



Leaving Cert English

Free Notes

Othello

Symbols – The Handkerchief



Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Handkerchief

The handkerchief is an interesting symbol in this play, as it means different things to all the different characters. To Desdemona, it is the first gift that Othello ever gave her, and it is a symbol of his love for her. It is portentous then, that when she seems to lose it he begins to treat her badly and shout at her. To Othello, the handkerchief initially represents marital fidelity. He tells Desdemona that it was woven by a 200-year-old sibyl, or female prophet, using silk from sacred worms and dye extracted from the hearts of mummified virgins. He tells her that it is magic, and that his mother kept it her whole life so his father would be faithful to her. If lost, the spell would be broken and he would stray. The pattern of strawberries (dyed with virgins' blood) on a white background strongly suggests the bloodstains left on the sheets on a virgin's wedding night, so the handkerchief implicitly suggests a guarantee of virginity as well as fidelity. Such red on white is private and dear to the heart of Othello, and he expects it to be similarly dear to his wife. Iago however, is able to use how important the handkerchief is to Othello to drive him into a further rage. He manipulates the symbolism of it so that Othello comes to see it as a symbol of Desdemona herself—her faith and chastity. By taking possession of it, he is able to convert it into evidence of her infidelity. He plants it in Cassio's room, and implies to Othello that Desdemona gave the handkerchief to Cassio herself. Othello later sees Bianca the prostitute with it, and assumes it was given to her by Cassio as a love token. Othello sees this as evidence of how Desdemona easily gave herself to Cassio, who cared no more for her than a handkerchief. It is the belief that Desdemona gave away his handkerchief and the sexually implications of the gift, along with the symbolism he attached to it, that drives him to kill her.

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