlemen identifies Iago when he disembarks. Later, armed gentlemen appear with Othello when he interrupts the fight between Cassio and Montano and chastises those two for brawling.

Gratiano:

Gratiano is a kinsman of Brabantio. In some editions of the play he is listed as Brabantio's brother. Other editions list him and Lodovico as two noble Venetians. Gratiano appears in the dark streets of Cyprus just after Roderigo has stabbed Cassio. He helps minister to Cassio and sort outhe identities of others in the confusing darkness. He is also present when Emilia accuses Othello of killing Desdemona and when Othello is apprehended. His chief function in the play seems to be one of eliciting explanations from the other characters, providing them with the opportunity to sort out complex events. Twice near the end of the play he asks, "What is the matter?" (V.ii. 170,259).

Herald:

The herald is sent by Othello to make a public proclamation: in celebration of the Turkish fleet's defeat and Othello's marriage, the populace is directed to feast, make bonfires, and dance, each man pursuing his own sport. This celebration is to continue from five to eleven that night.

Iago:

Iago is Othello's ancient, or ensign. He is a soldier with a good deal of experience in battle, having been on the field with Othello at 'both Rhodes and Cyprus. He is also one of Shakespeare's greatest villains. He is a master manipulator of people and gets the other characters in the play to do just what he wants. He manipulates others through a keen understanding he seems to have of what motivates them. For example, Iago uses the vision Roderigo has of a union with Desdemona to manipulate Roderigo. Cassio is a man driven by the need to maintain outer appearances and he easily accepts Iago's advice that he recover his rank by going through Desdemona. Iago also uses to his advantage the fact that Desdemona is of a kind and generous nature, one who will gladly accept the opportunity to persuade her husband to make amends with his lieutenant. And, finally, Iago uses Othello's jealous nature and his apparent insecurity to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. Emilia is the only one, it seems, that Iago cannot manipulate, perhaps because she knows him so well. Iago schemes to have Cassio demoted from his post as lieutenant, next suggesting that Cassio ask Desdemona to intercede for him with Othello on his behalf. She does, which contributes to Othello's suspicions. Othello first begins to distrust Desdemona when Iago points out that, as he and Othello approached Desdemona and Cassio, Cassio quickly departed.

Iago also reminds Othello that Desdemona, in eloping with Othello deceived her father, which shows her capacity for deception. Additionally, Iago reminds Othello of the differences between Othello and Desdemona in terms of color, age, and social status. The handkerchief that Othello had given to Desdemona as love token is also used to indicate her guilt, a situation also engineered by Iago.

Iago provides the audience with a number of clues to the motives for his actions. First, he feels a certain rancor at not being chosen as Othello's lieutenant. He reassures Roderigo of this:

Preferment goes by letter and affection,
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to th' first. Now, sir, be judge yourself
Whether I in any just term am affin'd
To love the Moor.
(I.i.36-40)

He is disgruntled at having been passed over for promotion, and he sees a chance to get back at both Othello, who has slighted him, and Cassio, the mocking symbol of that slight. Second, he suspects that Othello has engaged in adultery with his wife, Emilia. He mentions this on two occasions: 'I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / [He's] done my office" (I.iii.386-88) and

. I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth (like a poisonous mineral) gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife.
(II.i.295-99)

Apparently, Iago is so distressed by the thought of Emilia sleeping with Othello that he has accused Emilia of the act. As is typical of her, Emilia characterizes the accusation as absurd (IV.ii.14547). In their unfounded jealousy, Iago and Othello are very much alike.

Iago and Othello are alike in another way as well. At the end of the play, when Othello is under arrest and Iago has been apprehended and is brought into his presence, Othello says, "I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable" (V.ii.286). He is looking to see if Iago has cloven feet like the devil Othello now thinks him to be. But for al of Iago's hatred of Othello and Othello's newly discovered contempt for Iago, the two are very much alike in their sense of being excluded from upper-class Venetian society. When Othello calls him ' honest, honest Iago" (V.ii.154), he speaks of more than verbal truth. Iago is the only character who speaks directly to Othello's sense of his own inadequacy, a sense of inadequacy Iago perhaps shares. At the end of the play, after killing Roderigo and Emilia and revealing all he has done, Iago is taken prisoner.

Lodovico:

Lodovico is Brabantio's kinsman. (Some edi tions of the play list Gratiano as Brabantio' s brother and Lodovico as Brabantio's kinsman. Other edi tions list them both simply as two noble Venetians.) When Lodovico arrives in Cyprus, he and Othello greet one another with civil courtesy. Lodovico brings a letter from the duke of Venice, in which Othello is commanded to return to Venice immediately, Cassio taking his place of command in Cyprus.

As Othello reads the letter, he overhears Lodovico ask Desdemona if the rift between the general and the lieutenant can be repaired. Desdemona is hopeful and says, "I would do much / T'atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio" (IV.i.232-33). Although she means only that she is concerned for Cassio, Othello strikes her. Othello's action astounds Lodovico. When Othello leaves, Lodovico asks, 'Is this the noble Moor whom our Senate / Call al in sufficient?" (IV.i.264-65). He won ders aloud if the letter has caused Othello to experi ence such a wild mood swing. Lodovico is present later when Othello is apprehended and al finally realize that Othello has killed Desdemona.

Messenger:

Two messengers appear in the play. The first reports to the Venetian senators that a Turkish fleet of approximately thirty ships has threatened Rhodes but has since turned and headed for Cyprus. The second messenger appears as Cassio and Montano express concern for Othello's survival on the torrid sea. He announces that all of the townspeople have gathered on the shore to keep watch of the turbulent ocean and have spotted the sail of a ship.

Montana:

Montano is the governor of Cyprus. He has sent a messenger to the duke of Venice, confirming the presence of the Turkish fleet near Cyprus. He welcomes the Venetian protectors when they arrive on his isle, anxious for Othello's safety and elated when the tempest scatters the Turkish threat. As all celebrate the defeat of the Turks and Othello's marriage, Cassio must leave the celebration to gon watch. Iago slyly tells Montano that Cassio is an excellent man, but not when he has been drinking. He plays on Montano's concern and suggests that Cassio is not one to whom the safety of the isle should be entrusted. Then, when Roderigo attacks Cassio and the latter cries out, Montano goes to investigate the matter. From his very recent conversation with Iago, he is predisposed to se Cassio's actions as irresponsible; he accuses Cassio of being drunk, and the two men fight, the sounding of a general alarm disrupting the peace of the isle and rousing an irate Othello from his nuptial bed. Montano is present in the later scenes in which the former confusion is sorted out.

Musicians:

See Clown

Officers:

Officers appear in the company of both Brabantio and Othello when the two confront each other, Brabantio charging Othello with having abducted his daughter, and Othello maintaining his innocence of that charge. One of the officers confirms that the duke of Venice wants to see Othello immediately. Officers appear in the company of the duke as he and the Venetian senators try to deduce the intentions of the Turkish fleet. Again, at the end of the play, officers appear with Iago in their custody after having captured the fleeing villain.

Othello:

Othello, a Moor, is a general of the Venetian armed forces. He is a noble and imposing man, well respected in his profession as soldier. At the begin ning of the play he enjoys great successes, and everything seems to be going his way. Desdemona has chosen him over al of her other Venetian suitors, and Othello prevails over Brabantio's charges that Othello has coerced and abducted her. The duke of Venice and the Venetian senators place him in charge of the troops sent to defend Cyprus against the Turks. Things continue to go Othello's way when he arrives in Cyprus and discovers that the tempest has entirely eliminated the Turkish threat. He and Desdemona act differently toward each other in Cyprus. They are more openly loving, much less formal than they appeared in Venice. The couple"celebrate their marriage, and, even when that celebration is interrupted by the brawling of Cassio and Montano, Othello still appears confident and self-controlled. In the tradition of the best strongarmed heroic types, he says, 'He that stirs next to carve for his own rage / Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion" (II.iii. 173-74). He is a man in charge, one that will shoot first and ask questions later. But Othello's confidence starts to slip when Iago begins to work on his psyche, intimating that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. At first, Othello denies that the attractiveness of his wife's grace, charm, and beauty for other men could make him jealous because, as he says "... she had eyes and chose me" (III.iii. 189). But Iago's "medicine" (IV.i.46) soon begins to work, and Othello begins to question how Desdemona could continue to love him. After Iago has suggested that Desdemona has already deceived her father and Othello, the Moor begins to think Desdemona's betrayal of him is inevitable given his skin color, greater age, and lack of courtly charm (III.iii.26368). He begins to act as if her unfaithfulness is a certainty, bemoaning that "Othello's occupation is gone" (III.iii.357).

Iago works Othello into a jealous rage through these many insinuations. But it seems to be the handkerchief, the one Othello originally gave to Desdemona as a love token, that puts Othello over the edge. Iago convinces Othello that the innocently dropped handkerchief was actually given to Cassio (who in turn gives the handkerchief to

Bianca) by Desdemona. Othello focuses on this piece of cloth as damning physical evidence in his confrontation with his wife. He refers to it repeatedly before he kills Desdemona: "That handkerchief which I so lov'd, and gave thee, / Thou gav'st to Cassio" (V.ii.48-9); "By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in'shand" (V.ii.62); and again, "I saw the handkerchief" (V.ii.65). Desdemona repeatedly denies giving the handkerchief to Cassio, suggesting that perhaps he found it somewhere, but to no avail. In the end, Othello iso convinced by Iago's manipulation that he murders his wife in their bed. The most apparent reason for this deed is the one Othello gives to Emilia, stated repeatedly in response to her persistent questioning, immediately after he has smothered Desdemona: "She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore"; "She was false as water"; "Cassio did top her" (V.ii.132; 134; 136). Desdemona, Othello believes, has betrayed him and the sanctity of marriage, and she paid with her life. Yet some believe that Othello's motives run deeper, that Othello killed Desdemona because she violated the mores of Venetian society by marrying a Moor. Proponents of this view argue that Othello is accepted by Venetian society as long as he is an external element of that society. Barbantio and the Venetian senators are more than willing to accept his strength and military knowledge, but when Othello is internalized into their society by his marriage to Desdemona, his presence becomes disruptive. In his last speech, Othello asks to be remembered as "one that lov'd not wisely but too well" (V.ii.344). Is the object of that love Desdemona or Venice? Perhaps Othello never stops seeing himself as a soldier with the primary goal of preserving Venetian society. Perhaps his last act□his own suicide□is performed in the service of Venice, as mirrored in the language he uses to introduce it. He says that those around him should record events exactly as they have happened,

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him□thus.
(V.ii.352-56)

The last word of this speech is punctuated by the sound of Othello's knife sinking into his breast and mortally wounding him.

Roderigo:

Roderigo is a Venetian desperately desiring Desdemona. He is identified in the Dramatis Personae as a gull, a dupe or easy mark. Roderigo is gullible; he believes everything Iago tells him and does everything Iago commands of him. Athe beginning of the play, at Iago's instigation, he alarms Brabantio with the news that Desdemona has eloped with the Moor. He sails with Iago to Cyprus and, while there, serves as a pawn in Iago's plan to destroy Othello and Cassio. Upon instruction, he picks a fight with Cassio when the latter keeps watch during the general celebration. Later, he attacks Cassio in the dark and wounds him, suffer ing a wound himself. Roderigo has given Iago money to negotiate with Desdemona on his behalf and thinks that the tasks Iago assigns him

are intended only to remove Cassio from the picture, paving Roderigo's way to possessing Desdemona. Although his actions are despicable, he does evoke a measure of sympathy in the way that he is so utterly manipulated and ultimately betrayed by Iago, who stabs the wounded Roderigo on the dark street in order that he might not reveal Iago's involvement in Cassio's wounding.

Roderigo is continually threatening to quit his pursuit of Desdemona and cease giving Iago money for his intervention in that matter. Each time he does so, Iago assures him that Desdemona's attraction to Othello is only physical and that she will tire of the Moor fairly quickly. Iago suggests that Roderigo's best course of action is to accumulate a solid financial foundation. Iago tells Roderigo over and over to "Put money in thy purse" (I.iii.339-58), implying that, when Desdemona has satisfied her sexual lust, she will be attracted to the rich and stable sort of man. At one point, in his frustration at not realizing his goal, Roderigo says, "It is silliness to live, when to live is torment" (I.iii.307). He apologizes for being so silly but says he does not have the "virtue" to change, to which Iago responds, "Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves we are thus or thus" (I.iii.319). Iago maintains that men make of themselves what they desire to be; men do not follow a course predetermined by any inner qualities. Iago's advice seems to renew Roderigo's resolve even as his threatened suicide gives evidence to the intensity of his longing for Desdemona.

Sailors:

In I.iii, the duke and the Venetian senators have assembled to try and determine Turkish military intentions. A sailor enters and reports that the Turkish fleet is menacing Rhodes.

Senators:

In the republican city-state of Venice, the senators were powerful men; who, along with the duke, made laws and insured public welfare. In I.iii, the senators have come together to plan a way to counter the military intentions of the Turks. They have received conflicting reports of the Turkish fleet's whereabouts, first seen heading towards Rhodes and later towards Cyprus. One of the senators deduces that the Turkish move on Rhodes is just a feinting maneuver, their real target being Cyprus. This conjecture is confirmed by the messenger from Montano. The senators have sent for Othello, whose military expertise they desperately need in countering the impending attack on Cyprus. They are present when Brabantio pleads his case before the duke, arguing that Othello has bewitched and stolen his daughter Desdemona. We might imagine that they, like the duke, are not inclined to support Brabantio's suit since, under the present circumstances, Othello's services are urgently required.

Venice (Duke of Venice):

The duke of Venice is concerned about the safety of Venice and its interests in Cyprus. He and the Venetian Senetors have assembled to try and and figure out where the

Turkish fleet intends to attack. After hearing conflicting reports about Turkish intentions, it is determined that the Turks will attack Cyprus. The duke summons Othello in order to place the defense of Cyprus in his hands. But Othello is being accused by Brabantio of using witchcraft to seduce his daughter. When Brabantio and Othello are brought into the duke's presence, the duke agrees to hear Brabantio's case. Othello counters the charge that he has used witchcraft by relating how he enthralled Desdemona with tales of his suffering and his adventures. When he is done, the duke says, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.iii.171). After Desdemona con firms what Othello has said to be true, the duke rules against Brabantio, something he may have been less inclined to don an occasion when Othello's servic es were not so desperately needed. The duke then tries to repair the rift between Brabantio and the newly wedded couple. He says, "The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief; / He robs himself that spends a bootless grief" (I.iii.200809). The duke is urging Brabantio to be generous and accept things he cannot change.

Character Studies

Two primary interpretations of Othello's character have emerged among students and critics of the play: that he is virtuous, strong, and trustful; and that he is guilty of self-idealization and overweening; pride. Both views find support in the change in Othello's behavior. Although he is initially presented as a strong, confident character using typical heroic vocabulary, as he succumbs to jealousy and rage he becomes more like Iago and employs the villain's animal and diabolic imagery. According to critics who regard Othello as essentially noble, this change shows the innocent hero falling victim to Iago's schemes and being corrupted by his evil. Others, however, argue that Iago's actions merely cause Othello's noble facade to crumble, releasing his inherent savagery. The first interpretation places most, if not all, the responsibility for Othello's fall on Iago; the second puts much of the burden on the Moor himself.

Regardless of the degree to which Iago is to blame for Othello's downfall, he remains one of Shakespeare's most villainous creations, variously described as a brilliant opportunist taking advantage of the chances presented to him, as a personification of evil, and as a stock "devil" or "vice" figure, Iago's motivation remains a topic of considerable debate. Although he offers numerous motives throughout the play-resentment at being passed over for promotion, suspicions about Othello and Emilia. desire for Desdemona-Iago's plans seem curiously incomplete; he appears to be making up both his schemes and his motives for them as he goes along. The noted nineteenth-century writer and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge described this process as the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity," and for many readers Iago's behavior is simply evil, beyond explanation or understanding. For others, no explanation is necessary. They consider Iago a devil or vice figure, a stock dramatic villain. Many scholars, however, find Iago a more fully fleshed-out character, emotionally and psychologically complex. According to these critics, his pride and desire for power and control, along with his brilliant scheming and his jealousy, make Iago a fascinating, multi-faceted figure.

Desdemona has traditionally been seen as the "good" that contrasts with Iago's "evil," Generally overshadowed by the powerful and enigmatic figures of Othello and Iago, Desdemona has often been judged an uncomplicated character: an idealized goddess or a passive, undeveloped figure. Recently, however, critics have begun to detect a more intricate portrait of Desdemona as a vital, courageous, and sensual woman. Significantly, it is Desdemona rather than Othello who initiates their romance and courtship. In addition, she exhibits a remarkable boldness and independence in marrying Othello in the face of her father's objections. However, she pays a price for her freedom: isolated from her familiar Venetian surroundings, she becomes dependent upon Othello; and when his love turns to violence, she is alone and defenseless.

Conclusion

Othello has often been considered the most painful of Shakespeare's tragedies. The fall of a proud, dignified man, the murder of a graceful, loving woman, and the unreasoning hatred of a "motiveless" villain-all have evoked fear and pity in audiences throughout the centuries. If it lacks the cosmic grandeur of *Hamlet* or *King Lear, Othello* nevertheless possesses a power that is perhaps more immediate and strongly felt for operating on the personal, human plane.

(See also *Shakespearean Criticism,* Vols. 4 and 11.)

Themes

Jealousy

Traditionally, *Othello* was read as a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of the green-eyed monster, jealousy. Certainly, the play is filled with examples of jealousy, each contributing to the claustrophobic atmosphere of plot and counterplot, all orchestrated by Iago. Iago himself attributes his hatred of Othello to numerous sorts of jealousy: he is jealous of Michael Cassio because he believes that Cassio has been promoted unjustly over him and because he believes that Cassio might have had an affair with his wife. Iago is jealous of Othello because he believes that Othello might have had sex with his wife and because he says that he loves Desdemona himself. It is almost as if Iago examines the various kinds of jealousy he finds in himself in order to exploit those jealousies in others. For example, he first manipulates Roderigo. Roderigo, in love with Desdemona, is very jealous of Othello and by extension of Cassio. His jealousy makes him an easy dupe for Iago's plotting. Likewise, Bianca is jealous of any woman in whom Cassio might be interested, and thus she also can be manipulated by Iago. Of course, the most destructive jealous rage that Iago incites is that within Othello. Iago uses his own fear of cuckoldry as the basis for his plot against Othello. By projecting his own feelings (and a common cultural fear) onto Othello, he is able to convince Othello that what he fears most, Desdemona's betrayal, is a reality. It is jealousy that weakens Othello's mind and reason, thus rendering him increasingly vulnerable to Iago's plots.

In the twentieth century and into the early 2000s, some productions and some critics suggested yet another way that jealousy might work as a motivating force in the play. As Steven Orgel notes in his article "*Othello* and the End of Comedy," "Tyrone Guthrie in 1938 had [Laurence] Olivier as a homosexual Iago furtively longing for Ralph Richardson's Othello." Such an interpretation suggests that Iago is in love with Othello himself or, alternatively, in love with Cassio. He concocts his dastardly plan as the result of jealousy, playing the role of spurned lover. While the interpretation may seem strange to some readers, it does reinforce the thematic concern over jealous rage. Furthermore, it provides motivation for Iago's actions, something that troubled viewers and critics alike since practically the first performance of the play.

Sexuality

Many of Shakespeare's plays refer to sex through joke and innuendo. Some, such as *Much Ado About Nothing* even use a sexual pun in their titles. However, *Othello* stands out among Shakespeare's works as the most troublingly sexual of all plays. Indeed, it is the issue of sex that causes the downfall of both Othello and Desdemona.

In the opening scene, Iago and Roderigo awaken Brabantio to inform him of Desdemona's elopement. Their language is obscene and racist: "[A]n old black ram / [I]s

tupping your white ewe," Iago shouts, "[Y]our daughter / and the Moor are making the beast with two backs."

Further, Shakespeare calls attention to the nuptial night between Othello and Desdemona by having it interrupted several times, first in Venice when Othello is called to the Senate and later in Cyprus when Cassio stabs Montano. This serves to produce extreme sexual tension; in the scenes shared by Othello and Desdemona, their language is highly charged with interrupted desire.

For Othello, thoughts of sexual infidelity are also at the heart of his total disintegration. After murdering Desdemona, the thoughts of her supposed promiscuity continue to eat at Othello. "Iago knows / That she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed," Othello says in his own defense.

The fear of cuckoldry runs deep in many of Shakespeare's plays; yet in most plays it is a matter of joke and play. In *Othello*, however, Shakespeare demonstrates how such fear, when attached with deeper issues of sexuality, can turn tragic.

Principal Topics

Perhaps the predominant impression created by *Othello* is that of the terrible destructiveness of jealousy. Othello's suspicions regarding Desdemona's fidelity provoke him to rage and violence, and the collapse of his pride and nobility is swift. The speed and intensity of these changes in the hero have led some critics to question whether Iago's insinuations actually cause Othello's doubts or merely unleash his pre-existing fears. Shakespeare's analysis of the nature of jealousy is not limited only to the character of Othello, however. Both Roderigo and Bianca are torn by jealousy: he desires Desdemona and she yearns for Cassio. More importantly, Iago displays numerous symptoms of Jealousy. His bitterness at being passed over for promotion and his suspicions that his wife has had an affair with Othello prompt his desire for revenge and give rise to his malicious schemes. Although various forms of jealousy are displayed by these characters, they are all based on unreasonable fears and lead to equally irrational behavior.

Another significant aspect of *Othello,* one related to the jealousy theme, is Shakespeare's manipulation of time in the play. For centuries, readers have noted that the play has a dual time scheme: "short" time, in which the action on stage is an unbroken sequence of events taking place over the course of a very few days; and "long" time, in which characters' statements and other indications suggest that a much greater period of time has passed. Thus, for example, a close reading reveals that all the events from his arrival on Cyprus to Othello's death take place in less than two days. This compression of time heightens the sense of reckless passion and the extreme rapidity of Othello's fall. By contrast,

Othello's references to Desdemona's "stolen hours of lust" (III. iii. 338) and to his sleeping well in ignorance of the supposed trysts between his wife and Cassio, as well

as Bianca's chastisement of Cassio for keeping "a week away. . . seven days and nights. . . eight score eight hours" (III. iv. 173-74), reflect a longer passage of time. This extension of time may reflect the irrational quality of Othello's and Bianca's jealousy, by which their fears cause them to exaggerate. At the same time, it makes their doubts seem more plausible: if days or weeks have passed, there has indeed been time for repeated trysts between Desdemona and Cassio. Furthermore, in "long time" Othello's decline appears less sudden and absurd, thereby preserving the audience's sympathy with the proud and noble Moor.

Shakespeare's presentation of a black man as the hero of this tragedy has provoked much comment. In Shakespeare's England, blacks were considered exotic rarities. They were commonly feared as dangerous, threatening figures, sexually unrestrained and primitive. On stage, blacks were often stereotyped as villains; Shakespeare himself had employed this figure in Aaron in *Titus Andronicus.* With his presentation of the proud, virtuous soldier Othello, Shakespeare defies many of these stereotypes. In fact, actors and critics for centuries insisted that this noble "Moor" was an Arab rather than an African. However, several characters display racist attitudes and clearly designate Othello as black; this discrimination is most notable in Iago, who not only expresses his own racism but plays on the prejudices of others in his schemes against Othello. Thus, while rejecting stereotypes in his depiction of Othello, Shakespeare also presents characters who attack the hero's color and use his race to isolate and destroy him.

Style

Irony

Harmon and Holman in *A Handbook to Literature* define irony as "a broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance." *Othello* is an essentially ironic play in that Shakespeare creates such a wide divide between what appears to be real to the characters in the play and what appears to be real to the audience in the theater. He does this through several devices. In the first place, Shakespeare offers Iago some of the best language in the playwright's whole body of work. Consequently, Iago appears to the other characters as well spoken, appealing, and attractive. His language makes him someone they trust. This is evident from the number of times a character (particularly Othello) refers to Iago as "honest." Iago does not look like the villain he is. In this, Shakespeare deviates from the traditions of the Middle Ages in which evil characters always exhibit some degree of the evil on the surface. Indeed, in medieval romance, characters are as they appear: an ugly character is inevitably evil. Shakespeare plays with both audience and character horizon of expectation here. The first gap, then, is between what the characters and audience expect from such an attractive and well-spoken character and what he really is.

Shakespeare also structures his scenes so that the play becomes increasingly ironic. Invariably, Iago speaks to other characters on stage, lying to them and manipulating them. Then, when the characters leave the stage, Iago reveals his inner thoughts to the audience. For example, in Act 1, Scene 3, Roderigo is about to lose heart in his attempts to win Desdemona. Iago engages in a long eloquent speech telling Roderigo to "put money in / thy purse." The speech is intended to manipulate Roderigo to continue to finance Iago's plans. As soon as he exits, Iago speaks aloud, although he is alone, in a soliloquy, revealing to the audience his feelings about Roderigo: "For I mine own gained knowledge should profane / If I would time expend with such a snipe / But for my sport and profit." Consequently, as the play continues, the audience knows increasingly more about Iago than do the other characters, intensifying the sense of irony in the play.

In addition, the stature of Shakespeare and of this play contribute to the ironic atmosphere. Virtually anyone watching or reading the play knows the basics of the story: man meets woman, man marries woman, villain lies, man gets jealous, man murders woman. Consequently, a naive viewing of the play is exceedingly rare. Thus, lines such as Brabantio's in Act 1, Scene 3, anticipate what is to come: "Look to her, Moor, if though hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee." In this foreshadowing, the irony is doubled. Not only does the audience already know that Othello will believe that this prophecy has come to pass, the audience already knows that Othello will be wrong in that belief. Through devices such as this one, the play becomes thicker and thicker with irony.

Chronology

One of the strangest features in the construction of this play is Shakespeare's ordering of time or chronology. There are two chronologies functioning simultaneously in the play. As Orgel notes, "Credit for discovering the double time scheme in *Othello* is always accorded to two ingenious Victorian critics, Nicholas Halpin and John Wilson, writing in *Blackwood's* in 1849; but they were merely the first critics to treat it systematically and consider it a good idea." Orgel goes on to summarize the problem. A careful reader notes that the opening act includes Othello and Desdemona's elopement and their discussion with the Venetian Senate. The audience is informed that Cassio and Othello will leave immediately the next day while Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona will make whatever plans they need to make and then make their way to Cyprus. Orgel points out that there is a chronological gap here between Act 1 and Act 2. Othello and Desdemona are reunited on Cyprus, but their trips have taken varying lengths of time. At the point they are reunited, the action resumes continuously, and only takes about thirty-three clock hours to go from Desdemona's arrival on Cyprus until her death.

At issue is, then, that the characters accused of infidelity with each other are never together at the same time and place for the infidelity to take place. Although Iago is able to convince Othello that Desdemona and Cassio have had an intimate affair, careful readers and viewers know that there has been no opportunity for such indiscretions. Likewise, when has Cassio had the opportunity to start his affair with Bianca? The "past" that the audience believes to have been constructed disappears on closer examination. One could argue that this is Shakespeare not paying attention to the details; however, it is just as likely, as Orgel argues, that Shakespeare plays with the time in order to illustrate how easy it is to "dupe" someone like Othello□or an audience, for that matter.

Historical Context

The Moorish Ambassador and the Banishment of Africans

One of the large questions facing Shakespeare scholars was that of Elizabethan attitudes toward Moors and others of different races. It is difficult to determine how many English people had actually even ever seen someone with a different color skin than their own. It is known that in 1596, Queen Elizabeth I ordered the banishment of ten "blackamoors" from her country. Shortly after this, English prisoners being held in Spain and Portugal were traded for "blackamoors." Thus, while there were evidently people of color in England at the time, it seems likely they were exceedingly rare.

In 1600, in an odd turn of events, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud Anoun, the Moorish ambassador of Elizabeth I, came to England with his entourage. In a series of letters between Elizabeth and the king of the Barbary Coast, the two colluded for ways the North Africans and the English could work together against the Spanish. After a year or so of this fruitless negotiation as well as the frustration of the Englishman whose house had been commandeered as an embassy, the ambassador and his entourage left England. In the same year of 1601, Elizabeth ordered further expulsion of "blackamoors." It seems likely that the two events were related; it also seems likely that Shakespeare would have been aware of the Moorish ambassador's presence in London. How much of his play was influenced by these events is debatable, however.

Trade and Exploration

The Elizabethan and Jacobean ages were times of great exploration and trade. Like the Venetians of *Othello*, Elizabethans were merchants and traders, eager to open new avenues for raw goods and materials. Sometimes these goods also included traffic in human beings; from 1562 through 1568, Sir John Hawkes and others began slave trading from Africa to the West Indies. This disturbing practice continued unabated throughout the sixteenth century, and by 1600, an estimated 900,000 Africans had been transported to the Americas as slaves.

In the 1580s, English gentlemen such as Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir Walter Raleigh financed colonies in Newfoundland and Roanoke Island in an attempt to make a permanent presence on the North American mainland. In 1607, the Jamestown colony was founded in Virginia.

In 1600, Elizabeth also chartered the British East India Company for trade in the Eastern Hemisphere in an attempt to expand the British spice trade. Ultimately, the English conquered the whole of the Indian subcontinent through their ongoing mercantile expansion.

Shakespeare's interest in these explorations shows up clearly in the character of Othello as well as in plays such as *The Tempest*. The fascination with new frontiers and with new landscapes is also evident in the popularity of travel literature. For example, *The History and Description of Africa*, by Leo Africanus was published in 1600. Thus, the seeds of empire and colonialism were sown during the sixteenth century; their harvest would be the globe-spanning British Empire of the nineteenth century.

Modern Connections

While there are a number of issues in *Othello* that twentieth-century audiences can connect with (crimes of passion are not new to today's society; just turn on the evening news), modern audiences often come away from *Othello* feeling uncomfortable with the racism they se in the treatment Othello receives from the other characters in the play. And just as we are well aware of the racism in our own society, it may be that Shakespeare was writing about the racism in his own society, not just the racism in the Venetian society depicted in the play. Shakespeare's *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus, buthe Venetian society's fear of cultural difference, manifested in its racism, may be viewed as an indicator of Elizabethan England's concern to maintain its cultural identity in the face of extensive exploration and initial colonization of the New World. The Turk and the Moor, two traditional symbols of cultural values different from those of Western culture, threaten Venetian society but may be read as the embodiments of Elizabethan England's fear that its cultural values will be lost through colonization and the intermingling of different cultural values. In the same way, the depiction of Desdemona as the flower of Venetian society, the ideal of virtuous fidelity, is perhaps less a description of Venetian gender expectations than it is a depiction of woman designed to allay English fears that miscegenation (procreation between a man and a woman of different races) would threaten the order and culture of English society.

On one level, adultery in *Othello* can be seen as an individual infidelity that destroys both Iago and Othello as jealousy is incited in Othello by the promptings of his only confidante, "honest Iago." On another level, adultery may be viewed by some as destructive to a whole society. As some people in Shakespeare's time may have felt, and as some people in modern times may feel, the society that fails to limit the sexual activity of women runs the risk of losing a paternal identification□we can never be certain who the father is in cases of infidelity□but also losing cultural identity in mis cegenation, Iago claims to hate Othello because Othello has passed him over for promotion and slept with his wife, Emilia, but a third motive for his behavior is, perhaps, one that he does not or cannot explicitly state: the motive to preserve the racial and cultural identity of his society. Or, perhaps, Iago is motivated by his own more personal feelings of racism (rather than his society's) which come to the fore as Iago deals with the fact that his superior is a black man.

When Iago's schemes have been revealed by Emilia, he is encouraged by the others to reveal his motives. This would certainly seem to be the perfect opportunity to reveal his anger at the loss of promo tion and his jealous suspicions of Othello. But instead, he says, "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.ii.303-04). In one sense, this exclamation continues his power and control to the end. But in another sense, perhaps he cannot articulate his motives because they are the deep and unidentified racist feelings of his society in general. He is a functionary agent of a state that has irreconcilable misgivings about the marriage of a black Moor to a white woman.

Iago is arguably the voice of racial intolerance: he cries outo Brabantio, "your daughter and the Moor are [now] making the beast with two backs" (I.i.116-17) and "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88-89). These are metaphors calculated to alarm Brabantio and arouse his most primal fears. Racism and woman's unchecked sexuality are themes that resonate throughout the play and ignite the most confusion and fear when they are conceptualized as the offspring of a union between Desdemona and Othello.

Thus, Iago makes his fiercest appeal when he cries out to Brabantio: "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans" (I.i. 111-13). Although Iago takes it upon himself to repair the grievous cultural rupture caused by the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, he is not alone. Desdemona's own father cannot believe his daughter would be one

To fall in love with what she fear'd to look!
It is a judgment maim'd, and most imperfect,
That will confess perfection so could err
Against al rules of nature....
(I.iii.98-101)

Brabantio believes that Othello has caused her to stray from such perfection by using magic potions and witchcraft to sway her affections.

Iago confesses that he, too, loves Desdemona (II.i.291). But it is a love constituted by neither lust nor an attraction to inner beauty. What he loves is the construction of Desdemona as the "perfect" woman, a perfection of sensibilities that must not be allowed to err. The audience knows full well that Desdemona has not been unfaithful to Othello. However, in the eyes of Iago and the others, she is guilty of a greater betrayal: her marriage to Othello. *Othello* brings us closer to an understanding of Greek tragedy than any other of Shakespeare's plays. Othello perhaps never fully realizes how he has erred. What he has blundered into in ignorance is swiftly avenged by powerful and unstoppable forces. What excites fear and pity in the modern reader is an identification with Othello's frailty and the suspicion that those unstoppable forces are produced by the fears and ignorance in society.

Critical Overview

Othello received considerable critical attention from the seventeenth century to the early 2000s. The earliest published critique of the play is that of Thomas Rymer in 1693. Rymer famously notes that the play serves as "a warning to all good Wives that they look well to their Linnen." Rymer seems particularly concerned that *Othello* does not function properly within the traditions of either comedy or tragedy. He writes, "There is in this Play some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit; some shew, and some *Mimickry* to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is, plainly, none other than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour."

Samuel Johnson, the influential eighteenth-century literary critic and essayist also weighed in on *Othello*. He worried slightly that the strength of Iago's character could evoke admiration from the viewer: "There is always danger lest wickedness conjoined with abilities should steal upon esteem, though it misses of approbation; but the character of Iago is so conducted, that he is from the first scene to the last hated and despised."

The pace of Shakespearean criticism picked up in the nineteenth century with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt, among others writing on *Othello*. Like Johnson, Hazlitt was also concerned with the character of Iago. He writes, "The general groundwork of the character of Iago as it appears to us is not absolute malignity but a want of moral principle, or an indifference to the real consequences of the actions which the meddling perversity of his disposition and love of immediate excitement lead him to commit."

In the early twentieth century, scholar A. C. Bradley wrote what many consider to be the most influential volume of Shakespearean criticism of the century, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth"* (1904). He focused on the feelings of the reader or audience of *Othello*, calling *Othello* "the most painfully exciting and the most terrible" of all Shakespeare's plays. He continues, "From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation."

Subsequent criticism of *Othello* focused on issues such as gender, race, and history. John Russell Brown in his book *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (2001) notes that *Othello* "may be judged the most innovative of Shakespeare's tragedies with regard to sexuality, gender, racial inheritance, and social relationships." Patricia Parker, writing in *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context*, focuses on the history of the word "dilation," a word Shakespeare sprinkles liberally through his text. Parker succeeds in linking the word to issues of hiding, discovery, opening, closing, and female anatomy in her exploration of *Othello*.

Race, likewise, is at the center of much contemporary criticism. Many take as their starting point G. K. Hunter's seminal essay, "*Othello* and Colour Prejudice," first

published in 1967 and reprinted in 1978. The essay was an early attempt to try to recover Elizabethan attitudes toward race.

Karen Newman directly confronted both issues of race and sexuality in a 1987 chapter in the book *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*. She writes, "[F]or the white male characters of the play, the black man's power resides in his sexual difference from a white male norm."

Jyotsna G. Singh in 1998, on the other hand, considered how one teaches texts of "racial dissonance," particularly in the American classroom. Singh focused on Thomas Jefferson's use of literature for moral lessons and asks, "Given his naturalized fear of miscegenation, what moral lesson, one wonders, would Thomas Jefferson derive from Othello?" In an article that also appeared in 1998, Ferial J. Ghazoul enlarges the issue of race by exploring the role of the play in the Arab world. In doing so, he argues, "*Othello* offers a special case of relations among literatures. It is a product of an acculturation involving a double circulation of the Other and a complex intertwining that combines the effect of an African Arab (i.e., Othello and his background) on European imagination and, in a reversed way, its impact on Arabs/Africans."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

[Bradley presents an overview of Othello, *in an attempt to discover what makes this the "most painfully exciting and the most terrible" of Shakespeare's tragedies. He highlights aspects of the play which reinforce its emotional impact: the rapid acceleration of the plot, the intensity of Othello's jealousy, the passive suffering of Desdemona, and the luck and skill involved in Iago's intrigue. According to Bradley, these features combine to produce feelings of "confinement" and "dark fatality" that suggest that the characters cannot escape their destinies. He then discusses three scenes Othello's striking of Desdemona in IV.* i, *Othello's treatment of Desdemona as a whore in IV. ii, and her death in V. ii.-and maintains that the emotional intensity of these scenes also greatly contributes to the unique, painful quality of* Othello. *He concludes by noting that the play is less symbolic and more limited in scope than Shakespeare's other tragedies, and as a result we are left with the "impression that in* Othello *we are not in contact with the whole of Shakespeare.* "].

What is the peculiarity of *Othello? What* is the distinctive impression that it leaves? Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, I would answer, not even exc *epting King Lear, Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation. Evil is displayed before him, not indeed with the profusion found in *King Lear,* but forming, as it were, the soul of a single character, and united with an intellectual superiority so great that he watches its advance fascinated and appalled. He sees it, in itself almost irresistible, aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the innocent mistakes of its victims. He seems to breathe an atmosphere as fateful as that of *King Lear,* but more confined and oppressive, the darkness not of night but of a close-shut murderous room. His imagination is excited to intense activity, but it is the activity of concentration rather than dilation. (pp. 176-77).

Othello is not only the most masterly of the tragedies in point of construction, but its method of construction is unusual. And this method, by which the conflict begins late, and advances without appreciable pause and with accelerating speed to the catastrophe, is a main cause of the painful tension just described. To this may be added that, after the conflict has begun, there is very little relief by way of the ridiculous. Henceforward at any rate Iago's humour never raises a smile. The clown is a poor one; we hardly attend to him and quickly forget him; I believe most readers of Shakespeare. if asked whether there is a clown in *Othello,* would answer No.

In the second place, there is no subject more exciting than sexual jealousy rising to the pitch of passion; and there can hardly be any spectacle at once so engrossing and so painful as that of a great nature suffering the torment of this passion, and driven by it to a crime which is also a hideous blunder. Such a passion as ambition, however terrible its results, is not itself ignoble; if we separate it in thought from the conditions which make it guilty, it does not appear despicable; it is not a kind of suffering, its nature is active; and therefore we can watch its course without shrinking. But jealousy, and

especially sexual jealousy, brings with it a sense of shame and humiliation. For this reason it is generally hidden; if we perceive it we ourselves are ashamed and turn our eyes away; and when it is not hidden it commonly stirs contempt as well as pity. Nor is this all. Such jealousy as Othello's converts human nature into chaos, and liberates the beast in man; and it does this in relation to one of the most intense and also the most ideal of human feelings. What spectacle can be more painful than that of this feeling turned into a tortured mixture of longing and loathing, the 'golden purity' of passion split by poison into fragments, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness in naked grossness, and he writhing before it but powerless to deny it entrance, gasping inarticulate images of pollution, and finding relief only in a bestial thirst for blood? This is what we have to witness in one who was indeed 'great of heart' [V. ii. 361] and no less pure and tender than he was great. And this, with what it leads to, the blow to Desdemona, and the scene where she is treated as the inmate of a brothel, a scene far more painful than the murder scene, is another cause of the special effect of this tragedy.

The mere mention of these scenes will remind us painfully of a third cause; and perhaps it is the most potent of all. I mean the suffering of Desdemona. This is, unless I mistake, the most nearly intolerable spectacle that Shakespeare offers us. For one thing, it is *mere* suffering; and, *ceteris paribus* [other things being equal], that is much worse to witness than suffering that issues in action. Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. And the chief reason of her helplessness only makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. I would not challenge Mr. [Algernon Charles] Swinburne's statement [in his *Study of Shakespeare]* that we *pity* Othello even more than Desdemona; but we watch Desdemona with more unmitigated distress. We are never wholly uninfluenced by the feeling that Othello is a man contending with another man; but Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.

Turning from the hero and heroine to the third principal character, we observe (what has often been pointed out) that the action and catastrophe of *Othello* depend largely on intrigue. We must not say more than this. We must not call the playa tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character. Iago's plot is Iago's character in action; and it is built on his knowledge of Othello's character, and could not otherwise have succeeded. Still it remains true that an elaborate plot was necessary to elicit the catastrophe; for Othello was no Leontes [in *The Winters Tale*] *,* and his was the last nature to engender such jealousy from itself. Accordingly Iago's intrigue occupies a position in the drama for which no parallel can be found in the other tragedies; the only approach, and that a distant one, being the intrigue of Edmund in the secondary plot of *King Lear.* Now in any novel or play, even if the persons rouse little interest and are never in serious danger, a skilfully worked intrigue will excite eager attention and suspense. And where, as in *Othello,* the persons inspire the keenest sympathy and antipathy, and life and death depend on the intrigue, it becomes the source of a tension in which pain almost overpowers pleasure. Nowhere else in Shakespeare do we hold our breath in such anxiety and for so long a time as in the later Acts of *Othello.*

One result of the prominence of the element of intrigue is that *Othello* is less unlike a story of private life than any other of the great tragedies. And this impression is strengthened in further ways. In the other great tragedies the action is placed in a distant period, so that its general significance is perceived through a thin veil which separates the persons from ourselves and our own world. But *Othello* is a drama of modem life; when it first appeared it was a drama almost of contemporary life, for the date of the Turkish attack on Cyprus is 1570. The characters come close to us, and the application of the drama to ourselves (if the phrase maybe pardoned) is more immediate than it can be in *Hamlet* or *Lear.* Besides this, their fortunes affect us as those of private individuals more than is possible in any of the later tragedies with the exception of *Timon.* I have not forgotten the Senate, nor Othello's position, nor his service to the State; but his deed and his death have not that influence on the interests of a nation or an empire which serves to idealise, and to remove far from our own sphere, the stories of Hamlet and Macbeth, of Coriolanus and Antony. Indeed he is already superseded at Cyprus when his fate is consummated, and as we leave him no vision rises on us, as in other tragedies, of peace descending on a distracted land.

The peculiarities so far considered combine with others to produce those feelings of oppression, of confinement to a comparatively narrow world, and of dark fatality, which haunt us in reading *Othello.*

In *Macbeth* the fate which works itself out alike in the external conflict and in the hero's soul, is obviously hostile to evil; and the imagination is dilated both by the consciousness of its presence and by the appearance of supernatural agencies. These. . . produce in *Hamlet* a somewhat similar effect, which is increased by the hero's acceptance of the accidents as a providential shaping of his end. *King Lear* is undoubtedly the tragedy which comes nearest to *Othello* in the impression of darkness and fatefulness, and in the absence of direct indications of any guiding power. But in *King Lear.* . . the conflict assumes proportions so vast that the imagination seems, as in [John Milton's] *Paradise Lost,* to traverse spaces wider than the earth. In reading *Othello* the mind is not thus distended. It is more bound down to the spectacle of noble beings caught in toils from which there is no escape; while the prominence of the intrigue diminishes the sense of the dependence of the catastrophe on character, and the part played by accident in this catastrophe accentuates the feeling of fate. This influence of accident is keenly felt in *King Lear* only once, and at the very end of the play. In *Othello,* after the temptation has begun, it is incessant and terrible. The skill of Iago was extraordinary, but so was his good fortune. Again and again a chance word from Desdemona, a chance meeting of Othello and Cassio, a question which starts to our lips and which anyone but Othello would have asked, would have destroyed Iago's plot and ended his life. In their stead, Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the moment most favourable to him, Cassio blunders into the presence of Othello only to find him in a swoon, Bianca arrives precisely when she is wanted to complete Othello's deception and incense his anger into fury. All this and much more seems to us quite natural, so potent is the art of the dramatist; but it confounds us with a feeling, such as we experience in [Sophocles'] *Oedipus Tyrannus,* that for these star-crossed mortals. . . there is no escape from fate, and even with a feeling, absent from that play, that fate has taken sides with villainy. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Othello* should affect us

as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* never do, and as *King Lear* does only in slighter measure. On the contrary, it is marvellous that, before the tragedy is over, Shakespeare should have succeeded in toning down this impression into harmony with others more solemn and serene.

But has he wholly succeeded? Or is there a justification for the fact -a fact it certainly is- that some readers, while acknowledging, of course, the immense power of *Othello,* and even admitting that it is dramatically perhaps Shakespeare's greatest triumph, still regard it with a certain distaste, or, at any rate. hardly allow it a place in their minds beside *Hamlet, King Lear* and *Macbeth?* (pp. 17783).

To some readers, . . . parts of *Othello* appear shocking or even horrible. They think-if I may formulate their objection-that in these parts Shakespeare has sinned against the canons of art, by representing on the stage a violence or brutality the effect of which is unnecessarily painful and rather sensational than tragic. The passages which thus give offence are probably those already referred to,-that where Othello strikes Desdemona [IV. i. 240], that where he affects to treat her as an inmate of a house of ill-fame [IV. ii. 24-94], and finally the scene of her death.

The issues thus raised ought not to be ignored or impatiently dismissed, but they cannot be decided, it seems to me, by argument. All we can profitably do is to consider narrowly our experience, and to ask ourselves this question: If we feel these objections, do we feel them when we are reading the play with all our force, or only when we are reading it in a half-hearted manner? For, however matters may stand in the former case, in the latter case evidently the fault is ours and not Shakespeare's. And if we try the question thus, I believe we shall find that on the whole the fault is ours. The first, and least important, of the three passages-that of the blow-seems to me the most doubtful. I confess that, do what I will, I cannot reconcile myself with it. It seems certain that the blow is by no means a tap on the shoulder with a roll of paper, as some actors, feeling the repulsiveness of the passage, have made it. It must occur, too, on the open stage. And there is not, I think, a sufficiently overwhelming tragic feeling in the passage to make it bearable. But in the other two scenes the case is different. There, it seems to me, if we fully imagine the inward tragedy in the souls of the persons as we read. the more obvious and almost physical sensations of pain or horror do not appear in their own likeness, and only *serve* to intensify the tragic feelings in which they are absorbed. Whether this would be so in the murder-scene if Desdemona had to be imagined as dragged about the open stage (as in some modem performances) may be doubtful; but there is absolutely no warrant in the text for imagining this, and it is also quite clear that the bed where she is stifled was within the curtains, and so, presumably, in part concealed.

Here, then, *Othello* does not appear to be. unless perhaps at one point, open to criticism, though it has more passages than the other three tragedies where, if imagination is not fully exerted, it is shocked or else sensationally excited. If nevertheless we feel it to occupy a place in our minds a little lower than the other three (and I believe this feeling, though not general, is not rare), the reason lies not here but in another characteristic, to which I have already referred,-the comparative confinement

of the imaginative atmosphere. *Othello* has not equally with the other three the power of dilating the imagination by vague suggestions of huge universal powers working in the world of individual fate and passion. It is, in a sense, less 'symbolic.' We seem to be aware in it of a certain limitation, a partial suppression of that element in Shakespeare's mind which unites him with the mystical poets and with the great musicians and philosophers. In one or two of his plays, notably in *Troilus and Cressida,* we are almost painfully conscious of this suppression; we feel an intense intellectual activity, but at the same time a certain coldness and hardness, as though some power in his soul, at once the highest and the sweetest, were for a time in abeyance. In other plays, notably in the *Tempest,* we are constantly aware of the presence of this power; and in such cases we seem to be peculiarly near to Shakespeare himself. Now this is so in *Hamlet* and *King Lear,* and. in a slighter degree, in *Macbeth;* but it is much less so in *Othello.* I do not mean that in *Othello* the suppression is marked, or that, as in *Troilus and Cressida,* it strikes us as due to some unpleasant mood; it seems rather to follow simply from the design of a play on a contemporary and wholly mundane subject. Still it makes a difference of the kind I have attempted to indicate, and it leaves an impression that in *Othello* we are not in contact with the whole of Shakespeare. And it is perhaps significant in this respect that the hero himself strikes us as having, probably, less of the poet's personality in him than many characters far inferior both as dramatic creations and as men. (pp. 183-86)

A. C. *Bradley, "Othello," in his* Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet. Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, *second edition, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1905, pp. 175-206.*

Critical Essay #2

[Godfrey examines the portrayal of jealousy in Othello, *determining that it is the cause of evil in the play. The critic exposes the jealousy presented by several characters: Othello, Roderigo, Bianca, and Iago. He compares their irrational behavior to that of Leontes, the jealous husband of Hermoine in* The Winter's Tale *and asserts that each displays a form of sexual jealousy. Iago, however, exhibits "an all-encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations. "As a result, envious hatred takes possession of his soul, motivates his actions, and turns him into "the most completely villainous character in all literature. "*].

To proclaim Shakespeare's *Othello* as a tragedy of jealousy is but to echo the opinion of every critic who ever wrote about it. The jealousy not only of Othello. but of such lesser figures as Roderigo and even Bianca is surely self-evident enough to be taken for granted. And yet, though the jealousy of Othello in particular is invariably mentioned and assumed, it cannot be said that any over-riding importance has on the whole been attributed to it. While Othello may deliver judgement on himself as one,

not easily jealous, but being
wrought, perplex'd in the extreme,
[V. ii. 345-46]

critical opinion has hardly gone beyond admitting that jealousy itself has been a contributing factor, of far less importance, for example, than the diabolical "evidence" manufactured by Iago. Until we are left with the conclusion, or at least implication, that had Othello *not* been jealous, the tragedy would still have occurred. This taking for granted or even belittling of the factor of jealousy in *Othello,* is the more surprising in that Shakespeare through Iago and Emilia has taken pains to identify for our benefit the special nature of jealousy, and to call particular attention to the element of irrationality that accompanies it. Jealousy, warns Iago, in order to awaken it in Othello,

. . . is the green-ey'd monster, which doth
mock
That meat it feeds on.
[III. iii. 166-67]

And the same essence of irrationality is later confirmed by Emilia when, in response to Desdemona's pathetically rational "Alas the day! I never gave him cause" [Ill. iv. 158], she bluntly retorts:

But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster,
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
[III. iv. 159-62]

The coincidence of view is remarkable, and presumably intentional, and clearly reflects more than the individual judgement of Emilia or Iago. Moreover the truth of the judgement is demonstrated again and again throughout the play wherever jealousy is manifest. The jealous person, whether Othello, Roderigo, Bianca or, as we shall attempt to show, Iago himself, is revealed as one who, from the moment that jealousy strikes. divorces himself or herself from rationality. Jealousy, once awakened, becomes self-perpetuating, self-intensifying, and where no justifying evidence for it exists, the jealous person under the impulse of an extraordinary perversity will continue to manufacture it, inventing causes, converting airy trifles into "confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ," [III.iii.32324]. Any attempt. in other words, to interpret jealousy rationally, to look for logic in the mental processes of a jealous person, will be unavailing. For we will be dealing invariably and in at least some measure with a monster, a fonn of possession, an insanity. (pp. 207-08)

[In his *Shakespearean Tragedy,* A C. Bradley argues] that until Iago leaves him alone to the insinuating thoughts he has planted in him [III. iii. 257] Othello is not jealous at all. However, Othello's immediately ensuing soliloquy clearly indicates how deeply his faith in Desdemona has already been undermined, and though at the sight of her he rallies.

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,
I'll not believe it,
[III. iii. 278-79]

recovery is momentary, and when he reappears only minutes later, Iago does not need his "Ha, ha, false to me, to me" [III.iii.333], to recognize the symptoms of a consuming jealousy that all the drowsy syrups of the world can never alleviate. Othello may appear to be resisting insinuation, to recover from the shock of Iago's "Ha, ha, I like not that" [III.iii.35], and the sight of Cassio stealing away "so guilty-like" [III. iii. 39]. but it is soon evident enough that he has not recovered, that the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity has already invaded his mind. And. . . as with Leontes [in *The Winter's Tale],* the passage from initial doubt to the madness of absolute certainty, is incredibly rapid. The action of the whole "Temptation Scene" [III. iii], as it is sometimes called, is continuous, perhaps some twenty-five minutes of stage time, and by the end of it Othello is a man utterly possessed, calling out for blood and vengeance, authorizing Iago to murder Cassio, and resolving "In the due reverence of a sacred vow" [III.iii.461], himself to do the same for Desdemona:

Damn her, lewd minx: O, damn her!
Come, go with me apart, I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of
death.
For the fair devil.
[III. iii. 476-79]

Already present meanwhile in the initial reactions of Othello is of course that most encompassing of all the characteristics of the jealous man. a consuming irrationality. The presence of Iago with his diabolical insinuations tends somewhat to mask the

insanity of Othello. to present him as a man reacting logically in the face of accumulating evidence, indeed of proof. By the end of the Temptation Scene. however, there is still no more than the slenderest of evidence, a handkerchief that Iago *may* have seen Cassio wipe his beard with, and Cassio's alleged, and, as Iago himself admits, inconclusive dream. Leontes. only after a considerable interval of time and after sending to the Oracle for confirmation puts Hermione on trial for her life. Othello, however, with nothing but Iago,s word to go on, and without even seeking to cOnfront either Desdemona or Cassio, passes sentence of death. Later, it is true, circumstantial evidences multiply: Desdemona's tactless pleading for Cassio, Iago's statement of Cassio's confession, Bianca's returning of the handkerchief to Cassio before Othello's eyes; but it is strangely apparent that Othello's conviction of Des demon a's guilt is *confirmed* rather than established by such "evidences". In the exchanges between Iago and Othello at the beginning of Act IV it is revealed that the handkerchief had become so incidental to his conviction that he had actually forgotten it [IV. i. 10-22]. In the same way, when at length confrontation comes between himself and Emilia and subsequently with Desdemona, it is apparent that no rational enquiry, no seeking out of evidence is to be undertaken. Emilia's indignant denials are met with:

She says enough, yet she's a simple bawd
That cannot say as much.
[IV. ii. 20-1]

And Desdemona, assigned the horrible role of a whore in a brothel, is not to be rationally interrogated but rhetorically denounced, on the assumption. of which there is not the slightest sign, that she is fully aware of her guilt. Perhaps in no other scene is the impregnable insanity of Othello so fully evident.

Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidences are certainly there and must be allowed to provide in some measure a logical justification for Othello's "case" against Desdemona. Against that case however must always be set one unanswerable factor the effect of which is to demolish it utterly, the factor of time. With Desdemona dead, Othello can proclaim calmly and positively,

'Tis pitiful, but yet Iago knows
That she with Cassio hath the act of
shame
A thousand times committed,
[V. ii. 210-12]

Whereas it is obvious to anyone not wholly bereft of reason that the time for one single act of infidelity, let alone a rhetorical thousand, has simply not existed. "What place, what time, what form, what likelihood?" [IV. ii. 138] demands the practical Emilia, and of course the questions are unanswerable.

This very problem of the time factor in *Othello* has been greatly debated. Since Othello and Desdemona left Venice immediately after their marriage, and since Cassio and Desdemona were on different ships, and since but one night had passed on Cyprus, a

night that Othello and Desdemona had spent together, when indeed could the thousand adulteries have occurred? And how could the sheer impossibility of Desdemona's multiple infidelities never have presented itself to Othello's mind? Various familiar explanations have been attempted: that the text as it has come down to us is incomplete and that the indication of an interval of time after the arrival on Cyprus has been lost: that Shakespeare in effect is playing a trick on his audience on the valid assumption that they will not notice the time discrepancy anyway: that Shakespeare deliberately adopted a double time scheme, involving a background of "long time" against a foreground of "short time", the latter to accommodate the inconsistencies in Iago's plot against Othello, and his need to bring it to a speedy conclusion.

The respective merits of these various explanations have been copiously debated. Common to all of them is the reluctance of critics to assume that Iago, a supremely clever man, would ever have allowed his whole plot to depend on Othello's unlikely failure to realise the obvious, namely that the infidelities of which Desdemona stands accused could not have happened because there had been no time for them. Iago, it is argued, would never have taken such a risk; and so we, as well as Othello, are being required to assume that in some way or other time for a thousand shameful acts had in fact existed. I would suggest, however, that we cannot so assume, and are indeed not being asked to do so. For Iago knew, and we should realise, that by the time he felt it safe to proceed from hints and insinuations to firm accusations of infidelity, Othello would no longer be himself. but a quite different person possessed by the eclipsing madness of jealousy. 'Certainly we must agree that there are two time schemes in *Othello,* a long and a short, but equally each must be seen to operate within its own distinct world: on the one hand the long time world of everyday normality, on the other a short time, indeed a timeless universe, in which jealousy, divorced from reality, through distortion, falsification and sheer invention creates a nightmare reality of its own.

It may still be argued, of course that the degree of Othello's irrationality manifest in his blindness to the time factor, is excessive, unrealistic, and that Iago for all his insight and daring would not have taken so great a risk. We must assume however that Shakespeare as always, knew what he was doing and presenting, and that art, the art of the theatre in particular, must concern itself with the archetypal, the universal, with that which is necessarily larger, more extreme than in life. And surely we must take into account that elsewhere in *Othello,* in the case of Bianca, the refusal of the jealous person to be bound by the rationality of time is once again drawn to our attention. Bianca, whose jealousy over Cassio motivates her every word and action, reproaches him on her first appearance with an alleged seven days and nights of neglect:

What, keep a week away? seven days and
nights?
Eightscore eight hours, and lovers' absent
hours,
More tedious than the dial, eightscore
times?
[III. iv. 173-75]

The time here could hardly be more specifically stated, and yet, if we do not postulate the impossibility of an interval of almost a week between scenes three and four of Act III, the alleged dura tion of Cassio's neglect cannot be accepted. Act II begins with Cassio's arrival on Cyprus, and from this point to the moment of his encounter with Bianca the action on stage is continuous, and no more than a night and two days have elapsed before us. Once again it would seem that the irrationality of jealousy extending even into the reckoning of time is being demonstrated.

No less irrational, and no less typical of extreme jealousy, is the determination of Othello, as of Leontes, to destroy love through the anodyne of a deliberate cultivation of hatred. Here we must recognize that Othello, newly married, overwhelmed with relief to find Desdemona safe on Cyprus, has attained to an intensity of love deeper than that of Leontes for Hermione:

O my soul's joy,
. . . If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy. for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute,
That not another comfort, like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
[II. i. 184, 189-93]

Without hesitation, when jealousy strikes, Leontes achieves the transition from love to hate, but for Othello the process will be long drawn out, intermittent, subject to agonizing oscillations. The climax comes following the scene of final "proof", when Bianca has thrown the incriminating handkerchief back at Cassio, before Othello's eyes. The proof is not needed, for Othello's assumption of Desdemona's guilt has long been absolute, unassailable. On the other hand, love, or some remnant of it, still remains, and the moment has come, as Iago realises, for its final obliteration. Again and again, as Othello swings away in the dying agonies of love, Iago savagely recalls him:

Othello: ... a fine woman, a fair
woman, a sweet woman!
Iago: Nay, you must forget.
Othello: And let her rot, and perish, and
be damned to-night, for she shall not live; no, my heart is turn'd to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand: 0, the world
hath not a sweeter creature, she might lie by an emperor's side,
and command him tasks.
Iago: Nay, that's not your way.
Othello: Hang her, I do but say what she
is: so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, 0, she will sing the savageness out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and invention!
Iago: She's the worse for all this.
[IV. i. 178-91]

Iago: the very voice of jealousy itself, would appear to succeed. Desdemona is smothered in the bed she had contaminated, and hatred's consummation is achieved. Yet it could be argued in Othello's case, in contrast to that of Leontes, that love is never wholly obliterated. The insane grip of jealousy is such that Othello can no longer doubt his wife's guilt, but he can act against it finally only by assuming the mask of impersonal justice:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more
men.
[V. ii. 6]

And we may even wonder whether Othello. still agonizing over the beauty he must destroy, could ever have sustained his assumed and precarious role of just executioner, had not Desdemona's bewilderment and terror, interpreted as prevarication, provoked him to one last paroxysm of rage and hatred.

For a while, beyond the point it had set itself to achieve, jealousy continues to sustain its victim. But the instrument has served its deadly purpose, and can be discarded. As suddenly and totally as Leontes, Othello is abandoned to the hideous and incredulous realisation of what he has done. One moment of explanation, of truth, from Emilia is now enough. The handkerchief

She gave it Cassio? no, alas, I found it,
And did give't my husband.
[V. ii. 230-31]

Othello, in the full vortex of jealousy, had already heard the truth from Emilia and facilely rejected it, "She's but a simple bawd that could not say as much" [IV. ii. 20-1], but now the vortex is past, the possession ending and truth, with the completeness and instantaneousness that is jealousy's final characteristic, once more assumes control.

While Othello and Leontes, and also Bianca, present jealousy in its most characteristic form, it must be recognized that other forms and manifestations of this most devastating of human emotions are possible. At least two such variations on the play's basic theme of jealousy are to be found in *Othello.* the first of them presented by Roderigo. That Roderigo is jealous first of Othello and then of Cassia cannot be doubted, and Iago, before using him against Cassio, is careful to heighten in him the motivation of jealousy:

Didst thou not see her paddle with the
palm of
his hand? . . Lechery,
by this hand: an index and prologue
to the history of lust and foul thoughts: they met so near with their lips, that their breaths embrac'd together.
[II. i. 253-54, 257-60]

Thus primed and sustained by Iago, Roderigo overcomes his native timidity to the point of provoking the drunken Cassio on guard duty, and later of undertaking his murder.

Only the irrationality of a jealous man, we might infer, could explain behaviour so savagely abnormal, could account also for that ludicrous readiness to go on accepting Iago's word, all evidence to the contrary, that Desdemona might still be his. It _could perhaps be objected that Roderigo is not so much jealous as simply and deeply in love, as witnessed in particular by his uncritical idealising attitude towards Desdemona, his impregnable devotion. Surely, if jealous, he would have availed himself of the jealous man's most characteristic anodyne, a saving hatred. Need we in fact go any further than Iago in his assessment of Roderigo as one turned wrong side out by love? The answer must undoubtedly be that whatever Roderigo's love may have been at the outset, it has, thanks chiefly to the machinations of Iago, deteriorated, taken on elements of the irrational and ultimately of the diabolical; and to this deterioration jealousy has in large measure contributed. Roderigo, clutching at the straws of hope reached out to him by Iago, to the extent of selling all his land and following the Cyprus wars, has clearly ceased to act and react sanely. And when, quite definitely now under the compulsion of jealousy, he nerves himself to secure Cassio's dismissal and eventually to attempt his murder, he has reached a lower moral level than Othello, who can at least persuade himself that he is the instrument of justice. To the extent, then, of his irrationality and ultimate diabolism Roderigo is at one in jealousy with an Othello or a Leontes. On the other hand hisjealousy, unlike theirs, proceeds from a love that has never been requited, and the form of his madness is to persist in hope of an ultimate possession. For him the cuckold's simple anodyne of hatred and vengeance is not available.

The second and final variation on the play's central theme of jealousy is to be found, it is suggested, in Iago. The traditional association of jealousy with sexual passion or possessiveness, must not obscure the fact that other kinds of jealousy, no less virulent in operation, are to be found; although sexual jealousy, his suspicion of the involvement of both Othello and Cassio with his wife, is also a factor in Iago's motivation. Far more, however, than suspicion over a wife he clearly does not love or value very highly, are obviously at work in Iago and must be reckoned with if his extraordinary and diabolical behaviour is to be understood. The problem of Iago's motivation is certainly a major one, no less baffling than the problem of Hamlet's delay. A whole spectrum of explanations has accordingly been attempted, ranging from the famous "motiveless malignity" of [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, to simplistic assertions that Iago's motives, sexual jealousy and envy at Cassio's appointment, are perfectly adequate to explain him [see his *Shakespearean Criticism,* edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor]. That Iago is indeed a jealous and envious man has of course been generally recognized; such recognition, however, can certainly be taken further, in particular in terms of those special characteristics of jealousy we have been attempting to establish.

That certain recent events have precipitated a state of jealousy in Iago is revealed to us in the first act of the play; he is jealous of Cassio over the lieutenancy which he considered his due, jealous of Othello whom he suspects of having had a liason with his wife. We can assume that the effect of these experiences, and especially the former, has been devastating, to the point of working a profound and sudden change in Iago, a virtual metamorphosis. That he is indeed villainous becomes clear to us by the end of the first act, but we can hardly believe that he has always been so, and that his universal reputation for honesty has been based over a long period of time on

calculation and bluff. That a great change has been involved is further indicated to us by the particular way in which Iago is made to announce his age: "I ha' look'd upon the world for four times seven years" [I. iii. 311-l2]-a statement that would reveal. at all events to a Shakespearean audience, that here is a man arrived at one of the great seven year climacterics [critical stages], a time especially liable to crisis and change. A far reaching change, precipitated in particular by Cassio's appointment and to a lesser extent by the apparently malicious evidence presented to him of an affair between Othello and Emilia, can certainly be postulated; and thus a new Iago confronts us, jealous, embittered, vengeful, viciously repudiating the honesty and loyalty that have led him nowhere.

It is clear, however, that the jealousy by which Iago stands possessed, as totally as an Othello or a Leontes, is of a special. a more comprehensive kind. It contains elements of sexual provocation, but it is directed also and even more powerfully against all those whose lives continue to be motivated, as his had once been, by the conventions of love, trust, honesty and goodness, and who continue on such a basis to be happy and successful, where he himself has suffered and failed. Upon them he will proceed to, avenge himself, creating out of their now hated and envied love and goodness "the net that shall enmesh 'em all" [II. iii. 362].

Once the fact and comprehensive nature of Iago's jealousy has been established, all his subsequent thoughts and acts become, by reason of their very strangeness and irrationality, intelligible. Many attempts, for example, have been made to explain in rational terms the curious "motive hunting" of Iago displayed in his first two soliloquies. Here he conjures up, or so it would appear, motive after motive for proceeding in his plot against Cassio and Othello: desire to get Cassio's place, suspicion of his wife's infidelity first with Othello and then with Cassio, his own love for Desdemona, Yet there is an element of strangeness in his way of formulating his motives, as though the motive itself rather than the degree of his belief in it were at issue. What could be stranger, for example, than the irrational combination of belief and disbelief contained in his statement on the affair between Emilia and Othello:

I know not if't be true. . .
Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, Will do, as if for surety.
[I. iii. 388-90]

Also. it is hard for us to suppose that Iago really did suspect Cassio with his "nightcap," or that he was really himself in love with Desdemona. And no less strange is the fact that Iago, having formulated all his motives and proceeded into action, presumably on the strength of them, never once refers to any of them again. The irrational element in the motive hunting is certainly evident, and this, rather than the validity of the motives themselves, is what must concern us. Iago, enumerating his motives and persuading himself to believe them, only to demonstrate their irrelevance by forgetting them later. is certainly not thinking as a rational man; on the other hand, and ironically, he is reacting entirely in accordance with his own remarkable understanding of the nature of jealousy. Jealousy, as he later informs Othello, is that green-eyed monster, mocking the food it feeds on. And where there is no such food, what must the jealous man do but persuade

himself of its existence, endowing trifles light as air, if need be, with all the certainty of holy writ. The truth or otherwise of the reasons Iago dredges up to justify his jealous hatred of Cassio and Othello is quite irrelevant; they are the food his jealousy needs and that his intellect must provide.

Equally irrational, we must inevitably conclude, is the totality of Iago's behaviour, the way in which, with incredible persistence and ingenuity, he carries out his lunatic plot against Cassio and Othello. By way of rationalization, it is sometimes suggested that Iago starting out with no more than a vague spiteful desire to create mischief, underestimates the passions he is to awaken, and so becomes the unwilling victim of his own machinations. Certainly he is soon caught up in his own web, committed to the lies he has disseminated, unable to retreat; on the other hand he betrays no sign of ever wanting to do so, and views his own successes first against Cassio and then Othello with uninhibited satisfaction. Never once does the intrinsic *insanity* of what he is doing break through to him, the realisation, for example, that *all* the witnesses against him, Cassio, Desdemona. Roderigo, Emilia, Bianca, must somehow be killed if he himself is not sooner or later to be confronted with the awakened wrath of Othello. The truly astounding cleverness of Iago must not be allowed to blind us to the absolute stupidity, indeed the madness, of what he is attempting to do.

Iago, we must conclude, even more so than a Leontes or an Othello, confronts us as the very archetype of the jealous man. For here is an all encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations. In this connection it is pertinent, by way of conclusion, to consider jealousy as in fact the antithesis of love, as containing within itself the very essence of evil. Iago in the list of actors in the Folio [the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays] is described as a villain, and in the first act of the play he fully reveals himself as such. However, we have suggested that by reason of his universal reputation for honesty he could not always have been evil but had become so quite suddenly under the impact of jealousy. As a result a consuming, envious hatred of the goodness and love in those who had, as he saw it, betrayed him, takes possession of his soul. Evidences of Iago's hatred of love are everywhere in the play, as for example in his bitter reaction to the outpouring of love between Othello and Desdemona at the moment of their reunion on Cyprus:

O, you are well tun'd now,
But I'll set down the pegs that make this
music,
As honest as I am.
[II. i. 199-201]

Or again there is the extremely revealing moment when he recognizes in Cassio the continuation of all those qualities that he himself has irrevocably lost:

If Cassio do remain,
He has a daily beauty in his life,
That makes me ugly.
[V. i. 18-20]

That Iago is a villain, perhaps the most completely villainous character in all literature, is only too evident, and that his villainy originates in, is indeed synonymous with jealousy must also be recognized. By definition the supremely evil man appears as one in whom hatred of love and goodness is carried to the point of containing within itself the desire to reach out and destroy the loving and the good. Not all men of course, fortunately enough, surrender to jealousy with the absoluteness of an Iago, but the implication of *Othello* is that there are such men bearing latent within themselves as a kind of fate a terrible capacity for evil. "God's above all", declares Cassio in a moment of drunken insight; "and there be souls that must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved". To which Iago with tragic irony replies. "It is true, good Lieutenant" [II. iii. 103-05].

That Iago is indeed a damned soul, one predestined by his own intrinsic nature to eventual damnation, is made manifest to us in a number of ways, most frequently by what we might call his conscious diabolism. Iago, in reaction against his former honesty which has failed and betrayed him, dedicates himself in a spirit of jealous revenge to honesty's opposite, evil. Consciously and deliberately he allies himself with the powers of darkness, invoking Hell and night in his first soliloquy and later, after mocking his own "honesty" in advising Cassio to seek Desdemona's help, coming right into the open with devastating explicitness:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will their blackest sins put
on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly
shows,
As I do now.
[II. iii. 350-53]

A Shakespearean, witchcraft-conscious audience would have no difficulty in accepting such diabolism as fact, in recognizing Iago as one possessed, glorying in his identification with evil spiritual powers. For them, as he must be for us if we are to understand him, Iago is indeed a "demi-devil", one who can, rhetorically at least, be thought of as possessing the cloven hoof. Equally indicative of diabolism, of the way in which Iago serves and is in turn assisted by the powers of evil, is the disturbing and consistent "run of luck" that he is made to enjoy in carrying out his plans. He causes Roderigo to provoke Cassio on guard, but could not foresee that Cassio in his rage would attack and severely wound Montano. He could advise Cassio to seek the intercession of Desdemona, but could not anticipate her naive importunity or the luckless moments when she should manifest it. Nor could he anticipate that the fatal handkerchief would come into his hands, or that Bianca in a jealous fit would throw it back at Cassio while Othello watched. All this would be sensed in some measure by Shakespeare's audience as indicating the involvement of evil beings, ascendant for the moment, and possessed with a jealous hatred of love and goodness just as their instrument, Iago, is himself possessed.

The close association between evil and jealousy is a dominant issue in *Othello,* almost what the whole play is about: until we are left with the conclusion that there can scarcely

be an evil act for which envy or jealousy is not in some degree or wholly responsible. The outcome for love and goodness and innocence in *Othello* is almost unendurably tragic: yet tragedy. as always in Shakespeare, is" never allowed the final word. Iago the destroyer is by himself destroyed. Jealousy, self-harming, irrational, demonstrates once again the intrinsic instability of evil, the ultimate impotence of the jealous gods. (pp. 210-19)

D. R. Godfrey, "Shakespeare and the Green-Eyed Monster," in Neophilologus, *Vol. LVI, No.2, April,* 1972, *pp. 207-20.*

Critical Essay #3

[Cowhig provides background on blacks in England during Shakespeare's time, stressing the use of racial stereotypes in the dramas of the period. Observing that black people were typically depicted as stock villains, she suggests that Shakespeare's presentation of the noble, dignified Othello as the hero of a tragedy must have been startling to Elizabethan audiences. Cowhig also examines how several characters in the play, especially Iago, are racially prejudiced. Iago's racism is the source of his hatred of Othello, she claims, and he plays on the prejudices of other characters to turn them against the Moor. Importantly, Cowhig emphasizes that, although Shakespeare consistently challenges stereotypes with his depiction of Othello, he also demonstrates that, in a white society, the Moor's color isolates him and makes him vulnerable.]

It is difficult to assess the reactions and attitudes of people in sixteenth-century Britain to the relatively few blacks living amongst them. Their feelings would certainly be very mixed: strangeness and mystery producing a certain fascination and fostering a taste for the exotic: on the other hand prejudice and fear, always easily aroused by people different from ourselves, causing distrust and hostility. This hostility would be encouraged by the widespread belief in the legend that blacks were descendants of Ham in the Genesis story, punished for sexual excess by their blackness. Sexual potency was therefore one of the attributes of the prototype black. Other qualities associated with black people were courage, pride, guilelessness, credulity and easily aroused passions-the list found in John Leo's *The Geographical History of Africa,* a book written in Arabic early in the sixteenth century and translated into English in 1600. Contemporary attitudes may have been more influenced by literary works such as this than by direct experience: but recently the part played by such direct contacts has been rediscovered. The scholarly and original study *[Othello's Countrymen]* by Eldred Jones of these contacts and their effects on Renaissance drama has transformed contemporary attitudes.

Black people were introduced into plays and folk dancing in mediaeval England and later, during the sixteenth century, they often appeared in the more sophisticated court masques. In these, the blackness was at first suggested by a very fine lawn [linen fabric] covering the faces, necks, arms and hands of the actors. Then black stockings, masks and wigs were used; such items are mentioned in surviving lists of properties [theater "props"]. These characters were mainly valued for the exotic aesthetic effects which their contrasting colour provided. The culmination of this tradition can be seen in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* . In 1605, which he produced In answer to Queen Anne's request that the masquers should be 'black-mores at first'. The theme is based upon the longing of the black daughters of Niger to gain whiteness and beauty. This surely contradicts the idea that Elizabethans and Jacobeans were not conscious of colour and bad no prejudice: the desirability of whiteness is taken for granted!

Elizabethan drama also used Moorish characters for visual effects and for their association with strange and remote countries. In [Christopher] Marlowe's *TambUlaine the Great* for instance, the three Moorish kings play little part In the plot. and have no

individual character. Their main contribution to the play is In adding to the impression of power and conquest by emphasising the extent of Tamburlaine's victories. Their blackness also provides a variety of visual effects In the masques. Marlowe's plays reflect the curiosity of his contem poraries about distant countries, and must have whetted the appetites ofhis audiences for war and conquest: but the black characters are seen from the outside and have no human complexity. (pp. 1-2).

Only as we recognise the familiarity of the figure of the black man as villain In Elizabethan drama can we appreciate what must have been the startling impact on Shakespeare's audience of a black hero of outstanding qualities in his play *Othello.* Inevitably we are forced to ask questions which we cannot satisfactorily answer. Why did Shakespeare choose a black man as the hero of one of his great tragedies? What experience led the dramatist who hail portrayed the conventional stereotype In Aaron (in *TitusAndronicus*). In 1590 to break completely with tradition ten years later? Had Shakespeare any direct contact with black people? Why did he select the tale of Othello from the large number of Italian stories available to him?

We cannot answer such questions with certainty, but we may speculate. Until the publication of Eldred Jones' study, *Othello's Countrymen,* in 1965, it was generally assumed that Shakespeare depended only on literary sources for his black characters. Although the presence of black people in England is well documented, it went unrecognised. There are two main sources of information. One is [Richard] Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations,* the huge collection of narratives of Elizabethan sailors and traders which Hakluyt collected and published In twelve volumes. Volumes VI and XI describe voy ages during which black men from West Africa were taken aboard, brought back to England and afterwards used as interpreters on subsequent voyages. Later, between 1562 and 1568, [John] Hawkins bad the unhappy distinction of being the first of the English gentleman slave-traders: as well as bringing 'blackamoores' to England he sold hundreds of black slaves to Spain.

The other evidence is in the series of royal proclamations and state papers which call attention to the 'great number of Negroes and *blackamoors* in the realm, 'of which *kinde* of people there are *allready here too manye',* They were regarded by Queen Elizabeth as a threat to her own subjects 'in these hard times of dearth'. Negotiations were car ried on between the Queen and Casper van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, to cancel her debt to him for transporting between two and three hundred English prisoners from Spain and Portugal back to England by allowing him to take up a similar number of unwanted black aliens-presumably to sell them as slaves. Although the correspondence shows that the deal never materialised, since the 'owners' of these 'blackamoors' refused to give them up, it is clear that there were several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and landed gentry, or working in London taverns (pp. 4-5).

Thus the sight of black people must have been familiar to Londoners. London was a very busy port, but still a relatively small and overcrowded city. So Shakespeare could hardly have avoided seeing them. What thoughts did he have as he watched their faces, men uprooted from their country, their homes and families? I cannot help thinking

of Rembrandt's moving study of *The Two Negroes* painted some sixty years later, which expresses their situation poignantly. The encounter with real blacks on the streets of London would have yielded a sense of their common humanity, which would have conflicted with the myths about their cultural, sexual and religious 'otherness' found in the travel books. The play between reality and myth informs *Titus Andronicus:* Shakespeare presents Aaron as a demon, but at the end of the play suddenly shatters the illusion of myth by showing Aaron to be a black *person* with common feelings of compassion and fatherly care for his child. In *Othello* too there is conscious manipulation of reality and myth: Othello is presented initially (through the eyes of Iago and Roderigo) as a dangerous beast, before he reveals himself to be of noble, human status, only to degenerate later to the condition of bloodthirsty and irrational animalism. It is surely not surprising that Shakespeare, the dramatist whose sympathy for the despised alien upsets the balance of the otherwise 'unrealistic' *The Merchant of Venice* should want to create a play about a kind of black man not yet seen on the English stage; a black man whose humanity is eroded by the cunning and racism of whites.

Shakespeare's choice of a black hero for his tragedy must have been deliberate. His direct source was an Italian tale from [Geraldi] Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565); he followed this tale in using the love between a Moor and a young Venetian girl of high birth as the basis of his plot, but in little else. The original story is crude and lacking in subtlety. Cinthio, in accordance with the demands of the time, expresses concern that his tale should have a moral purpose. He gives it as recommending that young people should not marry against the family's wishes, and especially not with someone separated from them by nature, heaven and mode of life. Such a moral has nothing to do with Shakespeare's play, except in so far as he uses it ironically, so his choice of the tale remains obscure. Perhaps he regretted his creation of the cruel and malevolent Aaron, and found himself imagining the feelings of proud men, possibly of royal descent in their own countries, humiliated and degraded as slaves. Whatever his intentions may have been, we have to take seriously the significance of Othello's race in our interpretation of the play. This is all the more important because teachers will find it largely ignored by critical commentaries.

The first effect of Othello's blackness is immediately grasped by the audience, but not always by the reader. It is that he is placed in isolation from the other characters from the very beginning of the play. This isolation is an integral part of Othello's experience constantly operative even if not necessarily at a conscious level; anyone black will readily appreciate that Othello's colour is important for our understanding of his character. Even before his first entry we are forced to focus our attention on his race: the speeches of Iago and Roderigo in the first scene are full of racial antipathy. Othello is 'the thick lips' [I. i. 66], 'an old black ram' [I. i. 88], 'a lascivious Moor' [I. i. 126] and 'a Barbary horse' [I. i. 111-12), and 'he is making the beast with two backs' [cf. I. i. 116-17] with Desdemona. The language is purposely offensive and sexually coarse, and the animal images convey, as they always do, the idea of someone less than human. Iago calculates on arousing in Brabantio all the latent prejudice of Venetian society, and he succeeds. To Brabantio the union is 'a treason of the blood' [I. i. 169]. and he feels that its acceptance will reduce Venetian statesmen to 'bondslaves and pagans' [I. ii. 99].

Brabantio occupies a strong position in society. He is much beloved
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the Duke's
[I. ii. 12-14]

according to Iago. Although he represents a more liberal attitude than Iago's, at least on the surface, his attitude is equally prejudiced. He makes Othello's meetings with Desdemona possible by entertaining him in his own home, but his reaction to the news of the elopement is predictable. He is outraged that this black man should presume so far, and concludes that he must have used charms and witchcraft since otherwise his daughter could never 'fall in love with what she feared to look on' [I. iii. 98]. To him the match is 'against all rules of nature' [I. iii. 101], and when he confronts Othello his abuse is as bitter as Iago's.

But before this confrontation, the audience has seen Othello and we have been impressed by two characteristics. First his pride:

I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege.
[I. ii. 21-2]

and secondly. his confidence in his own achievements and position:

My services which I have done the Signitory
Shall out-tongue his complaints.
[I. ii. 18-19]

It is hard to overestimate the reactions of a Renaissance audience to this unfamiliar black man. so noble in bearing and so obviously master of the situation. But however great Othello's confidence, his colour makes his vulnerability plain. If the state had not been in danger, and Othello essential to its defence, Brabantio's expectation of support from the Duke and senate would surely have been realised. He is disappointed; the Duke treats Othello as befits his position as commander-in-chief. addressing him as 'valiant Othello'. The only support Brabantio receives is from the first senator, whose parting words, 'Adieu, brave Moor, Use Desdemona well' II- iii. 291], while not unfriendly, reveal a superior attitude. Would a senator have so advised a newly married general if he had been white and equal?

Desdemona's stature in the play springs directly from Othello's colour. Beneath a quiet exterior lay the spirited independence which comes out in her defence of her marriage before the Senate. She has resisted the pressures of society to make an approved marriage, shunning 'The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation' [I. ii. 68]. Clearly. Brabantio had exerted no force: he was no Capulet [*in Romeo and Juliet*]. But Desdemona was well aware of the seriousness of her decision to many Othello: 'my downright violence and storm of fortune' II. iii. 249] she calls it. Finally she says that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' II. iii. 252]: obviously the audience. conditioned by

prejudice, had to make the effort to overcome, with her, the tendency to associate Othello's black face with evil, or at least with inferiority.

It is made clear that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona is fully consummated. Desdemona is as explicit as decorum allows:

If I be left behind
A moth of peace, and he go to the war.
The rites for why I love him are bereft me.
II. iii. 255-57]

Othello, on the other hand disclaims the heat of physical desire when asking that she should go with him to Cyprus:

I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite.
Nor to comply with heat-the young affects
In me defunct.
II. iii. 261-64]

These speeches relate directly to Othello's colour. Desdemona has to make it clear that his 'sooty bosom' (her father's phrase) is no obstacle to desire; while Othello must defend himself against the unspoken accusations. of the audience as well as of the senators. because of the association of sexual lust with blackness.

In Act III Scene iii, often referred to as the temptation scene, Othello's faith in Desdemona is gradually undermined by Iago's insinuations, and he is eventually reduced by jealousy to an irrational madness. Iago's cynical cunning plays upon Othello's trustfulness:

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to
be so.
II. iii. 399-4001

The spectacle of Othello's disintegration is perhaps the most painful in the whole Shakespeare canon: and Iago's destructive cruelty has seemed to many critics to be inadequately motivated. They have spoken of 'motiveless malignity' and 'diabolic intellect', sometimes considering Iago's to be the most interesting character in the play. I think this is an unbalanced view, resulting from the failure to recognise racial issues. Iago's contempt for Othello. despite his grudging recognition of his qualities, his jealousy over Cassio's 'preferment', and the gnawing hatred which drives him on are based upon an arrogant racism. He harps mercilessly upon the unnaturalness of the marriage between Othello and Desdemona:

Not to affect many proposed matches.
Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature

tends
Foh! one may smell in such a will most
rank.
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.
[III.iii.229-33]

The exclamation of disgust and the words 'smell' and 'foul' reveal a phobia so obvious that it is strange that it is often passed over. The attack demolishes Othello's defences because this kind of racial contempt exposes his basic insecurity as an alien in a white society. His confidence in Desdemona expressed in 'For she had eyes, and chose me' II. iii. 189], changes to the misery of

Haply for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have. . .
[III.iii.263-651

This is one of the most moving moments in the play. Given Iago's hatred and astuteness in exploiting other people's weaknesses, which we see in the plot he sets for Cassio, the black Othello is easy game. We are watching the baiting of an alien who cannot fight back on equal terms.

Othello's jealous madness is the more terrifying because of the noble figure he presented in the early scenes, when he is addressed as 'brave Othello' and 'our noble and valiant general' [ll. ii. 11]. and when proud self-control is his essential quality; he refuses to be roused to anger by Brabantio and Roderigo: 'Keep up your bright swords for the dew will rust them' [I. ii. 58]. After his breakdown we are reminded by Ludovico of his previous moral strengths and self-control: 'Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake?' [IV. i. 265-66]. Thus the portrait is of a man who totally contradicts the contemporary conception of the black man as one easily swayed by passion. He is the most attractive of all Shakespeare's soldier heroes: one who has achieved high rank entirely on merit.

His early history given in Desdemona's account of his wooing is typical of the bitter experience of an African of his times 'Taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery' [I. iii. 137-38]. Othello's military career is everything to him, and the famous 'farewell' speech of Act IV, with its aura of romantic nostalgia, expresses the despair of a man whose achievements have been reduced to nothing: 'Othello's occupation gone' [III.iii.357]. Spoken by a black Othello, the words 'The big wars / That make ambition virtue' [III.iii.349-50], have a meaning beyond more rhetoric. Ambition was still reckoned as a sin in Shakespeare's time; but in Othello's case it has been purified by his courage and endurance and by the fact that only ambition could enable him to escape the humiliations of his early life. When he realises that his career is irrevocably over, he looks back at the trappings of warthe 'pride, pomp and circumstance' [III.iii.354], the 'spirit-stirring drum' [III.iii.352] and the rest-as a dying man looks back on life.

The sympathies of the audience for Othello are never completely destroyed. The Russian actor, Ostuzhev who set himself to study the character of Othello throughout his career, saw the problem of the final scene as 'acting the part so as to make people love Othello and forget he is a murderer'. When Othello answers Ludovico's rhetorical question 'What shall be said of thee?' [V. ii. 293] with the words, 'An honourable murderer, if you will' [V. ii. 294], we are not outraged by such a statement: instead we see in it a terrible pathos. What we are waiting for is the unmasking of Iago. When this comes, Othello looks down at Iago's feet for the mythical cloven hoofs and demands an explanation from that 'demi-devil', reminding us that blackness of soul in this play belongs to the white villain rather than to his black victim.

The fact that Othello was a baptised Christian had considerable importance for Shakespeare's audience. This is made explicit from the beginning when he quells the drunken broil with the words:

'For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl'

[II. iii. 172]. In the war he was seen to be leading the forces of Christendom against the Turks. But once Othello becomes subservient to Iago and vows his terrible revenge he seems to revert to superstitious beliefs. How else can we interpret his behaviour over the handkerchief? He seems under the spell of its long history-woven by an old sibyl out of silkworms strangely 'hallowed', given to his mother by an Egyptian with thought-reading powers, and linked with the dire prophecy of foss of love should it be lost. Yet in the final scene it becomes merely, 'An antique token / My father gave my mother' IV. ii. 216-17]. This irrational inconsistency is dramatically credible and suggests that when reason is overthrown, Othello's Christian beliefs give way to the superstitions he has rejected. The Christian veneer is thin. (pp. 7-12)

Shakespeare raises these and other questions about blackness and whiteness without fully resolving them. It rested upon the Elizabethan audience to consider them, this very act of deliberation involving a disturbance of racial complacency. If his purpose was to unsettle or perplex his audience, then he succeeded beyond expectation, for the question of Othello's blackness, and his relation with the white Desdemona, is one that provoked contradictory and heated responses in subsequent centuries. (p. 14)

Ruth Cowhig, "Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's Othello," in her The Black Presence in English Literature, *Manchester University Press, 1985, pp. 1-25.*

Critical Essay #4

[Granville-Barker examines the dramatic structure of Othello *and explicates the relation between Shakespeare's manipulation of time and the theme of sexual jealousy. He maintains that time in Act I passes naturally so that the audience can become familiar with the characters. Act II, however, introduces contractions and ambiguities of time that are sustained until Act V, scene* ii, *when "natural" time resumes, presenting a comprehensive view of the ruined Moor. The critic contends that the precipitous action is both dramatically convincing, since it hurries the audience along, and consistent with the recklessness of Iago and the pathological sexual jealousy that flaws the character of Othello.]*

[In *Othello]* time is given no unity of treatment at all; it is contracted and expanded like a concertina. For the play's opening and closing the time of the action is the time of its acting; and such an extent of "natural" time (so to call it) is unusual. But minutes stand for hours over the sighting, docking and discharging-with a storm raging, tool-of the three ships which have carried the characters to Cyprus; the entire night of Cassio's undoing passes uninterruptedly in the speaking space of four hundred lines: and we have, of course. Othello murdering Desdemona within twenty-four hours of the consummation of their marriage, when, if Shakespeare let us-or let Othello himself-pause to consider, she plainly *cannot* be guilty of adultery.

Freedom with time is, of course, one of the recognised freedoms of Shakespeare's stage; he is expected only to give his exercise of it the slightest dash of plausibility. But in the maturity of his art he learns how to draw positive dramatic profit from it. For this play's beginning he does not, as we have noted, contract time at all. Moreover, he allows seven hundred lines to the three first scenes when he could well have done their business in half the space or less, could even, as [Samuel] Johnson suggests [in an end-note to *Othello* in his 1765 edition of Shakespeare's plays], have left it to be "occasionally related" afterwards. The profit is made evident when later, by contrast, we find him using contraction of time, and the heightening of tension so facilitated, to disguise the incongruities of the action. For he can do this more easily if he has already familiarised us with the play's characters. And he has done that more easily by presenting them to us in the unconstraint of uncontracted time, asking us for no special effort of make-believe. Accepting what they *are,* we the more readily accept what they *do.* It was well, in particular, to make Iago familiarly lifelike. If his victims are to believe in him, so, in another sense, must we. Hence the profuse self-display to Roderigo. That there is as much lying as truth in it is no matter. A man's lying, once we detect it, is as eloquent of him as the truth.

The contraction of time for the arrival in Cyprus has its dramatic purpose too. Shakespeare could have relegated the business to hearsay. But the spectacular excitement, the suspense, the ecstatic happiness of the reuniting of Othello and Desdemona, give the action fresh stimulus and impetus and compensate for the break in it occasioned by the voyage. Yet there must be no dwelling upon this, which is still only prelude to the capital events to come. For the same reason, the entire night of

Cassio's undoing passes with the uninterrupted speaking of four hundred lines. It is no more than a sample of Iago's skill, so it must not be lingered upon either. Amid the distracting variety of its comings and goings we do not remark the contraction. As Iago himself has been let suggest to us:

Pleasure and action make the hours seem
short.
[II. iii. 379]

Then, upon the entrance of Cassio with his propitiatory aubade and its suggestion of morning, commences the sustained main stretch of the action. This is set to something more complex than a merely contracted, it goes to a sort of ambiguous scheme of time, not only a profitable. but here-for Shakespeare turning story into play-an almost necessary device. After that we have the long last scene set to "natural" time, the play thus ending as it began. The swift-moving, close-packed action, fit product of Iago's ravening will, is over.

Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her
bed.
[s.d., V. ii. 1]
-and, the dreadful deed done, all is done. While the rest come and go about him:
Here is my journey's end. . .
[V. ii. 2671

he says. as at a standstill, as in a very void of time.

And as the "natural" time at the play's beginning let us observe the better the man he was. so relaxation to it now lets us mark more fully the wreck that remains.

The three opening scenes move to a scheme of their own, in narrative and in the presentation of character. The first gives us a view of Iago which, if to be proved superficial, is yet a true one (for Shakespeare will never introduce a character misleadingly). and a sample of his double-dealing. Roderigo at the same time paints us a thick-lipped, lascivious Moor. which we discover in the second scene, with a slight, pleasant shock of surprise at the sight of Othello himself, to have been merely a figment of his own jealous chagrin. There also we find quite another Iago: the modest, devoted, disciplined soldier. . . . The third scene takes us to the Senate House, where Brabantio and his griefs, which have shrilly dominated the action so far, find weightier competition in the question of the war, and the State's need of Othello, whose heroic aspect is heightened by this. (pp. 11-14)

The scenic mobility of Shakespeare's stage permits him up to [I. iii] to translate his narrative straightforwardly into action. We pass, that is to say. from Brabantio's house, which Desdemona has just quitted, to the Sagittary, where she and Othello are to be found, and from there to the Senate House, to which he and she (later) and Brabantio are summoned. And the movement itself is given dramatic value by its quickening or slackening or abrupt arrest. We have the feverish impetus of Brabantio's torchlight

pursuit; Othello's calm talk to Iago set in sequence and contrast; the encounter with the other current of the servants of the Duke upon their errand; the halt, the averted conflict; then the passing on together of the two parties, in sobered but still hostile detachment, towards the Senate House.

Note also that such narrative as is needed of what has passed before the play begins is mainly postponed to the third of these opening scenes. By then we should be interested in the characters, and the more, therefore, in the narrative itself, which is, besides, given a dramatic value of its own by being framed as a cause pleaded before the Senate. Further, even while we listen to the rebutting of Brabantio's accusation of witchcraft by Othello's "round unvarnished tale" [I. iii. 90j, we shall be expecting Desdemona's appearance. the one important figure in this part of the story still to be seen. And this expectancy offsets the risk of the slackening of tension which reminiscent narrative must always involve.

Shakespeare now breaks the continuity of the action: and such a clean break as this is with him unusual. He has to transport his characters to Cyprus. The next scene takes place there. An unmeasured interval of time is suggested, and no scene on shipboard or the like has been provided for a link, nor are any of the events of the voyage recounted. The tempest which drowns the Turks, and rids him of his now superfluous war, and has more thrillingly come near besides to drowning the separated Othello and Desdemona-something of this he does contrive to present to us; and we are plunged into it as we were into the crisis of the play's opening:

What from the cape can you discern at
sea?
Nothing at all.
It is a high-wrought flood; I cannot, 'twixt the heaven and the main
Descry a sail.

[II. i. 1-4]

-a second start as strenuous as the first. The excitement offsets the breaking of the continuity. And the compression of the events, of the storm and the triple landing, then the resolution of the fears for Othello's safety into the happiness of the reuniting of the two-the bringing of all this within the space of a few minutes' acting raises tension to a high pitch and holds it there. (pp. 14-16)

The proclamation in [II. ii] serves several subsidiary purposes. It helps settle the characters in Cyprus. The chances and excitements of the arrival are over. Othello is in command; but the war is over too, and he only needs bid the people rejoice at peace and his happy marriage. It economically sketches us a background for Cassio's ill-fated carouse. It allows a small breathing space before Iago definitely gets to work. It "neutralises" the action for a moment (a herald is an anonymous voice; he has no individuality), suspends its interest without breaking its continuity. Also it brings its

present timelessness to an end; events are given a clock to move by. and with that take on a certain urgency. (pp. 22-3)

[In Act III, scene iii,] the action passes into the ambiguity of time which has troubled so many critics. *Compression* of time, by one means or another, is common form in most drama; we . . . [see] it put to use in the speeding through a single unbroken scene of the whole night of Cassio's betrayal. But now comes-if we are examining the craft of the play-something more complex. When it is acted we notice nothing unusual, and neither story nor characters appear false in retrospect. It is as with the perspective of a picture, painted to be seen from a certain standpoint. Picture and play can be enjoyed and much of their art appreciated with no knowledge of how the effect is gained. But the student needs to know.

We have reached the morrow of the arrival in Cyprus and of the consummation of the marriage. This is plain. It is morning. By the coming midnight or a little later Othello will have murdered Desdemona and killed himself. To that measure of time, plainly demonstrated, the rest of the play's action will move. It comprises no more than seven scenes. From this early hour we pass without interval-the clock no more than customarily speeded-to midday dinner time and past it. Then comes a break in the action (an empty stage; one scene ended, another beginning), which, however, can only allow for a quite inconsiderable interval of time, to judge, early in the following scene, by Desdemona's "Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?" [III. iv. 23]-the handkerchief which we have recently seen Emilia retrieve and pass to Iago. And later in this scene Cassio gives it to Bianca, who begs that she may see him "soon at night" [III. iv. 198]. Then comes another break in the action. But, again, it can involve no long interval of time; since in the scene following Bianca speaks of the handkerchief given her "even now". Later in this scene Lodovico, suddenly come from Venice, is asked by Othello to supper; and between Cassio and Bianca there has been more talk of "tonight" and "supper". Another break in the action; but, again, little or no passing of time can be involved, since midway through the next scene the trumpets sound to supper, and Iago closes it with

It is now high supper-time and
the night grows to waste. . . .
[IV. ii. 242-43]

The following scene opens with Othello, Desdemona and Lodovico coming from supper, with Othello's command to Desdemona:

Get you to bed on the instant. . . .
[IV. iii. 7]

and ends with her good-night to Emilia. The scene after-of the ambush for Cassio-we have been explicitly told is to be made by Iago to "fallout between twelve and one" [IV. ii. 236-37], and it is, we find, pitch dark, and the town is silent. And from here Othello and Emilia patently go straight to play their parts in the last scene of all, he first, she later. as quickly as she can speed.

These, then, are the events of a single day; and Shakespeare is at unusual pains to make this clear, by the devices of the morning music, dinnertime, supper-time and the midnight dark, and their linking together by the action itself and reference after reference in the dialogue. Nor need we have any doubt of his reasons for this. Only by thus precipitating the action can it be made both effective in the terms of his stage-craft and convincing. If Othello were left time for reflection or the questioning of anyone but Iago, would not the whole flimsy fraud that is practised on him collapse?

But this granted, are they convincing as the events of that particular day, the very morrow of the reunion and of the consummation of the marriage?

Plainly they will not be; and before long Shakespeare has begun to imply that we are weeks or months-or it might be a year or more-away from anything of the sort.

What sense had I of her stolen hours of
lust?
I saw it not, thought it not; it harmed not
me;
I slept the next night well, was free and
merry;
I found not Cassio's kisses on her
lips. . . .
[III. iii. 338-4 I]

That is evidence enough, but a variety of other implications go to confirm it; Iago's

I lay with Cassio lately. . . .
[III. iii. 413]

Cassio's reference to his "former suit", Bianca's reproach to him

What, keep a week away? seven days and
nights?
Eight score eight hours. . . .?
[III. iv. 173-74]

and more definitely yet, Lodovico's arrival from Venice with the mandate of recall, the war being over-by every assumption of the sort, indeed, Othello and Desdemona and the rest are living the life of [Giraldi] Cinthio's episodic story [in his *au Hecatommithi,* from which Shakespeare derived the plot of *Othello],* not at the forced pace of Shakespeare's play. But he wants to make the best of both these calendars; and, in his confident, reckless, dexterous way, he contrives to do so.

Why, however, does he neglect the obvious and simple course of allowing a likely lapse of time between the night of the arrival and of Cassio's disgrace and the priming of Othello to suspect Desdemona and her kindness to him, for which common sense-both our own, and, we might suppose, Iago's-cries out? A sufficient answer is that there has

been one such break in the action already, forced on him by the voyage to Cyprus, and he must avoid another.

The bare Elizabethan stage bred a panoramic form of drama; the story straightforwardly unfolded, as many as possible of its more telling incidents presented, narrative supplying the antecedents and filling the gaps. Its only resources of any value are the action itself and the speech; and the whole burden, therefore, of stimulating and sustaining illusion falls on the actor-who, once he has captured his audience, must, like the spellbinding orator he may in method much resemble, be at pains to hold them, or much of his work will continually be to do over again. Our mere acceptance of the fiction, of the story and its peopling, we shall perhaps not withdraw; we came prepared to accept it. Something subtler is involved; the sympathy (in the word's stricter sense) which the art of the actor will have stirred in us. This current interrupted will not be automatically restored. Our emotions, roused and let grow cold, need quick rousing again. And the effects of such forced stoking are apt to stale with repetition.

Hence the help to the Elizabethan actor, with so much dependent on him, of continuity of action. Having once captured his audience, they are the easier to hold. The dramatist finds this too. Shakespeare escapes dealing with minor incidents of the voyage to Cyprus by ignoring them; and he restarts the interrupted action amid the stimulating anxieties of the storm. But such another sustaining device would be hard to find. And were he to allow a likely lapse of time before the attack on Othello's confidence is begun it would but suggest to us when it *is* begun and we watch it proceeding the equal likelihood of an Iago wisely letting enough time pass between assault for the poison's full working. And with that the whole dramatic fabric would begin to crumble. Here would be Cinthio's circumspect Ensign again, and the action left stagnating, the onrush of Othello's passion to be checked and checked again, and he given time to reflect and anyone the opportunity to enlighten him! Give him such respite, and if he then does not, by the single stroke of good sense needed, free himself from the fragile web of lies which is choking him, he will indeed seem to be simply the gull and dolt "as ignorant as dirt" [V. ii. 164] of Emilia's final invective, no tragic hero, certainly.

Shakespeare has to work within the close confines of the dramatic form; and this imposes on him a double economy, a shaping of means to end and end to means, of characters to the action, the action to the characters also. If Othello's ruin is not accomplished without pause or delay, it can hardly be accomplished at all. The circumstances predicate an Iago of swift and reckless decision. These are the very qualities, first, to help him to his barren triumph, then to ensure his downfall. And Othello's precipitate fall from height to depth is tragically appropriate to the man he is-as to the man he is made to be because the fall must be precipitate. Finally, that we may rather feel with Othello in his suffering than despise him for the folly of it, *we* are speeded through time as unwittingly as he is, and left little more chance for reflection.

Most unconscionable treatment of time truly, had time any independent rights! But effect is all. And Shakespeare smooths incongruities away by letting the action follow the shorter, the "hourly" calendar-from dawn and the aubade to midnight and the murder-without more comment than is necessary, while he takes the longer one for granted in a

few incidental references. He has only to see that the two do not clash in any overt contradiction.

The change into ambiguity of time is effected in the course of Iago's opening attack upon Othello. This is divided into two, with the summons to dinner and the finding and surrender of the handkerchief for an interlude. In the earlier part-although it is taken for granted-there is no very definite reference to the longer calendar: and Iago, to begin with, deals only in its generalities. Not until the second part do we have the determinate "I lay with Cassio lately... .. [III. iii. 4131. the story of his dream. the matter of the handkerchief. and Othello's own

I slept the next night well, was free and
merry:
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips.
[m. iii. 340-41]

with the implication that weeks or months may have passed since the morrow of the landing. But why no tribute to likelihood here of some longer interval than that provided merely by the dinner to "the generous islanders" [III. iii. 280], between the sowing of the poison and its fierce, full fruition? There are two answers. From the standpoint of likelihood a suggested Interval of days or weeks would largely defeat its own purpose. since the time given the poison to work would seem time given to good sense to intervene too, From the standpoint simply of the play's action, any Interruption hereabouts, actual or suggested, must lower its tension and dissipate our Interest. at the very juncture, too, when its main business, overlong held back, is fairly under way. Shakespeare will certainly not feel called on to make such a sacrifice to mere likelihood. He does loosen the tension of the inmost theme-all else beside, it would soon become Intolerable-upon Othello's departure with Desdemona and by the episode of the handkerchief. But with Iago conducting this our Interest will be surely held; and, Emilia left behind, the scene continuing, the continuity of action is kept. And when Othello returns, transformed in the interval from the man merely troubled in mind to a creature incapable of reason. "eaten up with passion... .. [III. iii. 391], his emotion reflected In us will let *us* also lose count of time. obliterate yesterday In today, confound the weeks with the months in the one Intolerable moment

But the over-riding explanation of this show of Shakespeare's stagecraft is that he is not essentially concerned with time and the calendar at all. These, and other outward circumstances. must be given plausibility. But the play's essential action lies In the processes of thought and feeling by which the characters are moved and the story is forwarded. And the deeper the springs of these the less do time. place. and circumstance affect them. His imagination is concerned with fundamental passions, and its swift working demands uncumbered expression. He may falsify the calendar for his convenience; but we shall find neither trickery nor anomaly in the planning of the battle for Othello's soul. And in the light of the truth of this the rest passes unnoticed. (pp. 30-8)

Harley Granville-Barker. in his Prefaces to Shakespeare: *Othello, fourth series, Sidgwick & Jackson. Ltd..* 1945, *223p.*

Critical Essay #5

[Gerard examines Othello's personality. discovering cracks in the "facade" of the generous, confident, self-disciplined husband and general. The critic argues that Othello believes that his marriage to Desdemona will transform his life-from one of primitive "chaos" to one of civilization and contentment. This naive dream shatters, however, with his increasing jealousy and his growing awareness that his newfound happiness is an illusion. Gerard thus regards Othello's development as a change from innocence to self-awareness and recognition that he has been looking outsideto Desdemona and Venetian society-rather than inside himself for his sense of identity. For further commentary on Othello's character, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, Wyndham Lewis. And Henry L. Warnken.]

At the beginning of the play, Othello appears as a noble figure, generous, composed, self-possessed. Besides, he is glamorously happy, both as a general and as a husband. He seems to be a fully integrated man. a great personality at peace with itself. But if we care to scrutinize this impressive and attractive façade, we find that there is a crack in it, which might be described as follows: It is the happiness of a spoilt child, not of a mature mind: It is the brittle wholeness of innocence; it is preconscious, pre-rational, pre-moral. Othello has not yet come to grips with the experience of inner crisis. He has had to overcome no moral obstacles. He has not yet left the chamber of maiden-thought, and is still blessedly unaware of the burden of the mystery.

Of course, the life of a general, with its tradition of obedience and authority, is never likely to give rise to acute moral crises-especially at a time when war crimes had not yet been invented. But even Othello's love affair with Desdemona, judging by his own report. seems to have developed smoothly, without painful moral searchings of any kind. Nor is there for him any heart-rending contradiction between his love and his career: Desdemona is even willing to share the austerity of his flinty couch, so that he has every reason to believe that he will be allowed to make the best of both worlds.

Yet, at the *core* of this monolithic content, there is at least one ominous contradiction which announces the final disintegration of his personality: the contradiction between his obvious openheartedness, honesty and self-approval, and the fact that he does not think it beneath his dignity to court and marry Desdemona secretly. This contradiction is part and parcel of Shakespeare's conscious purpose. As Allardyce Nicoll has observed [in his *Shakespeare].* there is no such secrecy in [Giraldi] Cinthio's tale [the source for Shakespeare's plot of *Othello],* where, instead, the marriage occurs openly, though in the teeth of fierce parental opposition.

Highly significant. too. is the fact that he does not seem to feel any remorse for this most peculiar procedure. When at last he has to face the irate Brabantio, he gives no explanation, offers no apology for his conduct. Everything in his attitude shows that he is completely unaware of infringing the *mores* of Venetian society, the ethical code of Christian behaviour, and the sophisticated conventions of polite morality. Othello quietly thinks of himself as a civilized Christian and a prominent citizen of Venice, certainly not

as a barbarian (see II. iii. 17072). He shares in Desdemona's illusion that his true visage is in his mind.

Beside the deficient understanding of the society into which he has made his way, the motif of the secret marriage then also suggests a definite lack of self-knowledge on Othello's part. His first step towards "perception of sense" about himself occurs in the middle of Act III. While still trying to resist Iago's innuendoes, Othello exclaims:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee
not.
Chaos is come again.
[III. iii. 90-2]

This word, "again", is perhaps the most unexpect ed word that Shakespeare could have used here. It is one of the most pregnant words in the whole tragedy. It indicates *(a)* Othello's dim sense that his life before he fell in love with Desdemona was in a state of chaos, in spite of the fact that he was at the time quite satisfied with it, and *(b)* his conviction that his love has redeemed him from chaos, has lifted him out of his former barbarousness. Such complacency shows his total obliviousness of the intricacies, the subtleties and the dangers of moral and spiritual growth. In this first anagnorisis [recognition], Othello realizes that he has lived so far in a sphere of spontaneous bravery and natural honesty, but he assumes without any further questionings that his love has gained him easy access to the sphere of moral awareness, of high spiritual existence.

In fact, he assumes that his super-ego has materialised, suddenly and without tears. Hence, of course, the impressive self-assurance of his demeanour in circumstances which would be most embarrassing to any man gifted with *more* accurate self-knowledge.

This first anagnorisis is soon followed by another one, in which Othello achieves some sort of recognition of what has become of him after his faith in Desdemona has been shattered. The short speech he utters then marks a new step forward in his progress to self-knowledge:

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big
wars,
That make ambition virtue!
O, farewell!. . .
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!
[III. iii. 345-50, 357]

The spontaneous outcry of the first three lines results from Othello's disturbed awareness that the new world he has entered into is one of (to him) unmanageable complexity. He is now facing a new kind of chaos, and he wishes he could take refuge in an ignorance similar to his former condition of moral innocence. The pathetic childishness of this ostrich-like attitude is proportionate in its intensity to the apparent monolithic quality of his previous complacency.

What follows sounds like a *non sequitur.* Instead of this farewell to arms, we might have expected some denunciation of the deceitful aspirations that have led him to this quandary, coupled, maybe, with a resolution to seek oblivion in renewed military activity. But we may surmise that his allusion to "the general camp" [III. iii. 345], reminding him of his "occupation", turns his mind away from his immediate preoccupations. The transition occurs in the line

Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
[III. iii. 348]

which carries ambivalent implications. The content he has now lost is not only the "absolute content" his soul enjoyed as a result of his love for Desdemna: it is also the content he had known previously, at the time when he could rejoice in his "unhoused free condition" [I. ii. 26]. This was the content of innocence and spontaneous adjustment to life. There is no recovering it, for, in this respect, he reached a point of no return when he glimpsed the truly chaotic nature of that state of innocence.

The fact that Othello starts talking about himself in the third person is of considerable significance. G. R. Elliott has noticed [in *Flaming Minister: A Study of Othello]* that the words have "a piercing primitive appeal: he is now simply a name". Besides, in this sudden ejaculation, there is a note of childish self-pity that reminds one of the first lines of the speech. But the main point is that it marks the occurrence of a deep dichotomy in Othello's consciousness of himself. As he had discarded his former self as an emblem of "chaos", so now he discards the super-ego that he thought had emerged into actual existence as a result of his love. It is as if that man known by the name of Othello was different from the one who will be speaking henceforward. The Othello of whom he speaks is the happy husband of Des demon a, the civilized Christian. The worthy Venetian, the illusory super-ego; but he is also the noble-spirited soldier and the natural man who guesses at heaven. That man has now disappeared, and the "I" who speaks of him is truly the savage Othello, the barbarian stripped of his wishful thinking, who gives himself up to jealousy, black magic and cruelty, the man who coarsely announces that he will "chop" his wife "into messes", the man who debases his magnificent oratory by borrowing shamelessly from Iago's lecherous vocabulary.

Thus Othello, whom love had brought from pre-rational, pre-moral satisfaction and adjustment to life to moral awareness and a higher form of "content", is now taken from excessive complacency and illusory happiness to equally excessive despair and nihilism. These are his steps to self-knowledge. That they should drive him to such alternative excesses gives the measure of his lack of judgment.

From the purely psychological point of view of character-analysis, critics have always found it difficult satisfactorily to account for Othello's steep downfall. That it would have been easy, as Robert Bridges wrote [in his essay "The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare"], for Shakespeare "to have provided a more reasonable ground for Othello's jealousy", is obvious to all reasonable readers. The fact that Othello's destruction occurs through the agency of Iago has induced the critics in the Romantic tradition to make much of what [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge has called Iago's "superhuman art", which, of course, relieves the Moor of all responsibility and deprives the play of most of its interest on the ethical and psychological level. More searching analyses, however, have shown that Iago is far from being a devil in disguise. And T. S. Eliot [in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"] has exposed the Moor as a case of *bovarysme,* or "the human will to see things as they are not", while Leo Kirschbaum [in the December 1944 *ELH]* has denounced him as "aromantic idealist, who considers human nature superior to what it actually is".

For our examination of *Othello* as a study in the relationships between the intellect and the moral life, it is interesting to note that the ultimate responsibility for the fateful development of the plot rests with a flaw in Othello himself. There is no "reasonable I4round" for his jealousy; or, to put it somewhat differently. Shakespeare did not choose to provide any "reasonable" ground for it. The true motive, we may safely deduce, must be unreasonable. Yet, I find it difficult to agree that the Moor "considers human nature superior to what it actually is": this may be true of his opinion of Iago, but Desdemona is really the emblem of purity and trustworthiness that he initially thought her to be. Nor can we justifiably speak of his *"will* to see things as they are not" (though these words might actually fit Desdemona); in his confusion and perplexity there is no opportunity for his will to exert itself in any direction. The basic element that permits Othello's destiny to evolve the way it does is his utter *inability* to grasp the actual. If we want to locate with any accuracy the psychological origin of what F. R. Leavis [in his essay "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero"] has called his "readiness to respond" to Iago's fiendish suggestions, we cannot escape the conclusion that his gullibility makes manifest his lack of rationality, 0f psychological insight and of mere common sense, and that it is a necessary product of his undeveloped mind.

Othello has to choose between trusting Iago and trusting Desdemona. This is the heart of the matter, put in the simplest possible terms. The question, then, is: why does he rate Iago's honesty higher than Desdemona's? If it is admitted that Iago is not a symbol of devilish skill in evildoing, but a mere fallible villain, the true answer can only be that Othello does not know his own wife.

More than a century of sentimental criticism based on the Romantic view of Othello as the trustful, chivalrous and sublime lover, has blurred our perception of his feeling for Desdemona. The quality of his "love" has recently been gone into with unprecedented thoroughness by G. R. Elliott, who points out that the Moor's speech to the Duke and Senators [I. ill] shows that "his affection for her, though fixed and true. is comparatively superficial". Othello sounds, Indeed, curiously detached about Desdemona. His love is clearly subordinated, at that moment, to his soldierly pride. If he asks the Duke to let her go to Cyprus with him. it is because *she* wants it, it is "to be free and bounteous to her

mind" [I. iii. 265]. In the juxtaposition of Desdemona's and Othello's speeches about this, there is an uncomfortable suggestion that his love is not at all equal to hers, who "did love the Moor to live with him" [I. iii. 248], and that he is not interested in her as we feel he ought to be. At a later stage the same self-centredness colours his vision of Desdemona as the vital source of his soul's life and happiness: his main concern lies with the 'joy" [II. i. 184], the "absolute content" [ef. II. i. 191], the salvation [III. iii. 90-91] of his own soul, not with Desdemona as a woman in love, a human person. It lies with *his* love and the changes his love has wrought in him. rather than with the object of his love. It is not surprising. then. that he should know so little about his wife's inner life as to believe the charges raised by Iago.

On the other hand, his attitude to Desdemona is truly one of idealization, but in a very limited, one, might even say philosophical, sense. Coleridge wrote [in his *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets*] that "Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in the belief that she, his angel. had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence". But Coleridge failed to stress the most important point, which is that this belief is mistaken. Desdemona is *not* "impure and worthless", she has *not* fallen from the heaven of her native innocence. Othello is unable to recognize this, and his failure is thus primarily an intellectual failure.

His attitude to Desdemona is different from that of the "romantic idealist" who endows his girl with qualities which she does not possess, Desdemona does have all the qualities that her husband expects to find in her. What matters to him, however, is not Desdemona as she is, but Desdemona as a symbol. or, in other words, it is his vision of Desdemona.

In his *Essay on Man,* Ernst Cassirer has the following remark about the working of the primitive mind:

In primitive thought, it is still very difficult to differentiate between the two spheres of being and meaning. They are constantly being confused: a symbol is looked upon as if it were endowed with magical or metaphysical powers.

That is just what has happened to Othello: in Desdemona he has failed to differentiate between the human being and the angelic symbol. Or rather, he has overlooked the woman in his preoccupation with the angel. She is to him merely the emblem of his highest ideal, and their marriage is merely the ritual of his admission into her native world, into her spiritual sphere of values. Because he is identifying "the two spheres of being and meaning", he is possessed by the feeling that neither these values nor his accession to them have any actual existence outside her: his lack of psychological insight is only matched by his lack of rational power.

The Neo-Platonic conceit that the lover's heart and soul have their dwelling in the person of the beloved is used by Othello in a poignantly literal sense [IV. ii. 57-60]. If she fails him, everything fails him. If she is not pure, then purity does not exist. If she is not true to his ideal, that means that his ideal is an illusion. If it can be established that she does not belong to that world in which he sees her enshrined, that means that there is

no such world. She becomes completely and explicitly identified with all higher spiritual values when he says:

If she be false, then heaven mocks itself!
[III. iii. 278]

Hence the apocalyptic quality of his nihilism and despair.

The fundamental tragic fault in the Moor can therefore be said to lie in the shortcomings of his intellect. His moral balance is without any rational foundation. He is entirely devoid of the capacity for abstraction. He fails to make the right distinction between the sphere of meaning, of the abstract, the ideal. the universal. and the sphere of being. of the concrete, the actual. the singular.

When Othello is finally made to see the truth. he recognizes the utter lack of wisdom [V. ii. 344] which is the mainspring of his tragedy, and, in the final anagnorisis, he sees himself for what he is: a "fool" [V. ii. 323]. The full import of the story is made clear in Othello's last speech, which is so seldom given the attention it merits that it may be well to quote it at some length:

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;
Of one not easily jealous, but being
wrought
Perplex'd 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 turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state.
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. *(Stabs himself)*
[V. ii. 340-56]

One may find it strange that Shakespeare should have introduced at the end of Othello's last speech this apparently irrelevant allusion to a trivial incident in the course of which the Moor killed a Turk who had insulted Venice. But if we care to investigate the allegorical potentialities of the speech, we find that it is not a mere fit of oratorical self-dramatization: it clarifies the meaning of the play as a whole. There is a link between the pearl, the Venetian and Desdemona: taken together, they are an emblem of beauty, moral virtue, spiritual richness and civilized refinement. And there is a link

between the "base Indian", the "malignant Turk" and Othello himself: all three are barbarians: all three have shown themselves unaware of the true value and dignity of what lay within their reach. Othello has thrown his pearl away, like the Indian. In so doing, he has insulted, like the Turk, everything that Venice and Desdemona stand for. As the Turk "traduced the State" [V. ii. 354], so did Othello misrepresent to himself that heaven of which Desdemona was the sensuous image.

S. L. Bethell [*in Shakespeare Survey* 5 (1952)] has left us in no doubt that the manner of Othello's death was intended by Shakespeare as an indication that the hero is doomed to eternal damnation. Such a view provides us with a suitable climax for this tragedy. Othello has attained full consciousness of his barbarian nature; yet. even that ultimate flash of awareness does not lift him up above his true self. He remains a barbarian to the very end, and condemns his own soul to the everlasting torments of hell in obeying the same primitive sense of rough-handed justice that had formerly prompted him to kill Desdemona. . . . (pp. 100 06)

Albert Gerard, "'Egregiously an Ass', The Dark Side of the Moor: A View of Othello's Mind," in Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study and Production, *Vol. 10,* 1957, *pp. 98-106.*

Critical Essay #6

[Lewis wrote in a deliberately provocative style and outside the mainstream of Shakespearean criticism. The majority of his work on Shakespeare is included in his unusual study The Lion and the Fox (l927). *In the following excerpt from that work, Lewis argues that* Othello *depicts "the race of men at war with the race of titans" and that the gods have predetermined that Iago, the petty Everyman, will triumph over the grandeur of Othello. The critic assesses the Moor as the most typical of Shakespeare's colossi, or giants, "because he is the simplest" and emphasizes his pure, guileless, generous nature and the childlike, defenseless quality of his soul. Lewis considers Iago "no great devil, " but instead claims that he represents an ordinary, average, little man. For further commentary on Othello's character, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, Albert Gerard, and Henry L. Warnken.]*

Of all the colossi, Othello is the most characteristic, because he is the simplest, and he is seen in an unequal duel throughout with a perfect specimen of the appointed enemy of the giant-the representative of the race of men at war with the race of titans. . . . He is absolutely defenceless: it is as though he were meeting one of his appointed enemies, disguised of course, as a friend, for the first time. He seems possessed of no instinct by which he might scent his antagonist, and so be put on his guard.

So, at the outset, I will present my version of Othello; and anything that I have subsequently to say must be read in the light of this interpretation. For in Othello there is nothing equivocal, I think; and the black figure of this child-man is one of the poles of Shakespeare's sensation.

Who that has read Othello's closing speech can question Shakespeare's intentions here at least? The overwhelming truth and beauty is the clearest expression of the favour of Shakespeare's heart and mind. Nothing that could ever be said would make us misunderstand what its author meant by it. Of all his ideal giants this unhappiest, blackest, most "perplexed" child was the one of Shakespeare's predilection.

The great spectacular "pugnacious" male ideal is represented perfectly by Othello; who was led out to the slaughter on the Elizabethan stage just as the bull is thrust into the spanish bullring. Iago, the *taurobolus* [bull catcher] of this sacrificial bull, the little David of this Goliath, or the little feat-gilded *espada* [matador], is for Shakespeare nothing but Everyman, the Judas of the world, the representative of the crowds around the crucifix, or of the ferocious crowds at the *corrida* [bull fight], or of the still more abject roman crowds at the mortuary games. Othello is of the race of Christs, or of the race of "bulls"; he is the hero with all the magnificent helplessness of the animal, or all the beauty and ultimate resignation of the god. From the moment he arrives on the scene of his execution, or when his execution is being prepared, he speaks with an unmatched grandeur and beauty. To the troop that is come to look for him, armed and snarling, he says: "Put up your bright swords or the dew will rust them!" [I. ii. 59]. And when at last he has been brought to bay he dies by that significant contrivance of remembering how

he had defended the state when it was traduced, and in reviving this distant blow for his own demise. The great words roll on in your ears as the curtain falls:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once. . . .
IV. ii. 352]

Iago is made to say:

The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature.
[II. 1. 288-89]

But we do not need, this testimony to feel, in all our dealings with this simplest and grandest of his creations. that we are meant to be in the presence of an absolute purity of human guilelessness, a generosity as grand and unaffected, although quick and, "being wrought, Perplexed in the extreme" [V. ii. 345-46], as deep as that of his divine inventor.

There is no utterance in the whole of Shakespeare's plays that reveals the nobleness of his genius and of its intentions in the same way as the speech with which Othello closes:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and
they know it.
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;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being
wrought,
Perplex'd 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. . . .
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 turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog.
And smote him-thus.
IV. ii. 338-48, 350-56]
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And it is the speech of a military hero, as simple-hearted as Hotspur *[in Richard II* and 1 *Henry IV].* The tremendous and childlike pathos of this simple creature, broken by intrigue so easily and completely, is one of the most significant things for the comprehension of Shakespeare's true thought. For why should so much havoc ensue from the crude "management" of a *very* ordinary intriguer? It is no great devil that is pitted against him: and so much faultless affection is destroyed with such a mechanical facility. He is a *toy* in the hands of a person so much less real than himself; in every sense, human and divine. so immeasurably inferior.

And say besides, that in Aleppo once.

This unhappy child, caught in the fatal machinery of "Shakespearian tragedy," just as he might have been by an accident in the well-known world, remembers, with a measureless pathos, an event in the past to his credit, recalled as an afterthought, and thrown in at the last moment, a poor counter of "honour." to set against the violence to which he has been driven by the whisperings of things that have never existed.

And it is *we* who are intended to respond to these events, as the Venetian, Lodovico, does, when he apostrophizes Iago, describing him as:

More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!

[IV. ii. 362]

The eloquence of that apostrophe is the measure of the greatness of the heart that we have seen attacked and overcome. We cannot take that as an eloquent outburst only: it was an expression of the author's conviction of the irreparable nature of the offence. because of the purity of the nature that had suffered. The green light of repugnance and judgment is thrown on to the small mechanical villain at the last. (pp. 190-93)

Wyndham Lewis. "Othello as *the Typical Colossus." in his* The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare, 1927. *Reprint by Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1955, pp. 190-98.*

Critical Essay #7

[Bradley closely investigates Iago's character by examining his soliloquies. Finding that the motives of hatred and ambition inadequately account for Iago's actions. Bradley stresses the importance of the characters sense of superiority and his self-interest in determining his behavior. Iago's ego, wounded by the denial of promotion, demands satisfaction, and his schemes and manipulations allow him to reestablish his sense of power and dominance over others. Bradley also finds that Iago is motivated by a love of excitement and by his perception of himself as an artist He derives great pleasure from the successful execution of his complex and dangerous intrigues. The critic concludes that Iago's evil is comprehensible and therefore human rather than demonic. For further commentary on Iago's character, see Bradley's other essay and the excerpts by D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, Wyndham Lewis, and Henry L. Warnken.]

[Let us] consider the rise of Iago's tragedy. Why did he act as we see him acting in the play? What is the answer to that appeal of Othello's:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and
body?
IV. ii. 301-02]

This question Why? is *the* question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? is *the* question about Hamlet. Iago refused to answer it; but I will venture to say that he *could* not have answered it, any more than Hamlet could tell why he delayed. But Shakespeare knew the answer, and if these characters are great creations and not blunders we ought to be able to find it too.

Is it possible to elicit it from Iago himself against his will? He makes various statements to Roderigo, and he has several soliloquies. From these sources, and especially from the latter, we should learn something. For with Shakespeare soliloquy generally gives information regarding the secret springs as well as the outward course of the plot; and, moreover, it is a curious point of technique with him that the soliloquies of his villains sometimes read almost like explanations offered to the audience. Now, Iago repeatedly offers explanations either to Roderigo or to himself. In the first place, he says more than once that he 'hates' Othello. He gives two reasons for his hatred. Othello has made Cassio lieutenant; and he suspects, and has heard it reported, that Othello has an intrigue with Emilia. Next there is Cassio. He never says he hates Cassio, but he finds in him three causes of offence: Cassio has been preferred to him; he suspects *him* too of an intrigue with Emilia; and, lastly, Cassio has a daily beauty in his life which makes Iago ugly. In addition to these annoyances he wants Cassio's place. As for Roderigo, he calls him a snipe, and who can hate a snipe? But Roderigo knows too much; and he is becoming a nuisance, getting angry, and asking for the gold and jewels he handed to Iago to give to Desdemona. So Iago kills Roderigo. Then for Desdemona; a fig's-end for her virtue! but he has no ill-will to her. In fact he 'loves' her, though he is good enough to explain, varying the word, that his 'lust' is mixed with a desire to pay Othello in his own

coin. To be sure she must die, and so must Emilia, and so would Bianca if only the authorities saw things in their true light; but he did not set out with any hostile design against these persons.

Is the account which Iago gives of the causes of his action the true account? The answer of the most popular view will be, 'Yes. Iago was, as he says, chiefly incited by two things, the desire of advancement, and a hatred of Othello due principally to the affair of the lieutenancy. These are perfectly intelligible causes; we have only to add to them unusual ability and cruelty, and all is explained. Why should Coleridge and Hazlitt and Swinburne go further afield?' [see Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism,* edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor; William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespear's Plays;* and Algernon Charles Swinburne's *A Study* of *Shakespeare].* To which last question I will at once oppose these: If your view is correct, why should Iago be considered an extraordinary creation; and is it not odd that the people who reject it are the people who elsewhere show an exceptional understanding of Shakespeare?

The difficulty about this popular view is, in the first place, that it attributes to Iago what cannot be found in the Iago of the play. Its Iago is impelled by *passions,* a passion of ambition and a passion of hatred; for no ambition or hatred short of passion could drive a man who is evidently so clear-sighted, and who must hitherto have been so prudent, into a plot so extremely hazardous. Why, then, in the Iago of the play do we find no sign of these passions or of anything approaching to them? Why, if Shakespeare meant that Iago was impelled by them, does he suppress the signs of them? Surely not from want of ability to display them. The poet who painted Macbeth and Shylock [in *The Merchant of Venice]* understood his business. Who ever doubted Macbeth's ambition or Shylock's hate? And what resemblance is there between these passions and any feeling that we can trace in Iago? The resemblance between a volcano in eruption and a flameless fire of coke; the resemblance between a consuming desire to hack and hew your enemy's flesh, and the resentful wish, only too familiar in common life, to inflict pain in return for a slight. Passion, in Shakespeare's plays, is perfectly easy to recognise. What vestige of it, of passion unsatisfied or of passion gratified, is visible in Iago? None: that is the very horror of him. He has *less* passion than an ordinary man, and yet he does these frightful things. The only ground for attributing to him, I do not say a passionate hatred. but anything deserving the name of hatred at all, is his own statement, 'I hate Othello'; and we know what his statements are worth.

But the popular view, beside attributing to Iago what he does not show, ignores what he does show. It selects from his own account of his motives one or two, and drops the rest; and so it makes everything natural. But it fails to perceive how unnatural, how strange and suspicious, his own account is. Certainly he assigns motives enough; the difficulty is that he assigns so many. A man moved by simple passions due to simple causes does not stand fingering his feelings, industriously enumerating their sources, and groping about for new ones. But this is what Iago does. And this is not all. These motives appear and disappear in the most extraordinary manner. Resentment at Cassio's appointment is expressed in the first conversation with Roderigo, and from that moment is never once mentioned again in the whole play. Hatred of Othello is expressed in the First Act alone. Desire to get Cassio's place scarcely appears after the

first soliloquy, and when it is gratified Iago does not refer to it by a single word. The suspicion of Cassio's intrigue with Emilia emerges suddenly, as an after-thought, not in the first soliloquy but the second, and then disappears for ever. Iago's 'love' of Desdemona is alluded to in the second soliloquy; there is not the faintest trace of it in word or deed either before or after. The mention of jealousy of Othello is followed by declarations that Othello is infatuated about Desdemona and is of a constant nature. and during Othello's sufferings Iago never shows a sign of the idea that he is now paying his rival in his own coin. In the second soliloquy he declares that he quite believes Cassio to be in love with Desdemona. It is obvious that he believes no such thing. for he never alludes to the idea again, and within a few hours describes Cassio in soliloquyas an honest fool. His final reason for ill-will to Cassio never appears till the Fifth Act.

What is the meaning of all this? Unless Shakespeare was out of his mind it must have a meaning. And certainly this meaning is not contained in any of the popular accounts of Iago.

Is it contained then in Coleridge's word 'motive-hunting'? Yes, 'motive-hunting' exactly answers to the impression that Iago's soliloquies produce. He is pondering his design, and unconsciously trying to justify it to himself. He speaks of one or two real feelings, such as resentment against Othello. And he mentions one or two real causes of these feelings, such as resentment against Othello, and he mentions one or two real causes of these feelings. But these are not enough for him. Along with them, or alone. there come into his head only to leave it again, ideas and suspicions, the creations of his own baseness or uneasiness, some old, some new, caressed for a moment to feed his purpose and give it a reasonable look. but never really believed in. and never the main forces which are determining his action. In fact, I would venture to describe Iago in these soliloquies as a man setting out on a project which strongly attracts his desire. But at the same time conscious of a resistance to the desire, and unconsciously trying to argue the resistance away by assigning reasons for the project. He is the counterpart of Hamlet, who tries to find reasons for his delay in pursuing a design which excites his aversion. And most of Iago's reasons for action are no more the real ones than Hamlet's reasons for delay were the real ones. Each is moved by forces which he does not understand: and it is probably no accident that these two studies of states psychologically so similar were produced at about the same period.

What then were the real moving forces of Iago's action? Are we to fall back on the idea of a 'motiveless malignity;' that is to say, a disinterested love of evil. or a delight in the pain of others as simple and direct as the delight in one's own pleasure? Surely not. I will not insist that this thing or these things are inconceivable, mere phrases, not ideas; for, even so, it would remain possible that Shakespeare had tried to represent inconceivability. But there is not the slightest reason to suppose that he did so. Iago's action is intelligible; and indeed the popular view contains enough truth to refute this desperate theory. It greatly exaggerates his desire for advancement, and the ill-will caused by his disappointment, and it ignores other forces more important than these; but it is right in insisting on the presence of this desire and this ill-will, and their presence is enough to destroy Iago's claims to be more than a demi-devil. For love of

the evil that advances my interest and hurts a person I dislike, is a very different thing from love of evil simply as evil; and pleasure in the pain of a person disliked or regarded as a competitor is quite distinct from pleasure in the pain of others simply as others. The first is intelligible, and we find it in Iago. The second, even if it were intelligible, we do not find in Iago.

Still, desire of advancement and resentment about the lieutenancy, though factors and indispensable factors in the cause of Iago's action, are neither the principal nor the most characteristic factors. To find these, let us return to our half-completed analysis of the character. Let us remember especially the keen sense of superiority, the contempt of others, the sensitiveness to everything which wounds these feelings, the spite against goodness in men as a thing not only stupid but, both in its nature and by its success, contrary to Iago's nature and irritating to his pride. Let us remember in addition the annoyance of having always to playa part, the consciousness of exceptional but unused ingenuity and address, the enjoyment of action, and the absence of fear. And let us ask what would be the greatest pleasure of such a man, and what the situation which might tempt him to abandon his habitual prudence and pursue this pleasure. Hazlitt and Mr. Swinburne do not put this question, but the answer I proceed to give to it is in principle theirs.

The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved, secondly, the triumphant exertion of his abilities, and, thirdly, the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated. And the moment most dangerous to such a man would be one when his sense of superiority had met with an affront, so that its habitual craving was reinforced by resentment, while at the same time he saw an opportunity of satisfying it by subjecting to his will the very persons who had affronted it. Now, this is the temptation that comes to Iago. Othello's eminence, Othello's goodness, and his own dependence on Othello, must have been a perpetual annoyance to him. At *any* time he would have enjoyed befooling and tormenting Othello. Under ordinary circumstances he was restrained, chiefly by self-interest, in some slight degree perhaps by the faint pulsations of conscience or humanity. But disappointment at the loss of the lieutenancy supplied the touch of lively resentment that was required to overcome these obstacles; and the prospect of satisfying the sense of power by mastering Othello through an intricate and hazardous intrigue now became irresistible. Iago did not clearly understand what was moving his desire; though he tried to give himself reasons for his action, even those that had some reality made but a small part of the motive force; one may almost say they were no more than the turning of the handle which admits the driving power into the machine. Only once does he appear to see something of the truth. It is when he uses the phrase 'to *plume up my will* in double knavery' [I.iii. 393-94].

To 'plume up the will,' to heighten the sense of power or superiority-this seems to be the unconscious motive of many acts of cruelty which evidently do not spring chiefly from ill-will, and which therefore puzzle and sometimes horrify us most. It is often this that makes a man bully the wife or children of whom he is fond. The boy who torments another boy, as we say, 'for no reason,' or who without any hatred for frogs tortures a frog, is pleased with his victim's pain, not from any disinterested love of evil or pleasure

in pain, but mainly because this pain is the unmistakable proof of his own power over his victim. So it is with Iago. His thwarted sense of superiority wants satisfaction. What fuller satisfaction could it find than the consciousness that he is the master of the General who has undervalued him and of the rival who has been preferred to him; that these worthy people, who are so successful and popular and stupid, are mere puppets in his hands, but living puppets, who at the motion of his finger must contort themselves in agony, while all the time they believe that he is their one true friend and comforter? It must have been an ecstasy of bliss to him. And this, granted a most abnormal deadness of human feeling, is, however horrible, perfectly intelligible. There is no mystery in the psychology of Iago; the mystery lies in a further question, which the drama has not to answer, the question why such a being should exist.

Iago's longing to satisfy the sense of power is, I think, the strongest of the forces that drive him on. But there are two others to be noticed. One is the pleasure in an action very difficult and perilous and, therefore, intensely exciting. This action sets all his powers on the strain. He feels the delight of one who executes successfully a feat thoroughly congenial to his special aptitude, and only just within his compass; and, as he is fearless by nature, the fact that a single slip will cost him his life only increases his pleasure. His exhilaration breaks out in the ghastly words with which he greets the sunrise after the night of the drunken tumult which has led to Cassio's disgrace, 'By the mass, 'tis morning. Pleasure and action make the hours seem short' [II. iii. 378-79]. Here, however, the joy in exciting action is quickened by other feelings. It appears more simply elsewhere in such a way as to suggest that nothing but such actions gave him happiness, and that his happiness was greater if the action was destructive as well as exciting. We find it, for instance, in his gleeful cry to Roderigo, who proposes to shout to Brabantio in order to wake him and tell him of his daughter's flight:

Do, with like timorous accent and dire yell. As when, by night and negligence, the fire is spied in populous cities.

[I. i. 75-7]

All through that scene; again, in the scene where Cassio is attacked and Roderigo murdered; everywhere where Iago is in physical action, we catch this sound of almost feverish enjoyment. His blood, usually so cold and slow, is racing through his veins.

But Iago, finally, is not simply a man of action; he is an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and in the conception and execution of it he experiences the tension and the joy of artistic creation. 'He is,' says Hazlitt, 'an amateur of tragedy in real life; and, instead of employing his invention on imaginary characters or long-forgotten incidents, he takes the bolder and more dangerous course of getting up his plot at home, casts the principal parts among his nearest friends and connections, and rehearses it in downright earnest, with steady nerves and unabated resolution.' Mr. Swinburne lays even greater stress on this aspect of Iago's character, and even declares that 'the very subtlest and strongest component of his complex nature' is 'the instinct of what Mr. [Thomas] Carlyle would call an inarticulate poet.' And those to whom this idea is unfamiliar, and who may suspect it at first sight of being fanciful, will find, if

they examine the play in the light of Mr. Swinburne's exposition, that it rests on a true and deep perception, will stand scrutiny, and might easily be illustrated. They may observe, to take only one point, the curious analogy between the early stages of dramatic composition and those soliloquies in which Iago broods over his plot, drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work. Here at any rate Shakespeare put a good deal of himself into Iago. But the tragedian in real life was not the equal of the tragic poet. His psychology, as we shall see, was at fault at a critical point, as Shakespeare's never was. And so his catastrophe came out wrong, and his piece was ruined.

Such, then, seem to be the chief ingredients of the force which, liberated by his resentment at Cassio's promotion, drives Iago from inactivity into action, and sustains him through it. And, to pass to a new point, this force completely possesses him; it is his fate. It is like the passion with which a tragic hero wholly identifies himself, and which bears him on to his doom. It is true that, once embarked on his course, Iago *could* not turn back, even if this passion did abate; and it is also true that he is compelled, by his success in convincing Othello, to advance to conclusions of which at the outset he did not dream. He is thus caught in his own web, and could not liberate himself if he would. But, in fact, he never shows a trace of wishing to do so, not a trace of hesitation, of looking back, or of fear, any more than of remorse; there is no ebb in the tide. As the crisis approaches there passes through his mind a fleeting doubt whether the deaths of Cassio and Roderigo are indispensable; but that uncertainty, which does not concern the main issue, is dismissed, and he goes forward with undiminished zest. Not even in his sleep-as in Richard's before his final battle-does any rebellion of outraged conscience or pity, or any foreboding of despair, force itself into clear consciousness. His fate which is himself-has completely mastered him: so that, in the later scenes, where the improbability of the entire success of a design built on so many different falsehoods forces itself on the reader, Iago appears for moments not as a consummate schemer, but as a man absolutely infatuated and delivered over to certain destruction.

Iago stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices-such as ingratitude and cruelty-which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect. In the latter respect Iago is nearly or quite the equal of Richard, in egoism he is the superior, and his inferiority in passion and massive force only makes him more repulsive. How is it then that we can bear to contemplate him; nay, that, if we really imagine him, we feel admiration and some kind of sympathy? Henry the Fifth tells us:

There is some soul of goodness in things
evil,

Would men observingly distil it out;
[Henry V, IV. i. 4-5]

but here, it may be said, we are shown a thing absolutely evil, and-what is more dreadful still-this absolute evil is united with supreme intellectual power. Why is the representation tolerable, and why do we not accuse its author either of untruth or of a desperate pessimism?

To these questions it might at once be replied: Iago does not stand alone; he is a factor in a whole; and we perceive him there and not in isolation, acted upon as well as acting, destroyed as well as destroying. But, although this is true and important, I pass it by and, continuing to regard him by himself, I would make three remarks in answer to the questions.

In the first place, Iago is not merely negative or evil-far from it. Those very forces that moved him and made his fate-sense of power, delight in performing a difficult and dangerous action, delight in the exercise of artistic skill-are not at all evil things. We sympathise with one or other of them almost every day of our lives. And, accordingly, though in Iago they are combined with something detestable and so contribute to evil, our perception of them is accompanied with sympathy. In the same way, Iago's insight, dexterity, quickness, address, and the like, are in themselves admirable things; the perfect man would possess them. And certainly he would possess also Iago's courage and self-control, and, like Iago, would stand above the impulses of mere feeling, lord of his inner world.

All this goes to evil ends in Iago, but in itself it has a great worth; and, although in reading, of course, we do not sift it out and regard it separately, it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror.

All this, however, might apparently co-exist with absolute egoism and total want of humanity. But, in the second place, it is not true that in Iago this egoism and this want are absolute, and that in this sense he is a thing of mere evil. They are frightful, but if they were absolute Iago would be a monster, not a man. The fact is. he *tries* to make them absolute and cannot succeed; and the traces of conscience, shame and humanity, though faint, are discernible. If his egoism were absolute he would be perfectly indifferent to the opinion of others; and he clearly is not so. His very irritation at goodness, again, is a sign that his faith in his creed is not entirely firm; and it is not entirely firm because he himself has a perception, however dim, of the goodness of goodness. What is the meaning of the last reason he gives himself for killing Cassio:

He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly?
[V. i. 19-20]

Does he mean that he is ugly to others? Then he is not an absolute egoist. Does he mean that he is ugly to himself? Then he makes an open confession of moral sense. And. once more, if he really possessed no moral sense, we should never have heard

those soliloquies which so clearly betray his uneasiness and his unconscious desire to persuade himself that he has some excuse for the villainy he contemplates. These seem to be indubitable proofs that, against his will, Iago is a little better than his creed, and has failed to withdraw himself wholly from the human atmosphere about him. And to these proofs I would add, though with less confidence, two others. Iago's momentary doubt towards the end whether Roderigo and Cassio must be killed has always surprised me. As a mere matter of calculation it is perfectly obvious that they must; and I believe his hesitation is not merely intellectual, it is another symptom of the obscure working of conscience or humanity. Lastly, is it not significant that, when once his plot has begun to develop, Iago never seeks the presence of Desdemona; that he seems to leave her as quickly as he can [III. iv. 138]; and that, when he is fetched by Emilia to see her in her distress [IV. ii. 110], we fail to catch in his words any sign of the pleasure he shows in Othello's misery, and seem rather to perceive a certain discomfort, and, if one dare say it, a faint touch of shame or remorse? This interpretation of the passage, I admit, is not inevitable, but to my mind (quite apart from any theorising about Iago) it seems the natural one. And if it is right, Iago's discomfort is easily understood; for Desdemona is the one person concerned against whom it is impossible for him even to imagine a ground of resentment, and so an excuse for cruelty.

There remains, thirdly, the idea that Iago is a man of supreme intellect who is at the same time supremely wicked. That he is supremely wicked nobody will doubt; and I have claimed for him nothing that will interfere with his right to that title. But to say that his intellectual power is supreme is to make a great mistake. Within certain limits he has indeed extraordinary penetration, quickness, inventiveness, adaptiveness; but the limits are defined with the hardest of lines, and they are narrow limits. It would scarcely be unjust to call him simply astonishingly clever, or simply a consummate master of intrigue. But compare him with one who may perhaps fie roughly called a bad man of supreme intellectual power, Napoleon, and you see how small and negative Iago's mind is, incapable of Napoleon's military achievements, and much more incapable of his political constructions. Or, to keep within the Shakespearean world, compare him with Hamlet, and you perceive how miserably close is his intellectual horizon; that such a thing as a thought beyond the reaches of his soul has never come near him; that he is prosaic through and through, deaf and blind to all but a tiny fragment of the meaning of things. Is it not quite absurd, then, to call him a man of supreme intellect?

And observe, lastly, that his failure in perception is closely connected with his badness. He was destroyed by the power that he attacked, the power of love; and he was destroyed by it because he could not understand it; and he could not understand it because it was not in him. Iago never meant his plot to be so dangerous to himself. He knew that jealousy is painful, but the jealousy of a love like Othello's he could not imagine, and he found himself involved in murders which were no part of his original design. That difficulty he surmounted, and his changed plot still seemed to prosper. Roderigo and Cassio and Desdemona once dead, all will be well. Nay, when he fails to kill Cassio, all may still be well. He will avow that he told Othello of the adultery, and persist that he told the truth, and Cassio will deny it in vain. And then, in a moment, his plot is shattered by a blow from a quarter where he never dreamt of danger. He knows his wife, he thinks. She is not over-scrupulous, she will do anything to please him, and

she has learnt obedience. But one thing in her he does not know-that she *loves* her mistress and would face a hundred deaths sooner than see her fair fame darkened. There is genuine astonishment in his outburst 'What! Are you mad?' [V. ii. 194] as it dawns upon him that she means to speak the truth about the handkerchief. But he might well have applied himself the words she flings at Othello,

a gull! a dolt!
As ignorant as dirt!
[V. ii. 163-64]

The foulness of his own soul made him so ignorant that he built into the marvellous structure of his plot a piece of crass stupidity.

To the thinking mind the divorce of unusual intellect from goodness is a thing to startle; and Shakespeare clearly felt it so. The combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil is more than startling, it is frightful. It is rare, but it exists; and Shakespeare represented it in Iago. But the alliance of evil like Iago's with *supreme* intellect is an impossible fiction; and Shakespeare's fictions were truth. (pp. 222-37)

A. C. *Bradley, "Othello," in his* Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet. Othello, King Lear. Macbeth, *second edition, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1905, pp. 207-42.*

Critical Essay #8

[Warnken examines the relationship between Iago and Othello, determining that while Iago's evil corrupts Othello, the potential for evil already lurked within the Moor-Iago merely frees his capacity for evil. Iago's strengths-his ability to quickly exploit situations, his knowledge of human nature, and his innate cunning-exploit Othello's weaknesses-sensitivity, pride, insecurity, and short sightedness. The critic finds that Othello gradually adopts Iago's speech patterns and worldview, and by the play's end Iago "penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing as he does so, the evil already present within Othello." Thus, Othello ends the play dominated by the emotions over which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he had control. By succumbing to these emotions, he destroys himself. For further commentary on the character of Iago, see the excerpts by A. C. *Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, and Wyndham Lewis.]*

Iago is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest villain. He is hate and evil made physical, the most fully developed member of a group of characters that includes Richard III, Edmund [in *King Lear*] *,* and Ganeril and Regan [in *King Lear*]. Bernard Spivack, in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil,* has suggested that Iago is the medieval Vice given new life by Shakespeare [the Morality Play character Vice would tempt the protagonist].

Such a judgment is correct; but it would be misleading to conclude that Othello is the embodiment of goodness and trust, and therefore, nothing more than the innocent foil for the other's wickedness. Othello is. in fact, the source of Iago's diabolical inspiration. He contains within himself the potential for evil. Iago could never have succeeded in his designs were it not for Othello's dark suspicions, his predisposition to mistrust and the sense of inferiority it breeds.

Iago repeatedly tries to justify his actions with the same kind of superficial self-righteousness manifested by Othello. He feels and thinks that he has been cheated, betrayed, made a fool of by others but he has no proof. His arguments for revenge are built on suspicion, feeling, emotion, and impulse. He has no proof, for example, that Othello-or Cassio-has committed adultery with Emilia; he acts merely on suggestion and rationalization. In this he is remarkably similar to Othello, who also has a habit of accepting things at face value, acting on impulse and suspicion rather than on proof. Because he acts and thinks in this manner, Othello-like Iago-comes to accept the notion that mankind is moved only by the most selfish motives. Desdemona herself assumes this aspect in his eyes. Othello comes to see her with the same warped and corrupted imagination displayed by Iago.

Iago is clearly evil; but as the play progresses, Othello appears less good, less innocent than the public image of the opening scenes may lead one to suppose. Iago may manipulate Othello, but Othello is no mere puppet. By the middle of the play, his thoughts and feelings echo Iago's. He is the medium through which Iago works his diabolical plans-but he is a willing medium, responding to Iago's suggestions with the same kind of pseudo-rational justification Iago has insisted on as an excuse for his own

actions. Iago thus emerges as a *projection* of Othello, the full embodiment of the weaknesses and limitations of the other. Iago feeds on the errors that result from Othello's self-deception; but he himself is deceived in his vision of the world. For him, mankind is corruptible; love is a mere illusion; women are inferior beings. He acts on these assumptions in the same way that Othello acts on his warped vision of love, trust, and honor. Both act on a false set of premises. The relationship thus established is reflected and magnified, as will be seen, in the imagery and verbal patterns of the play.

One of the most striking of Iago's characteristics is his uncanny ability to take advantage of the situations and opportunities presented to him. His strategy, of course, does not succeed completely: Cassio remains alive, and Iago himself is captured and his plot revealed. On the whole, however, he is unbelievably successful. In his hands, the slightest shred of gossip, hearsay, or overheard conversation becomes a dangerous catalyst, a catalyst that intensifies Othello's reaction to the facts and situations Iago places before him.

Othello is easy prey for Iago because he is extremely sensitive and prone to anger. So long as his confidence remains unshaken, he has complete command of a situation. This is clearly seen when Brabantio, Roderigo, and others, threaten to attack him:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew
will rust them.
Good signior, you shall more command
with years
Than with your weapons.
[I. ii. 59-61]

When moved to anger, however, he tends to ignore reason-as when he comes upon the drunken Cassio, following the street fight engineered by Iago:

Now. by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment
collied,
Assays to lead the way.
[II. iii. 204-07]

Iago has already understood Othello's tendency to react without reason to a situation which touches him personally. He understands well that Othello's emotions feed and wax violent on doubt, that he seems to have a built-in capacity for self-deception, which can be utilized by Iago for his own ends. He works especially on Othello's doubt-planted in him by Brabantio's statements early in the play-that perhaps his marriage to Desdemona is a perversion of nature; he plays on Othello's ignorance of life and people, especially in Venice, and on his inability to distinguish between appearance and reality.

The Moor is of a free and open nature.
That thinks men honest that but seem to
be so.
[I. iii. 399-400]

Othello's judgment of Iago is, of course, the best illustration of this. "He holds me well" [I. iii. 390], Iago reminds us, but he himself is a much severer judge:

. . . little godliness I have. . .
[I. ii. 9]
. . . oft my jealousy Shapes faults that are not. . .
[III. iii. 147-48]
I am a very villain. . . .
[IV. i. 125]

The recognition of the contradiction between appearance and reality in his own case gives Iago the confidence he needs to turn fiction into fact and convince Othello that fair is foul. He correctly evaluates Othello's love for Desdemona:

Our General's wife is now the General. . . for. . . he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces.
[II. iii. 314-15, 316-18]
His soul is. . . enfetter'd to her love
[II. iii. 345]

-but he has no doubt about his ability to undermine that reality. He succeeds very often with a mere hint-as, for example, the suggestion that Desdemona cannot possibly escape the corruption for which the Venetian women (he implies) are notorious:

In Venice they do let heaven see the
pranks
They dare not show their husbands.
[III. iii. 202-03]

In the eyes of others, Iago is understandably "brave," "honest," and "just," for he invariably calls upon the virtues of others to effect their fall. It is the soldier's fearlessness, his impulsive response in critical situations, which he plays upon to bring Othello to ruin. Defending his marriage to Desdemona before the Duke and others in a council chamber. Othello reminds them that

. . . since these arms of mine had seven
years' pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they
have us'd
Their dearest action in the tented field;
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broil and

battle.
[I. iii. 83-7]

He has known the battlefield and war since early youth. He is a soldier, and therefore accustomed to hardship and cruelty. He himself admits that he can withstand hardship, and may even be stimulated by it:

I do agnize
A natural and prompt alacrity
I find in hardness.
[I. iii. 231-33]

He is also accustomed to acting quickly and making decisions rapidly, concentrating on the present state of affairs, rather than future consequences. In Act II Scene 3, when he puts an end to the drunken brawl going on when he enters, Othello immediately demands the name of the man who started it. The first man he asks is Iago. Iago lies, saying he does not know. Finding no answer here, he turns to Cassio himself. Again, no answer, so he turns to Montano. But he, too, refuses to point a finger, and consequently, Othello learns nothing. He knows what he wants, but he lacks the reason to show him the means to obtain it. It never once enters his mind that he could see each man personally and perhaps in this manner arrive at something reasonably close to the truth. But as the situation stands at that moment, he cannot understand it; his "passion" begins "to lead the way" and his "best judgment" is obscured [II. iii. 206-07]. The whole matter is "monstrous." The proof he finally does accept is Iago's; he makes no real attempt to hear Cassio. Othello's actions here reflect his military manner of thinking. On the field, when danger and uncertainty threaten, one must gather facts as quickly as possible, reach a decision, and implement it. Such a method of handling things may succeed brilliantly when employed on the battleground; but when used in every-day life, when used with respect to one's wife and friends, the results may be disastrous. Physically, Othello is living like a civilian; mentally, like a soldier. When a domestic problem arises he tries to solve it as if he were on the battlefield. Cassio is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Cassio is dismissed. Desdemona is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Desdemona is murdered.

Othello is quick to make decisions and act upon them, and so is Iago. Although Iago makes some attempt to reason out his plans. his reasoning nevertheless comes in flashes; a moment's reason for a moment's advancement. As soon as his plan "is engendr'd," he acts quickly so that he will "Dull not device by coldness and delay" [II. iii. 388]. Later in the play, going to plant Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room, Iago senses that "this may do something" [III. iii. 324]. Like Othello, Iago also knows war. He has served with Othello at Rhodes and Cyprus and has, of course, " . . . in the trade of war. . . slain men" [I. ii. 1]. Although Othello seems to seek understanding rather than destruction, he emerges, in the course of the play, as the image of Iago even in this respect; in his very attempts to understand Desdemona, he will destroy her.

The focal point of the entire play is Act III Scene 3, and it is here that Othello begins to show most clearly his Iago-like traits, attitudes. and verbal patterns. Watching Cassio leave Desdemona, Iago sets things in motion by exclaiming, "Ha! I like not that" [III. iii. 35]. Iago speaks it but Othello thinks it, for he adds, "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" [III. iii. 37]. Iago answers that it could not have been Cassio, for he would never "steal away so guilty-like" [III. iii. 39]. And Othello replies. "I do believe 'twas he" [III. iii. 40], beginning to confirm the doubts he haS in his own mind.

Later, defending Cassio (and trying to help him regain Othello's friendship), Desdemona describes him as the one "that came a-wooing with you" [III.iii. 71]. Iago catches this and quickly makes use of it:

Iago. Did Michael Cassio, when you
woo'd my lady, '
Know of your love?
Oth. He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?
Iago. But for a satisfaction of my thought;
No further harm.
[III. iii. 94-8]

Iago here is the doubt in Othello's own mind. Othello suspects Desdemona and Cassio, and although Iago asks the questions, they are merely "echoes" of Othello's own thoughts. He does not realize how closely Iago's words match his thoughts, but he does recognize that what is in Iago's mind is a "monster," a thing "too hideous to be shown" [III. iii. 108]. Whenever Othello cannot understand something it is "monstrous"; he describes the drunken brawl in Act II Scene 3 in the same way; and later, when Iago tells him of Cassio's supposed dream (in which he makes love to Desdemona) that, too, is "monstrous." Whatever Othello cannot comprehend he sees as some hideous creation; but the creation, in a very real sense, is his own. It is his because in demanding proof, he has already accepted the implications in Iago's veiled accusations. He will accept anything that seems like proof, or rather, anything that "honest" Iago offers him as proof. Interestingly enough, he always demands proof from others: he never seeks it on his own initiative.

Iago is very close to Othello in the sense that he, too, never really obtains proof for the things he fears or believes others have done to him. He lacks proof, for example, that Othello and Cassio have committed adultery with Emilia. And he obviously lacks proof for many of the things he tells Othello about Desdemona. It is perhaps this tendency to accept things blindly, on a kind of perverted faith, that enables Iago to reach Othello so readily with the most far-fetched insinuations and concocted stories.

The more twisted and perverted the information Iago gives to Othello, the more Othello seems to believe it. He still fails to understand Iago: "I know thou'rt full of love and honesty" [III. iii. 118]. Iago, true, honest friend that he is. warns Othello to "beware. . . of jealousy" for it is a "green-ey'd monster" [III. iii. 165-66]. His thoughts are running parallel to Othello's and he uses one of the words Othello originally borrowed from him when he denotes something as monstrous.

Othello, constantly hindered by his limited understanding of others, cannot determine where he stands:

I think my wife be honest. and think she
Is not:
I think that thou art just. and think thou
art not.
I'll have some proof. . . .
Would I were satisfied!
[III. iii. 384-86, 390]

And Iago answers:

I see, sir. you are eaten up with passion.
[III. iii. 39 l]

He has seen Othello like this before, in Act II Scene 3. when he could not comprehend the reasons for the street fight:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule.
[II. iii. 205]
>

The Moor's passion runs over his reason. and he asks Iago:

Give me a living reason she's disloyal.
[III. iii. 409]

Once again he wants proof, but asks for it, instead of trying to obtain it on his own. Instead of using his own reasoning, he lets Iago do it for him. Iago now goes on to describe how he heard Cassio murmuring in his sleep about his love-making to Desdemona. Othello, still incapable of understanding fully what is happening. utters his old cry "O monstrous! monstrous!" and Iago replies, "Nay, this was but his dream" [III. iii. 427]. But in Othello's mind this dream "denoted a foregone conclusion" [III. iii. 428]. Othello accepts the dream partly because in his aroused emotional state he will believe virtually anything, and partly because Iago, by describing the dream, makes audible the thoughts in Othello's own mind. Though Iago may tell the dream. Othello has already thought it: the dream, in sense, is his own. Iago confirms Othello's own doubts and suspicions.

Iago can easily strengthen such doubts because the two men are so similar. For example, Iago often speaks in a brusque, harsh manner; now Othello speaks in the same way:

I'll tear her all to pieces.
[III. iii. 431] I would have him [Cassio] nine years akilling!
[IV. i. 178] Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damn'd tonight; for she shall not live.
[IV. i. 181-82]

Othello can speak this way ofDesdemona, because he is ready to "see" that what Iago has been telling him is "true." What Iago tells him merely reinforces his own doubts and fears; proof is not really necessary since Iago's words merely echo Othello's own dark judgments. As the identity between the designs of Iago and the conclusions of the Moor becomes more explicit, Othello comes to sound like Iago more and more. In Act I, Iago had exclaimed:

I have't! It is engend'red! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the
world's light.
[1. iii. 403-04]

And later:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on.
[II. iii. 350-51]

Othello soon swears revenge in much the same terms:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow
hell!
[III. iii. 447]

Othello, full of "bloody thoughts," now demands "blood, blood, blood" [III.iii.457, 451], the very word used by Iago on a number of earlier occasions.

Othello's thoughts are now as evil as Iago's, and to think like Iago is to speak like him. Now, in his bewilderment and the confusion brought on by his lack of reason and discrimination, Othello takes evil for good and good for evil. Desdemona has become a "devil" and Iago is now Othello's "lieutenant:' And when Iago utters. "I am your own for ever" [III.iii.479], he echoes the earlier words that Othello spoke to him:

I am bound to thee for ever
[III. iii. 213].

Iago continues to work upon Othello, and in Act IV Scene I, he plans to have Cassio talk about Bianca, and Othello, hiding and listening, will think that he is speaking aoout Desdemona. But before Othello goes behind his hiding place, Iago urges him to "mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns that dwell in every region of his [Cassio's] face" [IV. i. 82-3]. Othello accepts Iago's words because they reflect what he has already conceived in his own mind. He agrees with Iago's picture of Cas sio because he himself pictures the former officer in the same way. After the conversation between Iago,

Cassio, and later, Bianca, Othello emerges from his hiding place completely convinced of Cassio's guilt: "How shall I murther him, Iago?" [IV. i. 170]. His emotions are so intense and his desire for vengeance so strong, that he forgets that Iago has already promised to kill Cassio:

Oth. Within these three days let me hear
thee say That Cassio's not alive.
Iago. My friend is dead; 'tis done at your
request.
[III. iii. 472-74]

He has, for the moment, lost all love for Desdemona, for his "heart is turn'd to stone" [IV. i. 182]. Iago at this point reinforces practically everything Othello says. The two seem in perfect accord. Iago's success is assured; all he does from this time on is to elaborate the evil Othello has come to acknowledge within himself. The following dialogue is, in a sense, the workings of one mind:

Oth. 1 will chop her into messes! Cuck
old me!
Iago. 0, 'tis foul in her.
Oth. With mine officer! *Iago.* That's fouler.
Oth. Get me some poison, Iago, this
night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago!
Iago. Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.
Oth. Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!
[IV. i. 200-10]

Parallels such as this between Iago and Othello are reinforced by the imagery and verbal echoes found in the play. One of the primary patterns of imagery is that of animals, and more than half of these images are Iago's. The animals which he mentions are usually small and repellent in some way, whether it be for their ugliness, filth, cunning, or some other quality the reader normally associates with them. Iago's use of such images can be seen when he and Roderigo come at night to awake Brabantio in order to tell him that his daughter has eloped with Othello and is by now married to him. Othello's happiness must be destroyed by constant irritation, and he tells Roderigo:

Plague him with flies.
[I. i. 71]

Animal and sexual images are combined in his conversation with Brabantio:

Even now, now, very now, an old black
ram
Is tupping your white ewe.
[I.i. 88-9]

. . . you'll have your daughter cover'd
with a Barbary horse.
[I.i.111-12]
. . . your daughter and the Moor are
now making the beast with two backs.
[I. i. 116-17]

With such terms Iago reveals his firm conviction that all love is lust. By using imagery of this kind he provides a powerful emotional accompaniment for his arguments, which are designed to convince Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago plays upon Othello's fear that Desdemona might some day deceive him as she did her father. He manages to twist Othello's view of his own marriage until it appears to be nothing more than a perversion of nature, and corrupts his image of Desdemona, until she seems to be nothing but a prostitute.

These patterns of animal, sexual and other images are highly important, because they underline the close similarities that exist between the two apparently different personalities. It is perhaps even more significant to note that such patterns of imagery abound in Iago's speech, initially, but are gradually absorbed and taken over by Othello as his mind and speech become twisted and corrupted by the evil rising up within him. Throughout the early part of the play, Iago makes repeated references to animals, most of them possessing cruel and despicable traits. He mentions the fox, with its selfish cunning, the ass, with its stupidity, the baboon, the locust, the spider, the wolf, the fly, the goat, and others. Through images such as these, he suggests stealth and evil, lechery, disease, and disaster. Such imagery reinforces Iago's view of life and people as things governed by animal instinct. Iago's world is similar in this respect to that in *King Lear,* where human beings are reduced to nothing more than a dog-eat-dog relationship. From Act III Scene 3 onward Othello joins Iago in the habit of seeing and describing things in terms of repulsive or dangerous animals. He echoes the earlier references to the goat, toad, dog, asp, worm, raven, bear, crocodile, monkey, and fly. . . . The progression is clear: the images used by Iago are gradually taken over by Othello. Words such as *monster, monstrous,* and *beast,* follow a similar pattern, as does another group of images which refers to parts of the human body-blood, arms, ear, heart, lips, brain, legs. In the beginning of the play it is Iago who uses these images most frequently. But in the third act, Othello becomes their chief spokesman, and remains so for the rest of the play. (pp. 1-12)

Readers of the play cannot help noticing the fact that Iago very often speaks of things in terms of imagery that contains connotations of, or outright references to, sex, lust, lechery, and prostitution. Iago is the first to use terms such as these, but when Othello begins to see and value things as Iago does, he, too, begins to use these images and, when he does, uses them with greater frequency than does Iago. The frequency and the shift of these images from one character to the other reinforces the pattern we have already defined. . . In *Shakespeare Survey* 5, S. L. Bethell discusses the shift in the use of diabolical images such as hell, devil, fiend, and damn, noting that Iago introduces these references, but Othello takes them over as evil increases its hold upon him. (pp. 12-13)

All of these patterns of imagery and verbal echoes elaborate and stress the change in Othello and the release of the latent evil within him, Iago being the spark that ignites it. But whereas Iago recognizes evil for what it is, Othello must regard it as a good in order to accept it; for him it becomes a means for obtaining justice and destroying those whom he considers corrupt-Cassio and Desdemona.

By the end of the play, Othello has become a man dominated and possessed by the very emotions which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he was not subject to. He thought he had perfect control over his emotions; he felt he could handle any situation, and often said so with colorful imagery:

Were it my cue to fight, I should have
known it
Without a prompter.
[I. ii. 82-3]

He proclaimed himself free from the heated passions of youth:

-the young affects
In me defunct
[I. iii. 263-64]

But his actions in the course of the play show that he does *not* have control over his emotions, and that he does *not* have the ability to handle any situation. The image he has of himself is as erroneous as his understanding of others. His ability to weigh and evaluate character and action is limited; and when caught in the mire of something he cannot comprehend, he often asks a series of questions, begging assistance, and ends with a half-pleading,

Give me answer to't.
[II. iii. 196]

And, of course, Iago is always ready to trigger Othello's buried passion and evil. Iago, like Othello, gropes about and makes hasty use of the materials he finds-gossip, hearsay, rumor-and with these tries and succeeds in giving direction and assistance to Othello's stumbling thoughts. He is a diabolic crutch, providing the assistance and direction that Othello craves. It is only at the very end of the play that Othello comes to have some insight into his own hidden motivations:

[A man] not easily jealous. But, being
wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme.
[V. ii. 345-46]

By succumbing to the emotions he thought he could control, he destroys himself, of course; by yielding to passion and weak reasoning he murders Desdemona, whose death shatters his "soul's joy,"_ But his realization that he had "lov'd not wisely, but too well" [V. ii. 344] applies to the trusted, "honest" friend, Iago, as well as to Desdemona.

His passions aroused, his reason fled and left him "perplex'd in the extreme,"' When he did try to rationalize, he built his arguments on the trusted words of Iago, which merely reinforced the suspicions and fears which he had already admitted into his own heart. He found true what Iago said about Desdemona because he himself thought it before Iago uttered it. Thus, he took Iago's words as a confirmation of truth. Iago understood this perfectly well, for as he himself explains:

I told him what I thought, and told no
more
Than what he found himself was apt and
true.
[V. ii. 176-77]

Iago's powerful hold over Othello is proof of Othello's own potential for evil. Iago penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing, as he does so, the evil already present within Othello. As Iago's weakly conceived ideas and convictions are given expression, Othello accepts them as his own, alienating himself more and more from the human and the rational. In his failure to understand himself, Desdemona, and Iago, he paves the way for his own ruin in the same way that Iago comes to destroy himself through his self-absorption. The destruction of one signals, in fact the destruction of the other. Having destroyed Othello, Iago promises that he "never will speak word" [V. ii. 304] of what he has done, much less why it has been done. With Othello dead, the rich field upon which Iago's malice and hate had taken root and flourished now lies wasted and destroyed. The public, dignified, military figure presented to us at the beginning of the play has fallen prey to what it tried most to believe was never there, conquered in large measure by its own weaknesses and delusions. And Iago, the forger of the perfect phrase, the subtle lie, the devastating hint, the man to whom language was both a mirror and a tool of personality, sentences himself to eternal silence. (pp. 13-15)

Henry L. Warnken, "Iago as a Projection of Othello, .. in Shakespeare Encomium, *edited by Anne Paolucci, The City College,* 1964, *pp.* 1-15.

Critical Essay #9

[*Gamer elucidates Desdemona's character, maintaining that Shakespeare carefully balanced the other characters' accounts of her as goddess or whore to present a complex portrait Othello's sensual view is countered by Brabantio's idealized concept in Act I and Roderigo and Cassio's romanticized vision is opposed by Iago's coarse innuendo in Act II Gamer then points out that Desdemona 's liveliness and assertiveness are confirmed by her marriage to Othello and that these positive traits become a fatal liability. Finally, the critic ends with a discussion of Desdemona's powerlessness in the face of her husband* 's *accusations, which leads to her death. For further commentary on the character of Desdemona, see the excerpts by A.* C. *Bradley and Albert Gerard.*]

As Desdemona prepares to go to bed with Othello in Act IV, scene iii of Shakespeare's *Othello,* the following conversation occurs between her and Emilia:

Emilia. Shall I go fetch your night
gown?
Desdemona. No, unpin me here.
This Lodovico is a proper
man.
Emilia. A very handsome man.
Desdemona. He speaks well.
Emilia. I know a lady in Venice
would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.
[IV. ii. 34-9]

Surely this is startling dialogue coming as it does between the brothel scene and the moment when Desdemona will go to her wedding with death. An actress or director would certainly have to think a great deal about how these lines are to be spoken and what they are to reveal of Desdemona's character. But a reader or critic is not so hard pressed, and he may, if it suits him, simply skip over them. This is precisely what most critics do.

Robert Heilman is representative. In his lengthy book on the play, *Magic in the Web,* he does not discuss the passage. One reason for this omission, of course, is that he, like most critics, is mainly interested in Othello and Iago. Nevertheless, since he uses the New Critics' method of close reading underscoring images, habits of diction, and grammatical structure-it is peculiar that when he treats Desdemona's character, dealing in two instances with Act IV, scene ill specifically (pp. 18990, 208-10), he fails to notice these lines. A partial explanation for this failure is that he sustains his interpretation of Othello and Iago and the theme of the play by insisting on Desdemona's relative simplicity and diverges from other critics who make her "over-intricate." More significantly, however, the passage is difficult to square with his contention that in the last act Desdemona "becomes. . . the saint," a representation of "the world of spirit." (p. 233)

Many critics and scholars come to Shakespeare's play with the idea that Desdemona ought to be pure and virtuous and, above all, unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty to Othello. The notion is so tenacious that when Desdemona even appears to threaten it, they cannot contemplate her character with their usual care and imagination.

At what appears to be the other extreme is such a critic as W. H. Auden, one of the few who notices the passage and sees it as a significant revelation of Desdemona's character. Viewing her cynically partly on account of it, he remarks: "It is worth noting that, in the willow-song scene with Emilia, she speaks with admiration of Ludovico [sic] and then turns to the topic of adultery . . . . It is as if she had suddenly realized that she had made a *mesalliance* [marriage with a person of inferior' social rank] and that the sort of man she ought to have married was someone of her own class and colour like Ludovico. Given a few more years of Othello and of Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover" ["The Alienated City: Reflections on 'Othello'," *Encounter* 17 (1961)]. But isn't Auden finally making the same assumption as the others? Doesn't his cynical and easy dismissal of Desdemona imply that he has expected her to be perfect? If she is not, then she must be corrupt. Isn't this Othello's mistake exactly? Either Desdemona is pure or she is the "cunning whore of Venice" [IV. ii. 88].

The poles of critical opinion are exactly those presented in the play. On the one hand is the view of Desdemona the "good" characters have; on the other is the negative vision of her that Iago persuades Othello to accept. At a time when we have become especially careful about adopting any single perspective of a character as the dramatist's or the "right" perspective, why do many critics now simply accept one extreme view of Desdemona or the other? I can only assume that they share a vision Shakespeare presents as limited.

Desdemona's character is neither simple nor any more easily defined than Iago's or Othello's. Any effort to describe it must take into account all of what she says and does as well as what other characters say about her and how their views are limited by their own personalities and values. Though Shakespeare does not give Desdemona center stage with Othello, as he gives Juliet with Romeo and Cleopatra with Antony, he does not keep her in the wings for most of the play, as he does Cordelia [in *King Lear]* or Hermione [in *The Winter's Tale].* She is often present so that we must witness her joy, fear, bewilderment, and pain. What happens to her matters because we see how it affects her as well as Othello. The meaning of the tragedy depends, then, on a clear vision of her character and experience as well as those of Othello and Iago.

That Desdemona is neither goddess nor slut Shakespeare makes very clear. He evidently realized that he would have to defend his characterization of her more against the idealization of the essentially good characters than the denigration of the villain. Consequently, though he undermines both extremes, he expends his main efforts in disarming Desdemona's champions rather than her enemy. In her first two appearances, Shakespeare establishes her character and thus holds in balance the diverging views, but he goes out of his way to make her human rather than divine.

He carefully shapes Othello's account of Desdemona to counter Brabantio's initial description of her as "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" [I. iii. 94-6]. Because Brabantio is unwilling to believe that Desdemona's "perfection so could err" [I. iii. 100] that she would elope with Othello, he accuses him of seducing her by witchcraft or drugs. In Othello's eloquent defense [I. iii. 127-69], he shows not only that Brabantio's accusations are false but also that it was Desdemona who invited his courtship. His description of her coming with "greedy ear" to "devour" his tales of cannibals, anthropophagi, and his own exploits suggests that she is starved for excitement and fascinated by Othello because his life has been filled with adventure. She loved him, he says, for the dangers he had passed. So far is Desdemona from being Brabantio's "maiden never bold" [I. iii. 94] that she gave Othello "a world of kisses" [I. iii. 159] for his pains and clearly indicated that she would welcome his suit:

She wished
That heaven had made her 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.
[I. iii. 162-66]

The scene is carefully managed so as to create sympathy for both Othello and Desdemona. Because Desdemona initiates the courtship, Othello is absolutely exonerated of Brabantio's charge. His cautiousness acknowledges the tenuousness of his position as a black man in Venetian society and is appropriate and even admirable. The Moor cannot be confident of Desdemona's attraction to him, and he undoubtedly knows that marrying him would isolate her from her countrymen. Recognizing Othello's reticence and undoubtedly its causes, Desdemona makes it clear she loves him but, at the same time, maintains a degree of indirection. Shakespeare does not wish to make her seem either shy or overly forward.

When Desdemona finally appears, she strengthens the image Othello has presented. Before the senators, she answers her father's charges forcefully and persuasively, without shyness or reticence. More significantly, it is she, and not Othello, who first raises the possibility of her going to Cyprus. Othello asks only that the senators give his wife "fit disposition" [I. iii. 236], but when the Duke asks her preference, Desdemona pleads:

If I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support

By his dear absence. Let me go with him.
[I. iii. 255-59]

Her wish not to be left behind as a "moth of peace" is a desire not to be treated as someone too fragile to share the intensity of Othello's military life. As though she might have overheard Brabantio tell Othello that she would not have run to his "sooty bosom" [I. ii. 69], she confirms her sexual attraction to him as well as her own sexuality by insisting that she wants the full "rites" of her marriage.

Shakespeare must have wanted to make doubly sure of establishing Desdemona's sensuality, for he underscores it the next time she appears. At the beginning of Act II, while she awaits Othello on the shore of Cyprus, her jesting with Iago displays the kind of sexual playfulness that we might have anticipated from Othello's description of their courtship.

As soon as Desdemona arrives at Cyprus, together with Emilia, Iago, and Roderigo, and is greeted by

Cassio, she asks about Othello. Immediately a ship is sighted, and someone goes to the harbor to see whether it is Othello's. Anxious about her husband, Desdemona plays a game with Iago to pass the time; in an aside, she remarks, "I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" [II. i. 121-22]. Their repartee grows out of a debate that Iago begins by accusing Emilia of talking too much. A practiced slanderer of women, he chides both his wife and Desdemona. Although Desdemona rebukes him, "O, fie upon thee, slanderer!" [II. i. 113], she asks him to write her praise. Instead he comments on general types of women:

Iago. If she be fair and wise: fair ness and wit,
The one's for use, the other useth it.
Desdemona. Well praised. How if she be
black and witty?
Iago. If she be black, and thereto
have a wit,
She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.
Desdemona. Worse and worse!
[II. i. 129-34]

Iago's "praises" commend women for what he might expect Desdemona to regard as faults, and none are without sexual overtones. Though Desdemona remarks that they "are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh I' th alehouse" [II. i. 138-39], they do not offend her and serve her well enough as a pastime for fifty-five lines, until Othello arrives.

Critics who take an extreme view of Desdemona see her pleasure in this exchange with Iago as a failure of Shakespeare's art. [M. R.] Ridley, for example, comments [in the Arden edition of *Othello]:* "This is to many readers, and I think rightly, one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare. To begin with it is unnatural. Desdemona's

natural instinct must surely be to go herself to the harbour, instead of asking parenthetically whether someone has gone. Then, it is distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap backchat with Iago, and so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way. All we gain from it is some further unneeded light on Iago's vulgarity." But this scene is unnatural for Ridley's Desdemona, not Shakespeare's. What the dramatist gives us here is an extension of the spirited and sensual Desdemona that has been revealed in the first act. Her scene with Iago shows her to be the same woman who could initiate Othello's courtship and complain before the senators about the "rites" she would lose in Othello's absence. Her stance is similar to the one she will take later when she tries to coax Othello into reinstating Cassio. That the scene impedes the dramatic movement too long and that its humor is weak are perhaps legitimate criticisms; to suggest that it distorts Desdemona's character is surely to misunderstand her character.

Shakespeare makes a special effort to maintain the balance of the scene. He keeps Desdemona off a pedestal and shows her to have a full range of human feelings and capacities. Yet he is careful not to allow her to fail in feeling or propriety. The point of her aside is to affirm her concern for Othello as well as to show her personal need to contain anxiety and distance pain and fear. As we see how Desdemona acts under stress later in the play, it seems consistent with her character that she should want a distraction to divert her attention in this extremity. Shakespeare brings the exchange between Desdemona and Iago to a brilliant close as Othello enters and greets his "fair warrior:' The sensual import of this moment and his address is surely heightened by what we have seen of Desdemona shortly before.

Shakespeare's delicately poised portrayal of Desde mona to this point prepares us for the splendid antithesis between Iago and Cassio in the middle of the second act:

Iago. Our general cast us thus early for
the love of his Desdemona; who
let us not therefore blame.
He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove.
Cassia. She's a most exquisite lady.
Iago. And, I'll warrant her, full of game.
Cassia. Indeed, she's a most fresh and
delicate creature.
Iago. What an eye she has! Methinks it
sounds a parley to provocation.
Cassia. An inviting eye; and yet methinks
right modest.
Iago. And when she speaks, is it not analarum to love?
Cassia. She is indeed perfection.
[II. iii. 14-28]

Such a carefully counterpointed exchange invites us to adjust both views.

Iago distorts Desdemona's character by suppressing the side of it that Cassio insists on and emphasizing her sensuality. His suggestions that she is

"full of game" and that her eye "sounds a parley to provocation" call up an image of a flirtatious and inconstant woman. Iago's view is clearly limited by his devious purpose and also by his cynical notions about human nature in general and women in particular.

But Cassio's view is limited as well. He idealizes Desdemona as much as her father did. It is evident1y clear to Iago that his efforts to persuade Cassio of his vision will fail when he pronounces Desdemona "perfection," as had Brabantio before him' [I. iii. 100]. The extravagance of language Cassio uses earlier in describing Desdemona must also make his view suspect. For example, he tells Montano that Othello

hath achieved a maid
That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning
pens.
And in th. essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.
[II. i. 61-5]

After the safe arrival of Desdemona and her companion in Cyprus, Cassio rhapsodizes:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and
howling winds,
The guttered rocks and congregated
sands,
Traitors ensteeped to enclog the guiltless
keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their moral natures, letting go safely by The *divine* Desdemona.
[II. i. 68-73; italics added]

This idealization gives as false a picture of Desdemona as Iago's denigration of her. Cassio's lines in fact comment more on his character than on Desdemona's. To accept his view of Desdemona, as many have done, is as grievous a critical mistake as to accept Iago's.

Desdemona's liveliness, assertiveness, and sensuality are corroborated in her marrying Othello. The crucial fact of her marriage is not that she elopes but that she, a white woman, weds a black man. Though many critics focus on the universality of experience in *Othello,* we cannot forget the play's racial context. Othello's blackness is as important as Shylock's Jewishness [in *The Merchant of Venice],* and indeed the play dwells relentlessly upon it.

It is underscored heavily from the beginning. The first references to Othello, made by Iago to Roderigo, are to "the Moor" [I. i. 39, 57]. Roderigo immedi ately refers to him as "the thick-lips" [I. i. 66]. He is not called by name until he appears before the senators in

scene ii when the Duke of Venice addresses him. He has been referred to as "the Moor" nine times before that moment.

Iago and Roderigo know they may depend on Brabantio's fears of black sexuality and miscegenation. When he appears at his window to answer their summons. Iago immediately cries up to him. "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" [I. i. 88-9] and urges him to arise lest "the devil" make a grandfather of him. The tone intensifies as Iago harps on Othello's bestial sexuality. To the uncomprehending and reti cent Brabantio he urges impatiently:

You'll have
your daughter covered with a Barbary
horse, you'll
have your nephews neigh to you, you'll
have coursers
for cousins, and gennets for germans.
[I. i. 111-14]

Mercilessly, he draws a final image: "Your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs" [I. i. 115-17]. The unimaginative and literal Roderigo adds that Desdemona has gone to the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" [I. i. 126]. (pp. 234-40)

Critics speculate about what Othello's marriage to Desdemona means for him but usually fail to consider what it means for her to marry someone so completely an outsider. What are we to make of Desdemona's choosing Othello rather than one of her own countrymen? Brabantio tells Othello that Desdemona has "shunned / The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation" [I. ii. 66-7]. It seems incredible to him that, having done so, she should then choose Othello. But Shakespeare intends to suggest that the "curled darlings" of Italy leave some thing to be desired; the image implies preciousness and perhaps effeminacy. He expects us to find her choice understandable and even admirable.

Of all Desdemona's reputed suitors, we see only Roderigo. The easy gull of Iago and mawkishly lovesick, he is obviously not worthy ofDesdemona. When Othello and Desdemona leave for Cyprus,

Roderigo tells Iago, "I will incontinently drown myself" [I. iii. 305], and we cannot help but assent to Iago's estimation of him as a "silly gentleman" [I. iii. 307]. Even Brabantio agrees that he is unsuitable, for he tells him, "My daughter is not for thee" [I. i. 98]. Only by comparing him to Othello does he find him acceptable.

The only other character who might be a suitor for Desdemona is Cassio. But it occurs to neither Cassio nor Desdemona that he should court her. Shakespeare makes him a foil to Othello and characterizes him so as to suggest what Desdemona might have found wanting in her countrymen. He is evidently handsome and sexually attractive. In soliloquy, where he may be trusted, Iago remarks that "Cassio's a proper man" [I. iii. 392] and that "he hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected-framed to

make women false" [I. iii. 397-98]. Drawing Cassio as one who is "handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after" [II. i. 245-47], Iago persuades Roderigo that Cassio is most likely to be second after Othello in Desdemona's affections. In soliloquy again, Iago makes clear that he thinks Cassio loves Desdemona: "That Cassio loves her, I do well believe 't" [II. i. 286].

Though he is handsome and has all the surface graces, Cassio is wanting in manliness. Shakespeare certainly intends Cassio's inability to hold his liquor to undermine his character. He gives this trait mainly to comic figures, such as Sir Toby Belch [in *Twelfth Night*] , or villains, like Claudius [in *Hamlet].* Once drunk, the mild-mannered Cassio is "full of quarrel and offense" [II. iii. 50]. His knowledge of his weakness [II. iii. 39-42] might mitigate it, but even aware of it, he succumbs easily. Though at first he refuses Iago's invitation to drink with the Cypriots, he gives in later with only a little hesitation to Iago's exclamation, "What, man! 'Tis a night of revels. the gallants desire it" [II. iii. 43-4]. His lack of discipline here and his subsequent behavior that disgraces him lend some credence to Iago's objections to Othello's preferring him as lieutenant. (pp. 241-42)

Desdemona's marrying a man different from Roderigo, Cassio, and the other "curled darlings" of Italy is to her credit. She must recognize in Othello a dignity, energy, excitement, and power that all around her lack. Since these qualities are attributable to his heritage, she may be said to choose him because he is African, black, an outsider. When she says she saw Othello's visage in his mind, she suggests that she saw beneath the surface to those realities that seemed to offer more promise of life. If the myth of black sexuality (which Othello's character denies at every turn) operates for Desdemona, as it does for some of the other characters, it can only enhance Othello's attractiveness for her as she compares him with the pale men around her.

Desdemona shows courage and a capacity for risk in choosing Othello, for it puts her in an extreme position, cutting her off from her father and countrymen. Brabantio in effect disowns her since he would not have allowed her to live with him after her marriage [I. iii. 240] if she had not been permitted to go with Othello to Cyprus. His last words are not to her, but to Othello, and they cut deep: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" [I. iii. 292-93].

Later we learn that Brabantio died of grief over the marriage [V. ii. 204-06]. We are to disapprove of Desdemona's deception no more than we are to disapprove of Juliet's similar deception of Capulet, or Hermia's of Egeus [in *A Midsummer Night's Dream].* Shakespeare gives Brabantio's character a comic tinge so that our sympathies do not shift from Desdemona to him.

That her marriage separates her from society is implied because of the attitudes we hear expressed toward Othello. but it is also made explicit. Brabantio does not believe that Desdemona would have married Othello unless she had been charmed partially because of his sense that she will "incur a general mock" [I. ii. 68]. After Othello has insulted Desdemona, Emilia's question of Iago makes clear what lines have been drawn: "Hath she forsook. . . Her father and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore?" [IV. ii. 124-27]. Desdemona does not marry Othello ignorant of the

consequences; when she pleads with the Duke to allow her to go to Cyprus, she proclaims:

That I love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world.
[1. i. 248-50]

She knows her action is a "storm of fortunes." Her willingness to risk the censure of her father and society is some measure of her capacity for love, even though her love is not based on complete knowledge. She does not see Othello clearly and cannot anticipate any of the difficulties that must necessarily attend his spirited life. Her elopement is more surely a measure of her determination to have a life that seems to offer the promise of excitement and adventure denied her as a sheltered Venetian senator's daughter.

Because Desdemona cuts herself off from her father and friends and marries someone from a vastly different culture, she is even more alone on Cyprus than she would ordinarily have been in a strange place and as a woman in a military camp besides. These circumstances, as well as her character and experience, account in part for the turn the tragedy takes.

At the beginning she unwittingly plays into Iago's hands by insisting that Othello reinstate Cassio immediately. On the one hand, she cannot know what web of evil Iago is weaving to trap her. On the other, her behavior in this matter is not entirely without fault. It is only natural that Desdemona should wish Cassio reinstated since he is her old friend and. except for Emilia, her only close friend on Cyprus. But her insistence is excessive. She assures Cassio that Othello "shall never rest" [iii. iii. 22] until he promises to restore the lieutenant's position, and indeed, she makes sure that he never does. Yet her persistence does not seem necessary, for Emilia has assured Cassio earlier:

All will sure be well.
The general and his wife are talking of it.
And she speaks for you stoutly. The Moor
replies
That he you hurt
Is of great fame In Cyprus
And great affinity, and that In wholesome
wisdom
He might not but refuse you.
But he protests he loves you.
And needs no other suitor but his likings
To bring you In again.
[III. i. 42-50]

Desdemona harps on her single theme playfully, teasingly. Her manner is no different from that which she took when she courted Othello or jested with Iago. Her vision seems not to extend beyond the range that allowed her to manage domestic life in Brabantio's quiet household.

As soon as Othello's jealousy and rage begin to manifest themselves. Desdemona's forthrightness and courage start to desert her. She can no longer summon up those resources that might help her. She is not as fragile as Ophelia [in *Hamlet];* she will not go mad. But neither is she as resillent or as alert to possibilities as Juliet. who was probably younger and no more experienced than she. Before Juliet takes the potion the Friar has prepared to make her appear dead, she considers whether he might have mixed a poison instead, since he would be dishonored if it were known he had married her to Romeo [IV. iii. 24-7]. She confronts the possibility of evil, weighs her own position, and takes the risk she feels she must. There is never such a moment for Desdemona.

Under the pressure of Othello's anger, Desdemona lies to him, by denying she has lost the handkerchief he gave her, and makes herself appear guilty. Her action is perfectly understandable. To begin with, she feels guilty about losing it, for she has told Emilia earlier that if Othello were given to jealousy, "it were enough / To put him to ill thinking" III. iv. 28-9]. But more important, she lies out of fear, as her initial response to Othello indicates:

Why do you speak so startlingly and rash?
Othello. Is't lost? Is'tgone? Speak, is
it out o' th' way?
Desdemona. Heaven bless us!
[III. iv. 79-81]

Then she becomes defensive: "It is not lost. But what an if it were?" [iii. iv. 83]. At this point Othello's demeanor must be incredibly frightening. Shortly before this moment he has knelt with Iago to vow vengeance against Desdemona if she proves unfaithful, and moments later, he is so enraged that he "falls in a trance" [IV. 1. 43]. In this sudden crisis, latent fears of Othello that are inevitably part of Desdemona's cultural experience must be called into play. Her compounded terror destroys her capacity for addressing him with the courage and dignity that she had summoned in facing her father and the senators when they called her actions in question.

If Desdemona has wanted the heights of passion, she finds its depths instead. That she is simply bewildered and unable to respond more forcefully to Othello's subsequent fury is attributable to several causes. To begin with, his change is sudden and extreme. When Lodovico arrives from Venice and meets the raging Othello, he asks incredulously:

is this the noble
Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient?
Is this the nature

Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?
[IV. i. 264-68]

Noble Othello is like the flower that festers and smells far worse than weeds. Only Iago anticipates the full possibilities of his corruption.

But the most important causes of Desdemona's powerlessness lie within herself. She idealizes Othello and cannot recognize that he is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. She tells Emilia that her "noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are" [III. iv. 26-8]. Evidently surprised, Emilia asks if he is not jealous, and Desdemona replies as though the suggestion were preposterous: "Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" [III. iv. 29-30]. Though Emilia immediately suspects that Othello is jealous [III. iv. 98], Desdemona does not credit her suspicions since she "never gave him cause" [III. iv.158]. Emilia tries to explain that jealousy is not rational and does not need a cause:

But jealous souls will not be answered so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
[III. iv. 159-62]

Though Iago provokes Othello, his jealousy, as Emilia says, arises out of his own susceptibility. He has romanticized Desdemona, as she has him. Forced to confront the fact that she is human and therefore capable of treachery, he is threatened by his own vulnerability to her. If he cannot keep himself invulnerable by idealizing her, then he will do so by degrading her. His fears are heightened because he thinks his blackness. Age, and lack of elegance make him less attractive sexually than Cassio. Despite the worsening crisis, Desdemona will not be instructed by Emilia, nor will she alter her view of Othello so that she might understand and possibly confront what is happening. Her only defense is to maintain an appalling innocence. The more she must struggle to keep her innocence in the face of the overwhelming events of the last two acts, the more passive and less able to cope she becomes. She must hold on to it for two reasons. First, nothing of her life in the rarefied atmosphere of Brabantio's home and society could have anticipated this moment, and nothing in her being can rise to meet it now. Therefore, she must close it out. Second, if she is deserted by her husband, there is nowhere for her to turn. Rather than suffer the terror and pain of her isolation, she must deny that it exists.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Desdemona from the beginning of Act IV until her death illustrates how finely and clearly he had conceived her character and how well he understood the psychology of a mind under pressure. As Iago's poison works and Othello becomes more convinced of Desdemona's guilt and increasingly madder with rage, Desdemona will become gradually more passive and continually frame means of escape in her imagination.

After the brothel scene, when Othello leaves calling Desdemona the "cunning whore of Venice" [IV. ii. 88] and throwing money to Emilia as to a madam, Desdemona is stunned. Emilia asks, "Alas, what does this gentleman conceive? / How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?"; Desdemona replies, "Faith, half asleep" [IV. ii. 95-7]. The action is too quick for her to be literally asleep; Othello has just that moment left. Rather, she is dazed; her mind simply cannot take in what it encounters. Almost at once she begins to look for ways out. Directing Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed [IV. ii. 105], she hopes to be able to go back in time, to recover the brief happiness and harmony she and Othello shared when they were newly married. Though she will subsequently assert that she approves of Othello's behavior, part of her will not approve and will continue to create fantasies to save herself.

Next, Desdemona begins to anticipate her death, directing; Emilia to shroud her in her wedding sheets if she should die [IV. iii. 25-6] and singing the willow song. She not only foreshadows her death but also expresses an unconscious desire for it. Her preface to the song makes her wish clear:

My mother had a maid called Barbary.
She was in love; and he she loved proved mad

And did forsake her. She had a song of
"Willow";
An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her
fortune, And she died singing it.
That song tonight
Will not go from my mind; I have much to
do But to go hang my head all at one side
And sing it like poor Barbary.
[IV. iii. 26-33]

That the song will not go from her mind and that she has "much to do" to keep from hanging her head and singing it suggest the insistence of a death wish. To express a desire for death here and to plead with Othello later to let her live is not inconsistent. Death wishes are more often hopes of finding peace and escape rather than real wishes to die. The song itself-quiet, soporific-promises calm in contrast to Othello's raging.

Just before Desdemona sings, she starts the conversation about Lodovico quoted at the beginning. That she thinks of Lodovico when she is undressing to go to bed with Othello suggests that she is still trying to find a way around the emergency of the moment. She admires Lodovico as "a proper man"-precisely the phrase Iago used to describe Cassio [I. iii. 392]-and as one who "speaks well,"_ calling up those qualities that Cassio has and Othello lacks. Since the man Desdemona has loved, married, and risked her social position for has turned into a barbarian and a madman, she unconsciously longs for a man like Lodovico-a handsome, white man, with those attributes she recognizes as civilized. In her heart she must feel she has made a mistake.

Desdemona does not know the world, *or* herself, for that matter. Like Lear, she has been led to believe she is "ague-proof." At the end *of* Act IV Shakespeare makes it certain, if he has not before, that she is self-deceived and that there is a great discrepancy between what she unconsciously feels and what she consciously acknowledges. When Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would cuckold her husband "for all the world" [IV. iii. 67], Emilia plays with the question, answering, "The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice" [IV. iii. 68-9]. Desdemona finally says she does not think "there is any such woman" who would [IV. iii. 83]. Her comment underscores her need to close out knowledge that might threaten her. Coming as it does after the passage about Lodovico, her remark can only emphasize her pitiable need to maintain an innocence that must inevitably court ruin.

Like Sleeping Beauty waiting for the prince's kiss, Desdemona is asleep when Othello comes. When he threatens her, the most she can do is plead for her life. Desdemona is not Hermione, who has the wisdom to know that if Leontes doubts her fidelity [in *The Winters Tale],* she cannot convince him *of* her chastity by insisting on it. And unlike Hermione' Desdemona merely asserts her innocence rather than reproaches her husband, with whom the final blame must lie. She can only lament that she is "undone" [V. ii. 76] and beg for time. She acts differently from the heroine *of The Winters Tale* not only because she is more fragile and less wise but also because her accuser is not a white man following at least the forms of justice in a court. Othello is a black man with rolling eyes [V. ii. 38] coming to do "justice" in her bedroom at night.

When Desdemona revives for a moment after Othello has stifled her, she affirms her guiltlessness [V. ii. 122] and to Emilia's asking who has "done this deed," she answers, "Nobody-I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord" [V. ii. 123-25]. Her answer is often thought of as an effort to protect Othello. Had Othello stabbed Desdemona, then the notion is plausible that she might pretend to have killed herself to save him. But Desdemona could not have smothered or strangled herself. I think her answer acknowledges instead her full responsibility for her marriage and its consequences. What her implied forgiveness of Othello means is unclear. Her remark of a moment before, "A guiltless death I die" [V. ii. 122], must be rendered with pain or anger, so her forgiveness may merely follow her old pattern of denying what she feels and acknowledging what she must; in other words, it may be unfelt. If her forgiveness is genuinely felt, however, it might suggest that Desdemona has come to see Othello with the prejudices of her countrymen and to regard him as acting according to a barbarian nature that will not allow him to act otherwise. She forgives him, then, as she would a child. Or at its best, her pardoning Othello means that she is finally capable of an ideal love, one that does not alter "when it alteration finds" or bend "with the remover to remove" [Sonnet 116]. But even if we see Desdemona as acting out of pure love, as most critics do, her triumph is undercut because she never confronts the full and unyielding knowledge in the face of which true love and forgiveness must maintain themselves. Furthermore, there is no ritual of reconciliation between Desdemona and Othello. Though Othello is by Desdemona's side when she forgives him, she uses the third person and speaks to Emilia.

Othello learns that he is wrong, that Iago, whom he trusted, has deceived him heartlessly, monstrously. But he never understands what in himself allowed him to become prey to Iago. The final truth for him is that he has thrown a pearl away. His suicide is a despairing act. He finally sees himself as unblessed and bestial-beyond mercy. Paradoxically, his only redemption must come through self-execution.

Othello is surely one of Shakespeare's bleakest tragedies. Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello must fail. They do not know themselves, and they cannot know each other. Further, they never understand the way the world fosters their misperceptions. We must watch as Othello is reduced from a heroic general, with dignity, assurance. and power to a raging, jealous husband and murderer, out of control and duped by Iago. We see Desdemona lose her energy, vitality, and courage for living to become fearful and passive. Both suffer the pains of deception, real or supposed loss of love, final powerlessness, and death. Tragedy never allows its protagonists to escape suffering and death, but it often graces them with the knowledge of life, without which they cannot have lived in the fullest sense. Yet for all their terrible suffering, Desdemona and Othello are finally denied even that knowledge. (pp. 243-50)

S. N. Gamer. *"Shakespeare's Desdemona,* " in Shakespeare Studies: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, and Reviews, *Vol.* 9, 1976, *pp.* 233-52.

Critical Essay #10

Andrews Henningfeld is a professor of English at Adrian College who writes widely on literature for educational publishers. In this essay, Andrews Henningfeld argues that the main characters belong to differing linguistic and discursive communities and are thus tragically unable to understand each other.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare offers several distinctive linguistic and discursive communities, including the patriarchal hegemony of the Venetian merchant class and the military hegemony of the soldiers on the field and in Cyprus. A linguistic community is one that shares a common language, while a discursive community is one that shares common forms of discourse such as ideas about law, business, or women. Further, "hegemony," according to Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, is a term often used by literary and cultural critics to refer to "the pervasive system of assumptions, meaning, and values . . . that shapes the way things look, what they mean, and therefore what reality is for the majority of people within a given culture." Thus, characters who find themselves cast as outsiders for reasons of race, ethnicity, social class, or gender, do not know or understand the values and assumptions that shape the reality of a hegemony. They may act or speak in ways that reveal their inability to "read" the structures of the culture in which they find themselves, sometimes with tragic results. Such is the case in *Othello*, a play about a black man attempting to function within a white mercantile culture, a white woman who marries a black military man, and a white Venetian soldier who destroys them both.

To begin to understand the relationship between the Venetians and Othello, a reader needs to remember that Venice is a mercantile society, one whose values are based on the buying and selling of goods. Turks represent such a threat to the Venetians because they restrict trade, the life-blood of Venetian society, by restricting ship traffic on the Mediterranean Sea. Othello is clearly an outsider in Venetian society. He is of a different race and different nationality, having come from North Africa to fight for Venice against the Turks. Moreover, Othello comes from a different discursive and linguistic community; he is not a native speaker of the culture or the language of Venice. He tells the Senate, "Rude am I in speech . . . / And little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broils and battle." Othello is correct in this assessment. He does not speak the language of buying and selling, the guarded language of negotiation and barter, but rather speaks the language of a soldier, rough and rude, straightforward and without guile.

His contribution to Venetian safety is well-documented; he is called repeatedly the "noble Moor" or the "valiant Moor" or the "brave Moor." Because of this record and reputation, he has been welcomed into the hearts and homes of Venetian citizens. Othello tells the Senate that Desdemona's "father loved me, oft invited me, / Still questioned me the story of my life / From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes / That I have past." Clearly, Othello has been an honored guest in Brabantio's home. Yet Othello, as an outsider, fails to understand the hegemony of which Brabantio is a part. In believing himself welcome in Brabantio's home, he has also believed himself worthy

of Brabantio's daughter. What Othello reveals, however, in his elopement with Desdemona is his failure to "read" the culture in which he finds himself. In Venetian culture, daughters obey their fathers, and fathers arrange marriages for their daughters. What Othello does not and cannot understand (as a linguistic and discursive outsider) is that an elopement is a kind of theft, depriving Brabantio of the money he could command from a prospective husband in the marriage market. While a military man takes what he wants, a merchant negotiates a sale. Thus, Othello and Brabantio are not only linguistically speakers of two different languages, they are also members of two radically different discursive communities.

At an even more fundamental level, Othello does not understand that he, like Desdemona, is a commodity; he has sold his military prowess to the Venetians for money. As such, he is "owned" by the Venetians, in much the same way that Desdemona is "owned" by her father. As such, according to Venetian hegemony, Othello does not have agency; rather, he is to be acted upon, rather than acting, to go where he is sent and do what he is told to do. Why then does the duke try to quell Brabantio's objection to the marriage and seem to approve of the elopement?

In the first place, Venice is both a merchant society and a patriarchal society. As noted above, fathers control their daughters. Indeed, in all ways, men control the goods, products, and means of production in this society. Daughters are commodities, something that can be bought and sold on the marriage market. As such, Desdemona does not have intrinsic worth to the entire society; rather, her value is to her father in how much money he can accrue through the negotiations leading to her marriage. Her worth, then, is of limited value to the hegemony, although her rebellion *is* a cause of grave concern to the patriarchal power structure. Yet an even graver danger looms on the horizon: the immediate Turkish threat to Cyprus.

Thus, the second reason that the duke recognizes Othello's marriage to Desdemona becomes clear. Venice needs Othello to go to Cyprus to quell the imminent danger from the Turks. Giving Othello a Venetian woman becomes a form of payment for Othello's service. Moreover, because Othello wants Desdemona with him, the duke is able to remove the rebellious element from Venetian society. He is able, in this move, to accomplish several goals: he can pay off the Moor in female flesh, a bargain for all the Venetians save Brabantio; he can protect his city-state from the Turks by sending the best soldier to lead the battle; and he can isolate Desdemona from other women of Venice who might be encouraged to form their own alliances with prospective husbands, thus depriving *their* fathers of their rightful marriage profits.

Once removed to Cyprus, it is Desdemona who becomes the outsider. Not only is she far away from the protective patriarchal structures of Venetian society, a hegemony that she flaunts in her choice to marry Othello, she is now in an entirely different discursive community, that of the military. She is surrounded by men who are pledged to fight for and with her husband to the death. Her misunderstanding of this is evident in her willingness to speak for Michael Cassio to her husband. Were she a member of the military hegemony, she would know that a commander's word cannot be undone. Once dismissed, Cassio is always dismissed. For Othello to do otherwise would be to

undermine his command. Further, military language is masculine, and Desdemona also does not "speak" the language of men. If she were to speak it, she would also realize that her husband would find her support of Cassio suspect. Her ignorance of the discursive communities and of their languages costs her dearly.

Shakespeare also puts one more ingredient in the mix: Iago. If Othello and Desdemona are outsiders, then Iago is the quintessential insider, a rare linguistic wizard, a polyglot who can speak the language of trade, of business, and of soldiering equally well. This facility with words and structures is what shifts the play from potential comedy to certain tragedy. As a native Venetian, Iago fully understands the sly wheeling and dealing of businessmen. "Put money in thy purse!" he admonishes Roderigo. He barters promises of Desdemona's favor in exchange for Roderigo's capital. He offers his comrades at arms advice. He entices his wife to betray her lady. In each of these dealings, using the deep structures of culture and language, he successfully moves himself toward his goal: the utter destruction of Othello.

Finally, there is one more language Iago speaks, and he does so just as subtly and cannily as he does the others, so subtly and cannily that the audience is never fully aware of how they, too, have been duped. Iago speaks the language of theater. In many scenes, Iago cajoles and flatters and has his way with the other characters. Once these characters leave the stage, however, Iago turns to the audience and reveals his "real" motivation. Theatergoers, too, belong to a hegemony of sorts and have unspoken, but firmly held, assumptions and values about what constitutes the "real" in a play. For example, an audience knows that when a character dies on the stage, the actor is not really dead. There is another assumption: soliloquies reveal the inner thoughts of a character. What the audience does not do, however, is to doubt the truth of what they hear in a soliloquy.

Iago is a troubling case, however. He demonstrates repeatedly that he does not speak the truth. "I am not what I am," he says. Yet the audience believes whatever he tells them. He hates Othello because he is jealous of Cassio. He believes Othello has sexual intercourse with Emilia. He also think Cassio had intimate relations with Emilia. He loves Desdemona. All the while the audience wonders how it is that Othello can believe Iago's obvious lies, the audience itself believes what Iago reveals when alone with them.

As the play closes, each of the characters demonstrates his or her final confrontation with the linguistic and discursive communities of the play. In the final act, Desdemona plays out the role demanded of her by the patriarchal hegemony in which she has been encultured, a hegemony that demands devotion and obedience to a husband. She sacrifices her immortal soul in order to protect Othello. When Emilia begs her to tell her who has killed her, Desdemona replies, "Nobody. I myself."

In the final act, Othello loses language altogether. As John Russell Brown suggests, "Increasingly during the last scene, Othello speaks of what is happening very simply, as if his ability to say more is entirely spent." He can no longer even attempt to speak the language of Venice, and he dies in his own nearly wordless grief. He cries, "O Desdemon! dead Desdemon; dead. O, O!"

And in the final act, Iago, the polyglot, chooses to remain silent. Language does not desert him, as it does Othello; rather, he voluntarily leaves the discursive communities of Venice, the military, and of theater in his final act of treachery, choosing to abandon his role as playmaker. "You know what you know," he says to Othello and to the audience. It is left to the other characters to piece together the story, like foreigners speaking a second language, badly.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on *Othello*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi adapted *Othello* into the opera *Otello* in 1887. Nearly one hundred years later, in 1986, film director Franco Zeffirelli directed a film version of the opera starring Placido Domino, Katia Riciarelli, and Justino Diaz. The film was released in 2003 on DVD and VHS from MGM Home Video.

In another adaptation, choreographer Lar Lubovitch interpreted *Othello* as a ballet. Performed by the San Francisco Ballet and released on DVD in 2003, the ballet featured Desmond Richardson, Yuan Yuan Tan, and Parrish Maynard. It is available through Kultur Video.

A 2001 British television production set *Othello* in the contemporary London Metropolitan Police Department. While keeping the structure of the plot and story, the drama did not use Shakespeare's language. Originally produced by London Weekend Television, the drama is available on DVD from Acorn Media.

Another film that used the basic plot of *Othello* but transforms the play into a modern setting with modern language is *O*. Directed by Tim Blake Nelson and starring Mekhi Phifer, Josh Hartnett, and Julia Stiles, the film is set in a southern boys' private school, and the action revolves around a basketball team. The original release of the movie was in 2000, and it was released on DVD in 2003, available from Vidmark/Trimark.

A more traditional filming of *Othello* was undertaken by the BBC as part of its *Complete Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* series. In 1981, the BBC produced *Othello*, directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Anthony Hopkins and Bob Hoskins, available through the BBC.

Othello was adapted for film in 1995 by Castle Rock Entertainment. It was directed by Oliver Parker and starred Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago. It is available from Turner Home Entertainment.

Famed director and actor Orson Wells directed himself in another adaptation of *Othello* in 1952. The film was released on DVD in 1999 and is available from Image Entertainment.

Stuart Burge and John Dexter II directed Laurence Olivier in *Othello* in 1965. The film was released on VHS in 1996 and is available through Warner.

Topics for Further Study

Read Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as well as descriptions of Venice written during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What does the setting of *Othello* provide for the play thematically? What issues is Shakespeare able to explore in the play because of his choice of a Venetian setting?

Research the status of women in England around 1600 both through primary sources such as William Gouge's *Of Domestical Duties: Eight Treatises* (1634) and through secondary sources such as Lawrence Stone's *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500—1800* (1977). How does an understanding of this status inform a reading of *Othello*?

Read accounts of the Moorish ambassador's visit to England in 1600 as well as selections from popular travel writing of the day. How does this contemporary information affect portrayal of Othello in the play?

Watch at least four different versions of *Othello* or adaptations of the story of Othello on video or DVD. How do directorial decisions concerning casting, editing, and scripting affect an interpretation of the play?

Compare and Contrast

1600s: By this date, it is estimated that some 900,000 Africans have been transported by English and other European slavers to the Americas.

2000s: Slavery has been abolished throughout the world, although many countries and people still feel the effects of the African Diaspora.

1600s: Women generally have little or no career options other than marriage and motherhood and are subordinate to men in every way.

2000s: Women have equal rights with men and are able to pursue careers outside the home.

1600s: Women are legally prohibited from acting on the stage so all female characters in Shakespeare's plays are acted by young boys.

2000s: Women actors play all female characters in Shakespeare; at times, women actors even play men's roles.

1600s: England is an absolutist state, although Elizabeth I demonstrates great ability to reach compromises with her various constituencies. James I, her successor, however, is a proponent of the absolute monarchy and attempts to control all functions of state.

2000s: The British monarchy is largely a figurehead, and Queen Elizabeth II, while important to her country as a symbol, has little or no political power.

What Do I Read Next?

Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) provides another look at the social outsider in the character of Shylock as well as employing a Venetian setting.

Another of Shakespeare's plays, *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), features an insidious villain and a jealous lover in a comedic rather than tragic plot.

Shakespeare and Race (2000), edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells, offers a historical and cultural examination of *Othello* as well as several of Shakespeare's other plays.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), a novel about a slave who murders his wife and commits suicide, provides an interesting contrast to Shakespeare's work.

Further Study

Literary Commentary

Adamson, W. D. "Unpinned or Undone? Desdemona's Critics and the Problem of Sexual Innocence." *Shakespeare Studies* XIII (1980): 169-86.

Asserts that Shakespeare has drawn Desdemona as "legally innocent of adultery, morally innocent of idly considering it, and psychologically innocent of even being capable of it."

Auden, W. H. "The Joker in the Pack." In his *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays,* pp. 246-72. New York: Random House, 1948.

Compares Iago to a practical joker who himself has no personal feelings or values, but contemptuously uses the very real desires of other people to gull and manipulate them. Auden also claims that Othello prizes his marriage to Desdemona not for any great love he holds for her, but rather because it signals to him, mistakenly, that he has fully integrated into Venetian society.

Dash, Irene G. "A Woman Tamed: *Othello."* In her *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays,* pp. 103-30. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Contends that *Othello* demonstrates "the cost to husband and wife. . . of attempting to conform to stereotyped ideals of marriage."

Gregson. J. M. *"Othello."* In his *Public and Private Man in Shakespeare,* pp. 156-76. London: Croom Helm, 1983.

Maintains that the characters Othello and Hamlet are opposites, and argues that the true tragedy of *Othello* is the Moor's inability to separate his public conduct as military leader from his private judgments as husband.

Grudin, Robert. "Contrariety as Structure: The Later tragedies." In his *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety,* pp. 119-79. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

Finds that Desdemona's "type of lamblike femininity" is compelling to Othello but not to Shakespeare and thus the dramatist demonstrates that her passive helplessness is implicitly ironic, for it "sharpens the impulse to aggression in others." The ambiguities of her virtue are comparable, Grudin maintains, to the complexities of Iago's wickedness.

Hallstead, R. N. "Idolatrous Love: A New Approach to *Othello." Shakespeare Quarterly* XIX, No.2 (Spring 1968): 107-24.

Argues that after the consummation of Othello and Desdemona's marriage in Cyprus, the Moor's love for his wife becomes so excessive that it is theologically idolatrous. Asserting that *Othello* is a "morality play in a completely realistic framework," Hallstead contends that the Moor is shown renouncing Christianity when he swears a pagan vow with Iago at the close of Act III, scene iii, but the critic also discovers in the final scene of the drama a clear pattern of Christian penance, concluding that Shakespeare has portrayed the "return of Othello's Christianity.'"

Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation.* New York: Atheneum, 1970, 180 p.

Assesses Iago's motives from five different critical perspectives, alternately questioning whether the ensign should be viewed as "a stage villain, or Satan, or an artist, or a latent homosexual, or a Machiavel." A pluralistic approach to this issue, Hyman argues, demonstrates the "tension, paradox, and irony" in Shakespeare's portrayal of Iago, while a single line of inquiry can only produce one perspective that is "inevitably reductive and partial."

Kott, Jan. "The Two Paradoxes of *Othello."* In his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary,* translated by Boleslaw Taborski, pp. 99-125. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1964.

Maintains that the struggle between Othello and Iago is a dramatic representation of a "dispute on the nature of the world" and an enquiry into the purpose of human existence. Kott focuses specifically on two paradoxical events in the play: Iago's own victimization by the evil he himself sets in motion and Desdemona's delight in the erotic aspects of love, which leads Othello to believe her capable of betraying him.

Morris, Harry. *"Othello:* No Amount of Prayer Can Possibly Matter.'" In his *Last Things in Shakespeare,* pp. 76-114. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985.

Interprets *Othello* as a Christian allegory about damnation.

Murry, John Middleton. "Desdemona's Handkerchief.'" In his *Shakespeare,* pp. 311-21. London: Jonathan Cape, 1936.

Argues that Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief symbolizes the perfection of her love for Othello, for she became heedless of it only "when Othello was sick and her concern for the man she loved drove out all concern for the token of their love."

Neely, Carol Thomas. "Women and Men in *Othello:* 'What should such a fool/Do with so good a woman?' " In *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare,* pp. 211-39, edited by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Analysis of the kinship of the women in *Othello* and the heroines in Shakespeare's comedies which emphasizes their similar capacities to initiate courtship, tolerate men's fancies, and balance romantic idealism with a realistic view of sexuality.

Nelson, T. G. A and Charles Haines. "Othello's Unconsummated Marriage.'" *Essays in Criticism,* XXXIII, No.1 (January 1983): 1-18.

Maintains that Othello's anger and passion in Acts III and IV is the result of his frustrated desire.

Rice, Julian C. "Desdemona Unpinned: Universal Guilt in *Othello." Shakespeare Studies* VII (1974): 209-26.

Argues that although Desdemona is apparently the most virtuous of women, she shares with Othello and all the other characters in the drama the frailties, imperfections, and moral vulnerability that are inherent in human nature. Rice maintains that Desdemona is partially responsible for her own murder through her "overconfidence in the power of virtue to triumph."

Rosenberg, Marvin. *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961,313 p.

An overview of the interpretations of the drama's main characters by actors from the Restoration to the mid-twentieth century. Seeking to synthesize the commentary of literary critics with the interpretations offered by leading performers, Rosenberg emphasizes the essential humanity of the play's three central figures.

Sen Gupta, S. C. "Symbolism in *Othello."* In his *Aspects of Shakespearian Tragedy,* pp. 88-113. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Asserts that Othello and Iago "represent the eternal conflict-both internal and externalbetween the *forces* of Love and Hate, of Good and Evil, and the realization that the conflict cannot be resolved is part of the tragedy of human life.'"

Wain, John, ed. *Shakespeare: Othello.* London: Macmillan, 1971, 244 p.

A collection of essays by prominent critics on various topics concerning *Othello.*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Shakespeare for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Shakespeare for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Shakespeare for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Shakespeare for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Shakespeare for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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