



**[eduresourceza.com](http://eduresourceza.com)**

(3)

## 2008 NOVEMBER

In the study of Shakespeare's Othello, some scholars would argue that it is the flaws in the character of the central protagonist, Othello that ultimately lead to his downfall.

YES, Othello may feel that:

- He is older therefore not worthy of the youthful beauty of Desdemona
- Different race –he is black(a Moor) she is white
- She is a gentle perhaps refined noblewoman and he a warring man/soldier
- She is schooled in upper class social mannerisms, he only in the art of war
- Her world – she is a Venetian, he a foreign Moor from Africa – is better
- Because of the above, he cannot believe that Desdemona loves him truly
- Leads to his uncontrollable jealousy
- Lacks the ability to really believe in the relationship despite her denials of the accusations
- His belief that he is a less experienced man in the art of love man blinds him to the truth
- Iago knows these weaknesses in Othello
- Uses them to manipulate Othello
- Plants doubt in Othello's mind about the faithfulness of Desdemona
- Easy for Iago to sway Othello to believe that Desdemona is interested in
- Cassio as he is a lady's man and both are Venetians to whom perhaps Philandering is not frowned upon
- Iago succeeds because of these flaws in Othello
- Othello believes that Desdemona has an adulterous relationship with Cassio.
- He kills Desdemona – has 'enough' evidence- ocular proof via the handkerchief scene
- The tragedy is - when the truth is revealed to him by Emilia, he kills himself
- Essay needs to highlight the clever manipulation of Iago

2009 NOVEMBER

*'Take a noble man. Put him in a situation where, despite his nobility, he fails to make the right decision or choice. See his gradual decay and downfall. Feel horror at the sight of his collapse. This is the tragedy of Othello.'*

Taking the above view into consideration, critically discuss the character and actions of Othello

In your answer you may consider some or all of the following aspects:

- Othello at the start of the play
  - Othello's decline: jealousy and gullibility
  - Othello's unwise decisions under the influence of Iago
  - Othello's final decision: the tragedy completed
- 
- Othello is descended from royalty.
  - He is a worthy and powerful soldier.
  - He is a simple, gentle, trusting, poetic man.
  - Yet, as a black man, he is the outsider in Venetian society.
  - His love for Desdemona is at once uncomplicated, yet all-encompassing and intense.
- 
- Othello is deceived by a man he knows and trusts: Iago.
  - His flaw is his jealous nature/inability to see deception to which he is exposed/ too trusting a nature.
  - He cannot rise above his passion that takes precedence over his reason.
  - Although slow to anger, once angered, passion overwhelms his good sense.
  - Iago persuades him that Desdemona is unfaithful.
  - Othello is deceived by the man he knows and trusts.
  - Othello is overcome with jealous rage.
  - He wrestles with himself, torn between his great love and his doubts.
  - Thoughts of Desdemona's betrayal are overwhelming.
  - He allows nothing to stand in the way of what he feels is justified revenge.
- 
- Increasingly he isolates himself, trusting only the false Iago.
  - He humiliates Desdemona in public.
  - The powerful love has turned to an all-embracing hatred.
  - He turns his anger on the innocent Cassio.
  - Blind and deaf to what is obvious – that Desdemona loves him and is chaste he plans to kill his wife.
- 
- As a result of cold-blooded and calculated planning, he kills Desdemona.
  - The truth of Emilia's words convinces Othello that he must punish himself: he is condemned to eternal damnation.
  - He is submissive and repentant.
  - The final speech restores his heroic status and true nobility.
  - When faced with reality, he feels there is only one option left and he takes his own life.
  - The waste of this once noble life – the promise and noble intentions, the way in which his pure and innocent love is destroyed, the final realisation of his deception - is tragic and moving.

**2010 FEB/MARCH**

**Desdemona is an innocent. She is a wife and woman caught up in a world of deception and lies.**

**Critically discuss this view of Desdemona.**

**In your answer you may consider some or all of the following:**

- Desdemona's actions and reactions
  - Iago's manipulations
  - Othello's role
  - Desdemona's fate
- 
- Desdemona lives a sheltered life as a Venetian young lady.
  - She is inexperienced, innocent in the ways of love and relationships.
  - She falls in love with an older man, of a different culture and race.
  - She listens enthralled to his stories.
  - She elopes with Othello, in spite of her father's disapproval.
  - She is disobedient to her father and disrespectful of his wishes.
  - She is totally devoted to her husband.
  - In Cyprus, she becomes a victim of the plans of the evil Iago.
  - Iago uses her to avenge himself on Othello.
  - Desdemona is caught up in the plot against her, involving a supposed relationship with Cassio.
  - Loyal to Othello, she is unaware of what is happening as his jealousy and rage increases.
  - She remains true to her promise to help re-instate Cassio.
  - She lies about the loss of the handkerchief – a crucial mistake.
  - Desdemona represents all that is good, but she is undermined by evil Iago's constant lies and deception, aided by Roderigo.
  - She has no defence against Othello's accusations as she is too young and inexperienced.
  - All the other characters praise her innocence, goodness and generosity.
  - Finally, utterly defenceless against her husband's unsubstantiated, jealous accusations, she dies, proclaiming her innocence, love and total devotion.
  - Ultimately Desdemona is destroyed by the manipulations of Iago and her husband's weaknesses. (Consider also Desdemona's role in her downfall.)

**2010 NOVEMBER**

**Othello and Iago are more alike than most people imagine. If it were not so, Iago would not be able to manipulate Othello into becoming a bloodthirsty killer, obsessed with revenge.**

- Othello's vulnerability to evil derives from his insecurities: he is not a native-born Venetian; indeed, he is black in a white society; he is much older than his wife; he is concerned that he lacks the sophisticated manners of Desdemona's fellow upper-class Venetians.
- Iago is also emotionally threatened. He admits that there is 'a daily beauty' in Cassio's life that makes him aware of his inferiority; he is sexually insecure and imagines that Emilia has betrayed him with Othello (an absurd fear); he bitterly resents being subordinated to an aristocratic non-Venetian (Cassio) with no real military experience.
- A crucial point is that Iago is utterly evil, whereas Othello is (like humanity in general, and typically of tragic heroes) of mixed potential.
- The intervention of the devilish Iago is necessary to activate the evil latent within Othello and to defeat the influence of the divine Desdemona.
- Both Iago and Othello are killers. Both have killed in battle.
- However, Iago plots the destruction of innocents in a dreadfully underhanded way.
- Othello would never behave like this, until unhinged by jealousy generated by the working of Iago's lies on his insecurities.
- Iago uses imagery of coarse sexuality, animal images and reference to hellish forces.
- Othello's diction is originally that of a noble gentleman.
- However, as Iago's poison works on him, Othello sounds more and more like Iago, and uses expressions suggestive of vile, bestial behaviour.
- Othello and Iago both swear to destroy Desdemona and Cassio; in this pact, they are very much alike.

(7)

2011 FEB/MARCH

**Both Iago and Desdemona are responsible for the downfall of Othello.**

- Othello, like most of us, has the potential for both good and evil.
- Desdemona can be seen as representing the finer possibilities of human nature (but not everybody agrees that she is flawless morally – some have a problem with her deceiving of her father and/or her lying about what has happened to the handkerchief).
- There are numerous references to her in terms of divinity and other ways of suggesting the wonderfully excellent.
- As long as Othello is happy in his relationship and trusts Desdemona, his diction is suggestive of the noble and refined.
- His behaviour is in keeping with this diction.
- More astute (or better taught) candidates might go as far as asserting that the Desdemona in Othello is dominant at the beginning of the play.
- However, Iago is evil.
- His words/imagery and his actions are devilish and bestial.
- Playing on Othello's insecurities, he poisons the general's mind against his wife.
- Iago manipulates Othello into becoming more like him (Iago): a bloody-minded killer.
- Othello's imagery and other aspects of his diction change and become reminiscent of Iago's: he increasingly uses imagery connected to the hellish and the disgustingly bestial.
- More astute (or better taught) candidates might go as far as asserting that the Iago in Othello is dominant in the later stages of the play.
- At the end, Othello capitulates to Iago and kills Desdemona, in the process figuratively killing the good in himself.
- However, he later tries to kill Iago. He fails: the significance of this failure is debatable in that some might think that his failure to return to his former self is suggested.
- In the end he commits suicide, killing the 'Turk' in himself and executing Venetian justice.
- He dies upon a kiss, beside the body of Desdemona. Perhaps this signifies the final redemption of Othello.

**2011 NOVEMBER**

**Iago lacks any genuine motive for his evil deeds. He is a villain. However, he does have some characteristics that one might be justified in admiring.**

- Iago does in fact provide a number of reasons for his evil deeds.
- True, he is evil as such, but he is not without motives.
- He resents Cassio's becoming lieutenant and his being overlooked for the post.
- He seems to be a racist and makes comments which suggest that he resents the prestige and authority of a Moor.
- He appears to be insecure about his manhood/ability to hold on to his wife and suspects both Othello and Cassio of cuckolding him.
- Iago does not care whether the rumours of his wife's unfaithfulness are true or not – the mere suspicion is enough to make him want revenge. This suggests a profoundly warped ego.
- He comments viciously on Cassio's aristocratic courtesies: clearly, he resents social advantage such as the attractive upper-crust young lieutenant's.
- He tells us that Cassio 'hath a daily beauty in his life/ that makes me ugly'.
- He 'loves' (for which read 'lusts after') Desdemona himself: sexual jealousy again.
- Iago seems to enjoy the game of dangerous scheming for its own sake ('Pleasure and action make the hours seem short').
- This energetic enjoyment of villainy might appeal to the reckless and darker side of some readers/audience.
- Iago's hilariously vulgar speech (e.g. what he says to Brabantio at the start of the play) would raise many a laugh.
- His ruthless honesty with himself about his own evil might earn him a measure of respect.
- His ability to come up with a good plan to get revenge suggests his intelligence as well as his exceptional understanding of human nature and emotions/human strengths and weaknesses.
- He is single-minded – he does not waver in his determination to get revenge. He makes a plan and then carries it out without being side-tracked by anything.
- He is very persuasive – he can get people to trust him and do exactly what he wants them to do.
- He is more plausible/credible as a human being than any of the other major characters.

2012 FEB/MARCH

Othello is a great leader, a man truly worthy of admiration.

- Othello is a great man. However, he does have some significant weakness that mitigates his claim to greatness.
- Othello is much admired as a leader on the battlefield.
- He has fought in several wars in various parts of the world.
- Brabantio also admired Othello greatly and this is what prompts him (Brabantio) to invite Othello to his home so that he can listen to stories of Othello's adventures in different parts of the world.
- Desdemona has spurned the advances of eligible young Venetian men, but is captivated by Othello chiefly because of his harsh experiences.
- His leadership ability is so admired by the Venetian state that he is appointed general of Cyprus when it is under threat of invasion by the Turks – an achievement when one considers that he is Moorish and not Venetian.
- He is a noble character who gives his all to any task.
- He is willing to make sacrifices e.g. he leaves Desdemona shortly after their marriage to take up his position as general in Cyprus.
- He is able to make decisions on his own, e.g. the decision to fire Cassio.
- He loves very deeply/passionately, and is also capable of a deep sexual jealousy;
- this is why Iago is able to manipulate him into believing that Desdemona has cuckolded him.
- His gullibility/trusting nature/inability to judge character is a flaw. He is unable to see through Iago and his plans, or to believe that Desdemona is telling the truth.
- His profound insecurities to do with his colour, his age, and his inexperience of sophisticated Venetian life are crucial.
- The play as tragedy: traditional definition of tragedy – a great man brought to his downfall as a result of flaws in his character.

**2012 NOVEMBER**

In Act 3 Scene 4, Emilia makes the following statement on jealousy:

*Jealous souls 'are not ever jealous for the cause,  
But jealous for they are jealous. 'Tis a monster  
Begot upon itself, born on itself.'*

Is Emilia's idea of jealousy supported by the play as a whole?

The point that Emilia makes is that jealousy is an inherent character trait and needs no cause. The jealousy that certain characters feel can be attributed to their own analysis of events rather than the truth. The play provides numerous elements that can be used to support or refute Emilia's opinion, depending on the 'spin' put on them.

- Iago is jealous of Cassio because he has a 'daily beauty in his life' that Iago can never possess.
- His jealousy is aggravated by his suspicion that both Othello and Cassio have had an affair with his wife, Emilia.
- He does not have any proof, but even though he knows there is no firm evidence, on the basis of mere suspicion, he will seek revenge.
- This reveals his insecurity in his marriage, which is a cause of his jealousy.
- Iago hates Othello's success and power as a military man, and his good reputation too.
- His jealousy proves to be monstrous because it makes him want to hurt and destroy Othello. (In the process of doing this, he destroys others, such as Desdemona and Roderigo.)
- Othello is also a victim of jealousy, because he is insecure in his marriage: he is black in a white society, a foreigner, much older than Desdemona, thinks he does not behave like an elegant Venetian gentleman, lacks experience in intimate relationships and is unfamiliar with the complexities of Venetian women.
- Iago produces minimal proof of Desdemona's infidelity (handkerchief; alleged dreams) and Othello becomes completely possessed by jealousy. He dismisses his love for his wife ('All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven').
- He undergoes a radical transformation from referring to Desdemona using imagery of divinity to using imagery of the bestial.
- He is beyond reason in his actions. He loses his ability to think coherently and is so consumed that he cannot see that the 'ocular' proof that Iago provides is not real.
- He fails to even consider Desdemona's possible response to the situation, thus showing his determination to find her guilty.
- Othello's loss of control sees him reduced from a man who is deservedly held in high esteem to a pathetic individual who loses control of his faculties (e.g. falling into a trance).
- Roderigo is jealous of Othello because he has married Desdemona, the woman he covets.
- He therefore believes that he has reason to assist Iago in his plans to inform Brabantio of the elopement.
- He is a materialistic fool who believes that if he showers Desdemona with more gifts and pays Iago to mediate, he will still stand a chance with her.
- This makes him jealous of anyone who stands in his way.

2013 FEB/MARCH

**Emilia and Desdemona can be held accountable for their own deaths.**

- When Desdemona is first introduced (in Venice), she is assertive and bold.
- She is a woman who dares to go after what she wants and shows bravery. We see this when she elopes and when she stands up to her father.
- This assertiveness is lost when she later becomes a passive victim of Othello's anger.
- Desdemona is a sensitive woman who is easily moved to tears of compassion – this is what prompts her falling in love with Othello in the first place (she pities the dangers he has experienced).
- Her compassion and sensitivity are traits that Iago uses for his own advantage. She readily falls into Iago's plans about speaking to Othello on Cassio's behalf.
- Desdemona sees only the good and positive aspects of everyone's character. This accounts for her being easily manipulated.
- She views Othello as a flawless man despite his mistreatment of her; for example, when he calls her a whore, she is devastated, but does not assertively object.
- Othello humiliates her in public when he slaps and ridicules her. Her only response is that she doesn't deserve this. She shows no anger whatsoever; instead, she weeps.
- Most of her actions reveal her love for Othello – these account for her spineless acceptance of his abuse.
- The traditional subordination of women in Shakespeare's society would in part also account for Desdemona's failure to fight back in a way we would expect from a spirited woman of our own day.
- She predicts her own demise by believing that she will have a fate similar to that of her mother's maid, Barbary. This approaches being a resigned acceptance of a dreadful fate she does not deserve.
- She orders Emilia to place her wedding sheets on the bed and sings the willow song – again, one would prefer her to rebel against her impending death, but instead she passively accepts it.
- She does not blame Othello for her death.
- She tries to protect Othello from the consequences of his actions by telling Emilia that she is responsible for her own death.
- She remains a loyal wife to the end, but her loyalty under the circumstances is misplaced because it interferes with her taking responsibility for her own life.
- Emilia is not loved by Iago – yet she remains loyal to him.
- Her desperation for love and approval sees her giving Desdemona's handkerchief to him. Her ready compliance with his requests reveals that she readily accedes to his demands without question/suspicion.