

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF OTHELLO**

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A CRITICAL STUDY OF OTHELLO

By

Frances Sweatt

Bachelor of Arts

Northeastern State Teachers College

Tahlequah, Oklahoma

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APPROVED:

Lawrence Babb  
In charge of Thesis  
for the Graduate Committee

Alice B. Traver  
Professor of English  
Chairman English Faculty

D. C. M. Inosh  
Dean of Graduate School

## INTRODUCTION

In this study I shall show that Othello illustrates the general nature of Shakespearean tragedy; that Othello is an excellent example of the inductive method of characterization; that the innate natures of Iago and Othello are the causes of their downfall; and that stylistic excellence in Othello is one of the strongest points of the drama.

Nothing will be said of Shakespeare's place in the history either of the drama or of English literature. I shall not attempt to give anything of his life and character. My object is to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the Shakespearean drama Othello.

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## CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF TRAGEDY AS ILLUSTRATED IN OTHELLO

In order to appreciate fully such a play as Othello one must understand the primary function of drama and particularly of that species of it which Othello represents--tragedy.

Shakespeare himself gives us a definition of drama: Hamlet in his explanation to the players who are to present the play before King Claudius says, "The purpose of playing, both at first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."<sup>1</sup> From this we learn that Shakespeare saw the drama as a reflection of life. But the play must obviously be more revealing and selective than the mirror in reflecting life. It must represent man in a web of complications. Influences are passing out from him and influences of others are coming back to him. The inner nature of man is revealed in his behavior. This revelation of motives, ends, and connections constitutes the most important feature of drama.

To the medieval mind a tragedy meant a narrative rather than a play, with a total reverse of fortune coming

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<sup>1</sup> Hamlet, Act III, Scene II, line 20.

unaware upon a man who stood in high degree, happy and apparently secure. To Shakespeare, the idea of the tragic fact is larger than this and goes beyond it. The Shakespearean tragedy brings before us a considerable number of persons, but it is the story of one person. The hero is first shown in all his magnanimity. He then encounters conflicts which eventually lead to a tragic death. Shakespeare shows that the downfall of the tragic individual is the culmination of a series of human actions, which are determined by the types of characters involved. Although he admits abnormal mental conditions, insanity and the like, they are not the causes of deeds but rather the symptoms. He allows chance a part in the action.

The elements of tragedy may be reduced to three:

- (1) The person involved in the tragedy
- (2) The action of tragedy
- (3) The reconciliation of conflicting forces

The hero in Shakespearean tragedy must be a person of high degree or public importance, but his actions or sufferings are unusual only in the intensity. This does not mean that the character is eccentric, but that he has a certain part of his nature intensified beyond the ordinary. Some, like Hamlet and Cleopatra, have genius. Others, like Othello, Lear, and Macbeth, are built on a grand scale; desire, passion, or will attains in them a terrible force. In almost all Shakespearean tragic characters there is a marked one-sidedness in some particular

direction, and the character is unable in certain circumstances to resist the force which draws in this direction. There is a tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind which is eventually fatal. This fatal tendency, it would seem, is the Shakespearean tragic trait. It is present in his early heroes, Romeo and Richard II, infatuated men who otherwise rise comparatively little above the ordinary level. "It is a fatal gift, but carries with it a touch of greatness; and when there is joined to it novelty of mind, or genius, or immense force, we realize the full power and reach of the soul, and the conflict in which it engages, acquires that magnitude which stirs not only sympathy and pity, but admiration, terror and awe."<sup>2</sup>

The tragic individual with Shakespeare is not always good, but he is always, as has been noted, great. It is necessary that he should be so great that, in his error and fall, we may be conscious of the possibilities of human nature.

In discussing the second element, the action of tragedy, we must note that the calamities of tragedy do not simply happen; they proceed mainly from actions of men. We see a number of human beings placed in certain circumstances; and we see arising, from the interplay of their

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<sup>2</sup> Bradley, A. C., Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 20.



characters in these circumstances, certain actions. These actions bring about other actions until the series of inter-connected deeds leads to a catastrophe. The action of a Shakespearean tragedy does not consist solely of human actions or deeds, but the deeds are the predominant factor. As the tragedy advances to its close, the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men and the main source of these deeds is the personality of the central character.

Other elements besides the characteristics, the deeds, and the sufferings and circumstances of the persons enter into the tragic action. Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of the mind, insanity, somnambulism, hallucinations; introduces the supernatural by means of ghosts and witches; or allows chance or accident to influence some point of action. Abnormal conditions of the mind are never the origin of the deeds; the supernatural element is used to confirm an inward movement already present in the character; and chance or accident is used as a part of the dramatic sequence, usually introduced after the action of the plot is well advanced. However, Shakespeare never uses these to motivate the tragic situation.

The action of tragedy may be further defined by describing it as a conflict. This conflict may be the conflict of man with man, as in Othello. \* We see Othello,

a generous and noble soul, who is an innocent victim corrupted by the evil of Iago. The conflict may be an inner conflict as we find in Hamlet, who dedicates his intellectual faculties to the passion of revenge, which destroys his finer nature and eventually destroys his soul. It may be the conflict of opposing principles, as is shown in Macbeth, a hero-villain, whose character degenerates from its former nobility.

The third element, the reconciliation of the conflicting forces which have caused the turmoil, can only be accomplished through the death of the individual who has introduced strife into the world. Harmony must triumph at last. It must sweep out the existence of the man who cannot be reconciled with it. This is a divine justice which sometimes looks harsh and inexplicable in destroying a beautiful, noble and even heroic personage who is usually guided by the purest motives and has maintained a high principle, but has assailed that which is higher and therefore must perish. Peace returns with the death of the tragic individual. Tragedy, therefore, ends in reconciliation brought about by death.

Perhaps no drama awakes sympathy better than Shakespeare's Othello. In it Shakespeare succeeds in showing \* a truly tragic character who is noble and capable of doing great things. He is forced by the tragic conflict of evil and good to turn from his nobility to ignoble conduct.

Othello very definitely fulfills the purpose of drama. It reflects and represents man in a web of complications. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation.

\* The hero involved in the tragedy, Othello, is of an exceptional nature, which has placed him above other characters in the drama. The consciousness of his high position never leaves him. When he is determined to live no longer, he is anxious not to be misjudged by the world.

The character Othello illustrated the principle of the tragic tendency to identify the whole being with one passion--jealousy. In fact, all other characteristics and tendencies are dormant. The tragic trait, his unobservant and trustful nature, is fatal to him. Othello errs by action and omission, and his errors, joining with other causes, bring on him ruin; however, the errors are accompanied by a full conviction of right.

The action of the tragedy Othello is brought about by the cooperation of their characters. Iago, who hates good simply because it is good and loves evil purely for itself, tricks foolish Roderigo, arouses the great Othello to insane jealousy, and causes the deaths of Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo.

The reconciliation of conflicting forces is adequately demonstrated in Othello. Othello's nature has been the means by which strife is introduced. He has been guided by the purest motives and has maintained a high principle throughout the drama. After he discovers his error, his honor will not permit him to live; so he practices the same justice upon himself that he has used on others.

## CHAPTER II

## SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC METHOD

A Shakespearean character is portrayed in its growth. It gradually unfolds its secret possibilities in connection with its surroundings. "Shakespeare begins with the observation of life, works slowly from the consideration of human facts, and ascends to ultimate truths."<sup>1</sup> Only by this method, the inductive method, which moves from particular to general can a playwright show both the genesis of a passion and the havoc that it causes in human lives.

We may contrast Racine's method of dramatic creation with Shakespeare's. Racine starts with the supposition that a situation is tragic, and then shows the terrible havoc produced in his characters. In the drama Phedre, Racine gives a typical example of the deductive method. He does not show how the tragic situation arose but starts with the hypothesis that the situation is tragic. Phedre's husband is away from home, and Hippolyte, the stepson of Phedre, has just returned from an exile caused by his stepmother. From the first we learn that Phedre is in love with Hippolyte. The tragic conflict is apparent. We know that it is a conflict between guilty, abnormal passion and reason. The remainder of the play is a demonstration of the tragic consequence. Horror, shame, fear, and

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson, Rev. H. N., Shakespeare's Life, Art, and Characters, I, 166.

Jealousy are exposed with ruthless realism. The final catastrophe, the self-murder of Phedre, is made to seem inevitable.

The inductive method calls for a presentation of the forces, human and otherwise, as they act upon individuals and bring out character. This means that Shakespeare is compelled to create a number of minor characters and incidents to show the evolution of character and passion.

Let us examine Othello to see how it illustrates the inductive method of dramatic creation. The hero, Othello, is a soldier with many years of experience, and is, at the opening of the drama, at the head of the army at Venice. That he is noble is an established truth with all who know him. Desdemona has fallen in love with him because she sees the "visage in his mind";<sup>2</sup> the duke justifies Othello's wooing Desdemona because of his noble character; Brabantio has often invited him to his home; Cassio shows great admiration for him in every speech which concerns Othello; and Iago, Othello's most bitter enemy, praises him--even when planning to wreck his life:

The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,  
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,  
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona  
A most dear husband.<sup>3</sup>

We know Othello to be of considerable worth to his adopted

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<sup>2</sup> Othello, Act I, Scene III, line 253.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, line 297.

country as a soldier. This is shown to us by the Duke, who will entrust the safety of Cyprus to no other; and even Iago says that the country has no other "of his fathom."<sup>4</sup>

✱ However, we are aware from the first that Othello has human forces working against him. Iago, who has been wrongfully treated, as he thinks, comes before us exercising his faculties on the dupe, Roderigo, and thereby gives the secret of his motives and impulses. He succeeds in arousing the anger of Brabantio, which adds another human force working against Othello.

Iago next analyzes the character of Othello and Cassio and sees wherein he is able to cause disruption. Othello, as has been noted, is unobservant and trustful, and Cassio is in every way adapted to excite the jealousy of Othello. Iago plans a complete separation between Cassio and Othello so that there will be no communication or explanation. This will necessarily put Desdemona in a place where she will have to intercede, thus adding two other human forces to help him carry out his plan.

Out of these circumstances Shakespeare traces the rise of jealousy. Iago, knowing Othello's nature, begins his plan by touching faintly the suspicion of Othello.

Iago: Ha! I like not that.

Othello: What dost thou say?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, line 153.

Iago: Nothing my lord! or if--I know not what.  
 Othello: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?  
 Iago: Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot  
 think it,  
 That he would steal away so guilty-like,  
 Seeing you coming.<sup>5</sup>

This slightest hint casts a shadow over Othello. A word from Desdemona is sufficient to allay mistrust, but another word from Iago is sufficient to renew it. Suspicion being aroused, Iago knows he must confirm his own honesty in the mind of Othello. This he does by the apparent unwillingness with which he tells his dark surmises, and by the pretended dislike with which he assails the reputations of people. In these cases he seems to manifest the most tender regard for the rights and characters of others; indeed, he repeatedly confesses his own tendency to suspect wrongfully.

Now comes Iago's master-stroke by which he completely captivates the Moor's mind and turns it in whatever direction he pleases.

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;  
 It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock  
 The meat it feeds on: that cuckold lives in bliss  
 Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;  
 But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er  
 Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet soundly loves!<sup>6</sup>

At the conclusion of the speech Othello knows this is the very passion with which he is affected. Iago has

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, line 34.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, line 165.



established himself and his honesty in the favor of the Moor. Iago can now proceed with more certainty and directness. He can be more bold. Heretofore, he has directed his hints and surmises against Desdemona; but now he begins to assail Desdemona with the most artful intimations. She is from Venice, where it is the custom to be untrue. She has deceived her father; she has pretended in his presence to tremble at Othello's looks when she loved him the most; and as preparatory to the final and culminating charge, Iago renews his warning against jealousy. Othello foresees his intent and is prepared for it:

Othello: And yet, how nature erring from itself,--

Iago: Ay, there's the point: as,--to be bold  
with you--  
Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto<sup>7</sup> we see in all things nature  
tends<sup>7</sup>

We see with what effect this reproach takes hold of Othello in the following soliloquy.<sup>8</sup> His confidence is shaken; he is confused and deeply troubled; he even feels horror; and from this point jealousy may be traced. But it is only after an interval of solitude that the passion lays hold of him. Othello has had time to dwell on the idea presented to him and he accepts Iago's statements as facts. For a moment Othello realizes that no positive proofs have

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, line 227.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, 257.

been produced. He turns upon Iago and demands ocular proof. Once more Iago speaks of his jealousy:

I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion:  
I do repent me that I put it into you.  
You would be satisfied?<sup>9</sup>

It is a thought whose truth Othello cannot deny.

Othello now asks for more direct proof rather than surmises; Iago is ready with them. He narrates the dream of Cassio, gives the complete demonstration of the handkerchief, and makes the direct charge that Cassio has revealed to him Desdemona's infidelity. Othello is so overcome that he falls in a swoon. When he recovers it is to watch Cassio, as he imagines, laughing over his shame.

Othello is now resolved; his mad suspicion has been wrought up to the point where no explanation can help. He does investigate, but his resolution is already taken. No declaration of Emilia, whose character he cannot trust, and no denials of Desdemona can shake his belief. The passion has taken too deep a hold; he will not and cannot withdraw from its grasp. The plan of Iago has reached its climax. He began with faint hints, he proceeded to direct assertions, and lastly, he gave what seemed to be a demonstration to the senses. We now see Othello as a jealous fiend seeking revenge.

The retribution must follow. The tragic preparation

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, 391.

of the previous scenes is carried to the consummation. Roderigo is led to assail Cassio, but is slain by Iago. Desdemona is killed by the Moor. Jealousy has done its worst--has slain its most beloved object. Iago is at last unmasked. The whole breadth of his wicked plan is exposed, mainly by Emilia. He tries to stop her speech. When he cannot, he stabs her. The truth flashes on Othello. He is ready to practice upon himself that severe justice which he imagined he was employing against others. Honor, too, will not permit him to live. As he once slew a Turk who traduced the State, so now he slays himself, who has acted so as to deserve the same fate.

Thus we see the genesis of jealousy; we acquire a complete realization of the hero's tragedy after we have accompanied him through all the experiences and circumstances which give rise to it.

All of which clearly demonstrates that Shakespeare saw his characters, not from the outside, but in their inner nature. This process of presenting the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters shows the complexities of human nature: there is food for endless thought and reflection in the persons of the play, an inexhaustible wealth and significance beyond what is directly seen. The more they are looked into, the more they are found to contain.

Truly we then can say of Shakespeare's characters, as Hudson did, "There is a sort of realistic verisimilitude in

Shakespeare's characters. It is as if they had been veritable living men and women, and he had seen and comprehended and delivered whole and pure truth respecting them. Of course, therefore, they are as far as possible from being mere names set before pieces of starched and pointed rhetoric, or mere got-up figures of modes and manners. They are no shadows or images of fancy, no heroes of romance, no theatrical personages at all; they have nothing surreptitious or make-believe or ungentine about them; they do not in any sort belong to the family of poetical beings; they are not designs from works of art; nay, they are not even designs from nature; they are NATURE itself."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hudson, Rev. H. N., Shakespeare's Life, Art, and Characters. I, 166.

CHAPTER III  
ANALYSIS OF IAGO AND OTHELLO

Several interpretations of Iago have been given by different critics. These interpretations fall into two main divisions. The first group says that Iago is an ordinary villain who is trying to get revenge because Cassio has received the appointment which Iago feels is rightfully his by the policy of "gradation where each stood heir to the first"; or a husband who has been wronged by Othello;<sup>1</sup> or an ambitious man who wishes to ruin his rival. The second group believes that Iago hates good simply because it is good and loves evil purely for itself, and that his action is not prompted by any evident motive like jealousy, revenge, or ambition, but by a "motiveless malignity".<sup>2</sup>

Laying aside these interpretations I shall attempt to show Iago as he is revealed by himself and other characters in the drama.

We know something of Iago's early life. From his sea phrases and English drinking song, we must conclude that he has spent some time as a sailor and has been to England. There is no sign that he is an atheist or unbeliever. One is led to believe, however, that he was

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<sup>1</sup> Draper, John, PMLA, 46, (1931), 724.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley, A. C., Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 209.

probably reared in a Christian home. This is revealed by him in the following casual phrases:

By the Mass, 'tis morning,<sup>3</sup>  
Trifles light as air  
Are to the jealous confirmation strong  
As proofs of holy writ.<sup>4</sup>

Iago is a Venetian soldier, twenty-eight years old, who has seen a good deal of service, and has a high reputation for courage. His manner is that of a coarse and blunt soldier who speaks his thoughts freely. He has a superficial good nature, the kind of good nature that wins popularity. He has never been found to have committed any serious offense, but outwardly has lived a decent life, enjoying the excitement of war and casual pleasures. The one thing perfectly obvious about him is his "honesty." He and other characters refer to this characteristic trait a number of times. Such he seems to the people about him, even to those who like Othello and Emilia have known him for a long time. Only Roderigo is allowed to know Iago's true character.

[ In order to see how the tragedy arises one must study Iago's inner nature. [He is a liar. One must examine every statement that he makes on any subject, including himself, and compare it with known facts or other statements before it can be accepted.] He says of himself that it is his

<sup>3</sup> Othello, Act II, Scene III, 383.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, 322.

Othello's  
in his  
phrases  
above

#2  
#3  
#4  
#5

PROVERBIAL  
QUOTE

WHILE HE

nature's plague  
 To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy  
 Shapes faults that are not.<sup>5</sup>

In the opening scene one is led to believe that Iago has refused the desired position offered to him by "three great ones of the city,"<sup>6</sup> that he has refused it because he knew his own price, and that Cassio is ignorant in the affairs of war--a fact which is absolutely false, because he is later chosen by the Senate to succeed Othello at Cyprus.

In order to stir the anger of Othello toward Brabantio, Iago tells him that Brabantio has

prated,  
 And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms  
 Against your honour  
 That, with the little godliness I have,  
 I did full hard forbear him.<sup>7</sup>

He knows that he is touching a sensitive subject when the honor of Othello is questioned; however, up to this time Brabantio has said nothing detrimental to Othello's honor, and Iago has no intention of trying to "forbear him."<sup>8</sup>

Iago makes insinuations to the effect that Cassio and Othello have wronged him.<sup>9</sup> In the same speech that he makes the insinuations, Iago gives a general analysis of

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<sup>5</sup> Othello, Act III, Scene III, 146.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene II, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 316.

the character of Othello and a brief indication of his own plans, a fact which would indicate that he treats the accusations rather lightly. Iago says that Cassio's drinking is "his vice."<sup>10</sup> There is no indication elsewhere in the drama that would cause one to believe that Cassio is a drunkard, and he is described by Iago as a "proper man."<sup>11</sup>

Every word and every implication which is used by Iago to create jealousy in Othello has no basis of truth. Desdemona's character is above reproach, and Cassio has never acted in any way except as a gentleman toward her. Thus, we see plans, incidents, and situations manufactured by Iago until the characters are caught in a web that can have no outlet except death.

Iago hates goodness. It is his nature to make remarks disparaging to human nature. This is very obvious in the language that he uses to arouse Brabantio, in words degrading women, and in suggestive vulgar statements throughout the drama. Iago hates Cassio because he has a daily beauty in his life; he pretends to follow Othello only "to serve my turn upon him,"<sup>12</sup> although he admits that Othello is of a "constant, loving, noble nature;"<sup>13</sup> he professes

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene III, 398.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 298.



to love Desdemona, "Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure I stand accountant for as great a sin."<sup>14</sup> In discussing virtue and love with Roderigo, he says, "Virtue! a fig--love is merely a lust of the blood."<sup>15</sup> When Cassio is bewailing the fact that he has lost his reputation, Iago comforts him with these words: "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition."<sup>16</sup>

Iago is a man of action and enjoys it. This trait may be noted in him from the opening scene. Brabantio is awakened by stirring terms such as "Rouse him!--Proclaim him;--Incense her kinsmen, . . . Do with a timorous accent and a dire yell."<sup>17</sup> When this is accomplished, he then hastens to Othello to incite him to anger by relating that Brabantio has spoken disparagingly of Othello's honor.

Again, we find Iago in action when he advises Roderigo to anger Cassio to the extent of striking him; later, he devises a plan to get Cassio drunk so that he will be "as full of quarrel and offense as my young mistress' dog."<sup>18</sup> The plan works perfectly; Cassio and Roderigo fight; Montano tries to stop them; Cassio fights Montano. As a climax to all, Iago hastens to give the alarm. When the brawl is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 300.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene III, 321.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 267.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 52.

quieted and the dismissal of Cassio is executed, Iago begins his plan of action wherein Cassio may be reinstated in Othello's favor.

Now that Iago's plan has begun to take root, Othello is confronted with the fact that Desdemona is false. He is constantly reminded of it by Iago until he is thoroughly convinced that she is guilty. Even then Iago is ready to suggest murder. Iago is so intent in this procedure that he is not aware that the night has passed.

By the Mass, 'tis morning;  
Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.<sup>19</sup>

Wherever he is found in action, we note the intense enjoyment on his part.

Roderigo is instructed by Iago to kill Cassio; and when he fails, Iago wounds Cassio and stabs Roderigo. Later, when the truth is revealed, he murders his own wife.

Iago is a person who takes great pride in the powers of his intellect and his ability to dissimulate. This is very obvious in his relation to each character. Othello never suspects that he is the victim of premeditated ruin until it is actually revealed to him and the revelation is substantiated by Emilia. Iago is well aware of the Moor's free and open nature and uses this as a means by which he may gain his purpose. Roderigo knows that Iago is plotting

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<sup>19</sup>

Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 384.

to wreck Othello in order to satisfy his own injured pride; however, the situation is so presented that Roderigo gives him, not only his complete assistance, but the very strings to his purse. Desdemona is so confident in Iago's ability that she asks him to bring about a reconciliation between Othello and herself. Emilia, though the wife and companion of Iago, has no idea that he is planning to disrupt the life of Othello and Desdemona, of that she, by securing the handkerchief, has any part in bringing about this tragedy until Desdemona is murdered. From this one would have to recognize the facts that Iago has a keen insight into human nature and is a genius in working upon it.

Iago never betrays his own nature and seems to be a genius in controlling his thoughts and impulses. In the most dangerous moments of the plot, he shows no signs of nervousness. When Othello takes him by the throat, he merely shifts his part with his usual instantaneous adroitness. When he is attacked and wounded at the end, he is perfectly unmoved.

Iago is an egoist with a disregard of conscience or honor of any kind. He believes most people to be fools. He says that Roderigo is a mere gull, fool, and snipe, and is poor trash of Venice; he considers Cassio to be altogether unskilled in war; Othello is an ass; he utterly despises Desdemona as one who has fallen in love with the

Moor merely for his bragging and telling fantastic tales; and he calls his wife a fool. He declares that he "never found man that knew how to love himself."<sup>20</sup> He expresses admiration for the servants

Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,  
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Iago is almost destitute of feeling. He shows no trace of affection and he shows pleasure or indifference in the presence of the most intense suffering.

Iago is not an ambitious man or he would have already risen higher. On the other hand, he is sensitive to anything that touches his pride or self-esteem or would in any way lessen his superiority. That is the reason he becomes so enraged when Cassio receives the desired appointment. He thinks that he is superior to Cassio because his knowledge of war is a result of observation and experience. His pride has been injured. He must find some way to satisfy his own desire for vengeance. To be master of Othello, who has undervalued him, and of Cassio, who has been preferred to him, would give extreme satisfaction. I think that this sense of power and his great pleasure in promoting difficult actions are the forces which drive him on.

The analysis is not finished, but we are in a position

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene III, 314.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 50.

to consider the reasons for Iago's actions. He repeatedly offers explanations for them. In the first place he says that he hates Othello. He gives two reasons for this hatred: Othello has made Cassio lieutenant; he suspects, and he has heard it reported, that Othello has had an intrigue with Emilia. He never says he hates Cassio, but unquestionably he does. There are three reasons why he should: Cassio has been preferred to him; he suspects Cassio of an intrigue with Emilia; and Cassio has a "daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly."<sup>22</sup> In addition to these annoyances he wants Cassio's place. Now the first group of critics referred to in the opening of this chapter says that Iago is incited by two things, the desire of advancement and hatred of Othello due to the affair of the lieutenantcy. I think these are perfectly intelligible causes, but I do not believe that they are the only motives. Nor even if we add to them Iago's hatred of Cassio do we explain Iago's behavior fully.

Resentment at Cassio's appointment is expressed in Act I, Scene I, and is never mentioned again. Hatred for Othello appears in Act I only. Desire to get Cassio's place scarcely appears after the first soliloquy, and when it is gratified, Iago never refers to it. The suspicion of Cassio's intrigue with Emilia comes as a second thought in

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<sup>22</sup>

Ibid. Act V, Scene I, 19.

the second soliloquy and never appears again. The mention of the jealousy of Othello is followed by the declaration that Othello is infatuated with Desdemona and is of a "constant, loving, noble nature."<sup>23</sup> Iago's disappointment at the loss of the lieutenantcy supplies a touch of resentment. But I believe that his real motive lies in his egoism. Let us remember his keen sense of superiority, his contempt for others, and his spite against goodness, as well as his enjoyment of action.

The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved exertion of his abilities and the excitement of danger, his delight would be complete.

Once Iago is embarked on his course, he cannot turn back. Also convincing Othello proves more difficult than he expects. Iago is caught in his own web and is not able to free himself.

In the study of the character of Othello it is necessary to know him as a man influenced by surroundings. At the opening of the drama, we find him in the beautiful city of Venice where the very atmosphere breathes of romance. At this particular time the powerful republic would appropriate anything or anybody that would be beneficial to herself, buying from other nations the most intelligent and

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<sup>23</sup>

Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 297.

courageous captains and soldiers and using them for her own purpose. Othello is given the important mission of saving the island of Cyprus, which is at this time under the republic of Venice, from an invasion of the Turks.

Much of Othello's early life is revealed. He is a civilized barbarian descended from "royal siege."<sup>24</sup> His youth and manhood have been spent in the affairs of war, where he has played the hero in numberless battles and sieges. He has wandered in the vast deserts, has been in the land of the cannibals, has been sold into slavery, and has sojourned for a time in Aleppo. At the opening of the play we find him to be somewhat older, a grave and dignified soldier steeled by experience in countless perils, hardships, and vicissitudes.

✱ We must analyze the character of Othello to see how his fall comes about. He is a noble and magnanimous personage. This characteristic is an accepted fact by all who know him, and even Othello recognizes this trait in himself.

My parts, my title, and my perfect soul  
Shall manifest me rightly.<sup>25</sup>

His officers speak of him as, "our noble general Othello;"<sup>26</sup> the Duke calls him "a very valiant fellow,"<sup>27</sup> and is willing

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene II, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene II, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene II, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Act V, Scene I, 52.

to entrust the safety of Venice to no other; Montano, upon hearing that Othello is in full commission in Cyprus, speaks approvingly and says of him, "I have served him, and the man commands like a full soldier;"<sup>28</sup> Cassio, before and after dismissal, speaks praisingly of Othello; Desdemona falls in love with him because she "saw Othello's visage in his mind;"<sup>29</sup> Lodovico, when he hears of Othello's ignoble conduct, expresses consternation and surprise by saying, "Is this the nature whom passion could not shake;"<sup>30</sup> and even Iago, who is planning to arouse dissension, says,

The state . . .  
 Cannot with safety cast him . . .  
 Another of his fathom they have none,  
 To lead their business."<sup>31</sup>

Othello is a gentleman. One must note the dignity and repose with which he confronts the enraged father, his manly self-confidence, the noble modesty and simplicity which mark his story of love and reveal the essential qualities of his character.

Othello is a romantic figure because of the strange life of war and adventure which he has led since childhood. There is mystery in his descent from a royal family, in his wanderings on the desert and among marvelous people, in the story of the magic handkerchief, in the vague glimpses of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene III, 252.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene I, 276.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 153.



the numberless battles, in his being sold into slavery, in his time spent in Aleppo, and in references to his baptism.

He is not merely a romantic figure; his own nature is romantic. Amid the storms of war, the roar of guns, amid hatred and strife and love of slaughter, he preserves a frank, loving heart asking only for kindness of disposition and sentiment. He is capable of loving, in the fullest and highest sense of the work, beauty of soul, grace, and nobleness of mind, and desires lovingly and longingly to make them his own. This is obvious in his love for Desdemona, which is of the purest and noblest kind centered in his inmost nature. He is not blind to her personal charm, but this alone would not have won him. Desdemona herself makes the first advance, and only when he sees that it is not his exterior but his inmost nature that has impressed her does he give himself up to her with all the fervor and fire of unimpaired manhood. This same romantic tendency is portrayed in Othello's most famous speeches, in casual phrases, and in expressions of most intense feelings.

Othello is a man of action. His description of himself as

one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
Perplex'd in the extreme;<sup>32</sup>

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Ibid. Act V, Scene II, 346.

is perfectly just. Though usually free from anger, if he is infuriated he does not take time for reflection. This characteristic trait is obvious throughout the drama.

He himself reveals it:

He that stirs next to carve for his own rage  
Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion.<sup>33</sup>

And:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule;  
And passion, having my best judgment collid,  
Assays to lead the way: if I once stir,  
Or do but lift this arm, the best of you  
Shall sink in my rebuke.<sup>34</sup>

When he believes Cassio is the best man for the position, he makes him his lieutenant; and on the other hand, he is equally ready to dismiss him when he is justified in so doing. Again, we see this same trait in Othello's quick decision to kill Desdemona when he is thoroughly convinced of her guilt. Later, when the truth flashes on Othello, he passes judgment on himself in the same severe manner which he uses for others.

The flaws in Othello's character are responsible for his downfall. Othello's nature is simple. His great speeches are beautiful in thought and romantic in nature, but they do not show a mind that is observant, quick-witted, or shrewd. He is void of self-contemplation; he never

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 173.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 205.

deliberates once his decisions are made. He has an open and trustful nature and his trust is absolute. This is revealed time after time in his relations with Iago, and it is unmistakable in his relations with Desdemona.

Therefore, when such a passion as jealousy seizes Othello it becomes uncontrollable. He presses for immediate conviction or immediate relief, takes little time for reflection, and when convinced, acts with the authority of a judge.

After noting the characteristic traits of Othello one is able to see how he is forced into jealousy. His nature is so trustful that he puts utter confidence in the honesty of Iago, who has been a close companion. This does not reveal stupidity on the part of Othello, for everyone who knows Iago thinks him honest. It would be quite unnatural for Othello not to be moved by the warnings of a friend, warnings which were offered in such a reluctant manner. Iago gives these warnings to a man who has been married a very short time and who does not know a great deal about Desdemona.

Iago, after an artful preparation, suggests to Othello that he is not an Italian, not even a European; that he is totally ignorant of the thoughts and morality of Venetian women; and that Othello himself has seen how Desdemona deceived her father. For a moment the past is revealed. Iago then follows up with humiliating insinuations which

would have caused any man to be disturbed. However, up to the time Othello dismisses Iago, he has shown no mark of jealousy. His confidence has been shaken, he is confused and troubled, but he is not jealous. The passion of jealousy is seen first in Othello's soliloquy in Act III, Scene III, line 260. He has had time to ponder over the accusations and statements and the passion lays hold of him. We see him not as an essentially jealous man, but one whose faith and love is wrecked. Iago has withheld the whole truth, and his simple nature demands "ocular proof."<sup>35</sup> Iago is able to provide evidence with the handkerchief which Othello has given Desdemona. We now see Othello in his fall. The madness of revenge is in his blood, and as hesitation is foreign to his nature, he passes judgement instantly and controls himself only to make his sentence a solemn vow.

Iago sees now that he is able to risk any lie. He tells him that Cassio has confessed the guilt. Othello falls in a swoon and recovers to find Cassio, as he imagines, laughing over his shame. Othello's self-control has wholly deserted him and he strikes Desdemona. He loses all sense of reality. He questions Emilia, but nothing can convince him.

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Ibid. Act III, Scene III, 360.

Before the end there is again a change. The supposed death of Cassio satisfies his desire for vengeance. Othello, however, must kill Desdemona for the sake of honor. He is no longer angry. A boundless sorrow has taken its place:

this sorrow's heavenly;  
It strikes where it doth love.<sup>36</sup>

After the death of Desdemona and the realization of the mistake, the nobility of Othello returns and we again see him to be a true gentleman, a great warrior, a loving husband, courteous in speech, dignified in bearing, and impressive in manner:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they  
know't.  
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
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; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued  
eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him, thus.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Act V, Scene II, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Act V, Scene II, 337.

## CHAPTER IV

## STYLISTIC EXCELLENCE

Shakespeare's Othello reveals stylistic excellence in the music of his lines, in his choice and arrangement of words, and in his imagery. No drama of Shakespeare's surpasses Othello in poetical beauty. A comparison of Othello's most famous speeches--those that come from the depth of his soul--with the speeches of other heroes reveals Othello as the greatest poet of all. His casual phrases express similar beauty; for instance,

Keep up, your bright swords, for the dew will rust  
them,<sup>1</sup>  
Some nine moons wasted,<sup>2</sup>  
Soft you; a word or two before you go.<sup>3</sup>

In expression of intense feeling Othello uses language that cannot be excelled. His cries reveal such intensity of feeling that the reader can imagine nothing beyond them. A modern poet turns to Othello for the ultimate in the expression:

"O the pity of it, the pity of it Iago!"  
Christ, What a Hell  
Is packed into that line! Each syllable  
Bleeds when you say it!<sup>4</sup>

Auslander might as well have quoted:

My wife! my wife! what wife? I have no wife.  
O, insupportable! O heavy hour!

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<sup>1</sup> Othello, Act I, Scene II, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene III, 84.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Act V, Scene II, 337.

<sup>4</sup> Auslander, Joseph, Steel, One New World, Sec. Ser., p.271.

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse  
Of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe  
Should yawn at alteration.<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare uses the language of the people. We find him using the vulgarity of the streets in many speeches of Iago; the words of chivalry in Cassio's praises of Desdemona, such as "The riches of the ship is come on shore,"<sup>6</sup> "Our great captain's captain";<sup>7</sup> the prattle of a lover when Othello and Desdemona are reunited in Cyprus; and the language of sailors and soldiers, as they actually spoke it.

Shakespeare's arrangement of words has nothing bookish about it. He has no set rules, no favorite order. His language is flexible. We must conclude that he did not learn his craft in the little narrow school of rhetoricians where all goes by the cut-and-dried method, but from the speech of the common people. We find him varying the order of words with unconscious ease of perfect freedom and moulding his language into an endless diversity of shapes.

Since Homer, probably, no poet has come so near Shakespeare in originality, freshness, and boldness of imagery. His imagery explains, in a large part, the surpassing beauty of his poetry. Moreover, his best thought often appears in

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<sup>5</sup> Othello, Act V, Scene II, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 74.

images in the form of similes and metaphors in their widest sense, representing any and every imaginative experience.

Shakespeare has used in Othello the imagery of animals preying upon one another. We note Othello's reference to "foul toads"<sup>8</sup> breeding in a cistern, "The ill-boding raven over an infected house,"<sup>9</sup> "goats and monkeys,"<sup>10</sup> and "birdsnaring."<sup>11</sup> Iago uses such animal images as a "plague of flies,"<sup>12</sup> "leading asses by the nose,"<sup>13</sup> "a spider catching a fly,"<sup>14</sup> "beating an offenseless dog,"<sup>15</sup> and "wild cats, . . . wolves, . . . goats and monkeys."<sup>16</sup>

The images involving insects and reptiles swarming and preying on each other in accordance with their natural instincts are used by Shakespeare to symbolize Iago's method. Othello's animal images are those which represent the innocent animals trapped or beaten, which is symbolic

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene II, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene I, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene I, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene I, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 70.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene III, 407.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 170.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 276.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene II, 403.



of the way in which Othello is trapped by Iago.<sup>17</sup>

The setting of the drama is the seaports, Cyprus and Venice, which would necessarily suggest language and images symbolic of the sea. We find that Iago uses many such expressions. He describes himself as being "be-leed and calm'd";<sup>18</sup> he knows that the state has not another of Othello's "fathom";<sup>19</sup> he says he must "show out a flag and sign of love";<sup>20</sup> he describes Othello's marriage in terms of a pirate taking a prize galleon; and when he sees his evil plot is working he uses typical sea language: "My boat sails freely, both with wind and stream."<sup>21</sup>

The first scene in Act II has many sea images, "a foaming shore," "the chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds," "desperate tempest," and "high seas," all of which are in keeping with the setting.

Othello uses sea images in his moments of most intense emotion. With his first reuniting with Desdemona in Cyprus he says:

O, my soul's joy!  
If after every tempest comes such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Spurgeon, Caroline, Shakespeare's Imagery, p. 267.

<sup>18</sup> Othello, Act I, Scene I, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 153.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene I, 157.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene III, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Act II, Scene I, 186.

Again, when Iago has succeeded in arousing Othello's suspicion and then begs him to have patience, he says:

Like to the Pontic sea,  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,  
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,  
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,  
Till that a capable and wide revenge  
Swallow them up.<sup>23</sup>

And at the end, when he has killed Desdemona and found his mistake, he again uses sea imagery to express his determination to kill himself:

Here is my journey's end, here is my butt  
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.<sup>24</sup>

A London audience, composed of people who lived close to the sea, would appreciate the images symbolic of sea life. Shakespeare knew this. He created images which conveyed the atmosphere of the sea in a way that no description could possibly do.

Shakespeare makes Othello live by stylistic excellence. His mastery of this reveals him to be one of the greatest of poets. Wordsworth's description of a poet adequately applies to Shakespeare:

He is a man speaking to men: A man it is true  
endowed with more lively sensibility, more  
enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater  
knowledge of human nature, and a more compre-  
hensive soul, than are supposed to be common

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Act III, Scene III, 453.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Act V, Scene II, 267.

among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings on of the universe and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, William, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in English Prose, edited by J. M. Manly, p. 302.

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