

Final Project: Final Paper

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Shakespeare's Othello: Jealousy, the Death of Us All

I. Introduction

The theme of relationships or 'love' in poetry is a favorite for many. You can find some sort of love theme throughout many pieces. There are different types of love themes addressed in literature and they include forbidden love, family love, unrequited love, and friendship (Masterclass). In *Othello*, the theme would focus on a forbidden love. "Yearning and disapproval collide in forbidden love stories, which often find star-crossed lovers hurtling towards a tragic fate" (Masterclass). In his play *Othello*, William Shakespeare portrays the theme of love as passionate and sacred; however, as the characters evolve, their actions prove love can also lead to deceit and a motive for revenge. Othello and Desdemona's love are enduring because of their passion and devotion to each other, and as we witness racial injustice, gender equality, jealousy and betrayal, the reader experiences a lot of emotions that they can relate to.

Racial injustice was very prominent in the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare pushed the envelope by having a black man as his protagonist. Not only was he black, but he also carried a high rank as a general and was an admirable character. "It may be interesting to note that in the seventeenth century, most black people were mainly originated in the African continent, and by that time, Queen Elizabeth had shown her discontent of the numbers of these Africans since they were viewed as pagans who did not believe in God or Christianity" (Abbassi 6-7). Iago's depiction of him as a Moor, would be what most people, especially Queen Elizabeth, would think of him during this era. "Moreover, based on this play and also the English literature on

Africa in the early modern period, “Moor” was a synonym for “Negro” (Abbassi 8). Shakespeare knew what he was doing when he based *Othello* around this stereotypical issue, which made him quite the rebel of his time.

Gender roles in the Elizabethan era centered around men being the high point and dominating over women, who are basically considered a man’s property. “The Elizabethan era was a time when women were portrayed to be weaker than men. During that time it was said that “women are to be seen, and not heard” (Das). As times were changing and women were taking up high ranking positions (Queen Elizabeth), these roles were seeing some transformations. “The issue itself, namely, women’s role in a still predominantly patriarchal society, certainly became a focal point for examination within the literary community of that socio-politically changing time period” (You). In *Othello*, Shakespeare created this rebellious woman that doesn’t want to follow how society thinks she should be. “Unlike Othello, who wishes to conform to a society that has a low tolerance for otherness, Desdemona wants desperately to escape from this said society and its monotonous sameness. Her very action of falling in love with Othello is an attempt to defy the dominance of a patriarchal and paternal society” (You). Desdemona seeks equality in her marriage, but unfortunately it doesn’t make it far enough to make a difference.

Othello is a play about two lovers, Othello and Desdemona marrying against the consent of her father. Iago a supposed companion of Othello, is sick with jealousy, as he is in love with Desdemona (unbeknownst to Othello). Iago betrays Othello and will stop at nothing to break him and Desdemona apart. Iago plots to break them apart by adulterous means-lies that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. When Othello finds out about the accusations, he smothers Desdemona and later finds out it was all a lie. Othello then tragically kills himself. Othello

relates to the theme as we see a great love between Othello and Desdemona, the jealousy and deceit of Iago to break them apart, revenge, and death in its cruelest form.

II. Theme

During the Elizabethan era, there were strict guidelines for courtship and marriage. Arranged marriages, where fathers chose their daughter's husband became an issue. Women were conflicted and wanted to choose a husband based on love. In *Othello*, we see Desdemona going against the 'norm' and marrying Othello without her father's consent. Unfortunately, we see the love of Othello and Desdemona poisoned by dishonesty and jealousy, and end in tragedy.

The literary devices that were influenced by *Othello's* theme include characterization and plot. We see a major personality change in the protagonist Othello, from a calm, respected general, to an easily persuaded, jealous and vengeful man. This change is due to a supposed friend, Iago's claim of Othello's wife Desdemona's, infidelity. Therefore, we see a large conflict that has formed in the plot. From this alleged adultery, we see Othello become a lunatic, ignore Desdemona's pleas of innocence, and seek revenge in its deadliest form.

Othello pushed the envelope of the Elizabethan era norms by displaying marriage for love and not by the arrangement of a father. "In the early modern period, customs of courtship and marriage were undergoing significant shifts. Throughout the medieval period, money, class or alliance governed and regulated marriage. As Europe modernized, however, the Puritans and others began to champion the novel idea of marriages based on mutual inclination and love. Time and again Shakespeare's plays dramatise the conflict between the old order in which fathers chose husbands for their daughters and the new order in which daughters wished to choose their own mates based on affection" (Rasmussen). Desdemona marries Othello because

she fell in love with him, not because her father chose him. Having an African American protagonist was another main influence that affected the Elizabethan era. “In a country where few people outside London would ever have seen a black person, and centuries before the problems that fuel the tragedy became as ubiquitous and pressing as they are today, Shakespeare produced in *Othello* a searing critique of racial and sexual injustice, which is more powerful now in the 21st century than it could ever have been at the dawn of the 17th” (Ryan). African Americans were seen as inferior, and this played a role in why Desdemona’s father did not want her to marry Othello.

Upon reading *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Henry V*, I was able to see some similarities that connect with *Othello*’s theme. We see arranged marriages as a source of conflict in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*. In *Othello*, Desdemona does not abide by her father choosing her husband, rather she marries Othello out of her affection for him. Similarly, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, love becomes the pinnacle of Petruchio and Katherine’s relationship, even if their marriage started out rocky and was somewhat arranged. Lies, deception, and disguising one’s true identity can be seen throughout *Othello* when Iago fabricates Desdemona’s fidelity, fools Othello into believing he is a true friend, and persuades Othello into believing the lies about Desdemona. Petruchio deceives Katherine when they are first married, as he treats her cruelly in order to make her more submissive and hides his true intentions of wanting to marry her initially for her dowry, in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Deception is also prevalent in *Henry V* when people close to him lie for their own benefit. Bishops Canterbury and Ely greedily persuade Henry into waging a war with France to put off a bill they do not want to pass, that takes money and land away from the church. Also, the characters Grey, Cambridge, and Scrope plot to kill Henry, but their plan is foiled when Henry finds out, and all three are put to death.

III. Contemporary Context

The theme of jealousy, which is very prominent in *Othello*, particularly in relationships, is very relevant and alive in our contemporary culture. Similar examples can be seen or experienced that Othello suffered nowadays. A jealous friend who wants the girl/boy, job, friendship, etc. ultimately conspires against the other with lies and deceit to try and get his/her way. Another theme conveyed in *Othello* that is enduring in contemporary culture is racism. This has been and continues to be a touchy subject for many. We see racism play out in *Othello* as he is deemed an unworthy husband to Desdemona because he is black, and she is white. African American's were seen as inferior during the Elizabethan era and we unfortunately continue to see these prejudices in our society today. Lastly, gender equality plays a big role in *Othello*. Prearranged marriage, men acting as if they are better than women, and trust issues men have over women, are just as significant in our contemporary culture, as they were in *Othello*.

O, an *Othello* inspired twenty-first century movie, represents some of the themes that are enduring in the original. In *O*, a young, black, basketball star, Odin, finds himself a victim of his supposed best friend, Hugo's, jealous tendencies to bring him down with a lie that he raped his girlfriend Desi. The end follows *Othello* closely, as Odin can't get past the accusations and he kills Desi, but then finds out Hugo lied about it all, and Odin kills himself. In *Othello*, we see a similar story line play out as Iago plots to take down Othello in a jealous rage, to turn Desdemona against him. This movie presented the theme in its original form, as we saw the lies and deceit, and we also experienced an interracial relationship. There were some plot changes that communicated a contemporary feel. In *O*, Hugo isn't jealous of Odin's girlfriend, he wants to be a basketball star and take Odin's prominent title. Also, with the setting being in high school and a younger audience, this made the movie seem more modern-day and relatable.

All Night Long, another rendition of *Othello*, portrays a similar scenario, but is centered around a different turn of events. This movie is based around musicians, one in particular, Delia, who is a retired singer. A drummer, Johnny Cousin, wants Delia to be the lead singer of his band, but she is reluctant to resume her singing career. Johnny begins to create lies about Delia having an affair with the band manager Cass and things begin to spiral between Delia and her husband Rex. Rex then assaults Delia, but then shortly after, realizes that Rex has concocted all of these deceptions and Rex and Delia rekindle their relationship. The themes are similar in they both focus on lies of adultery and dishonesty, but isn't originally presented, due to having some differences in the plot that made it communicate a more modern day feel. These changes include Rex not killing Delia, like Othello does to Desdemona; they work out their problems. *All Night Long* is also focusing on the gain of a musical career, not the gain of a woman like in *Othello*. The musical setting and character names make it more relevant in modern society.

IV. Conclusion

As we focus our attention on Othello and Desdemona's love, we see that their relationship is challenged by jealousy, racial injustice, betrayal, and gender equality. For example, we see the betrayal of love with deadly effects still prominent these days.

Cross-cultural and historical reviews of adultery law reveal remarkable conceptual consistency: unauthorized sexual contact with a married woman is a crime and the victim is the husband.

We find male sexual jealousy to be the leading substantive issue in social conflict homicides in Detroit. A cross-cultural review of homicide indicates the ubiquity of this motive.

Social psychological studies of “normal” jealousy and psychiatric studies of “morbid” jealousy both suggest that male and female jealousy are qualitatively different in ways consistent with theoretical predictions.

Coercive constraint of female sexuality by the use or threat of male violence appears to be cross-culturally universal (Daly).

Gender equality is also prevailing throughout the play and in the twenty-first century. “Othello, examines the distribution of power and authority among men and women within a highly structured and patriarchal society. Although modern feminism did not appear until roughly three centuries after Othello, the play has contained in itself a subtly violent war between men and women, offering both the audience in Elizabethan England and the global citizens in 21st century an effective way to investigate the relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and patriarchy and feminist movement” (You). I feel these elements in this theme will keep *Othello* enduring because these are elements that are very relatable and relevant in our society today.

Shakespeare creates works that are emotional and contain themes and characters that readers can identify with. Love and relationships resonate with large audiences. The love between Othello and Desdemona is passionate, which then makes the tragic ending very intense to readers. Racial prejudice and stereotypes take center stage throughout *Othello* and create a significant response still from audiences, as this issue is still prevalent in our current society. Big emotions such as jealousy, envy, and deceit surface from readers, as we make our way through *Othello*, whether we are already familiar with them or have yet to experience them. All of these

facets that were the cornerstones of *Othello* in the seventeenth century, are very much still significant today.

Shakespeare was written during the Elizabethan era and continues to thrive in our society today. There are classes, movies, and other works of literature devoted to Shakespeare and his plays. I foresee his legacy living on further into the future, as I don't see the relatable elements in my theme dying off. Many people will at some point be jealous or betrayed, some will struggle with gender equality and racial injustice; these qualities although unpleasant are emotions and trials that will make their appearance at some point in our lives and in the lives of future generations. Shakespeare will continue to be read, analyzed, and respected for many years to come!

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