

OTHELLO

by William Shakespeare

"Othello" is an almost foolproof play. The plot is so tightly drawn and the characters so ingeniously played against one another that a theatre group of average competence can bring off a compelling performance.

While the title character is the one who suffers a tragic change, the audience pays closest attention to Iago. He is a picture of pure evil, unreasoning hate; or rather a hate which is excused by so many reasons that it really has none.

At any point, Iago's daring plan can go awry. The agility with which he seizes every opportunity is a kind of genius. Unlike other villains in Shakespearean plays, he is taken to be utterly honest by all the other characters, a reputation which enables him to do the utmost damage. His venom is revealed to none but Rodrigo and we see it at the very beginning of the play.

In the first scene, Iago, Othello's ancient (standard-bearer), and a foppish young man named Roderigo are conversing in front of the home of Signior Brabantio, father of the beautiful Desdemona. We learn that Desdemona has stolen away from her father to wed Othello, a black warrior of great renown.

The unhappy Roderigo is also in love with the girl. Iago assures him that he will do whatever he can to cross Othello. At Iago's insistence, they awaken the household to tell Brabantio of his daughter's flight. Before Brabantio comes down to the street, Iago leaves so as not to be identified. Brabantio rouses his servants to come with him to arrest Othello.

Iago tells Othello that Brabantio is planning to arrest him. Othello shrugs the news off. Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, arrives to inform him that the Duke (Doge) of Venice requires his immediate presence. When Brabantio enters, to arrest Othello, he is told of the sudden summons and all exit to meet the Duke and Venetian Council.

At the council, Othello learns that he is to leave immediately for Cyprus to defend it against a Turkish fleet. Brabantio then complains to the Duke that the man chosen to head the Venetian fleet has stolen his daughter by magic. Othello protests that Desdemona married him willingly and sends for her to give testimony. He then relates the story of his wooing in the play's in a memorable and hauntingly beautiful soliloquy:

Her father loved me; oft invited me;
Still question'd me the story of my life,
From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I have passed.
I ran it through, even from my boyish days,

To the very moment that he bade me tell it;
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field
Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
And portance in my travels' history:
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven
It was my hint to speak,--such was the process;
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline:
But still the house-affairs would draw her thence:
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse: which I observing,
Took once a pliant hour, and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
Whereof by parcels she had something heard,
But not intentively: I did consent,
And often did beguile her of her tears,
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
That my youth suffer'd. My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man: she thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story.
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used:
Here comes the lady; let her witness it.

Desdemona arrives second in Othello's story. Brabantio yields, but warns the Moor that, having deceived her father, she may deceive him, too. Othello laughs: "My life upon her faith!" Their wedding night postponed, Othello and Desdemona leave to embark on separate ships for Cyprus. When all have left, Iago urges the love-sick Roderigo to sell his possessions, raise money thereby, and follow them to Cyprus where, Iago assures him, he shall surely win Desdemona.

At the beginning of Act II, the Venetians arrive at Cyprus: first Cassio; then Desdemona and Iago; finally, Othello. There, they learn that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed in a storm. The war is over.

A herald proclaims a holiday to celebrate the victory-by-default.

Othello prepares to retire. He sets the watch, warning his lieutenant Cassio to keep the peace. Iago enters and urges Cassio to have a drink, knowing the captain will quickly be drunk. Iago then tells Roderigo to draw Cassio into a quarrel which quickly grows into a riot. This brings an angry Othello from his bed and he demotes Cassio on the spot. Iago counsels Cassio to plead with Desdemona to restore him to Othello's good graces, hoping to use that as a means of making the Moor jealous.

This part of the plot works and Cassio earnestly pleads with Desdemona. When Othello and Iago approach, he leaves in some embarrassment. Iago uses Cassio's quick departure as a means of opening his campaign to make Othello suspicious. His subtle suggestions that there is something between Cassio and Desdemona gives Othello pause.

When Desdemona returns with Emilia, she gives Othello her handkerchief to wipe his brow. He drops it and Emilia picks it up. She, in turn gives it to Iago who has often asked her to steal it. Now that Iago has the handkerchief, he has the device he needs to convince Othello that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. Othello returns in torment, lashes out at Iago, but Iago artfully convinces him that he is being betrayed, by relating, among other false stories, that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief, a gift from Othello to his wife.

Desdemona earnestly pleads with Othello to forgive Cassio, which only confirms his suspicions. When he asks for the handkerchief, she cannot produce it. Othello storms out. Iago and Cassio enter and Cassio renews his request for Desdemona's aid. She says she will continue even though her husband is in a puzzlingly bad humor. After she leaves, Bianca enters, a woman of the town familiar to Cassio. He gives her the handkerchief which he found in his quarters and asks her to copy it for him.

Iago and Othello enter, Othello in a terrible state. He falls into an epileptic fit. Cassio enters, but Iago sends him away, asking him to return shortly. When Othello comes to, Iago sets him apart where he may overhear Iago speaking with Cassio about Bianca. However, he tells Othello that they will really be discussing Desdemona. Suddenly, Bianca enters and furiously returns the handkerchief to Cassio. This is the final proof for Othello and he resolves to kill Desdemona, assigning Iago to kill Cassio.

A delegation arrives from Venice and is shocked at Othello's rude treatment of his wife. Othello then questions Emilia, who stoutly defends Desdemona. Othello thinks she must be a party to the affair. Desdemona enters and Othello accuses her of adultery. After he leaves, Desdemona kneels before Iago to beg his help in restoring

her to Othello's favor. After the women leave, Iago talks Roderigo into helping him kill Cassio.

In her chamber, Desdemona prepares for bed, talking with Emilia about her sad situation. She retires after singing the Willow Song.

Iago and Roderigo prepare to meet with Cassio, but they botch the job. Cassio wounds Roderigo and is wounded in turn by Iago. Iago then kills Roderigo, silencing a possible witness to his treachery. Othello hears Cassio call for help and assumes that Iago has kept his part of the bargain. He leaves to kill Desdemona, while others gather to assist Cassio.

In the final scene, Othello awakens Desdemona, accuses her of infidelity, refusing to heed her cries for mercy, then tries to suffocate her with a pillow. Hearing an insistent voice outside, he finishes the job with a dagger. Emilia is finally admitted to the room, finding her mistress near death. Desdemona gains consciousness briefly and tells Emilia that she killed herself. Othello rages that she lies; he did it. Then he learns the truth from Emilia. Others enter the chamber. Emilia accuses her husband who tries to kill her but is prevented. A second attempt succeeds. Iago refuses to answer any questions. In despair, Othello takes his own life.

Comments

That's a rather spare outline of a richly constructed plot which pulls the audience along like a rip tide. It is a deeply moving story, a domestic tragedy, a disturbing demonstration of the destructive power of jealousy. Above all, it is a harrowing tale of how susceptible virtue can be to strongly motivated hate.

Like "Hamlet," "Othello may be considered a revenge play. But, revenge for what? Hamlet is commanded by the ghost of his father to punish his murderer. No one goads Iago to destroy Othello but himself.

So, what is his motive? He gives several during the course of the play, but the simplest is the stark statement, "I hate the Moor." Our fascination with Iago is rather akin to that with which we might watch a cobra rearing its head.

The scene in which Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's supposed infidelity is one of Shakespeare's most riveting. It is revealing to examine the text to fix the point at which Othello is won over. It is when he begins to change his poetic images of majestic sweep for Iago's.

"By heaven, I'd rather be a toad and live upon the vapor of a dungeon vile than keep a corner of the thing I love for other's uses." That's Othello speaking with Iago's mind.

An Observation

One of the most arresting aspects of "Othello" is the manner in which Shakespeare operates on two different "clocks" simultaneously. He carefully sets the principal action within a 24-hour period, yet we assume a much longer interval.

Othello and Desdemona arrive at Cyprus at night to celebrate their long-delayed honeymoon. Since they had traveled to Cyprus on separate ships, their marriage could not have been consummated earlier. That same night, the drunken brawl occurs in which Cassio is disgraced.

The next morning, Cassio sues for Desdemona's help and Iago makes his first insinuations. By afternoon, Othello is convinced and Lodovico arrives from Venice. A state dinner is held that evening, after which Roderigo is slain, Cassio injured, Desdemona murdered, and Iago's treachery revealed.

It is not possible that Iago could have convinced Othello of Desdemona's infidelity in 24 hours. There simply wasn't enough time for her to have done anything out of Othello's sight.

Yet, we are as taken in as Othello. We assume a longer period without question, aided by references in the text. For example, Bianca chides Cassio for his absence of several days, which makes no sense, since he had just arrived from Venice as well. He would have needed time to meet her, start a liaison, lose interest, and neglect her long enough to justify her complaint: clearly a history which cannot be compressed into a single day.

But such is the power of Shakespeare's narrative, that we suspend such critical thoughts, lost in the grip of the action. This is not the only play in which Shakespeare plays fast and loose with real time, but surely one of the most striking.

Sources

The story comes from a collection of tales by Giovanni Battista Giraldis (Cinthio) entitled *Hecatommithi*, stories supposedly told by a group of men and women on a sea voyage after the sack of Rome in 1527. It is the seventh novella of the third decade - number 37 of 100 stories in all.

The only name to survive from the original, slightly altered, is Desdemona, wife of the Moor, Christophoro Moro, who is served by an ensign named Alfiero. Shakespeare stayed with the main lines of the plot, making the ensign's motive less clear and the death of Desdemona less brutal (The Moor has Alfiero beat her to death with a sack filled with sand, then pull the ceiling of her room down to make it look like an accident).

In the original story, the Moor meets a dreadful end at the hands of Desdemona's relatives, being tortured until his body ruptures. Shakespeare's changes in the story, transforming a grim and rather nasty tale into a poetic drama of shattering intensity and abiding interest.