Reconceptualising Shakespeare: Who is To Blame for the Tragedy of *Othello*?

During this EPQ, I will be attempting to answer the question ‘Who is To Blame for the Tragedy of *Othello*?’ Within my essay, I will be exploring four different arguments: Is Othello to blame? Is Iago to blame? Is setting to blame? Or are women to blame? In order to assess each determinant, I will be analysing evidence directly from the play itself, combined with interpretations and analysis from existing literary critics. Although my verdicts are heavily backed up by textual evidence from the play, I cannot definitively confirm my conclusions are what Shakespeare himself thought. However, this does not diminish the value of my project, as ambiguity and uncertainty are essential elements within the art of English literature. This topic still remains highly relevant, as Shakespeare’s legacy has diffused into the modern world; not just within literature, but in the world we live in. This is because Shakespeare wrote about timeless themes such as life and death, youth versus age, and love hate; which are arguably more relevant now then they have ever been. Moreover, Shakespeare teaches us about ourselves and humanity, (Lehmann, 2002)¹ and studying his work has become a necessity within education.

Throughout my studies of English Literature, I have developed an immense captivation with texts which explore feminism; such as *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf ² and *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster³. Upon my reading, I have discovered that the dynamic between men and women massively shapes narrative within literature- even within texts that aren’t specifically about gender roles or feminism. When reading *Othello*, I have picked up on the significance of women within the play and how vital I believe this is in evoking tragedy. I believe that this is an essential, if not the most essential origin of tragedy in *Othello*—which I have conclusively explained in the latter part of my essay. As established in my conclusion, this element permeates through all other alternatives so strongly that I believe the mistreatment and mistrust of women is to blame for the tragedy. However before reaching this conclusion, I have fully identified and explained alternative beliefs on what causes tragedy in *Othello*; which have just as much weighting and value.

*Othello* is a tragedy of sexual jealousy, which pioneers exploration of racial prejudice. Written in 1603, the play tells the story of Othello—an African General in the Venetian army—who becomes deceived into believing his wife, Desdemona, has been unfaithful to him. This manipulative trickery is

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² Woolf, V. (1929) *A Room of One’s Own* (London, Stronck Press)

³ Webster, J. (1613) *The Duchess of Malfi* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc)
orchestrated by the character of Iago as a form of revenge; due to him being enraged by the fact Othello has been promoted to General instead of him. Once Othello believes Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, it awakens an intense feeling of jealousy which eventually leads him to kill her, before killing himself. As the play follows tragic conventions, more deaths begin to occur. Iago kills the wealthy- but incredibly gullible- character of Roderigo, and also murders his wife Emilia after she reveals the truth about Desdemona’s innocence.

In order to adequately assess what is at the heart of the tragedy, one must begin to ask the question- what actually is a tragedy. Cambridge University defines a tragedy as ‘a very sad event or situation, especially one involving death or suffering’. At first, this may initially cause us to begin asserting blame upon characters within the play who directly or deliberately cause death. If this was the case, one may point the finger at Iago and Othello- who could both be considered murderers in the play. However, the tragedy which unfolds is much more complexed than this; and the motive power behind the murderous ending must be considered. Without some kind of motivation or incentive, one could argue that these killings would have never taken place.

Is Othello to Blame for the Tragedy?

Shakespeare’s use of linguistic nuance and characterisation suggests that Othello himself is to blame for tragedy in the play. Greek philosopher Aristotle described a tragic hero as ‘a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty’. (Aristotle, 335 BCE) Shakespeare’s character of Othello arguably aligns entirely with Aristotle’s concept, and critics have attempted to identify the ‘error’ or ‘frailty’ within his character for many years. However, Othello’s single flaw of ultimate misfortune remains uncertain; and so the core means of propulsion behind the tragedy is never explicitly revealed. Identifying Othello’s hamartia or ‘fatal flaw’ could help to answer what leads to the tragedy as, ultimately, this is the downfall within the entire play.

Some critics have argued that Othello’ flaw or weakness is his nature as a black man, and how institutionalised racism has prompted a sense of inadequacy- generating an unspoken insecurity and suffering. Despite his qualities of bravery, intelligence and skill as a soldier, Othello is inevitably a racial outsider- providing him with access for misfortune and fatality. This suggests that, perhaps, his race is at the core of the tragic narrative. When presenting black individuals in literature, predominantly male characters, writers often linguistically explore their animalistic urges or their ‘true nature’ being exposed in the face of adversity or conflict. In Shakespeare’s Othello, Iago

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describes Othello as ‘an old black ram (…) tupping your white yew’ (Shakespeare, 1603)⁶-the white yew here being Desdemona. The explicit contrast between the depiction of Othello, and the depiction of Desdemona here suggests that his blackness is corrupting her purity associated with the colour ‘white’. The aggressive tone of ‘tupping’ also implies their physical interactions are brutally forceful and cheerlessly received by Desdemona. This animalistic portrayal of their relationship takes away the beauteous and loving aspect of it, suggesting it is driven by uncontrollable biological desires- as if it were an interaction between two animals. As the play develops, Shakespeare continues to extend on this brutal, animalistic portrayal of Othello. Iago describes how Othello ‘foams at the mouth…and breaks out into savage madness.’ Here we see Othello’s descent into savageness as he dramatically fulfills the in factual prejudices against him. The severe, graphic nature and visualisation of this description is rather distressing, and suggests that this forged disposition of a nobleman he has withheld is weakening, and his true nature as a black individual is unravelling. This is supported by existing criticism, for instance J. Singh (2004)⁷ describes how ‘Othello constructs a white and therefore inauthentic identity’. Within an inauthentic identity, follows a sense of temporality, and an inability to maintain infinitely; which could suggest that this deterioration of his façade and unravelling of his inauthenticity leads to the tragedy.

Upon reading Joseph Conrad’s late 19th Century novel ‘Heart of Darkness’, I have recognised significant reoccurrences of this savage, animalistic, and purely physical portrayal of black individuals. Heart of Darkness is a semi-autobiographical novel of horror and confession, which tells the story of European colonisers in the Congo during the ‘Scramble for Africa’. Before embarking on his journey to The Congo, Conrad’s central character and fictional spokesperson, Marlow, describes an incident between a Belgian coloniser, Fresleven, and a group of Africans. Unprovoked, Fresleven physically attacks one of the natives and- in reaction to this- a fellow African ‘made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man- and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder blades’. (Conrad, 1899)⁸ This linguistic representation of how the black man’s spear went through ‘quite easy’ suggests that black individuals are instinctively destructive without mental reasoning or consideration, suggesting that the physicality of a black man will always override any moral objection- similar to the descriptions of Othello explored previously.

Outside of fiction within sports journalism, for example, I have also identified similar reoccurrences of demeaning representations of black physicality, as the media continues to non-explicitly perpetuate fear and intimidation of the black male athlete. Ben Carrington gives an example from the April 2008

⁶ Shakespeare, W. (1603) *Othello* (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Classics)
⁸ Conrad, J (1899) *Heart of Darkness* (London, Penguin)
cover of Vogue which ‘generated some controversy’ he describes, over how NBA star LeBron James is depicted with a supermodel. ‘In the picture’, Carrington explains, ‘LeBron has striking similarities to the classic image of “King Kong” carrying a white woman, a racially loaded metaphor that draws upon white fears about male hyper sexuality and violence’. (Carrington, 2010) This parallels entirely with Shakespeare’s illustration of the dynamic between Othello and Desdemona, and how Othello’s animalism corrupts the human reality of their relationship. Carrington then continues to describe how during the 2010 World Cup, when the Ghanaians played the United States, sports journalists and commentators often described the Ghanaians as both ‘athletic’ and ‘unpredictable’. Although on the surface this may seem like an acceptable observation, it takes away any creativity, strategy or skill within their craft as sportspeople. This only highlights the significance of their physicality; which Carrington describes as ‘racism without racists’. Furthermore, wild animal activity and behavior cannot be predicted by us as humans; due to their biological instincts and a lack of intellectual capacity. Therefore, the ‘unpredictable’ element of the Ghanaians’ presence reinforces the animalistic representation of black men, as it suggests mankind cannot predict their actions- creating a distance between black individuals and the rest of humanity.

Despite the age and genre disparity between Shakespeare, Conrad, and modern-day sports journalists, we can still identify these insulting representations of ‘the black man’- and how significant these are in generating conflict. This exploration of the significance of race could suggest that Othello’s blackness is to blame for tragedy in the play. However, perhaps the single flaw or frailty within the play does not in fact belong to Othello himself. Perhaps society itself is flawed- in the form of institutionalised racism, prejudice and inability to accept black individuals- and maybe this, above all, is at the heart of the tragedy. One could suggest that the character of Iago is profoundly racist; and the deception he induces comes from a place of loathing and hatred for black people. Karen Newman (1987) supports this view that it is not the assumed qualities of Othello’s race itself which triggers tragedy, but racism amongst society and those around him. She describes how, ‘the play should be used to examine and dismantle the racism and sexism of the leadership of the state’. This alternative concept suggests that injustice, inequality and mistreatment within society is the play’s weakness- leading to everything tragic which occurs. Hugh Quarshie (2016) also supports this view, but with a stronger emphasis on Shakespearean views on race, he describes ‘ways in which Moors were depicted on the Elizabethan stage were based on racist assumptions’ and that the playwright himself was just ‘elaborating on literary and theatrical conventions which usually conveys Moors as a menace to

10 Newman, K (1987) And wash the Ethiop white’: femininity and the monstrous Othello (New York, Methuen)
society’. However, Kaufmann (2016)\(^\text{12}\) argues that the fact that the play was written in Elizabethan England affirms that racism cannot be the driving force as this kind of prejudice was yet to exist. During an interview, Kaufmann expressed her belief that ‘ideology develops to defend the action rather than the action being motivated by the ideology’. This argument proposes that perhaps the tragedy is not driven by racism, but how racism was generated as a result of the events and tragedy which unravelled. This ideology can be transferred to make a much wider point about the disreputable history of our predecessors, which arguably remains in the world today. It reminds us of global humanitarian catastrophes, such as the colonisation movement, were driven by primarily financial intentions; but these aims became constructed by an abhorrence of a different group of people—demonstrating how utterly shameful and inhumane this real-life tragedy was.

However, perhaps the destructivity- or assumed destructivity- of Othello’s character, or the institutionalised racism surrounding him is not what causes tragedy. One source comments upon the fact that tragedy arises from ‘a tragic flaw or from a tragic error in judgement’.\(^\text{13}\) Although this does acknowledge the significance of a ‘flaw’ within a character, it also provides an alternative dimension to explore- the ‘tragic error in judgement’. This parallels directly with the essence of Shakespeare’s Othello, as one could argue that it his belief in Iago that causes his downfall. Aristotle described how ‘character determines men’s qualities, but it is their action that makes them happy or wretched.’ This reinforces the concept that action and judgment are more to blame for tragedy than characteristics or qualities of an individual. The idea that it is Othello’s judgement is more significant than his characteristics is supported by F.R Leavis (1952)\(^\text{14}\) who believed ‘Othello is too stupid to be regarded as a tragic hero’. Although Leavis’ conclusion is harsh, he believes it is blatantly obvious that Iago’s threat and plan is manufactured; suggesting that it is Othello’s lack of good judgment is to blame for his downfall and tragedy. However, one must not ignore the importance of pressures put upon Othello, and his insecurities about his race, position, and his wife. Arguably, the most significant pressure on Othello is Iago; with his undeniably effective methods of persuasion, that pinpointed and attacked any insecurities Othello may have had.

Is Iago to Blame for the Tragedy?

Within the domain of literary criticism, there have been continuous disputes as to whether Othello or Iago should deserve the title of the ‘protagonist’ in the play. Some may argue that it is Iago in fact who adopts this role, as the story is told primarily from his perspective. By serving as the play’s


\(^{14}\) Leavis, F.R (1952) Othello: Critical Essays (Oxfordshire, Routledge)
primary narrator, Iago subconsciously makes the audience his accomplices as he openly shares his true intentions with them whilst hiding these from the other characters. Even in 1887, Boito and Verdi’s opera ‘Otello’ had ‘Iago’ as its working title for some time; demonstrating the importance of his character in shaping the narrative. If we were to consider Iago as the most significant character within the play, this may suggest that it is in fact his manipulation combined with Othello’s belief in Iago’s dishonesty which causes tragedy. One critic describes that ‘tragedy is a mixture of circumstance and character’, which seems to be most applicable to Othello. Without Othello’s inherent jealousy, perhaps he wouldn’t have been fooled into thinking Desdemona was cheating on him. With that said, without the intellect of Iago, and the circumstances that contributed to his bitterness, this flaw in his character would never have been put under so much pressure. There is no doubt that Iago serves as the catalyst within the tragedy, regardless of what his motives are, as his intense and relentless manipulation breaks down Othello’s moral strength and faith in Desdemona. This emotional poisoning of Othello’s and Desdemona’s relationship resulting in Desdemona’s death is arguably the tragic peak of the play. Therefore, the fact that Iago secretly operates this deterioration suggests that he is in fact the cause of tragedy.

If one was to consider that Iago’s manipulation is the cause of tragedy, it is essential to consider what the possible motives behind his actions are. One potential view is that Iago’s motivation is driven by intense racism and a loathing for Othello accelerating his desire to bring him down. In Act I, Scene III, Iago says ‘But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor’. This comment communicates Iago’s hatred not just for Othello but for Moors in general. This suggests that perhaps Iago’s motivation is not simply to bring down Othello, but to assert a wider feeling of lingering hatred for black people through Othello. By describing his hatred for Othello as a ‘sport’ and ‘profit’, it suggests that not only does he enjoy it, but is so satisfied that he feels it profits and benefits him in some way. Some may argue that Shakespeare’s use of the word ‘sport’ confirms the view that Iago is to blame for the tragedy; as the active term suggests Iago actually exercises his feelings through his actions the tragedy of Othello being one of them. During Act I, Iago also labels Othello ‘Black Othello’. The structural configuration of this phrase suggests that Iago feels Othello’s race comes before his name; and that it is a more significant element of his character which must be considered before looking at him as a person supporting the view that tragedy is caused by Iago trying to bring Othello down to satisfy his wider views about race. Newman (1987) recognises the interdependency between Iago’s manipulation and Othello’s race in encouraging tragedy, she describes how ‘his (Iago’s) manipulation of Othello depends on the Moor’s own prejudices against his blackness and belief that Desdemona would prefer white Cassio’. Newman’s view proposes tragedy would not have occurred if Othello was

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15 Newman, K (1987) And wash the Ethiop white: femininity and the monstrous Othello (New York, Methuen)
white; suggesting that Iago would not have hated him, and Othello would have had less insecurities for him to play around with.

Other critics suggest that perhaps Iago’s motivation is not to bring Othello down because of his race, but perhaps as a way of proving himself rationally and intellectually. Jan Kott\(^\text{16}\) describes Iago as a ‘diabolical stage manager’- highlighting the way in which Iago ‘runs’ the play with his extreme manipulation and planning. Like a stage manager, he ensures that he is always aware of what’s going on around him and is in full control of every eventuality. The control Iago has as a ‘stage manager’ and his role as a subconscious narrator further supports the view that he controls, and therefore evokes, the tragedy. The term ‘diabolical’ suggests that Iago uses his intelligence, organisational and persuasive skills for evil- without having any clear motivation for his actions. It is almost as though he is doing such deeds purely because he is enjoying it- giving him a devil-like quality. Some critics have even described Iago’s motivation as ‘motiveless malignancy’. This is mirrored directly with Iago’s words in the play, as he describes ‘if thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport.’ – demonstrating the immense pleasure he is receiving from setting Othello up for misfortune, failure, and ultimately tragedy. S.T Colderidge\(^\text{17}\) says ‘Iago is a being next to the devil only not quite the devil- and this Shakespeare has attempted- and executed- without disgust, without scandal’. This suggest the villainous character is never involved with obvious scandal or crime- it implies his intelligence and the scary nature of his character who smiles and betrays others around him is what causes tragedy. The rational, calculated way he controls the events in the play means he never loses sight of his aim- to bring about tragedy- and he ensures all characters are working towards his overall goal at all times. Some critics have even referred to Iago as an ‘artist’- emphasising the way he is so creative in his plans, and the smoothness of his method is almost beautiful as he entirely manipulates even the greatest of generals. Iago’s actions seem to completely surpass the significance of Othello’s ‘flaw’; therefore suggesting he is the source of tragedy. A.C Bradley supports this view and says ‘Any man situated as Othello was would have been disturbed by Iago’s communications and…many men would have been made wildly jealous.’\(^\text{18}\) This suggests that nobody could have resisted Iago’s techniques, and that he went far beyond what anybody would expect an enemy to do, manufacturing


\(^{17}\) Colderidge, Samuel Taylor. *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature.*


greatly theatrical events which Othello had no reason to believe. This argument places all blame on Iago and provides great sympathy for Othello.

Is Setting to Blame for the Tragedy?

There is no doubt that characterisation plays a massive role in allowing writers to evolve their narrative and explore various themes and ideas. However perhaps looking beyond the obvious and considering the setting surrounding the characters allows one to access a deeper understanding to what is at the core of the tragedy.

The majority of Othello is set in Cyprus, which is a significantly conflicted location for Shakespeare to select- and therefore is vital to consider when searching for the root of tragedy. The play is set against the backdrop of the wars between Venice and Turkey; that raged in the latter part of the 16th century. This destination had become a Venetian outpost, and was being fought over for ownership by the Venetians and Ottoman Empire. This backdrop of conflicted military setting serves as a metaphor for tensions that permeate the play as a whole; the issue of ownership within gender politics, particularly of women’s sexuality as well as women living within a patriarchal structure. This is introduced instantaneously in Act I Scene I, when Iago says to Desdemona’s father ‘look to your house, your daughter, and you bags!’ (I.I)¹⁹ – suggesting that Desdemona is just Brabantio’s property. The idea of Desdemona being a man’s property remains throughout the entirety of the play- as the possession shifts from her father to her lover, Othello. This scramble for possession and ownership parallels entirely with the spirit and aim of military conflict in the setting, suggesting that it is in fact the backdrop which causes the male control over women. This links to tragedy as it suggests that the possessive setting and sense of a conflicted ownership is what causes the male characters to aim to control women and their actions- which ultimately leads to Desdemona’s death.

The setting of Cyprus is also highly significant as it was a military outpost where weapons and soldiers remained when uninvolved in war. Critic Michael Flachmann²⁰ explores the importance of the ‘Moral Geography’ within the play. He describes the landscape of Othello as a ‘bastion of male power’ with a ‘savage warlike milieu’- conveying the intersection of external and internal conflict. The fact that Othello and Desdemona arrive in Cyprus after the war is fought and won means that there is severe toxic, masculine aggression saturating the setting- but nowhere to assert or spend this violence due to the lack of a physical battle. This is structurally effective as the external conflict is taken away from Othello- as well as his sense of purpose and identity- and the battle turns inwards and his aggression is displaced onto Desdemona. Perhaps this, above all, is what causes tragedy; as it

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¹⁹ Shakespeare, W. (1603) Othello (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Classics)

evokes conflict, and creates an enemy dynamic between the characters leading to downfall and murder.

Not only is the military backdrop a potential cause for tragedy in the play, but the island setting of Cyprus is also highly significant. The fact that the majority of Othello is located upon an island represents Desdemona’s isolation as she is cut off from her support system in Venice. The claustrophobic intensity of the island heightens the violence within every decision, and every action suggesting this is why tragedy occurs. The journey to Cyprus that Desdemona chooses is also significant; as it disrupts the natural order of events. Typically, a woman would leave the home of her father and enter the home of her husband as if she is property that is being transferred. However, Desdemona does not make this journey as she travels to Cyprus to be with Othello, which could foreshadow and lead to the disorder, chaos, and tragedy within the play.

Another element within the setting of Othello which may be the cause of conflict and tragedy is the religious and cultural contrast between the first location, Venice, and the last location, Cyprus. Venice is a highly Christian and Roman Catholic destination - the cradle of culture, finest artwork, and the Renaissance age. However, Cyprus is described as being on the ‘edge of Christian territory’, as religion was disputed across the region. The country was viewed as barbaric, uncivilised, and had constant dissimilarities between its population - the combination of Muslim and Christian beliefs. This tension and uncertainty may be the cause of tragedy as it allows Shakespeare to establish a moral ambiguity. Therefore, the boundaries between good and evil are blurred and Othello can no longer tell the difference between them - the characters collectively lose sight of their ethics and morals. Cyprus was also believed to be the birth place of Aphrodite - the Goddess of love. This is highly significant as it means Cyprus provides the perfect location for Othello to believe in Desdemona’s infidelity.

Mistrust of women, and paranoia about women being sexually irrepressible is arguably what drives Othello to murder Desdemona; and this setting may be why Othello’s anxiety about his wife is heightened. Therefore, despite Shakespeare’s intense character development, perhaps tragedy was inevitable due to the unhealthy setting suggesting no narrative could have avoided a tragic ending within this location.

Are Women to Blame for Tragedy?

Whilst searching for the root cause of tragedy in Othello, objective consideration of all prospects has been essential. As discussed throughout my essay, Othello’s blackness, the unravelling of Othello’s ‘inauthentic identity’, racism within society, Iago’s evil nature and his intelligence, and the conflicted, possessive setting can all be argued as what activates tragedy in the play. However, I feel there is a much stronger element that is fundamental in evoking the tragedy of Othello. This is the mistrust, misunderstanding, and mistreatment of women - more particularly institutionalised misogyny, toxic masculinity, and paranoia about women’s infidelity. I believe that this, above any alternative, is at the
heart of the tragedy; as it causes men to act irrationally without reason or moral justification. Othello is convinced that his wife, Desdemona, has been unfaithful to him—without having any justifiable evidence. This inaccurate accusation is what triggers the spiraling of tragic events; as Othello’s psychological paranoia becomes heightened as the narrative progresses. Othello says to Iago ‘Villain be sure to prove my love a whore,’ almost like he has already decided that Desdemona is guilty of being unfaithful, and now seeks evidence to advocate and justify his response; which seems incredibly amoral. Misogyny permeates throughout the entirety of Othello, and the way in which male characters refer to women in the play suggests they feel a degree of superiority and supremacy. When Iago says to Desdemona ‘look to your house, your daughter and you bags!’ On the surface this may seem like a harmless description, however the fact that Desdemona is casually placed in amongst inanimate objects represents women as having no intellectual or moral capacity; as well as labelling her as a possession. These possessive descriptions of women are relentless throughout the play; as Othello is described as a ‘foul thief’ and exclaims how he ‘won’ Desdemona, and had ‘stolen’ her from her father. This ownership and tossing around of Desdemona diminishes her value further as a woman; suggesting women are just commodities for men.

Whether considered property or not, it is always men who define the women of the play. Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are all ultimately limited by the fact they are defined by the men which they encounter. Critic Lisa Jardine describes how ‘All three (women) though unequal in their rank-power, are equally vulnerable to a sexual charge brought against them.’ This demonstrates that class does not interfere with male fear over women’s infidelity. Any feminist ought to be dismayed at the suggestion that the single speech—Emilia Act V Scene II—made on behalf of women is placed in the mouth of the very character who is neither listened to nor believed until after Desdemona’s death. The handkerchief symbol is the only thing to unite all three women in the play and, in doing so, perhaps leads to a depressing conclusion on women in Othello.

After studying the play, and taking a look at the world around us, I strongly feel that institutionalised misogyny is not driven by a hatred, loathing or disgust for women. Moreover, I believe that those within society who practice suppressive and prejudicial behavior do not truly believe that their actions are righteous or morally acceptable. Instead, I feel that hatred for women is driven by jealousy, excessive envy, and a deep insecurity and therefore an unspoken inferiority men feel towards women—and I believe that this, above all, is what causes the tragedy. Women obtain a strong physicality and presence; acting as the embodiment of natural potential and power since the start of time. Along with beauty, and intellectual capacity, women also have the ability to sculpt men’s emotions within

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relationships and the sexual realm - both intentionally and unintentionally - and this power is something which men can’t handle. In the play, Othello says that Desdemona ‘must die, else she’ll betray more men’. This exposes Othello’s insecurity as a man, and shows that the tragedy - beginning with Desdemona’s death - was mainly triggered by Othello’s inability to accept his wife being with other men. This demonstrates an intimidation and threat posed by women to men - causing them to feel inadequate and emasculated. No wonder such intense desire for male possession, ownership and power has existed within our world throughout history - as men within patriarchal societies aim to suppress and control what they can - as their emotions are at risk of being interfered with by women. The inability to accept female power is a highly counterproductive view - as women represent half the human race, yet Othello shows us that men do in fact fear women’s potential. Not only does this cause tragedy in the play, but also the world we live in.

Conclusion

We have established that one of Othello’s flaws is misplaced trust, which is seemingly impossible to explain until we consider the systematic mistrust of women - as Othello invests all belief into Iago. Some early critics saw Othello’s extraordinary transformation as an example of his true nature, his black nature, being exposed under pressure. However, it is mistrust of women and subsequent jealousy that causes this pressure. Iago’s motivations, if he has any, are impossible to conclusively define. After witnessing the aftermath of his callous activity at the end of the play, Iago refuses to explain himself to either the characters or the audience; he says, ‘Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. /from this time forth I never will speak word’. This secures his place among the least understandable, most diabolical antagonists. However, his methods are clear, and we can say with some confidence that jealousy is the force he conjures to destroy Othello; even if it is not his ultimate motivation. Iago’s insights throughout the play show his awareness of the power of jealousy and mistrust - ‘Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on’.

In conclusion, the threat of women permeates through all other reasons for tragedy - and exists behind every decision, and every action. There is no doubt that Iago’s methods are highly significant in evoking tragedy, however these methods would have been proved ineffective if there wasn’t an existing misconception that women are untrustworthy - creating an insecurity in Othello’s masculinity. Bonnie Greer supports this, saying that ‘the type is male’; emphasising how jealousy is tied to masculinity, not to race or any other alternative. Furthermore, within setting, the plot moves from being situated in Venice, to Cyprus, then finally to a bed. Not only does this reduction in space

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increase conflict through the claustrophobic atmosphere, but it also pushes man and woman close together- causing friction and a clash between them. Therefore, the intense development of character, setting, and narrative, Shakespeare’s Othello is a wider observation of the dynamic between men and women. Shakespeare builds the individual traits of the given character on the foundation of race, but the conflicts themselves have nothing to do with race, nation, society or social group. The conflicts, the emotions, are human.

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