



Introduction to *Othello*

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Important Dramatic Term

Tragedy—a drama of a solemn and dignified quality that typically depicts the development of a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force, such as fate, circumstance, or society, and reaches a mournful or ruinous conclusion.

Othello – A Shakespearean Tragedy

- *Othello* is a Shakespearean Tragedy
- It encompasses elements of tragedies such as:
 - It ends with the death of numerous characters including the title character
 - The protagonist is admirable, but flawed, with the audience able to understand and sympathize with the character.
 - The protagonist is capable of both good and evil
 - Free will is insisted upon – the protagonist must always be able to back out of a situation or to redeem themselves – but always leads towards their inevitable doom.

Important Dramatic Terms

Tragic flaw—a defect in the protagonist that brings about his or her downfall.

Hubris: derived from the Greek word *hybris*, means “excessive pride.” In Greek tragedy, hubris is often viewed as the flaw that leads to the downfall of the tragic hero.

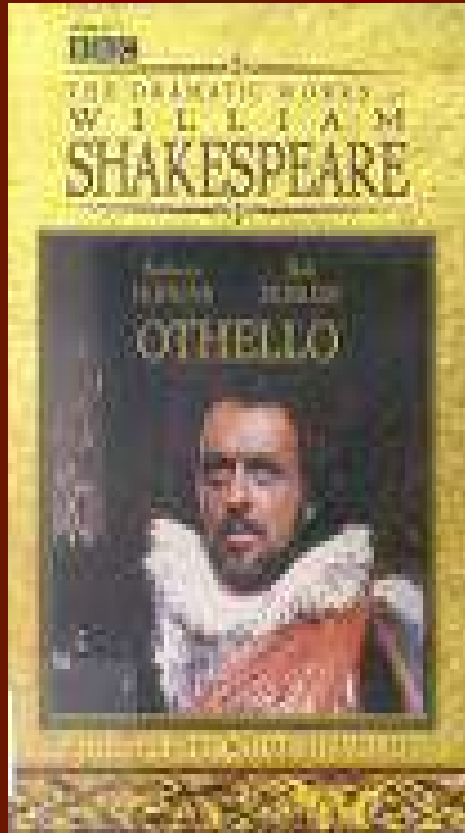
Important Dramatic Terms

- **Tragic hero:** the main character of great importance to his state or culture and who is conventionally of noble birth and high social station, the ruler or an important leader in his society.
- The moral health of the state is identified with, and dependent upon, that of its ruler, and so the tragic hero's story is also that of his state.

Important Dramatic Terms

- Such heroes are mixed characters, neither thoroughly good or thoroughly evil, yet “better” or “greater” than the rest of us in the sense that they are of higher than ordinary moral worth and social significance.

Setting



Setting (time) · Late sixteenth century, during the wars between Venice and Turkey

Setting (place) · Venice in Act I; the island of Cyprus thereafter



Cyprus is located east of Italy, in the Mediterranean Sea. It is just south of Turkey.



People in *Othello*

● Venetians

- Most are noblemen and women (Brabantio, Desdemona, Roderigo)
- There are also the servants (Emilia)
- Some are soldiers (Cassio, Iago)
- Others are part of Venetian government (the Duke)

Types of People (cont'd)

- Moors (Othello)
 - Black nomadic people of the northern shores of Africa, originally the inhabitants of Mauretania
 - Converted to Islam in the 8th century

Moors (cont'd)

- Invaded Spain in 711 and dominated until the 11th century
- Had great dynasties up until 1492, when the last of their cities was conquered by Spain
- Virtually exterminated by Spain during the Inquisition (late 1400s-1820)

Moors (cont'd)

- Othello is a Moor
 - Discriminated against because of his race (African/black)
 - Othello has been accepted in some ways because he is a Christian and a military genius
 - Yet his marriage to Desdemona reflects the prevailing negative view toward interracial marriage.



Iago

- Iago is one of Shakespeare's most sinister villains, often considered so because of the unique trust Othello puts in him, which he betrays while maintaining his reputation of honesty and dedication.
- Shakespeare contrasts Iago with Othello's nobility and integrity.
- Iago is a malcontent – he has a bitter and cynical view of the world around him.
- The name Iago is a shortened version of the Spanish name "Santiago" or "St James".
- Saint James of Spain was also known as "St James the Moor Killer" which seems appropriate within the play.



THE CULTURE OF THE TIME

The Wife's Status



A typical wife receiving her instruction

- The husband, in the accepted role as head of the household, gives moral and secular direction to his wife and children, who sit obediently listening.

Evil Women

In the Elizabethan times there was a long and well established tradition in the Church of what we would now call misogyny – women were distrusted simply because they were women. At the time it was assumed that most women would cheat – it was part of their nature.



The men in "Othello" have differing views of women – from Othello who idolizes his wife (Desdemona) to Iago who sees love as "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will".

The attitudes of the audience at the time are likely to have been varied, too.

The Cuckold

Any man whose wife cheated on him (without his knowledge) was known as a cuckold.

The word derives from "cuckoo" – the bird known for laying their eggs in another's nest.



It was highly undesirable to be considered a cuckold.

All of the community would find out about it and was considered a public humiliation.

Cuckolds were often described as having horns – a hangover from the days when a cuckold was forced to parade around his town wearing antlers as a sign of his wife's infidelity.

Jealousy

- Jealousy was viewed as something irrational and linked to the deadly sin of envy.
- It was viewed as a sudden infection against which there was no prevention or cure.
- It was thought of as eroding trust and it dissolved the bonds holding together marriages, families and social frameworks.
- Being jealous could let in evil and chaos, and it was a state greatly feared by Shakespeare's audiences.

Consider Characters



Task

- On the following slide are some lines spoken by, or about, various characters in the play. Consider what you think each quotation reveals about the person speaking/being spoken about, and what they are like as a character.

- 1) Iago - describing Othello: "loving his own pride and purposes".
- 2) Iago - speaking about his relationship with Othello: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him".
- 3) Iago - speaking about himself: "I am not what I am".
- 4) Othello - speaking about himself: "My parts, my title and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly".
- 5) Othello - about Iago: "A man he is of honesty and trust".

Task~ Today's society

Think about the cultural rules that you live by.

Look at the questions to the right and consider the answers. Be sure to make notes.

- What rules dictate the behavior of young men and women in relationships today?
- What are the things "nice girls" just don't do?
- What are the things "nice boys" just don't do?
- What do you think the consequences are of breaking these rules?