



**It's Never Simply Black and White**  
**Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice***

William Shakespeare's extraordinary tragedy *Othello* is one of his most tightly-constructed plays and is generally considered to be one of his finest works. It is a powerful and gripping drama that still intrigues and interests audiences. This is perhaps because of its astonishing ability to transcend its own time and place. *Othello* seems both ancient and modern in its themes.

The play concerns Desdemona, a young woman of Venice, who has just eloped with Othello, the "noble Moor." Modern interpreters tend to believe that Othello was of sub-Saharan ancestry, but in spite of the fact that the play is quite concerned with racial difference, Shakespeare does not provide us with a specific indication of Othello's race.

To an Elizabethan audience, a Moor could have been an Arab from Northern Africa, a so-called "white Moor" of the Barbary Coast, or a "black Moor" from more Southern Africa. And even Shakespeare's use of the word "black" to describe Othello could have been interpreted as "swarthy," simply more deeply complected than the Anglo-Saxons, who sometimes even referred to brunettes as "black." However one chooses to see *Othello*, it is plain that Shakespeare did mean for he and his wife to be an interracial couple.

Soon after the play begins, Othello, with Desdemona in tow, leaves Venice to command the Venetian army in a battle against the Turks on the island of Cyprus. However, even before they leave for Cyprus, we've already witnessed the first of many treacheries against Othello by his ensign Iago.

**Iago's Story**

One of the most extraordinary villains ever created, it is the deceitful Iago who drives the action in the play forward and lays the groundwork for the play's tragic end. And, in point of fact, there really is no play without Iago's machinations. His force upon the story is so great that it has caused some scholars to muse that Shakespeare should have made Iago the title character.

Iago is upset at Othello for passing him over for a promotion and giving the rank of lieutenant, which Iago believes is rightfully his, to the inexperienced Cassio. Swearing hatred and revenge on Othello, Iago begins to lay his plot. Before leaving Venice he tries to turn Desdemona's father against Othello. Upon reaching Cyprus, he attempts to turn Othello against Cassio by insinuating that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona. During this time of methodically plotting behind Othello's back, Iago begins to insinuate himself into the Moor's confidences.

**A Play About A Handkerchief**

One of the seminal moments in the play is when Desdemona's maid, Emilia, who happens to be the wife of Iago, finds an embroidered handkerchief that Desdemona has dropped and gives it to Iago.

It seems simple and innocuous enough. In fact, it seems downright silly when you write it down: the maid steals a handkerchief and from that act tragedy ensues. But, we all know that a snowball can become an avalanche and a few misplaced words can start a war and, in this case, one simple act begins hurtling us toward a horrific conclusion.

Evil Iago takes the purloined handkerchief and plants it on Cassio. He tells Othello that he has seen Cassio use this handkerchief which was the first gift Othello ever gave to Desdemona and which hold particular sentimental value to him. Othello flies into a rage. Then, Iago engages Cassio into telling him about his encounters with a local prostitute, Bianca. He has stationed Othello within eavesdropping distance and tells Othello that he will get Cassio to tell him of his illicit affair with Desdemona.

Upon hearing Cassio speak of Bianca and believing him to be talking about Desdemona, Othello again flies into a rage, strikes Desdemona, and accuses her of being a whore.

### **No Faith**

Later, convinced that Desdemona is unfaithful, Othello smothers her. Emilia finds them and Othello tells the maid that he has killed his wife for her infidelity which he would not have known about but for his faithful ensign.

Realizing what Iago has done and the part that she unwittingly has played, Emilia confesses that it was she who found the handkerchief and gave it to Iago. Othello is grief-stricken. Iago murders Emilia, his wife, and attempts to flee, but is captured and brought back. Othello attempts to kill Iago, but fails. Othello is told that he must be returned to Venice to stand trial but before he can be taken, Othello kills himself.

### **The Resonance of the “Green-Eyed Monster”**

This is one intense play. With virtually no sub-plot to let our minds wander, Shakespeare has crafted a spellbinding, gripping drama which often provokes gasps of astonishment from audiences, such as when Iago gives Othello the famous advice to “beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on” while cultivating just such a monster himself. It is here that we know no good will ever come from Iago.

*Othello* resonates for modern audiences just as it did in Shakespeare's time and just as it has done for the last four centuries because it speaks to human nature. It speaks to the good and the evil in all of us. It speaks to trust in our relationships, both personal and professional, and, perhaps most importantly of all, it makes us think of the all-to-human actions of broken vows and misplaced faith.

As the play ends and the stage is littered with bodies – lives that have been ended for reasons that, even though it's all been explained to us, make little sense – we have to wonder if things would have turned out differently if only Othello had listened to his wife.

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