

Othello

“The robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief.”

“It is felt that a person is less fully civilized, less fully instructed in what Western culture values if she or he has not encountered the writings of Shakespeare.” --

S.L. Wofford

I. Shakespeare & *Othello* (late 1601-) 1602

- Shakespeare is an innovator of language, not plot
- *Othello* stems from a short story written in 1565 by Giraldi Cinthio about a Moorish Captain who takes a Venetian wife
- Queen Elizabeth, Moorish Ambassador in 1600-1601; Shakespeare meets him
- *Othello* is set in Italy to avoid censors of the English Court
- *Othello* is a play about gender, not race; race exaggerates the sexual issues
- The entire action of the play covers about 3 days
- Machiavelli & politics...in 1513 wrote *The Prince*, which was a “manual for acquiring and keeping political power.” He was a Florentine like Cassio
- Watch the handkerchief...

II. English Renaissance (1500-1650)

- Humans had the potential for development
- Medieval Christianity was questioned (this world is preparation for eternal life) people began to see everyday life as meaningful and a time for noble activity
- This was a time for heroes. The ideal Elizabethan man was a talented courtier, adventurer, fencer, poet, and conversationalist. He was a witty and eloquent gentleman who examined his own nature and the causes of his actions.

- Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth
- Women had a lower social status than men
- People were concerned over the order of things. They felt there was “a great chain of being” (more to come on that later)
- People felt that their rulers were God’s agents. To kill a King was a heinous crime; the heavens would show ominous signs when such evil was present.
- The Crusades and explorations of Columbus, etc., exposed the relatively isolated English to races they did not know exactly how to interact with.

III. Tragedy

- drama that relates the fall of a person of high status as a result of the protagonist's **tragic flaw**
- celebrates courage and dignity as the hero faces inevitable doom
- begins in chaos and ends with the restoration of order

IV. The Tragic Hero

- The **tragic hero**, according to Aristotle, was a man (god, demi-god, hero, high ranking official) who rose to a high position and then fell from that high position - usually to utter desolation and death. Two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy, the tragic hero's **tragic flaw** (or *hamartia*), and **fate**.
- By the Renaissance, people generally felt themselves to be less pawns of fate and more in control of their own destinies. The Elizabethan tragic hero, therefore, is much more often responsible for his own downfall. This “waste of human potential,” as it were, seems to be much more tragic to the Elizabethans than the vagaries of fate.

V. Features of Shakespearean Drama

- **Formal versus Informal forms of address** (Be aware of how the various characters address one another and in what contexts they use what form of address)
- in the Renaissance, there were two forms of second-person address—the formal and the informal. *You* was the **formal** form of address, and *thou* was the **informal** or **familiar**.
 - The formal form of address was used when an inferior was talking to a superior, when two business colleagues who were not close friends were speaking, or when the speaker wanted to maintain a distance. It was also the standard way for the upper classes to talk to each other.
 - The informal was more intimate, to be used among friends, family members, and persons to whom the speaker wanted to imply closeness. *Thou* was also used by people of higher rank to those beneath them, and by the lower classes to each other.

- Motifs (see website & assignment)
- Meta-fiction/ Meta-drama:
 - Meta-fiction is a kind of fiction that comments on the very devices of fiction it employs. It usually involves irony and is self-reflective. Meta-drama is similar—drama that calls attention to itself as a play or has occasion to comment on its own actions and devices.

VI. Devices of Shakespearean Drama

- **Ghosts** (no ghost in *Othello*)
- **Madness**, either real or pretended, was another popular device in Elizabethan Drama.
- **Allusion**: an indirect reference to another event, person or work with which the writer assumes the reader is familiar.
 - Shakespeare uses **ALLUSIONS** as techniques for establishing character, building theme, and setting mood. In *Othello*, there are allusions to *Greek* and *Roman mythology*, *Roman history*, and the *Bible*.

- **The Aside:** gives the audience insight into the character. Here the character is speaking either to himself or directly to the audience. There are other characters onstage who, by convention, do not hear the aside.

The mechanics of the **Aside:**

- if a character *is* aware that others are on stage the aside *cannot* be overheard by others
- If a character is *not* aware that other characters are on stage, than the aside *can* be overheard by others onstage
- Other devices can be found online on the website (**foil**, **dramatic irony**, **blank verse**, etc.)

- **Dramatic Reverse:** the action or particular act in the play that determines or changes the fate of the protagonist
- **Climax:** In Shakespearean plays, the climax always takes place in Act III
- **Play-within-the-play:** a dramatic device where a play is performed on stage by characters in a play, often with other characters forming an "audience"...often having symbolic and psychological significance, as well as having an important function in the plot . Can function as a form of **Meta-drama**.

VII. The Chain of Being

- This concept originated with Plato and expressed the idea that there is a proper order within all things, and among all things, based on complexity, from the tiniest grains of sand to heaven and God...

Rank of the Chain of Being

- God
- Angels (Seraph)
- Humans (King)
- Animals (Lion or Elephant)
- Vegetables (Oak Tree)
- Minerals (Diamond, Gold, Marble)

- When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony. When the order was broken, everything was upset and everyone suffered. This creates literary, political, and moral implications (see handout “The Chain of Being” on website for further details)
- If Shakespeare compares a woman to a vine and her husband to an oak tree, what does this mean? He doesn't do so merely to talk about her beauty or his strength. Instead, he emphasizes her subordination to him in the Chain of Being.

- Another example: If two characters fight for the throne, one compared to a lion, the other compared to a boar, which one has a legitimate claim? There is a comparison being made here.
- Likewise, imagery from the sun, the moon, or other parts of nature often involve an implied set of connotations concerning that object or animal's place in nature.

VIII. Setting

- Act I is set in Venice while Acts II-V are set in Cyprus
- A fact taken for granted by Shakespeare was that Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe, especially in its sexual tolerance
- British Romantic poet Lord Byron writes about the state of morals in Venice “a woman is virtuous (according to the code) who limits herself to her husband and one lover; those who have two, three, or more, are a *little* wild; but...only those who are indiscriminately diffuse...are considered overstepping the modesty of marriage.”
- What are the implications of this to the play? Consider that Desdemona is Venetian.

IX. Essential Questions

- What defines *masculinity* and *femininity* in the play? Are *masculinity* and *femininity* artificially invented cultural and social constructs?
- How do assumptions about race, femininity and masculinity define social expectations?
- How does language affect characterization?
- How many different ways are we to understand the word *honest* in the play?
- How do age, social position, and race impact the relationship between Desdemona and Othello?

Online *Othello* Stuff

- Link to online text of *Othello*
- Supplementary handouts of the following:
 - *Othello* Character Map
 - Men and Women in *Othello*
 - A Brief History of the Moors
- *Othello* Play Synopsis
- The Chain of Being
- Literary Terms
- Close Reading Questions
- Some Thoughts about Tragedy
- Motif Assignment/Rubric

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