

Year 9 English - 'Othello' by William Shakespeare



1

Iago is angry that Othello, the general of the army, has promoted Cassio to be his lieutenant instead of Iago.

Othello has secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of a senator in Venice.

Iago tells Desdemona's father about the secret marriage to cause trouble for Othello.

Desdemona's father makes a formal complaint about Othello's behaviour to the Duke of Venice. His complaint is ignored, and the Duke sends Othello to Cyprus to continue fighting in a war.

Othello goes to Cyprus and takes his new wife Desdemona with him, together with Iago and Michael Cassio.



2

Characters

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Othello:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respected Impulsive Victimised Suspicious  | <p>Desdemona:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submissive Kind Naïve Innocent  | <p>Iago:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manipulative Disloyal Resourceful Duplicious  | <p>Emilia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loyal Outspoken Independent Down-trodden  |
|--|--|---|---|

3

Historical Context

In Elizabethan England, the term "Moor" could be used to refer to a wide range of non-European people, including black Africans, North Africans, Arabs, and even Indians. References to Othello's origins throughout the play are frequent: Iago calls Othello a 'Barbary horse'; Barbary was an area in Africa between Egypt and the Atlantic Ocean. Roderigo, however, calls him 'thicklips', suggesting that he may come from further south on the African continent. Brabantio calls him 'sooty'; Othello, along with numerous other characters, refers to himself as 'black'. Shakespeare's reference to Othello as a 'Moor' is almost certainly an indication that Othello's ethnicity is of African descent. In England during Shakespeare's time, views regarding 'Moors' were slightly more complex because of strong anti-Catholic sentiment in England and English fears of invasion by the Spanish. In fact, England maintained independent trade relationships with "Moorish" Northern Africa, despite Spanish and Portuguese protest. The English slave trade also brought black slaves to Europe, from mid-sixteenth century onward.

Iago encourages Cassio to get drunk whilst on duty. Cassio ends up in a drunken fight and is demoted from his position as lieutenant.



Iago begins to plant seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind about his wife's relationship with Michael Cassio. Iago gets hold of a handkerchief belonging to Desdemona and hides it in Cassio's room pretending it is proof of Desdemona's unfaithfulness.



Desdemona pleads with Othello to give Cassio his job back. She does this innocently, but Othello takes this as proof of her feelings for Cassio.

4

Useful 'translations' from Shakespearean to modern English:

- Thee and thou = you**
- Thy = your**
- (**'thee', 'thou' and 'thy'** were more informal versions of 'you' in Shakespearean times. Characters are more likely to use 'you' and 'your' when they are being respectful or polite, e.g. when speaking to someone with a higher status than them.)
- art = are**
- chide = tell off/ scold/ rebuke/ reprove**
- cuckold = (mocking/insulting) a man with an unfaithful wife**
- false = treacherous, traitorous, perfidious**
- forsooth = in truth, certainly, truly, indeed**
- hath = has**
- humour = mood / temperament**
- morn = morning / dawn**
- o'er = over**
- oft = often**
- prate = talk / chat**
- prithce = Please, may I ask**
- thy = your**
- 'twixt = between**
- vex'd = angry**
- wench = girl**
- whence = why**



5

KEY QUOTES EXPLAINED

'I'll [...] make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me For making him egregiously an ass.' Iago is left alone and delivers soliloquy revealing his evil scheme. He has announced that winning Desdemona for himself would be the best possible form of revenge against Othello, but that he will settle for driving Othello mad with jealousy by tricking him into thinking Desdemona has been unfaithful. Iago finishes his speech with the alarming boast that he will make Othello **'thank me, love me, and reward me'** for making a fool out of him, again using the racist imagery and says he will turn Othello into an ass (donkey). This passage is a reminder of Iago's scheming nature—he wants to destroy Othello not only for the pleasure of vengeance, but also for the "reward" of advancing his own career. It also reveals the truly stubborn, heartless extent of his desire for revenge. It is not enough for Iago to ruin Othello; he wants Othello to "thank" and "love" him for it too.

Iago's wife, Emilia, tells Othello that Iago has lied. Othello realises his tragic mistake as Iago is arrested.



Iago continues to manipulate Othello to the point where Othello punishes his new wife for her supposed lies and unfaithfulness.



Year 9 English - 'Othello' by William Shakespeare

6



The Purpose and Function of Allusion



What is an allusion?

In literature, an allusion is an unexplained reference to someone or something outside of the text. Writers commonly allude to other literary works, famous individuals, historical events, or philosophical ideas, and they do so in order to layer associations and meanings from these sources onto their own work. Allusions can be direct or indirect, meaning that they might explicitly state the name of the thing they're referring to, or they might hint at it in other, subtler ways.

Reasons why writers use allusion:

- To efficiently convey big ideas or refer to stories that would take too long to explain.
- To deepen and enrich the meaning of a text by adding a layer that may not be obvious to all readers.
- To invite readers to reflect on the similarities between their own lives and the lives of authors or characters being alluded to.

Where can we see allusion in 'Othello'?

He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and / she is sport for Jove."

In the allusion to Jove in *Othello*, Iago is using deceitful tactics to play with Cassio's mind by attempting to attract him to Desdemona. He claims that Desdemona is "sport for Jove," signifying that Desdemona is a woman fine enough to belong to the King of Gods. Since the King of the Gods is likely to have a woman of high class and beauty, the allusion to Jove is ideal. In addition Jove had many different wives and famously cheated on Hera, suggesting Othello might be the same.

7

Themes



PREJUDICE: Othello shows the impact of racial prejudice. In nearly every case, the prejudiced characters use terms that describe Othello as an animal or beast. In other words, they use racist language to try to define Othello

not only as an outsider to white Venetian society, but as being less human and therefore less deserving of respect. Othello himself seems to have internalized this prejudice. On a number of occasions he describes himself in similarly unflattering racial terms. And when he believes that he has lost his honour and manhood through Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness, he quickly becomes the kind of un-rational animal or monster that the white Venetians accuse him of being:

Jealousy:



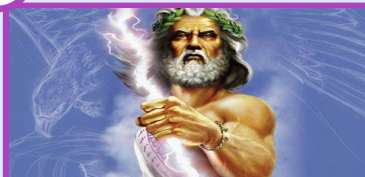
Iago refers to jealousy as the "green-eyed monster." As this metaphor suggests, jealousy is closely associated with the theme of appearance and reality. For instance, at one point Othello demands that Iago provide "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity—he demands to see reality. But Iago instead provides the circumstantial evidence of the handkerchief, which Othello, consumed by his jealousy, accepts as a substitute for "ocular proof." Othello's jealousy impedes his ability to distinguish between reality and appearance.

Women and marriage: Two contrasting images of womanhood dominate Othello: the virtuous and loyal woman, or Madonna, embodied by Desdemona; and the strong and opinionated, embodied, to a certain extent by Emilia. Desdemona often describes her devotion to Othello in front of other people, she plays the role of the virtuous wife. Emilia is far less idealistic about marriage and the world in general than Desdemona is, she is loyal to her mistress.



8

Shakespeare alludes to the following mythological characters in Othello.



In Roman mythology, Jove is the king of the gods as well as the god of sky and thunder. Jove is also commonly known as Jupiter was the chief deity of Roman state religion throughout the Republican/ Imperial eras, until the Empire came under Christian rule. He is the Greek equivalent of Zeus, who wielded bolts of thunder.



In Greek mythology, the Hydra is poisonous serpent-like water beast that possessed up to nine heads. Additionally, for each head cut off, it grew two more, and it had extremely infectious poisonous breath and blood; the stench from its breath was enough to kill man or beast. Hercules found the Hydra and killed it. Hercules cut off the heads one by one from the Hydra and Iolaus held a torch over the open wounds to stop them from growing, until just one head was left. Hercules used a golden sword from Athena to destroy the last head with a mighty blow.



The term Janus describes someone who is duplicitous. Shakespeare's mythological allusion to Janus is, ironically, a quote by Iago. Even more surprisingly, when he uses it he is not telling a lie; he simply swears no by Janus when Othello asks him if Brabantio is approaching. Nevertheless, Janus, as a two faced god, is very appropriate and fitting for Iago's own role during the play. Iago himself is many faced with all of his feigned behaviours. His duplicity is further demonstrated when Othello steps away and Iago shows his other face of Janus and begins his malicious scheming again, yet switches back his original "face" when Othello returns.