

## Character sketch of Othello

The play's protagonist and hero. A Christian Moor and general of the armies of Venice, Othello is an eloquent and physically powerful figure, respected by all those around him. In spite of his elevated status, he is nevertheless easy prey to insecurities because of his age, his life as a soldier, and his race.

Othello is a combination of greatness and weakness, in his own words "an honourable murderer". He is a general in the Venetian defense forces, and, although a foreigner from Africa, he has won this post by excellence in the field of war. He has courage, intelligence, the skill of command, and the respect of his troops. Under pressure, he makes an inspiring speech. When the colony of Cyprus is threatened by the enemy, the Duke and Senate turn to "valiant" Othello to lead the defense.

After many years on campaign, Othello has come to live in Venice, among the sophisticated people of the city. Senator Brabantio has invited him to his home, and this is a revelation to the soldier. He is dazzled by the comfortable life, the learned conversation, the civilization. He appoints a student of military knowledge, Cassio, to be his lieutenant. Suddenly he sees possibilities for himself to which he had never before aspired.

Othello is an outsider who is intelligent and confident in military matters but socially insecure. He leads an intense life, swinging between triumph and dread. He is different from those around him, due to his origins and his life history, but he shares their religion, values, and patriotism to Venice. More importantly, he is visibly different due to the color of his skin, so he lives constantly among, but separated from, other people. Whenever they look at his black face, however brilliant a general he is, he knows the others are thinking "Yes, but he is not really one of us." Shakespeare presents this fact in the dialogue and also in the staging of the play: Othello's is a black face among a sea of white faces, and he is constantly referred to as "The Moor," a representative African, while others go by their personal names and are seen as independent individuals. When other characters call him "black," they refer to his face but also to the concept of color symbolism in Elizabethan morality: White is honor, black is wickedness; white is innocence, black is guilt.

Othello tells his life story to Desdemona, and she sees him through his words. The life of early separation from home and family, followed by danger and adventure, is perhaps the life story of thousands of men down the ages who become soldiers of fortune and who end up as corpses in ditches at an early age, unwept, unpaid, and unrecorded. Othello's achievement is not so much that he survived this unpromising life, but that he survived it in such a spectacularly successful manner, ending up one of the most powerful men in the Venetian defense forces.

On the field of battle Othello is skilled and triumphant; in the drawing room he is reluctant until Desdemona takes the lead and encourages him to tell his life story. It is Desdemona, as well as Othello, who turns the secret marriage into a social success with her skillfully worded defense.

Othello feels that his marriage is at the pinnacle of his life: "If it were now to die, 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear / My soul hath her content so absolute, / That not another comfort, like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate He is triumphant in war and in love, the hero at his greatest moment. Such triumph, in a tragedy, cannot last.

Othello is aware of the precarious nature of success and happiness. "But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (III.3, 91-93). These are the words of a man who knows chaos and believes himself to have been rescued from it by love. Love for Othello puts order, peace, and happiness into his mental world, which would otherwise lapse back into chaos. He has grown up in exile, slavery, danger, and despair, now, as a professional soldier, he lives amongst chaos on the battlefield, but he need no longer have it in his inner being, because he has love. Chaos is the old concept of Hell, where everything is dreadful anguish, and Desdemona is the angel who has rescued Othello with her love.

When faced with the prospect of managing love and marriage, Othello's inexperience undermines his confidence. Iago finds it easy to drive Othello to jealousy and think that Desdemona loves another man because he already feels that her love for him is too good to be true. Othello sees Cassio as the man most Venetian women in Desdemona's position would like to marry and, therefore, as the man she would turn to if she ceased to love her husband. In a way, he is waiting for the dream to come to an end, for Desdemona to decide that she has made a mistake in marrying him.

Othello's insecurities are so close to the surface that a few words of hint and innuendo from Iago can tear the confident exterior and expose his fears, desires, and tendency to violence. Othello cannot stand uncertainty; it drives him to destroy his sanity. However, once he makes a decision, he is again the military man, decisive in action. Iago has only to push Othello to the belief that he has been betrayed, and Othello does the rest, judging, condemning, and executing Desdemona.

Fate is cruel to Othello, like the cruel fate of ancient Greek tragedies. Like the Greek heroes, Othello can confront this fate only with the best of his humanity. In his final speeches, Othello brings again a flash of his former greatness: his military glory, his loyalty to Venice, the intensity of his love, and his terrible realization that, by killing Desdemona, he has destroyed the best in himself. No man has full control over his life, but a man can judge himself and perform the execution and die with his love.

Shakespeare has built the character of Iago from an idea already existing in the theatrical culture of his time: the Devil in religious morality plays, which developed into the villain in Elizabethan drama and tragedy. Iago says (I.1, 65) "I am not what I am," which can be interpreted as "I am not what I seem." But it is also reminiscent of a quotation from the Bible which Shakespeare would have known: In Exodus, God gives his laws to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and Moses asks God his name. God replies: "I am that I am" (Exodus,iii,14). If "I am that I am" stands for God, then Iago's self-description, "I am not what I am" is the direct opposite. Iago is

the opposite of God, that is, he is the Devil. Iago in this play, has the qualities of the Devil in medieval and Renaissance morality plays: He is a liar, he makes promises he has no intention of keeping, he tells fancy stories in order to trap people and lead them to their destruction, and he sees other's greatest vulnerabilities and uses these to destroy them. Iago does all this not for any good reason, but for love of evil.

Iago is surrounded with bitter irony: he is not as he seems, his good is bad for others, people repeatedly rely on him, and he betrays them. He likes to have others unwittingly working to serve his purposes. But for all this, as his plot against Othello starts moving and gathering momentum, he loses control of it and must take real risks to prevent it from crashing. Iago is a man with an obsession for control and power over others who has let this obsession take over his whole life. Necessity forces his hand, and, in order to destroy Othello, he must also destroy Roderigo, Emilia, Desdemona, and ultimately himself. The one man who survived Iago's attempt to kill him, Cassio, is the only major character left standing at the end of the play.

William Hazlitt wrote: "Iago is an extreme instance . . . of diseased intellectual activity, with the most perfect indifference to moral good or evil, or rather with a decided preference of the latter, because it falls more readily in with his favorite propensity, gives greater zest to his thoughts and scope to his actions. He is quite or nearly indifferent to his own fate as to that of others; he runs all risks for a trifling and doubtful advantage, and is himself the dupe and victim of ruling passion — an insatiable craving after action of the most difficult and dangerous kind.

The great nineteenth-century actor Booth wrote about playing Iago: "To portray Iago properly you must seem to be what all the characters think, and say, you are, not what the spectators know you to be; try to win even them by your sincerity. Don't act the villain, don't look it, or speak it, (by scowling and growling, I mean), but think it all the time. Be genial, sometimes jovial, always gentlemanly. Quick in motion as in thought; lithe and sinuous as a snake."