



**Leaving Cert English**

**Free Notes**

**Othello**

**Analysis Of Characters**

## Othello

The namesake of the play, Othello is our protagonist and tragic hero. He is a Christian Moor, and the general of the armies of Venice. Othello is a strong, powerful figure who also has an eloquent way with words. Although he is a cultural and racial outsider in Venice, his skill as a soldier and leader are clearly valuable and respected by the state. He is constantly called to assist the duke and to speak with the senate, as we are told by Cassio's comment that the senate "sent about three several quests" to look for Othello. Othello clearly commands respect, and is admired by all those who know him. As a sign of this trust and respect, the Venetian government puts him in full martial and political command of Cyprus. Indeed, in his dying speech Othello reminds the Venetians of the "service" he has done their state.

Despite all this however, from the beginning of the play it becomes clear very quickly that Othello harbours a huge number of insecurities. As soon as Iago hints that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him he believes it almost immediately, blaming his old age, the fact that he doesn't have the manners of a courtier, that he is a soldier and his race. He possesses a "free and open nature," which his ensign Iago uses to twist his love for his wife, Desdemona, into a powerful and destructive jealousy.

Shakespeare cleverly uses Othello's introduction to us as a character to set his isolated nature firmly in our mind. We hear of him, but do not see him. Indeed, for most of the first scene Roderigo and Iago call him nothing but "he" and "him". Once they become more specific in their descriptions, they still avoid his name, and use racial epithets instead. These include "the Moor", "the thick-lips", "an old black ram", and "a Barbary horse". Othello actually appears at the beginning of the second scene in act one, yet despite this we still do not hear his name mentioned until scene three. After this, Othello's isolation becomes more physically marked onstage. For example, he is the last of the three ships to arrive to Cyprus at the beginning of the play, and he stands apart while Cassio and Iago supposedly discuss Desdemona in act four, scene one. Added to that, Othello presumes that Cassio is dead despite not being present for the attack in act five, scene one. Othello's status as an outsider may be the reason he is such easy prey for Iago, and his isolation is one of the main themes of the play.

Even the people who would consider Othello their social and civic peer, such as Desdemona and Brabantio, set him out as different and otherworldly. Othello points this out to us when he tells the duke of his visits to Brabantio's house. He says, "[Desdemona's] father loved me, oft invited me, still questioned me the story of my life from year to year". It is because of the strange tales of his life that Othello is able to woo Desdemona, and it is also another indication of the eloquence of his speech. The duke's reply to Othello's tale of how he brought about his courtship and marriage of Desdemona with his tales of adventure is: "I think this tale would win my daughter too".

Aside from others pointing it out, Othello sometimes makes a point of presenting himself as an outsider. It is unclear whether he does this because he is aware of his exotic appeal, or merely because he is self-conscious and defensive about his difference from other Venetians. For example, even though he has proved his eloquence on a number of occasions beforehand, he blames Desdemona's unfaithfulness on his inability to speak sweetly. In act one, scene three, he protests, "Rude am I in my speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace". Though this rudeness of speech never comes to pass in the play, Othello's eloquence is put under strain by Iago's constant hints and suggestions. In the final moments of the play, Othello regains his composure and, once again, seduces both his onstage and offstage audiences with his words. The speech before his suicide is a gripping tale that holds the audience's attention, gives a picture of the brave, noble warrior he once was, and makes his suicide all the more tragic. It is the tension between Othello's victimization at the hands of a foreign culture and his own willingness to torment himself that makes him a tragic figure rather than simply Iago's ridiculous puppet.

- "Haply for I am black, and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have; or for I am declined into the vale of years—yet that's not much— She's gone."
- "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak of one that loved not wisely but too well; of one not easily jealous, but being wrought perplex'd in the extreme."
- "I kissed thee ere I killed thee, no way but this, Killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

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