



Othello

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Othello, the drama's vain hero, is a Moor--traditionally interpreted as a black man--who wins the heart of Desdemona with his rollicking tales of battle and adventure, much to the dismay of her father and the Venetian court of which they are a part. Othello is a military man, ill at ease with public pomp and circumstance. The plot speeds up quickly when Iago, a subordinate of Othello, vows revenge after he has been passed over for promotion.

What follows is a series of intrigues in which Iago slowly convinces Othello of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio, the lieutenant to whom Othello had given the position Iago had sought. Othello's inability to relate to individuals on a personal basis makes him a poor judge of character and highly susceptible to the ruthless Iago's machinations.

Oblivious to Iago's scheming and the transparent innocence of his wife and lieutenant, Othello is ultimately a victim of his own naivete and implacable ignorance. The final verdict upon Othello's character, despite what he claims in his final speech, is that he loved neither "wisely" nor "too well."

Bibliography:

Bloom, Harold, ed. *William Shakespeare's "Othello."* New York: Chelsea House, 1987. Seven essays that explore the issues of power and the difference between male and female roles and occupations. Holds that the play is at once tragic and comic. Includes helpful bibliography and Shakespeare chronology.

Calderwood, James L. *The Properties of "Othello."* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. Takes the theme of ownership as a starting point and provides an overview of Elizabethan property lines to set the stage for argument. Stretches the term property to include not only material and territorial possessions but racial, social, and personal identity.

Heilman, Robert B. *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in "Othello."* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956. Extensive discussion of Iago's manipulative rhetoric. Argues against Othello as a "victim," presenting him as responsible, if only in part, for his own actions. A good resource for both general readers and students.

Nevo, Ruth. *Tragic Form in Shakespeare.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972. Chapter on *Othello* describes the two primary ways of looking at the Moor of Venice: as a man blinded by love, and as a man blinded by his tainted vision of that love. Chronicles the events leading to the protagonist's downfall.

Vaughan, Virginia Mason, and Kent Cartwright, eds. *"Othello": New Perspectives.* Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991. A collection of twelve essays that examine different theoretical approaches. Goes beyond a discussion of good versus evil to reveal a variety of nuances in the play. Traces readings and misreadings from the first quarto to the present.

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