

Othello

“With Rhymes and Reason”, Loesher

The plot

Othello, the Moor of Venice, is a powerful and skilful general who has won the heart of Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator. After their marriage, their happiness is undermined and eventually destroyed by Iago, an envious lower officer, who arouses Othello's jealousy by telling him that his wife is unfaithful to him with his lieutenant Cassio. Othello believes Iago's evil words and smothers Desdemona with a pillow. When he finds out that Iago's accusations were false, he kills himself.

Apart from the first act, set in Venice, the story takes place in Cyprus, and is compressed into 36 hours building up to a climax of tension. There are only a few main characters in this play and no sub-plot. For these reasons the play is one of Shakespeare's most closely-knit and traditional in structure, following Aristotle's rules for drama¹.

1. Aristotle in his *Poetics* asserts three classical unities for drama, that is the *unity of action* (a play should have one main action that it follows, with no or few subplots); the *unity of place* (a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place); the *unity of time* (the action in a play should take place over no more than 24 hours).

Shakespeare's source

The seventh novella of the third decade of the *Hecatommithi* (1566) by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio provided the plot for *Othello*, which Shakespeare used in the original Italian version or the French translation by Gabriel Chappuys (1584). As in other cases, Shakespeare altered the original story, in particular through the triangle - Othello, Iago, Desdemona - and even more, through the close and complex relationship of attraction/repulsion, faithfulness/hatred, light/darkness between Othello and Iago, Shakespeare creates one of his most charming dramatic designs.

Let's get started

1. Light and darkness are two contrasting images used frequently in literature to express contrasting concepts, characters or themes. Can you think of some examples yourselves from any texts you have read in English or other literatures? What do you, personally, associate with light and darkness?

Othello



The extract you are going to read is from Act V, Scene II, near the end of the tragedy. The scene of Desdemona's murder opens with a poignant and magnificent speech by Othello. It is night: darkness is needed for the crime, but images of light are interwoven into the dark fabric of the scene. It is the light of a candle, but it is also the light of Desdemona's life which will be put out. Furthermore, light and darkness are also related to white (Desdemona's purity) and black (Othello's complexion as a Moor).

	<i>Una camera nel castello. Desdemona a letto addormentata. Entra Otello con un lume.</i>
OTHELLO. It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars! - It is the cause. - Yet I'll not shed her blood; Nor scar that whither skin of hers than snow,	OTELLO È la causa, è la causa, anima mia; ma a voi non la dirò, caste stelle. È la causa; ma non verserò il suo sangue né scalfirò la sua pelle più bianca

<p>And smooth as monumental alabaster. Yet she must die else she'll betray more men, Put out the light and then put out the light: If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can again thy former light restore, Should I repent me; but once put out thy light, Thou cunning'st pattern of excellent nature, I know not where is that Promethean¹ heat That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd thy rose I cannot give it vital growth again, It needs must wither: - I'll smell it on the tree. - <i>[Kissing her.]</i> O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade Justice to break her sword! - One more, one more. - Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, And love thee after. - One more, and this the last. So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep But they are cruel tears: this sorrow's heavenly It strikes where it doth love. - She wakes.</p>	<p>della neve e liscia come alabastro sepolcrale. Pure deve morire, o tradirà altri uomini. Prima spegni una luce, e poi quell'altra; se spengo questa fiaccola, e mi pento, posso ripristinare la sua luce; ma una volta spenta la tua luce, o modello compiuto della perfezione di natura, non so dove si trovi il fuoco prometeico che la riaccenda. Quand'ho svelto la rosa non posso più ridarle il suo rigoglio; appassisce per forza. L'odorero sullo stelo.</p> <p><i>La bacia.</i></p> <p>O alito balsamico, che quasi induci la Giustizia a spezzare la sua spada! Un altro; un altro. Resta così nella morte, e io ti ucciderò, e ancora ti amerò. Ancora un bacio, e sia l'ultimo bacio. Mai dolcezza fu così fatale. Piango, sì, ma lacrime crudeli; è una pena celestiale, colpisce l'oggetto del suo amore. Si ridesta...</p>
--	---

Understanding the text

1 Answer the following questions.

1. Where is the scene set?
2. What is Desdemona doing?
3. What does Othello do after entering the room?

2. Fill in the passage with the following words.

- skin
- kisses
- intention
- decides
- blood
- betray
- die

Othello reasons with himself why Desdemona must (1) ____: he wouldn't like to shed her (2) _____ and scar her perfect, white (3) _____, but he has to do so otherwise she will (4) _____ other men. He (5) _____ her and asks for more; he nearly abandons his (6) _____ to kill her, but in the end (7) _____ she must die.

3 There are three key words in Othello's monologue:

- cause

- light
- rose

Which of the following meanings can you associate with each word?

Desdemona's life
 Desdemona's beauty
 Desdemona's imagined infidelity
 Desdemona's love for Othello
 Othello's jealousy
 Othello's wish to avenge his honour
 a lit up candle on a bedside table
 the restoration of justice and moral order

4. Two contrasting colours are juxtaposed in Othello's speech. What colours are they? What words and expressions suggest them? What meanings do you think are symbolised by these colours?

5. What role has Othello chosen for himself in this monologue? Choose from the following and give evidence from the text.

- a jealous husband
- a raving mad killer
- a judge who is expected to punish an offender

Context

6 Othello repeats the word 'cause' three times in the opening three lines of his soliloquy. For the Elizabethans, 'cause' had several meanings: - an action which prompts a reaction (Desdemona's infidelity)

- a morally justifiable end one is pursuing, (e.g. 'all in a good cause')

- a legal usage meaning an accusation brought against someone in court (Othello sees himself as an agent of impartial justice).

Which of the above meanings would apply to Othello considering his situation and state of mind at this point in the play?

Discussion

7. Iago, the person who sowed the seed of doubt in Othello about Desdemona's faithfulness resulting in her murder, represents the tradition of the devil of medieval history plays, of Judas and the fallen angels in the Bible and of Vice in the morality plays. Shakespeare, however, makes him great in his wickedness and personification of evil. He is a villain able to manipulate the innocent. Do you know any other great villain in literature?