



Leaving Cert English

Free Notes

Othello

Motifs – Sight and Blindness



Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Sight and Blindness

The act of seeing and sight is a very prevalent motif throughout this play. When Desdemona asks the duke to be allowed to accompany Othello to Cyprus, she explains that she is a soldier's wife and will follow him anywhere by saying that she "saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate". This is an important quote, as not only is it indicative of Desdemona's understanding of Othello's identity as a soldier, it also tells us that she saw through the darkness of his skin and the prejudice against him. She sees him for what he is, even if he himself cannot. This is especially tragic when we realise that it is Othello's insecurities over the colour of his skin which result in the rage and jealousy that drives him to kill Desdemona.

There are many references to sight throughout the play, and some of these hint at the later manipulation of the characters that is to come. For example in act one, scene three, the senator suggests to the duke that the Turks are merely feigning their retreat to Rhodes, when he says that it is "a pageant to keep us in false gaze". The beginning of act two opens in Cyprus where we see people staring out to sea looking for the ships coming in, unsure as to whether they will be enemy or friendly.

Sight as a motif especially comes into play with Othello's character. He is a man who trusts what he can see – He trusts Iago because as far as he can "see" Iago is a trustworthy friend. He never once thinks to investigate further. When Iago suggests that Desdemona is cheating on him, Othello immediately demands "ocular proof". However, Othello is blinded by his faith in Iago, and is frequently convinced by things he does not see:

- He demotes Cassio from the position of lieutenant based on the Iago's version of events.
- He instantly believes Iago's story of seeing Cassio wiping his beard with a handkerchief exactly like the one he gave Desdemona.

- He believes that Iago has successfully murdered Cassio simply because he heard the man scream.

His weakness in taking things on faith from what he sees also comes into play when Iago quizzes Cassio on Bianca, and Othello watches. Othello trusts what he sees entirely, and even though he cannot hear what Cassio is saying, he imagines that he is describing how he wooed his wife.

After Othello has killed himself in the final scene, Lodovico demands that Iago, “look on the tragic loading of this bed. This is thy work. The object poisons sight. Let it be hid.” Much of the main plot of the play revolves around the characters never seeing things: Othello never sees any sign of Desdemona’s infidelity yet believes it totally, and Emilia, although she watches Othello erupt into a rage about the missing handkerchief, does not figuratively “see” what her husband has done.

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