

Othello: Character- Desdemona

Brabantio's daughter:

- Early in the play Brabantio defines Desdemona as his 'jewel' (I.3.196). He says she is 'A maiden never bold,/ Of spirit' (I.3.95–6), modest and opposed to marriage, afraid to look on Othello. **A02**
- She emerges from her father's descriptions as an innocent, girlish figure. This version of Desdemona proves inaccurate when she speaks in Act I. However, by the end of the play Othello's abusive treatment has turned Desdemona into the fearful girl Brabantio described. This is horribly ironic. Desdemona has been silenced and it seems her final role is to be a sacrifice to masculine pride. **A02**
- In Othello (1997), E. A. J. Honigmann suggests that it is possible to see Desdemona as 'one of the most heroic of spirits in the play' **A05**

As A Wife:

- If you are writing about Desdemona as a romantic heroine, an opening topic sentence might be, 'In Act I, Scene 3, Desdemona is portrayed as a determined character with a strong commitment to loving.' **A01**
- Desdemona asserts her sexuality- for example Desdemona's participation in the crude talk with Iago in Act II Scene 1, and her admiring reference to Lodovico in Act IV Scene 3.
- But the heroine's active sexuality is necessary to the play. Iago is able to make a great deal out of the fact that Desdemona deceived her father in order to choose her own husband, and is therefore untrustworthy.
- It is important to remember that although Desdemona has disobeyed her father, she expects to submit to Othello's authority. She states this explicitly when she says, 'My heart's subdued/ Even to the very quality of my lord' (I.3.251–2). **A02**
- When Desdemona urges Othello to reinstate Cassio, she believes she is acting in Othello's best professional interests. Desdemona's 'nagging' can be portrayed on stage as playful and loving, her anxiousness about Othello's health touching. **A02**
- But Desdemona is not faultless: She lies to Othello about the handkerchief (understandably, for he frightens her with his serious talk about its magical properties). **A02**
- When Othello strikes her publicly Desdemona reproaches him briefly: 'I have not deserved this' (IV.1.240). She then accepts – and defends – his authority over her, as we see from her discussion with Emilia at the start of Act IV Scene 3. **A02**
- Desdemona asserts her loving loyalty and questions Othello bravely in Act IV Scene 2 (see lines 30–89) but is reduced to dumb misery when her husband calls her 'that cunning whore of Venice' (IV.2.91): 'nor answer have I none' she says woefully (IV.2.105), remarking – girlishly – that she is 'a child to chiding' (IV.2.116). **A02**

Final Words:

- Ultimately Desdemona refuses to blame Othello for her unhappiness: she declares it is her 'wretched fortune' (IV.2.129). **A02**
- Marriage teaches Desdemona that 'men are not gods' (III.4.149) and this is a disappointment to her. But while Desdemona submits willingly to the man she chose to marry, she dies valiantly, fighting to be allowed to live and asserting her honesty. **A02**
- Her final words are intriguing and contradictory. Why does Desdemona take the blame for her own death? Is she trying to protect Othello in death as she sought to defend him in life? Or is she simply a victim asserting her own innocence? However we interpret Desdemona's final words, we will probably feel that the heroine's passivity in Act V Scene 2 contradicts her earlier assertiveness. **A05**
- In Othello (1997), E. A. J. Honigmann interprets Desdemona's last words as 'an act of forgiveness'. He claims that 'Love and Goodness defeat Evil' at the end of Othello **A05**

DESDEMONA: IAGO'S VICTIM

- In Act II Scene 1, Iago says that he 'love[s]' Desdemona, 'Not out of absolute lust' but 'Partly to diet mine own revenge' (II.1.289–92). He wants to be even with Othello 'wife for wife' (II.1.297). So Iago decides he will 'turn her virtue into pitch' (II.3.355). **A02**
- E. A. J. Honigmann argues that Iago finds it difficult to respond to Desdemona in Act IV Scene 2 when he sees how miserable she is. There is one line of Iago that could be delivered with a hint of regret: 'Do not weep, do not weep: alas the day!' (IV.2.126). However, you may feel this is another example of Iago's ability to dissemble and further proof that Iago enjoys turning Desdemona into a victim. **A05**

BRAVERY: **A02**

- Desdemona defends her own honour throughout the play, shown when she says to Othello, 'By heaven, you do me wrong' (IV.2.82).
- Desdemona is still brave and assertive, even when Othello attacks her verbally and physically.
- The reference to heaven reinforces Desdemona's virtue.
- This is an example of irony and foreshadowing; Othello will refer to heaven just before he murders Desdemona.

Othello: Character-Brabantio

BRABANTIO THE SENATOR

- Ironically, he shared many qualities with his son-in-law Othello. We are led to believe that Brabantio is a valuable member of the council, well respected by others. The Duke says that he was missed during the discussions about the Turkish invasion, and takes trouble to reconcile Brabantio to Desdemona's marriage.
- Ironically, like Othello, Brabantio puts his private affairs before the affairs of state. Brabantio insists the council put Othello on trial for witchcraft in Act I Scene 3 when they are more concerned with the military fate of Cyprus.

PROGRESS BOOSTER: A03

- Shakespeare lived in a patriarchal society and consider the different ways Elizabethan and modern audiences might respond to Desdemona's behaviour towards her father in Act I.

STUDY FOCUS: BRABANTIO THE PATRIARCH

- Brabantio plays the role of the wronged patriarch. Shakespeare's audience may have felt his wrongs more deeply than we do today. They would have recognised Desdemona's elopement as an assault on patriarchy. A03
- Like Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, the treasured daughter denies her father's right to dispose of her in marriage as he sees fit. Brabantio sees this as a 'gross revolt' (I.1.132) against the natural order. A04
- He reminds Desdemona that it is her duty to obey him in Act I Scene 3 (see lines 135-9). Brabantio holds what would have been recognised by Shakespeare's audience as traditional, suspicious views of foreigners. These views come across in Brabantio's descriptions of Othello as a 'foul thief' (I.2.62) who has bewitched Desdemona. A05
- To a modern audience these views seem racist. Brabantio suggests that Desdemona's marriage to Othello undermines not just his own authority, but the whole social order. A05
- KEY CONTEXT: A03
- Elizabethan society was patriarchal and hierarchical. Fathers expected to control their daughters and marry them off to their own social or financial advantage. Marriage was a means by which men controlled and passed on their property, and women were seen as possessions. Brabantio is more tolerant than many Renaissance aristocrats – he says he was willing to allow Desdemona some choice about whom she married.

BRABANTIO'S LOVE FOR DESDEMONA

- Brabantio has not been an unsympathetic parent. Until the elopement his home has been a place of family harmony. Othello has been entertained often and Brabantio has been a friendly host. Any audience would understand Brabantio's desire to find a suitable match for his daughter.
- His paternal love of Desdemona has been wise- rejecting the unworthy Roderigo, as we see when he sternly reminds the failed suitor that Desdemona 'is not for thee' (I.1.97). Brabantio has also allowed Desdemona to reject suitors herself.
- Brabantio's descriptions of Desdemona in the senate scene may not fit with the confident young woman we see when she appears, but Brabantio recognises his daughter's virtues and cares for her deeply.
- Not all of Brabantio's speeches about losing his daughter are unsympathetic. In Act I Scene 3 it clear that the loss of Desdemona weighs very heavily on his soul. He says 'my particular grief/ Is of so flood-gate and o'erbearing nature/ That it engulfs and swallows other sorrows' (I.3.57-9). Brabantio's sense of loss is profound. A02
- The intense emotion described in this speech foreshadows Othello's outraged feelings when he believes he has been betrayed by Desdemona. It is ironic that the reluctant father and his son-in-law are linked by the language of loss they use. Like Othello, Brabantio dies grieving for his lost love. We are told Desdemona's marriage was 'mortal [fatal] to him' (V. 2.203). A02

Othello: Theme - Jealousy

JEALOUSY AND DESTRUCTION

- Jealousy is a form of tyranny- destroys love, honour and nobility in those it afflicts.
- It makes both male protagonists murderous and violent. It also seems that it is the nature of jealousy not to be satisfied. Iago continues plotting against Cassio after he has disgraced him and is not content with disturbing Othello's peace of mind: he must continue until Desdemona is dead.
- Othello's jealous thoughts are characterised by references to acts of violence against Desdemona. He says he will 'tear her all to pieces!' (III.3.434) or 'chop her into messes' (IV.1.197). Othello also wants to torture and kill his supposed rival Cassio. Once his jealousy has been proved false, Othello turns his sword on himself. Jealousy has destroyed him. It also destroys Iago, whose torture is fitting punishment for his jealous crimes.

KEY INTERPRETATION: A05

- F. R. Leavis has claimed that Othello's jealousy 'is unassociated with any real interest in Desdemona as a person'. He says Othello 'slips ... readily into possessive jealousy because he is "self-centred"'. To what extent do you agree with these comments?

PROFESSIONAL JEALOUSY

- Iago's professional jealousy, which can be linked to the sin of envy, sets the tragic events of the play in motion. Iago envies Cassio primarily because he is promoted to a post Iago has coveted. Iago is also envious of Cassio's superior manners and social status. As late as Act V, Iago is still motivated by jealous thoughts about Cassio. Iago says Cassio must be destroyed because of the 'daily beauty in his life/ That makes me ugly' (V.1.19).
- element of professional jealousy in Iago's treatment of Othello- wishes to destroy Othello's military reputation, as well as his marriage?

IMAGERY OF JEALOUSY:

- The imagery associated with jealousy suggests it is an all consuming, irrational emotion.
- It is 'the green-eyed monster, which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on' (III. 3.168-9), 'a monster/ Begot upon itself, born on itself' (III.4.161-2). There is a strong sense of devouring and being devoured in these images, which fits in with Iago's description of Othello as being 'eaten up with passion' when he believes Desdemona is unfaithful (III.3.394). A02
- Shakespeare explores the monstrous power of jealousy again in The Winter's Tale where King Leontes becomes convinced his wife, Hermione, has been unfaithful. Unlike Othello, whose mind is poisoned by a villain, Leontes's jealousy is fuelled by his own thoughts. A04

STUDY FOCUS: JEALOUSY AND MADNESS: A02

- Iago makes explicit connections between jealousy and madness. When Othello is overcome by jealous thoughts he falls down in a fit.
- Iago observes how 'he foams at mouth, and ... Breaks out to savage madness' (IV. 1.54-5). Later Iago feeds Othello's jealousy as Othello watches Iago's conversation with Cassio.
- Othello believes he is watching Cassio describe his adulterous liaison with Desdemona. Iago comments, 'As he [Cassio] shall smile, Othello shall go mad' (IV. 1.101). Emilia also makes a connection between madness and jealousy when she describes how husbands 'break out in peevish jealousies' (IV.3.88).
- If jealousy is associated with madness, to what extent is Othello responsible for the actions he commits when he is under its influence?

Othello: Genre-Tragedy

STUDY FOCUS: SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY AND OTHELLO

- In Othello, Shakespeare pits good (Othello) against evil (Iago) and we watch as the tragic hero's new family unit is destroyed against the backdrop of the Turkish conflict
- As well as observing some of the conventions of Greek tragedy, Shakespeare makes effective use of the theatrical conventions of his own age. By the time he came to write Othello, it was usual to present tragedies in five acts, with a climax or turning point in Act III and a tragic outcome in Act V.

KEY CONNECTION:

- Rory Kinnear, who played Iago in a production of Othello in 2013, says that the tragedy of the play is 'all the more overwhelming' because the audience knows about Iago's evil scheming and are 'powerless to stop it'.

THE POWER OF THE VILLAIN IN OTHELLO

- In Othello the tragic hero becomes a victim because of the evil schemes of the villain, Iago. The suffering of the central couple is a direct result of his malicious plotting. The audience will recognise that Othello has faults, but that he is a noble man brought low by a very powerful adversary.
- The play is extremely painful to watch because we know how untrustworthy the villain is from the very first scene, and can see how expert Iago is at exercising his power.

PROGRESS BOOSTER: A02

A key theme in tragedy is isolation. Think about how the villain Iago works to isolate the characters from each other in Othello and why he does this. You might also consider to what extent Iago's success lies in his own isolation. Or does Iago need others for his plans to succeed?

LOVE AND PITY IN OTHELLO

- Othello is a tragedy preoccupied by the nature of love. In Act I we are presented with a couple whose deep mutual love makes them appealing to the audience. We side with Othello and Desdemona in the Senate scene in Act I Scene 3 because their love is threatened.
- As the play progresses our admiration for the couple is turned to pity, as we watch Iago destroy their relationship. From Act III love is undermined by mistrust, uncertainty and jealousy. However, in spite of the violent deaths in Act V, it is possible to argue that love reasserts itself at the end of Othello.
- Desdemona defends her love for Othello with her dying breath, and the tragic protagonist dies 'upon a kiss' (V.2.357).

A02:

If you are asked to write about genre you need to be able to discuss whether Othello is a domestic tragedy. In Renaissance drama a domestic tragedy is a tragedy in which the protagonists are ordinary middle-class or lower-class individuals. This contrasts with classical tragedy, in which the central character is usually a king or of noble rank and his downfall not simply a personal matter, but also an affair of state with consequences for the whole nation he rules.

Othello: Structure- Timescales

'LONG TIME' A02

- In Act III Scene 3, Iago describes Cassio's lustful dream, which we are told occurred 'lately' (III.3.416) when Iago shared Cassio's bed. In Act III Scene 4, Bianca complains to Cassio that he has stayed away from her a week, and Othello himself says that he believes Desdemona has committed adultery with Cassio 'A thousand times' (V.2.210). It seems highly unlikely that Lodovico would have been in Venice to install Cassio as governor within a week of Othello's arrival in Cyprus.
- These statements which suggest 'long time' are primarily designed to increase the plausibility of Othello's jealousy. But it is also necessary for Shakespeare to present the poisoning of Othello's mind occurring so fast, without a substantial interval of time. The play would be less dramatic if Iago loosened his grip on his victim once he was in his grasp.

KEY INTERPRETATION: A05

Helen Gardner states that the 'terrible end' of Othello has 'a sense of completeness' which makes it 'the most beautiful end in Shakespearean tragedy'. How would you argue for or against Gardner's viewpoint?

Double time scheme:

The theory of a 'double time scheme' in Othello dates from the middle of the nineteenth century. There can be no doubt that there are inconsistencies in the way time is presented in Othello. It appears that the disintegration of Othello's mind and marriage occurs extremely fast and Iago recognises that he must move quickly if his plots are to remain concealed; at the same time the characters make statements that suggest time is moving quite slowly.

A02: NIGHT TIME SCENES

- Notice how the majority of the scenes in the play take place at night.
- The opening scene occurs in the street in Venice at night, and the play ends in Othello's bedroom in Cyprus at night. Cassio's reputation is destroyed at night after a drunken brawl. In Act V he is wounded by Iago in the street at night. Roderigo and Emilia are also stabbed at night, dying of their wounds. What significance does this have? Because Iago is present or has instigated all the violent events that occur at night, we know that night-time is associated with his evil progress.
- Iago has been able to use the cover of darkness to conceal his plots, so it is highly appropriate that he is unmasked at night.
- However, because so much of Othello occurs at night, it can be argued that there is never any doubt that evil will triumph over goodness. A05

'SHORT TIME': A05

- This brings us to the question of 'short time'. The first act of Othello takes place in one night. When the characters have arrived in Cyprus (after a period travelling) time seems to move very quickly, increasing the sense of claustrophobia and heightening the intensity of the drama.
- The characters land just before 'this present hour of five' (II. 2.9-10), the wedding celebrations occur that evening, Cassio is dismissed from his post the same night and we see Iago packing Roderigo off to bed at dawn the following morning. On this day Desdemona pleads for Cassio, having met with him earlier in the morning. Iago sees his chance and moves into action immediately.
- Between Act III Scene 3 and Act IV Scene 1 there might plausibly be a short interval, but thereafter there can be no break until the curtain falls at the end of Act V. It is this relentlessness that grips us in the theatre, where we do not notice the inconsistencies.
- It might also be argued that an insistence on 'short time' is a deliberate theatrical decision. Perhaps Shakespeare uses his time scheme to show us how powerful and unreasonable jealousy is. A02
- We know that Desdemona has not had the opportunity to commit adultery, and yet her husband becomes convinced she has betrayed him often. A05

Othello: Interpretations

- NEW HISTORICIST READINGS

- New Historicist critics seek to consider Othello in relation to its social and historical context, looking at the play in relation to the ideology and beliefs of Shakespeare's society. New Historicists are particularly interested in whether or not Othello reinforces or subverts the values of Shakespeare's society. Commenting on the violence against female characters in drama of the Jacobean period, Leonard Tennenhouse (see Power on Display, 1986) asserts the view that 'Jacobean tragedies offer up their scenes of excessive punishment as if mutilating the female could somehow correct political corruption. The female illogically may be completely innocent ... yet in play after play she demands her own death or else claims responsibility for her murder.' Tennenhouse suggests Desdemona has to be destroyed because she is subversive. Unlike many feminist critics, Tennenhouse suggests that Desdemona is 'the embodiment of power' when she appears in Act I and defends her right to choose her own husband.
- Frances Dolan (see 'Revolutions, Petty Tyranny and the Murderous Husband' in Kate Chedgzogy, ed., Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender, 2001) considers Othello in relation to its historical context. She notes how in Shakespeare's society, murdering one's spouse was considered a threat to the social order. Dolan also comments on how Jacobean drama reflects seventeenth-century anxieties about the racial 'other', the traitor 'inside', the plotting subordinate and abusive authority figures. Dolan says that Othello can be linked to all these 'spectres of disorder'. Dolan defines him as a 'domestic tyrant who murders his wife on spurious grounds'. She also suggests Othello is in an ambiguous position because of his race. He cannot hold on to his authority with any confidence or security because he is different from the Venetians. For Dolan, Othello's race would have undermined his heroism: 'By making his protagonist black, Shakespeare prepares his original audience to question Othello's authority, to suspect that he might misuse it groundlessly.'
- Nicholas Marsh (see Shakespeare: The Tragedies, 1998) considers Iago in relation to his historical context. He suggests that Iago represents a new way of thinking about the world. Iago is a typical malcontent or Machiavel, a dissatisfied and cynical man who will not stay in his place. He wants to get his own back on a society that thwarts him. Marsh points to Iago's speech in Act I Scene 3, where he outlines his philosophy – 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus' (line 320) – as proof of his subversive qualities. By way of contrast, Othello 'often conjures the magnificence of a traditional, military order and medieval ideals, such as honour. His love for Desdemona has strong overtones of medieval courtly love where the woman's purity is worshipped and idolized.'
- KEY INTERPRETATION
- In 'Othello's Real Tragedy' (1987), Caryl Phillips offers a reading of Othello informed by historicist approaches. Phillips stresses the hero's isolation as a black man in a white world. He says Othello is fully aware of his 'tenuous' position and that his tragedy is caused when he 'begins to forget that he is black'. Do you agree with this view?