



Leaving Cert English

Free Notes

Othello

**Themes – The Incompatibility
of Military Heroism & Love**



Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Incompatibility of Military Heroism & Love

From the very beginning of the play, it is made clear to the audience that above all else, Othello is a soldier. It is his main characteristic, and it is a very important part of how he views his own identity. Immediately however, his career affects his married life. When he is ordered to Cyprus by the Duke, in order to defend it from the Turkish invaders, Othello notes that he himself is used to the callings of his military life, saying that it "...hath made the flinty and steel couch of war my thrice-driven bed of down". He asks that his wife be more comfortably accommodated, but she insists that she is a soldier's wife now, and will follow him to Cyprus. In many ways, Desdemona seems to be the perfect match for Othello – She easily accepts his duty to the state despite their being newlyweds, she tells the duke that she is part of a soldier now and follows Othello to Cyprus, she is unshaken by the tempest and appears unafraid of the imminent Turkish invasion. Added to that, she seems open to all the changes to her life which accompany her marriage. For example, she is genuinely curious rather than irate when she is roused from bed by the drunken brawl in act two, scene three. Othello himself seems to see this, and he refers to her as his "fair warrior", delighting in having her by his side while he is in his element.

Othello's identity as a general also enables him to gain acceptance into Venetian society in an era when this would have been extremely difficult. Mercenary Moors were common during that time period, but Othello has risen above the ranks and is often called to the side of the duke. We see throughout the play that characters constantly reference Othello's prowess as a soldier, and his skill in conducting warfare. References are made to his lack of fear on the battlefield and his fighting ability. That said, it is clear that Othello is still seen as an outsider. Brabantio was perfectly happy to have Othello in his home and to have him tell stories, but he is shocked when he discovers that his daughter has married a Moor. He turns very quickly, and accuses Othello of having bewitched her with black magic and stolen her. When Desdemona affirms that she married him because she loves him, he bars her from his home.

Othello's identity as a soldier is tied into every facet of his life. He woos Desdemona with his tales of military battles and his travels with the army. However, once he reaches Cyprus, there is very little for him to do in a military capacity. The Turks have drowned, and the invasion never occurs. We almost see how much of a loose end he is at in the second scene of act three when he states that he will view the town's fortifications, having little else to do. Othello uses his military prowess and success as a means to reassure himself, and to help battle the insecurities he has developed from a life facing constant prejudice. However, once it becomes clear that there is no call for his abilities as a soldier in Cyprus, those insecurities slowly begin to creep back in. He can no longer prove his bravery and reaffirm his manhood publically on the battlefield, and as a result, Othello begins to feel uneasy in a private setting, the bedroom. Iago, who seems to sense this weakness and insecurity, preys upon it and takes advantage of it. When Othello is so overcome by rage and jealousy that he slips into a trance, Iago is quick to point out that it was "[a] passion most unsuited such a man." In other words, Iago is calling Othello unsoldierly. Iago also takes care to mention that Cassio, whom Othello believes to be his competitor, saw him in his emasculating trance.

Othello is desperate to cling to his military way of thought, and to prove himself as a soldier once more. No doubt, everything is far clearer to him on a battlefield than it is when dealing with matters of the heart. His identity as a soldier becomes even more important to him, as his identity as a lover who can please his wife seems to prove false and unfounded. With his inability to prove himself as a soldier mingling with his failed identity as a lover, Othello begins to confuse the one with the other. His expressions of jealousy start out in a foreseeable manner, as he exclaims "Farewell the tranquil mind", but they quickly devolve into an absurd and strange farewell to war - "Farewell the plum'd troops and the big wars that make ambition virtue! O, farewell, farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump, the spirit-stirring drum, th'ear piercing fife, the royal banner, and all quality, pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!" It's pretty clear here that Othello is saying goodbye to all the wrong things, as his failure as a soldier is tied intrinsically to his failure as a man, which is linked to his failure as a lover. That said, there is something very noble in Othello's way of thinking, and audiences have found themselves seduced by these speeches. Othello's final speech before his suicide is one which

reminds the audience of the noble figure at the start of the play, the strong general. When he speaks of the deeds he performed defending Venice, and asks those around him to remember all the good he did for the state, Othello is relying on his identity as a soldier to glorify himself in the public's memory, and to try to make his audience forget his and Desdemona's disastrous marital experiment.

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