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## SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO – BETWEEN MORAL GREATNESS AND WEAKNESS OF PERCEPTION

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the theme of the tragic mistake of the main character in Shakespeare's *Othello*, based on the violation of generally accepted moral norms of Venetian society. The course of Othello's vain struggle and tragic fall is described, as well as the unfolding of the plot in the light of the establishment of a new moral and social order. Othello's problem lies in his belonging to a different race and his marriage to Desdemona, a representative of the Venetian high class. The relationship between Othello and Iago is analysed in the light of the confrontation between good and evil. His character is so noble, his suffering so heartbreaking, that it arouses in most readers a passion of mingled love and pity that they feel, as for no other Shakespearean hero. The plot of the play revolves around the love between Othello and Desdemona and the manipulative actions of Iago, who makes that love unhappy and tragic. Othello is a man who has succeeded in his life, thanks to his own abilities and the independent decisions he makes. However, there is the villain Iago. Out of hatred for Othello, he tries, from the very beginning, to arouse Othello's doubts about Desdemona's fidelity. Iago is a Machiavellian hero who uses concealment and deception as a means to achieve his own selfish goals. In the last act, we see the destruction caused by passion. Othello asks Desdemona to confess her sin, repent and enter the other world clean. He acts like a priest who grieves for his child and prays for his redemption. He is the redeemer and the jailer at the same time. However, Othello enters the role of a cruel murderer, suffocating the innocent light of her life. The noble hero changes and perishes under the influence of the villain Iago, unaware of the presence of an evil enemy until the very end. That fall is quite natural and logical considering Iago's insidiousness and vile calculation. Othello may have had little knowledge of Desdemona, but his downfall is the result of his deep humanity, selflessness, and faith in human virtue. The basic element that drives Othello's fate is his inability to see reality. Othello is considered to be credulous. He easily succumbs to Iago's suggestions, because he is not rational and does not possess common sense, and this, according to him, is the result of his underdeveloped mind. When it comes to his relationship with Desdemona, he is unable to see that she has not sinned, which indicates that he is not a romantic idealist who sees in her qualities that she does not have. Desdemona is not important to him, but his vision of Desdemona. All this indicates that his decline is, above all, an intellectual decline.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, moral greatness, tragic mistake

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Written more than four centuries ago, Shakespeare's play *Othello* is still relevant today. The play is the subject of extremely conflicting interpretations of many critics. Wayne (1994) believes that *Othello* has a simple plot compared to Shakespeare's other great tragedies. Criticising *Othello*'s last monologue, Eliot (1975) believes that *Othello* thinks only of himself, and that he is trying to escape from reality. Bradley (1992) considers *Othello* to be Shakespeare's most romantic hero. Gardner (1956) praises enthusiastically the intellectual and moral beauty of the play, and sees *Othello* as a hero from the past. For Macaulay (2005), this Shakespearean tragedy is the greatest literary work in the world.

The situation is completely different when it comes to *Othello*'s opposite - Iago. Critics have a unique attitude towards him. To them, Iago is an evil, hypocritical, insidious villain. The only difference is that they interpret his nurturing motivation in different ways. The character of Iago is seen by all critics as a villain. It is often claimed that Iago is a direct descendant of old Vice, a character from medieval allegorical morality plays. He enjoys evil, treachery, lying, and trickery. Coleridge (2020) sees in him the embodiment of evil that has no motive, and for Hazlitt (2020) *Othello* is a villain who manages other people's lives according to his imagination. Iago is the real villain for a tragedy of jealousy.

However, he is not just jealous. For him, jealousy is only one stage of envy, and in his heart, there is perfect hatred. Iago admits this already at the beginning (1.1.58-65). He is jealous of Cassio, who got what he wants, and he hates *Othello*, who decides that way. Iago is turned to evil, which inspires him and feeds his perverted ambition. He goes to the goal without choosing the means. Bate (2008) however, disagrees with Coleridge's assertion that Iago's malice is without motive: his motivation is that he has a mind but not a heart that is capable of thinking but not loving, and therefore he wants to destroy the love wherever he sees it. Bell (2011) disagrees with Coleridge's statement about

the lack of motive for Iago's hatred. He believes that Iago's motive is to destroy love, beauty and the virtue of others, so that he does not have to compare himself with them. "His hatred of others is stronger than his hatred of himself" (202). At the same time, Iago is a fascinating character. Readers admire his intelligence, perfect irony, and moral cynicism.

Motivated by malice and envy, Iago sets in motion a tragic plot based on the power of deception and lies. His conflict with Othello, who is portrayed as a bright, morally perfect character, represents the struggle between evil and good, between vice and virtue.

Shakespeare wrote *Othello* around the end of 1603 and the beginning of 1604. During the 17th century, it was the most frequently performed Shakespeare's play.

Shakespeare took the material for his tragedy from *One Hundred Stories*, (Hecatommithi) the collection of short Italian tales by the Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio, published in 1566. However, Shakespeare did not stick closely to his source.

The biggest deviation from Cinthio's story is reflected in the emphasis on race as one of the key determinants of Othello's character. Othello is a foreigner of another race. He is different, and he is "the other" against which we, as Europeans, define our own identity.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF "THE OTHER"**

The concept of "the other" is present in the works of existentialists, especially Sartre (2018). For the existentialist Sartre, it is very significant because "the other" enables a judgment to be made about oneself as an object, in the way it is present for the other. The essence of subjectivity is confirmed in terms of the other. In order for a person to be aware of himself, there needs to be "the other", and the relationship with "the other" is permeated with a struggle for self-affirmation that does not make existence peaceful, but rather destabilises it. Othello's otherness is perhaps his tragic mistake. Although foreigners of a different race can become military leaders in the 16th century Venetian army, they cannot not marry Venetian women. Othello is appreciated by all the characters in the play as an exceptional soldier, and everyone emphasises his skill and honour. However, the Venetians accept Othello and admire him only as a successful military leader. When Othello, as a man of a different race, chooses a Venetian woman as his wife, and when she chooses him, the Venetians become dissatisfied. Brabancio, Desdemona's father and Venetian senator, considers his daughter's marriage to Othello unnatural and refuses to accept it. Considering Desdemona's marriage as "treason of the blood" (1.1.168), Brabancio renounces his daughter and ends his life, overwhelmed by pain and disappointment.

Brabancio, Iago, Emilia and Rodrigo perceive Othello, the same way they perceive other people of his race, as a source of misfortune. They are perceived as an inferior race, as people who are depraved, backward and not to be trusted. Othello's physical difference is quite drastic, and represented, as Greenblatt notes, not so much a sign of attraction as a reason for hatred (Greenblatt, 2010). They call Othello "an old black ram" (1.1.89), "the thick lip" (1.1.67), "a lascivious Moor" (1.1.125), "the black devil" (5.2.136). Their perception of Othello is based on prejudices not only in Venetian society but also in Shakespeare's England. Those prejudices apply to all dark-skinned people (Turks, Moors and other members of the Islamic faith), because Shakespeare's contemporaries do not distinguish between dark-skinned people, regardless of where they come from. They are characterised as backward, uncivilised, and backward. Leading among them are the Turks, who are perceived with some caution, as the 16th century English view the Ottoman Empire as militarily superior. The Turks are seen as cheats and criminals, as a dangerous nation that is expanding very fast and can present a great danger. It is a well-known fact that Queen Elizabeth I ordered their persecution in 1601. Being a Turk in Shakespeare's England means having a seriously unstable, "dark" character. Othello is portrayed as a black man who has been incorporated into Christian society, but who ultimately returns to "black" deeds, taking his own life and that of others.

In contemporary theatre adaptations of the play, Othello is always black-skinned. What is important for the interpretation of the play is the clearly emphasised black and white contrast. Binary oppositions of white-black, good-evil, become more complicated and ambiguous during the plot. This very contrast, the fact that Othello, due to his "black" appearance, is considered a lecher and a man of distrust and therefore excluded from the "white" - "respectable" and "moral" Christian society makes the play particularly relevant in a moral, symbolic and social sense.

## **3. BETWEEN MORAL GREATNESS AND WEAKNESS OF PERCEPTION**

The plot of the play revolves around the love between Othello and Desdemona and the manipulative actions of Iago, who makes that love unhappy and tragic. Feeling obliged to justify their love, Othello and Desdemona consciously renounce the outside world. Leaving behind their former life, they discard prejudices and false morals, and enjoy true love. Despite the ban, they choose to stay together and are willing to endure whatever inconvenience that choice

may bring. Desdemona loves Othello's personality, with pure, true, love and is determined to be his faithful and caring wife. She refuses to obey her father and thus violates the moral order of the society in which she lives. Fighting for her love, Desdemona gains her freedom, but at the cost of her own life and the lives of the people around her. Othello and Desdemona's tragic mistake is precisely their unconventional love that breaks the rules of the morally hypocritical Venetian society. Due to his uniqueness and belonging to a different race, Othello is an unacceptable and unwanted son-in-law (Mehl, 1987).

Othello is a man who has succeeded in his life, thanks to his own abilities and the independent decisions he makes. He is full of self-respect and a sense of personal worth. Unlike Desdemona, he is a free man, thanks to his profession and the fact that he does not belong to any social environment. Successes on the battlefield brought Othello a sense of self-control and dignity. As such, he chooses Desdemona, "invests" all of himself in their love and is ready to die for her. Both Othello and Desdemona defend their love and are resolute in their attitude.

However, there is the villain Iago. Out of hatred for Othello, he tries, from the very beginning, to arouse Othello's doubts about Desdemona's fidelity. He makes a plan of revenge, for the implementation of which he will use Cassio, the man who Othello has the most confidence in.

Iago is a Machiavellian hero who uses concealment and deception as a means to achieve his own selfish goals. He is very intelligent, but he is devoid of all moral standards. The audience sees him in one light, and the characters in the play in another. Precisely because of this, the contempt that the viewer feels for Iago from the first scene to the last is not felt by the other characters in the play. A good reputation and honesty, which looks real, are the keys to his success. Iago is accepted and loved in society. Othello trusts him and considers him a good standard-bearer, Cassio sees him as a virtuous friend, and for Desdemona, he is a fun and cheerful companion (Empson, 1951).

Desdemona and Iago arrive in Cyprus. Desdemona comes out of the environment in which she has grown up, and Othello has yet to show and prove that he is a faithful and good husband. For them, Cyprus becomes a new environment where the only thing that they know and that they have as certain and safe is their love. In his happiness with Desdemona, Othello realises himself in a way that is completely new for him. This division between the old and the new, the old soldier and the new happy bridegroom, leads to a terrible split in him. He does not bring to his love for Desdemona the measured wisdom gained by experience. His new "I" is created her love for him, and it depends on his faith in her.

Right there, in Cyprus, Iago's intrigue continues to spread. He is determined to awaken in Othello "a jealousy so strong that / judgment cannot cure" (2.1.304). In order to overcome obstacles and remove everyone who bothers him, he will abuse their best qualities and undermine the moral order of the community to which he belongs. The third act of the play is a turning point in the development of the plot. Iago manages to completely poison and overcome Othello with his doubts. He turns from a heroic figure into a person dominated by the desire for uncontrolled revenge that destroys everything in front of him. Some critics see Othello as a weak person, prone to jealousy. However, the transformation that the protagonist undergoes is an important aspect of Shakespeare's characterisation technique and is not the simple proof of Othello's credulity (Mehl, 1987). One stream of critics led by Leavis takes an extremely negative attitude towards the play, seeing in it the pathetic sentimentality of Othello's character, his "ignorance of himself and Desdemona", selfishness and "need for self-idealisation" (Leavis, 1952, p. 134).

The noble hero changes and perishes under the influence of a shrewd rogue, unaware of the presence of an evil enemy until the very end. That fall is quite natural and logical considering Iago's insidiousness and vile calculation. Othello may have had little knowledge of Desdemona, but his downfall is the result of his deep humanity, selflessness, and faith in human virtue.

The long dialogue between Iago and Othello in the third act announces the beginning of Othello's mental decline. "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul, / But I do love thee and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.90–93), says Othello. The important words here are "again" and "chaos." Such was Othello's life before he was ennobled by his love with Desdemona. And now he is that again, a savage, a barbarian who indulges in jealousy, black magic and cruelty. Love raised him to moral consciousness and a higher form of pleasure, and now, after excessive happiness, he sinks into equally excessive despair and nihilism. These are his steps of self-realisation. Such a change of extremes is possible due to a lack of reason.

Iago hints to Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful, very carefully, through subtle provocations, persuasion and seeming concern for his well-being. He very skilfully and wisely chooses his words, manipulating Othello's awareness of his own exclusion and the trust he has from the other characters in the play who do not doubt his benevolence. Feigning sincere concern for Othello, Iago slowly wins over his confidence, closing him in a vicious circle of obsession and lies. Through language manipulation, Iago manages to turn virtue into vice, and Othello's openness and gullibility into the worst evil. Seduced by sweet talks, Othello blindly surrenders to Iago's deception,

just like to Desdemona's love before. He is obsessively searching for convincing proof, unable to be satisfied with half-certainty.

Othello begins to falter and surrender slowly under the power of Iago's words. He is deeply aware of his social exclusion, age and belonging to a different race. Because of all this, he admittedly, at first reluctantly, and then more and more openly accepts Iago's insinuations. If she be false, O! then Heaven mocks itself " (3.3.275), laments Othello over his own fate. He feels that all the values of honour, dignity, trust in which he believed and which formed the basis of his personality have disappeared and for him to doubt becomes the only certainty. His mind completely "collapses" under the influence of doubt. All the former magnificence of his mind is gone. Since then, he becomes a slave to passion. He says goodbye to his friends and his job with serenity and satisfaction, threatens Iago and at the same time begs him for the proof, and in the end he is brought to the brink of madness when he again talks about honour; this time about Desdemona's honour (3.3.386-90). Iago correctly observes that Othello is consumed by passion. From then on, Othello lives in a world where passion has made chaos. The only salvation is revenge. Jealousy is now closely related to anger that seeks revenge (III, iii, 442-50). "Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell! / Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught, / For 't is of aspics' tongues!" (3.3.447-450). ). Finally, he vows revenge (3.3.457-60).

Othello's anger is the beginning of his downfall (Campbell, 1971). He is aware that his heated blood begins to prevail over reason and he summons the terrible forces of evil, wanting to take revenge on the woman he loves, who desecrated his ideal of purity and nobility. Desdemona, whom he considers being the embodiment of virtue and whom he loves immensely, turned out to be impure and worthless. What he now feels is contempt and regret (Sanders, 1988). After Iago's story of a false dream in which Cassio tells of the passion between him and Desdemona, Othello is completely distraught. "Clear evidence" in the form of a handkerchief will only speed up the general suffering. On the brink of insanity, Othello swears before Iago that he will take revenge on Desdemona, that "shameless whore", and asks Iago to kill Cassio. The scene in which two heroes kneel before each other, swearing eternal fidelity, marks Othello's complete transformation.

Nothing is clearer in Othello's character than the great discrepancy between the strength of passion and emotion, the weakness of perception, and the inability to see through the character and motives of others. He strives to dispel the convictions imposed on him by his cold-blooded enemy, but at every step he is met with suggestions that torment him. Othello is not gifted with superior intellect. He has great willpower, all the qualities that adorn a soldier. He is open, generous, brave, faithful, and minimally jealous; in short, he possesses the qualities that can be abused by a cunning and vile deceiver of greater intellectual ability, who knew exactly when, how and where to attack him. When Iago tells him to beware of jealousy, while at the same time doing everything to add fuel to the fire, Othello is unable to see the contradiction. The passion deepens and Iago is more and more sure about his victim. Othello lacks the natural wisdom and ability to see through someone, which is necessary to protect himself from the machinations of the intellectual villain and the moral bankruptcy that haunts him to the point of despair. Throughout this scene, we feel Othello's weakness and complete inability to see through and analyse Iago's character and motives. He does not have enough wisdom to help him deal with this intellectual villain (Kellogg, p. 192).

On the other hand, Desdemona is completely unaware of her husband's suspicions. She responds mildly to Othello insults and attributes his anger to an important state job. For her, Othello is still the only source of meaning in her life. "What ignorant sin have I committed?" (4.2.69), asks Desdemona, and the answer she receives is incomprehensible and inarticulate. Having seen the fatal handkerchief with Cassio and having convinced himself of his wife's alleged sin, thanks to Iago's trickery, Othello prepares to destroy the life of the being he sincerely loves. He hesitates painfully, his soul rejects the horrible act, and his mind, poisoned and deceived, sees no other way out than crime. The essence of his life will disappear, will be wiped out and cruelly suppressed, but Othello commits the act to restore the beauty of Desdemona's character and save her innocence.

In the last act, we see the destruction caused by passion. The emphasis is on the passion due to which man assumes the role of God (dispenser of justice) and implements God's laws through private revenge. That revenge is imposed by passion, not by a court that dispenses justice. Desdemona sees that he is shaking with some bloody passion. Othello believes that he is sacrificing her for the sake of his honour. He will carry out the same justice on himself. He admits that he "he lov'd not wisely, but too well;" and he was not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme;" (5.2.346-8). Othello asks Desdemona to confess her sin, repent and enter the other world clean. He acts like a priest who grieves for his child and prays for his redemption. He is the redeemer and the jailer at the same time. Desdemona has nothing to confess except her love for him. (She says to Othello that her sins „are loves I bear to you." (5.2.40)). However, Othello enters the role of a cruel murderer, suffocating the innocent light of her life. Only in the death of Desdemona does she win her "master" again. Her sacrifice, paradoxically, becomes an apology for Othello's sin and a testimony of love.

Othello's suffering enters a new stage after learning about the irreversible loss. He destroys the creature that loves him with all his soul. Othello suffers as a noble hero can suffer. He laments the destroyed world of beauty and joy and longs for his own damnation in the other world. Othello's grief is bottomless and boundless, it is absolute and final, and he yearns for his own damnation in the next world. But even that remorse is not enough to destroy his mental integrity; his mind is calm even in the greatest despair. This is especially evident in his last words: "Soft you; a word or two, before you go" (5.2.340). Othello's tragic mistake drove all characters to downfall. Before taking his own life, he recalls the services he did for the Republic of Venice and asks those present to speak of him after his death as the truth dictates ("Speak of me as I am / nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.344–345)).

Othello dies, and his death brings a calmer tone to the plot and announces the establishment of a new social and moral order. Cassio was appointed viceroy of Cyprus, and the death of the most exemplary heroes, caused by external action, and perhaps also by their innate and acquired nature, brings catharsis, but also instils faith in the impossibility of survival of insidious and unmotivated evil.

In addition to apparent sincerity, Iago is characterised by a sharp intellect and strong will, a deep insight into human nature, resourcefulness and speed in solving sudden problems and taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities. He uses these virtues to achieve goals driven by egoism, which he sees as the only valid and rational attitude. According to him, conscience and concern for others are absurd, and people are mostly honest fools (Bradley, 1992). He is sensitive to everything that affects his self-esteem. He has a high opinion of himself and a great contempt for others, whom he believes are inferior to him. This makes him competitive and is the reason why Cassio's promotion upsets him, but it is also the reason for his jealousy towards his wife Emilia. Iago is a liar, although he does not achieve his deception through direct assertions but through subtle and manipulative suggestions. When, for example, he tells Othello to look after his wife, he did not explicitly say that Desdemona was having an affair, but he used his knowledge of Othello and their close relationship to lead him to such an untrue belief. Othello, as a cooperative interlocutor, could not even interpret his messages differently.

It seems interesting to see why Iago manages to fool Othello so easily.

According to Bradley (1992) the first reason Othello trusted Iago was that he had trusted him before and found him honest, as did most of the other characters. They carried weapons together, but also discussed personal issues. Another reason was that, again, according to Bradley, any man in Othello's situation, i.e. the one only recently married, behaved equally, so we couldn't talk about Othello's excessive jealousy. However, we could add another important reason to that: Othello's fears that Desdemona was lying to him and hiding her affair with Cassio from him could be supported by the realisation that she had lied to her father.

Analysing Othello's character, Raatzch (2009) thinks that Iago did not crucially change him, but that he only stimulated processes for which there were already predispositions. Iago is Othello's counterbalance: as much as one is self-sufficient, the other is aware of the others in the play and changes in interaction with him.

The basic element that drives Othello's fate is his inability to see reality. Leavis (2015) considers Othello to be credulous. He easily succumbs to Iago's suggestions, because he is not rational and does not possess common sense, and this, according to him, is the result of his underdeveloped mind. When it comes to his relationship with Desdemona, he is unable to see that she has not sinned, which indicates that he is not a romantic idealist who sees in her qualities that she does not have. Desdemona is not important to him, but his vision of Desdemona. All this indicates that his decline is, above all, an intellectual decline.

Othello describes himself as someone who doesn't get jealous easily, but who goes completely crazy when he does. Bradley (1992) believes that his whole nature was not prone to jealousy, but was open to deception and passionate. As a result, once his passions boil over, he is very likely to act immediately, without much thought, and in the most decisive manner possible. This is primarily a study of a noble black-skinned man, who adopted some Christian values, but did not completely free himself from some wild passions of Moorish blood and suspicions of female honesty, which is common among most of Asian peoples. Othello's nature is all of one piece. When he trusts someone, he trusts absolutely. It is almost impossible for him to hesitate. His character is so noble, his feelings and deeds so inexorably flow from him, his suffering so heartbreaking, that it arouses in most readers a passion of mingled love and pity that they feel, as for no other Shakespearean hero.

Shakespeare gave Othello an unusual form of expression, unique but also divided. His professional self-awareness is hyperbolized, which is inevitable since he is a foreigner, a black man who honourably serves the Republic of Venice. As Bloom (1998) underlines, it is precisely this acute experience of one's own reputation and embellished rhetoric that betrays a certain discomfort. Othello sees himself only in grandiose proportions and presents himself as a legend or myth, which he and the audience believe in, given the authentic nobility of his expression. Othello is a heroic commander who knows little about anything but war. He seems to look at himself from above, and does not

see the abyss in the centre, which Iago uses. Bloom believes that Othello is powerless before Iago and that this helplessness is perhaps the most painful element of the play.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We see from the beginning that Othello's fate is sealed, because he is no match for the intriguer who pursues him. Despite that, it is painful to witness the futile struggle of this noble victim. He bravely fights the monster that awaits him at every turn and destroys his soul and body. He tries to find out if he is being honest or lying to him. However, all that passion is weak and worthless in the clash with the cold, calm intellectuality of the other side. The tragedy of Othello can be called a tragedy of a major disappointment that destroys the life of the main character.

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