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# The Theme of Othello

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THE THEME OF OTHELLO

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BY

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THESIS

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The task of discerning and explicating the theme of Othello is one that has intrigued many prominent Shakespearean critics. This play, which is considered by many as the author's greatest achievement in tragedy, lends itself to a wide range of thematic interpretation. G. B. Harrison minces few words in his explanation of the theme: "...the theme is universal; jealousy in love is one of the commonest of human failings."<sup>1</sup> John W. Draper voices a similar interpretation in saying, "Love is the theme of Othello, and jealousy is the alembic by which that love is tried."<sup>2</sup> Irving Ribner, on the other hand, concludes that Shakespeare's ultimate message in writing Othello was to give "dramatic form to a Christian view of mankind's encounter with evil, the destructive power of that evil, and man's ability to attain salvation in spite of it."<sup>3</sup> Winifred Nowotny says, "This is a drama of an error of judgment, the error being in the application of judgment to love."<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Heilman deciphers the major theme as the conflict between reason and love: "Wit and witchcraft: in this antithesis is the symbolic structure, or the thematic form, of Othello...witchcraft is a metaphor for love," and "the realm of 'wit'" is that "of the reason,

<sup>1</sup>G. B. Harrison, "Introduction to Othello," in Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. G. B. Harrison (Chicago: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1968), p. 1058.

<sup>2</sup>John W. Draper, The "Othello" of Shakespeare's Audience (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), p. 229.

<sup>3</sup>Irving Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1960), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup>Winifred M. T. Nowotny, "Justice and Love in Othello," in A Casebook on "Othello", ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961), p. 179.

cunning, and wisdom...."<sup>5</sup>

These diverse elucidations upon the theme of Othello represent careful study and consideration. However, if one looks closely at the play, he finds it difficult, perhaps almost impossible, to ignore the rather serious and introspective comment by the author upon the human being's reaction to and connection with "honesty." As William Empson points out,<sup>6</sup> the words "honest" and "honesty" are repeated fifty-two times in the course of the play. In addition to these blatant repetitions, one is immediately aware of a multitude of semantically connected images such as: true, truly, truth, lie, liar, liest, belie, deluding, deceive, trust, false, falsely, believe, perjury, perjured, unvarnished, and counterfeit. When one stops to consider that Shakespeare, the master of varying, unique expression, should consciously and willfully express himself in the same terms and images, he cannot avoid the realization that the author brings light to bear intentionally upon the attributes of honesty and dishonesty as they relate to human experience.

The qualities of honesty and dishonesty bring to the mind a wide range of pictures. As Empson points out in his essay, these attributes may be aligned with particular and various meanings depending upon the context and the period. However, considered in their broadest meanings, the words "honesty" and "dishonesty" evoke very particular meanings. Honesty is a quality possessed by the person who exhibits the most sincere regard for truth,

<sup>5</sup>Robert B. Heilman, "Wit and Witchcraft: An Approach to Othello," in Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Leonard F. Dean (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 338-340.

<sup>6</sup>William Empson, "Honest in Othello," in Shakespeare's Tragedies, ed. Laurence Lerner (Baltimore: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), p. 107.

reality, and what is. The honest man clings ultimately to truth and voices constantly his affirmation of life. Conversely, the quality of dishonesty may be attributed to that person who in varying degrees becomes a disciple of untruth, illusion, that which seems, and what is not. The person who is constantly unable or unwilling to search out truth and align himself with reality voices ultimately a negation of life and an impulse toward nothingness and annihilation.

In Othello one comes to the somewhat sorry and tragic conclusion that no character in the play takes a stand continuously on the side of truth, reality, and life. None of the characters in their varying degrees of understanding and awareness stand constantly against appearance and illusion. Rather, all the major figures within the play become willful, ignorant, or lazy followers of falsehood, illusion, and non-existence. The universal prevalence of dishonesty in the characters of Othello must lead the reader to an understanding and awareness of the tragic consequences that must be faced in an unaware avoidance of or blatant opposition to truth.

As one views and evaluates each individual's relative position in connection with truth, he realizes immediately and unequivocally that Iago is by far the most thoroughly aware character in the play. At the very beginning of the play he vocalizes quite clearly his understanding of the honest man (follower of truth, reality, and what is) and the dishonest man (follower of falsehood, illusion, and what is not):

You shall mark  
 Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave  
 That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,

Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,  
 For naught but provender; and when he's old, cashiered....

Others there are  
 Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,  
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves;  
 And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
 Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined their coats,  
 Do themselves homage.<sup>7</sup>

In this straightforward explanation by the villain, one becomes aware that Iago understands clearly what it means to be an honest servant of truth or a dishonest disciple of falsehood. The honest man, who reveres truth and reality, exhibits a very fearful aspect of life, an aspect which, although not pleasant, is very true. The honest servant of truth, whom Iago calls a "knee-crooking knave," lives his life in a type of bondage. The truth of the relationship of man to life is very clearly one of little control. The honest man realizes that he cannot totally control and manipulate life as it is. Life for everyone holds varying degrees of pleasure and pain, and the honest man is aware that he can only affirm the grandeur and truth of life by living honestly.

The dishonest man is a manipulator of reality and a follower of illusion and seeming. Man loses his connection with honesty when he attempts to manipulate and manage the truths of life, and he exhibits finally the desire to destroy what is real if he seeks to subvert it. Iago's definition of the dishonest man is the picture of one who would attempt to establish total and undeniable control over life. The dishonest man would rip, tear, and claw at the fabric of reality and in doing so destroy the essence of reality.

<sup>7</sup>William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Othello, in A Casebook on "Othello," ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961, I.i.44-54. Subsequent quotations of Shakespeare will be cited from this source.

Iago, in professing his servitude to what is not, repulses immediately and vilely any connection with the attributes of the honest man. "Whip me such honest knaves!" (I,i,49) is his reaction to those who serve what is. Conversely, he says of the dishonest men, "These fellows have some soul; / And such a one do I profess myself." (I,i,54-55) Any element or attribute which is synonymous with truth is one which Iago repels vehemently from his own person, "...not I for love and duty, / But seeming so...." (i,i,59-60) Iago, as a dedicated follower of what is not, becomes a disciple of seeming as opposed to being. He says, "I am not what I am," (I,i,65) and by this he means that he lives totally in a world contrived in illusion. As we watch the villain unfold his design toward the annihilation of truth and life, readers must agree ultimately that Iago is more than a mere layman in the congregation of dishonest souls; he is a high priest and prince of falsehood.

It is very important for the reader to locate the origin of Iago's utter hatred of truth and reality. Much has been written and discussed concerning the villain's need and motivation to ravage and overthrow truth and reality and to torture the people around him. If one realizes that Iago despises truth and reality and that this devil avoids what is at every turn, he may arrive at inspirational insights into the villain's particular motive and into general motives for all those who avoid truth.

Iago states rather clearly in the opening lines of the play that his primary, outward reason for hating the Moor lies in the fact that he had been passed over in promotion to lieutenant. Iago is an experienced soldier who has worked his way up through the ranks. As a career soldier who has acquired his military



knowledge through first-hand experience, he feels that his capabilities overshadow those of Cassio, who has amassed military knowledge through study. Although Iago rationalized his superiority over Cassio, he was obviously insecure in his bid for promotion and attempted to further his chances by manipulation. He solicited "three great ones of the city" (I,i,8) to plead his case before Othello. However, Cassio received the promotion.

The impetus, then, that initiated Iago's evil play to destroy truth and render shambles of the lives of everyone is the fact that he has not been promoted. However, Iago will not be satisfied with merely discrediting Cassio in the eyes of the Moor and replacing Cassio as Othello's lieutenant. Because his manipulative power and sense of control have failed in his quest for promotion, Iago becomes obsessed with the need to prove to himself that he can, in fact, manipulate, control, and finally destroy life around him. He will no longer allow himself to exist in a setting where truth and reality are prevalent. He is unable and unwilling to live in the honest bondage to what is; so he sets out maliciously to annihilate the fabric of truth and desecrate the garment of life.

The prime motivation for anyone to dedicate every ounce of his being ultimately to falsehood and illusion, as Iago does, is located in a very acute and pressing fear. The fear of Iago which leads him to an alignment with devilish evil is that he is unable to control the true circumstances of life around him. The fear generated by his failure to control the promotion arouses the need in Iago to prove to himself that he can control and manipulate. This fear of truth and reality begets a fear of life as it is and a fervent desire to destroy all that is true in life. Iago no longer seeks

merely to control his own position in life, but rather he desires maliciously to perpetrate the destruction of all reality and life.

Iago becomes a devil in the guise of human flesh. The fear of not maintaining control causes Iago to take on the qualities of Satan, who also feared the lack of control and manipulative power and fell from the reality of heaven to become the master of illusion. Iago is primarily motivated by the desire for revenge upon the Moor. His act of revenge includes an alliance with satanic endeavors and an elation in his contempt for all truth and reality. At first he exhibits a fiendish delight even in his inner thoughts in toying with truth and scoffing at reality. Finally, he proves to himself that truth and reality are utterly empty for him when he invents secondary motives falsely for his evil designs. Three times he tests and teases his own connection to truth:

- (1) 

I hate the Moor;  
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets  
H'as done my office. I know not if't be true;  
Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do as if for surety. (I,iii,392-396)
- (2) 

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor  
Hath leaped into my seat; the thought whereof  
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;  
And nothing can or shall content my soul  
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife;  
(II,i,304-308)
- (3) 

For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too.  
(II,i,316)

By dredging up from his totally false imagination and toying with these illusory conjectures, Iago is consciously kicking the final grains of sand in the face of truth. With an evil sneer he is ultimately attempting to prove to himself that he has achieved the capacity to bully reality and hold no regard for what really is.

Once Iago has committed himself totally to falsehood and dissolved any connection or regard for truth, he is motivated completely by a pressing need and malicious desire for the destruction of reality and life. He is a driven man who wants more than to overturn the beauty of truth quietly; he desires rather to mangle and rape every element of reality.

The instances of his violent destruction of reality explode from the page and terrify the reader into an understanding of Iago's satanic endeavors and delights. The love between Othello and Desdemona, were it allowed to thrive, would stand as a lasting manifestation of a truthful relationship of life. However, Iago smacks his lips greedily at the thought of destruction as he observes Othello and Desdemona exchange their vows when they are reunited in Cyprus. The villain turns aside to the audience and spills forth his venomous plan of destruction: "O, you are well tuned now! / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music." (II,i,202-203)

At every turn Iago seeks to lead those around him to see illusion and falsehood. He is actually incapable of directly destroying truth and reality; so he attempts to cloud the ability of others to recognize truth with the smoke and soot of illusion and seeming.

The virtue of Desdemona is a reality that strikes wonder in the eyes of everyone who observes her. Such marked revelation of truth comes also under the evil scrutiny of Iago. He cannot directly destroy the reality of virtue within Desdemona, but alternatively he plans an equally effective course of evil action:

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
 And out of her own goodness make the net  
 That shall enmesh them all. (II,iii,366-368)

He will blacken the virtue of Desdemona in the eyes of others. Aided by the relative inability or unwillingness of others to recognize truth, Iago's devilish scheme will render what is secondary to what seems for the onlookers.

When the villain points out Desdemona's reception of Cassio to Cyprus to Roderigo, the latter sees no more than the real picture of human "courtesy." However, the devil plants the seed of ugly illusion immediately in the mind of Roderigo: "Lechery, by this hand! an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts. They met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together. Villainous thoughts, Roderigo! When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th' incorporate conclusion. Pish! But, sir, be you ruled by me...." (II,i,262-267) Here one sees not only Iago's attempt to direct another into the snare of appearance, falsehood, and illusion, but also the devilish villain's fervent need to control and rule both people and reality.

The devil which comes to life in the body and intellect of Iago is a very real and potent evil force. The reader watches this devil move about as a very shrewd salesman, ever trying to sell earnestly that which is untrue. The sales pitches which he gives are built totally upon illusion; they are made up of that which seems. Iago convinces Roderigo continually that the latter may retain hope for Desdemona's affection, and while he is telling this gullible mark to "put but money in thy purse," (I,iii,350) the sly pitchman is draining the material and emotional savings of his

subject. He strives to sell to Roderigo, Cassio, Emilia, and most of all, Othello the illusion that Desdemona is less than totally virtuous. He convinces Montano that Cassio is and always has been a servant to the grape.

When Iago convinces Cassio that the best and most practical way to return to the favor of the Moor is to make an appeal through Desdemona, he says of his advice:

And what's he then that says I play the villain,  
When this advice is free I give and honest,  
Probal to thinking...? (II,iii,342-344)

Again, Iago sneers at honesty and truth. The advice is falsehood, but Iago revels in the fact that he has achieved the ability to replace reality with illusion in the eyes of others. However, such a statement very clearly points out that Iago, as the devil, possesses an acute awareness that people are often confused and unaware concerning reality, especially when they find themselves in passionate or problematical situations. Iago is an acute observer of the human situation, and he realizes that truth and reality for most people are in times of stress clouded or influenced by seeming. Iago is certain that Cassio will fall victim to the illusion because he realizes that Cassio is emotionally distraught. Cassio has suddenly lost his sensation of control and is blindly willing to flail and grope for any probable remedy.

Without his accurate knowledge of this aspect of human nature, Iago would be impotent as a devil and helpless as a perpetrator of illusion. However, his knowledge and awareness is valid, and he exhibits his related understanding of Othello:

The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so. (I,iii,405-406)

Iago's sales pitch to Othello, which is the foundation upon which the tragedy is built, is carefully concocted in the villain's knowledge that when a man loses his secure feeling of control and is pitched into a situation of stress, he is readily unable or unwilling to distinguish between reality and illusion. Thus, the villain first breaks each individual's grasp and sensation of control; then he dangles the attractive fruit of falsehood before each victim. He knows that as he creates more emotional havoc and chaos in the mind of his victim, his false solutions will appear more pleasing, and he will increase his own malicious control over the lives of others.

In the character of Iago one observes the epitome of dishonesty. His sudden fear and hatred of all reality make him perhaps the most detestable caricature of dishonesty in the world of literature. As the reader will see, the other major characters in the play also succumb to dishonesty. Although they are not motivated by the supreme desire to destroy reality as Iago is, they all compromise truth in varying degrees. By equivocating the truth, they all unconsciously aid Iago in his plan of destruction.

Of course the first victim to purchase from Iago totally what is not is the emotion-torn Roderigo. Few would argue that Roderigo is any more than a simpering, emotional fool. His desire for the affection of Desdemona renders him helpless in the skillful, molding hands of Iago's intellect. Iago practices his deceptive ability upon Roderigo merely for his satanic enjoyment and monetary advancement:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse;  
For I mine own gained knowledge should profane

If I would time expend with such a snipe  
But for my sport and profit. (I,iii,389-392)

Indeed, Roderigo is a "snipe," and never does he exhibit any degree of understanding or awareness of reality. Certainly the deception of Roderigo has little influence upon Iago's grand plan of destruction. However, it exhibits clearly the warped delight of Iago in controlling and manipulating the lives of others.

Actually, Iago begins to perpetrate and conceive his grand plan with the deception of Cassio. Cassio is a logical subject for Iago's blossoming malice because the former received the coveted promotion. However, the warped vision of the villain also sees something in the character of Cassio that must be destroyed:

If Cassio do remain,  
He hath a daily beauty in his life  
That makes me ugly. (V,i,18-20)

Cassio from the outset is a man who is at least partially swayed in his attitude and thought by appearance. Obviously, he savors his new position as lieutenant and enjoys the aura of superiority and respect which he feels accompanies the position. When the lieutenant greets the second ship and Desdemona, Emilia, and Iago to Cyprus, he plays enjoyably the role as the ranking member of the party. By kissing Emilia Cassio flaunts his superiority of rank before Iago:

Let it not gall your patience, good Iago,  
That I extend my manners. 'Tis my breeding  
That gives me this bold show of courtesy. (II,i,98-100)

Iago scrutinizes the outward airs and appearances of Cassio, and, as Cassio prates over Desdemona, the villain begins to formulate his plan:

He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper! With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do! I will gyve thee in thine own courtship. -- You say true; 'tis so, indeed! -- If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kissed your three fingers so oft -- which now again you are most apt to play the sir in. Very good! well kissed! an excellent curtsy! 'Tis so, indeed. Yet again your fingers to your lips? Would they were clyster pipes for your sake! (II,i,167-179)

The plan of Iago is built upon his knowledge of the propensity of Cassio to be swayed by appearances. Cassio enjoys the sensation that he is in total control of each situation of life, and although total control is not a reality of life, Cassio is satisfied with his appearance of control. Iago will begin his attack upon Cassio with the knowledge that the lieutenant's thought is swayed by appearances.

The plan of Iago is set into motion when he tells Cassio that the latter should join the wedding celebration: "Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello." (II,iii,29-34) Immediately, Cassio exhibits his awareness of the reality of such a situation. Othello has given the lieutenant charge over order and the watch. Cassio has responsibility; he must retain full control of his physical and mental faculties. Furthermore, Cassio acknowledges a truth of his own physical make-up: "I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking." (II,iii,36) However, Iago leads the lieutenant to the false realization that he must comply for appearance. "Tis a night of revels: the gallant desire it." (II,iii,46) Cassio ignores truth and reality, and he



succumbs to the illusion of appearance and joins the party. Thus the primary goal of Iago, like that of Satan, is to cause his victim to lay aside his knowledge of truth and reality and cling to falsehood and illusion. The prime tool of alcohol which is used by Iago has also been called the tool of the devil.

Immediately upon compromising his relationship with truth and reality, Cassio experiences the tragedy that necessarily follows. Under the influence of Iago's clever deception and the alcohol, Cassio is suddenly removed as the Moor's lieutenant. By simply ignoring the reality of the situation, Cassio has suddenly lost his position and favor with Othello and has found himself in an emotionally chaotic state. Othello, having been roused from his marriage bed and exhibiting justifiable irritation at the interruption, searches out the facts of the disturbance. When Cassio is called upon to explain the truth of the situation, he replies, "I pray you pardon me; I cannot speak." (II,iii,189) Although Cassio knows the truth of the situation and events, he allows illusion to stand because he fears dreadfully that he will seem ridiculous to the others and, most of all, to Othello. If he were a dedicated lover of truth, he would broadcast immediately the facts, and, although he would be forced to acknowledge his own shortcoming, he could appeal to Othello's humanity and understanding.

At this point the plan of Iago is right on schedule. Cassio has first been deluded by appearance and secondly has knowingly removed himself from truth because he feared seeming ridiculous. Cassio is in a state of mental chaos and emotional turmoil. He has lost his sense of confident control of his situation in life

and is willing to cling to any plan that will promise the return of a sense of control. If he were a total disciple of truth, he would neither find himself in this traumatic situation nor allow himself to be deluded by the false notion that man should retain total control. When Iago offers the plan to Cassio through which he may regain and retain control, the former lieutenant accepts and praises it immediately: "I think it freely; and betimes in the morning will I beseech the virtuous Desdemona to undertake for me. I am desperate of my fortunes if they check me here." (II,iii,335-338) The plan of Iago is another illusion, and if Cassio were a lover of truth, he would see it as such. However, because he is in a chaotic mental state, because he fears seeming ridiculous before the Moor, and because he fears the unbalanced sense of no control, Cassio ignores the reality of his situation and succumbs to the illusory resolution which is offered by the satanic Iago.

Emilia also falls far short of a love for truth and what is, and she too is deluded into dishonesty and falsehood by Iago. As the wife of Iago, Emilia exhibits the most acute understanding of the reality of the villain. She is the only major character who never refers to Iago as honest. Conversely, even before the truth of Iago's totally evil character is openly exposed, Emilia refers to the villain as her "wayward husband." (III,iii,292) It is also clearly evident that Emilia loves and respects her mistress. Therefore, it would seem apparent that Emilia possesses an aware understanding of the opposing forces of truth in Desdemona and falsehood in Iago. Yet, when she is faced with the test of controlling the handkerchief, she presents knowingly and willfully the important, controlling object to the agent of falsehood.

Although Emilia realizes the shortcomings of her husband, she is sincerely and totally in love with him, and the strength of her love would cause her to do virtually anything to retain the love of her man and receive approval from him. When Emilia and Desdemona discuss the prize acceptable for the vice of marital infidelity, Desdemona states honestly and virtuously that she would not defile her marriage vows "for all the world." (IV,iii,65) Emilia, on the other hand, replies: "By my troth, I think I should; and undo't when I had done it. Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition; but, for all the whole world-- 'Ud's pity! who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for't." (IV,iii,71-77) Obviously, the sin of infidelity is serious to Emilia. Yet, she would willingly commit such a sin in order to exalt the man she loves.

Emilia has always loved Iago and has done everything in her power to receive the like emotion from him. However, in return for her love she has continually received jibes and indelicate comments. She has constantly been in the unbalanced state of seeking a loving, approving eye from Iago. Therefore, when she sees the handkerchief fall from Desdemona's hand, Emilia entertains hopes of immediately pleasing her husband and establishing a secure bond of love between them:

I am glad I have found this napkin;  
 This was her first remembrance from the Moor.  
 My wayward husband hath a hundred times  
 Wooed me to steal it; but she so loves the token  
 (For he conjured her she should ever keep it)  
 That she reserves it evermore about her

To kiss and talk to. I'll have the work ta'en out  
 And give't Iago.  
 What he will do with it heaven knows, not I;  
 I nothing but to please his fantasy. (III,iii,290-299)

Thus, Emilia ignores truth and honesty willfully; she states very clearly that she is unconcerned with the reality of the situation. Rather, the desire to achieve control and the good feeling that would result from an approving nod from Iago render Emilia dishonest. She attempts to milk her theft of the handkerchief for every drop of praise as she presents the coveted prize to Iago:

Emilia: Do not you chide; I have a thing for you.  
 Iago: A thing for me? It is a common thing --  
 Emilia: Ha?  
 Iago: To have a foolish wife.  
 Emilia: O, is that all? What will you give me now  
 For that same handkerchief?  
 Iago: What handkerchief?  
 Emilia: What handkerchief!  
 Why, that the Moor first gave to Desdemona;  
 That which so often you did bid me steal.  
 Iago: Hast stol'n it from her?  
 Emilia: No, faith; she let it drop by negligence,  
 - And to th' advantage, I, being here, took't up.  
 Look, here it is.  
 Iago: A good wench! Give it me. (III,iii,301-312)

This is a sorry spectacle in the character of Emilia. The faithful and loving servant has compromised her position, her honesty, and her truth, and in return she received the insincere words, "A good wench!" Yet, for Emilia these three words are the equivalent of the whole world. Momentarily she has regained a false sense of control. She has become a servant to falsehood and illusion in order to avoid seeming ridiculous in her own eyes and to glory in the brief sensation that she maintains control of her marital situation. As the reader will see in the following pages, it is less than ironic that the devil who has led Emilia from truth

should be the instrument of her inevitable annihilation.

When one scrutinizes the character of Desdemona in her personal relationship to truth and reality, he sees a character who appears at the beginning to be a fervent disciple and follower of what is. Desdemona in her very first appearance in the tragedy exhibits a most amazing understanding of and devotion to the reality of life. As she defends her love of Othello before her husband, her father, and the senate, she stands as a real picture of the truth of an honest, intelligent wife:

My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty.  
To you I am bound for life and education;  
My life and education both do learn me  
How to respect you: you are the lord of duty;  
I am hither to your daughter. But here's my husband;  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord. (I,iii,180-188)

These are not the words of a confused, emotional young woman who is unsteady in thought and conviction. Rather, this laudable expression characterizes a virtuous woman who has been enlightened by the fulfilling reality of honest love. She is prepared to leave the security of position and wealth behind in order to live with the uncertain truth of her emotional situation. She could have accepted the illusion of a secure life if she had turned against reality and put herself and her life into the well-meaning hands of her father. However, she is not willing to live in falsehood and illusion. When Desdemona is offered the option of living in the security of Venice while Othello faces the brutality of war in Cyprus, she again steps forward as an unafraid follower of the

truth of her emotion:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
 My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,  
 May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued  
 Even to the very quality of my lord.  
 I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
 And to his honors and his valiant parts  
 Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
 So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,  
 A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
 The rites for which I love him are bereft me,  
 And I a heavy interim shall support  
 By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (I,iii,249-260)

The truth and reality of life and love for Desdemona are not to be equivocated or eluded.

It is a further asset in the character of Desdemona that she is not easily influenced by the satanic salesman of illusion. While the Venetians await the arrival of Othello's ship to Cyprus, they occupy themselves with a light conversation on feminine virtue. The devilish Iago and the virtuous Desdemona are the principles in the bantering, and, although the conversation is far from a serious discussion, it is obvious that Iago is testing Desdemona as a prospective receptacle for his venomous poison. Desdemona shows clearly that she will accept none of Iago's parcels of illusion and falsehood as she repels the villain's offerings at every turn:

O, fie upon thee, slanderer! (II,i,114)

O heavy ignorance! Thou praisest the worst best.  
 (II,i,144)

O most lame and impotent conclusion! Do not  
 learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband.  
 How say you, Cassio? Is he not a most profane  
 and liberal counsellor? (II,i,162-165)

While the others purchase Iago's illusive stock openly (Cassio:  
 "He speaks home, madam." (II,i,166)), Desdemona proves to the

audience and to Iago that she possesses a virtue that will not be compromised in falsehood.

Iago learns that Desdemona is an unselfish and loving proponent of reality, and he uses her honest virtues to further his evil plan. When Cassio falls out of favor with the Moor, Iago sends the former lieutenant to Desdemona, knowing well that she will openly take the side of Cassio. Indeed, when Cassio approaches Desdemona with his plea, she realizes immediately that he is an unfortunate victim and, as a true friend, pledges her aid in restoring him to his former position:

Be thou assured, good Cassio, I will do  
All my abilities in thy behalf. (III,iii,1-2)

Desdemona, as a follower of truth, recognizes the reality of the situation, and, although she is unaware of the malicious seriousness behind the events, she will strive to make the truth known:

You do love my lord;  
You have known him long; and be you well assured  
He shall in strangeness stand no farther off  
Than in a politic distance. (III,iii,10-13)

Desdemona seeks to make the truth known for the benefit of Cassio and Othello. Although she is not aware of the vicious force behind the prevalent falsehood, she pledges herself strongly and ironically to Cassio's cause and posits herself on the side of truth:

Therefore be merry, Cassio,  
For thy solicitor shall rather die  
Than give thy cause away. (III,iii,26-28)

To this point Desdemona has been the picture of devotion to reality and truth. She has always been in total control of every

situation, and she has faithfully relied upon a strong belief in a vocal servitude to reality. However, as Iago works his infamous magic upon the attitude of the Moor, Desdemona's relationship with Othello falls into obvious strain. Desdemona becomes aware of the turmoil of her situation as the Moor begins to question her about the handkerchief. Just as Cassio and Emilia turned to illusion and falsehood in chaotic emotional states, Desdemona, too, abandons truth when she finds herself driven by the overwhelming panic of emotional turmoil. One observes Desdemona's equivocation or avoidance of exact truth in the conversation concerning the whereabouts of the handkerchief:

Desdemona: It is not lost. But what an if it were?  
 Othello: How?  
 Desdemona: I say it is not lost.  
 Othello: Fetch't, let me see't!  
 Desdemona: Why, so I can, sir; but I will not now.  
 (III,iv,83-87)

At the time in her life when total devotion to truth and honesty is most crucial, Desdemona fails to clarify the facts. Desdemona falls victim to the illusion that this stalling tactic will re-establish the lost sense of control in the same manner that Cassio and Emilia did. In order to shelter and protect her love for Othello, Desdemona fails to acknowledge to Othello that the handkerchief is misplaced as she did to Emilia: "Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?" (III,iv,23) She suddenly forgets or ignores the fact that her love for the Moor had been firmly structured upon truth, and in the panic of overwhelming emotional strife she seeks shelter in falsehood.

To establish control and manipulative powers in the lives of Cassio, Emilia, and Desdemona provides a great deal of satisfaction



and confidence to satanic Iago. Yet, the supreme challenge for this adherent of falsehood, the deception upon which the tragedy is structured, lies in the malicious act of deceiving and destroying Othello. Iago hates Othello because the Moor selected Cassio as his lieutenant. The villain conjectures vilely that Othello, "hath leaped into my seat." However, the true basis for Iago's hatred lies in the fact that Othello is everything Iago is not. The Moor, as a servant of truth, is a respected warrior who always appears to be in total control of any situation. Iago must desecrate every pillar of truth, and Othello, as a paragon of truthful discipline, is the prime target of Iago's evil.

The courageous Moor had been places and seen wonders of the sorts that excite and arouse every man's imagination. Briefly, he tells the Duke and senators of his past as it was related to Desdemona:

Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,  
 Of moving accidents by flood and field;  
 Of hairbreadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach;  
 Of being taken by the insolent foe  
 And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence  
 And portance in my travel's history;  
 Wherein of anters vast and deserts idle,  
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,  
 It was my hint to speak -- such was the process;  
 And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. (I,iii,134-145)

Here lies the type of courageous and romantic life of which men dream. Othello had seen and experienced wonders, and perhaps the greatest wonder of all is that he battled through and survived all his adventures and achieved greatness and respect.

Othello through the first two acts of the play is a paragon of

of courageous power and clear, intelligent thought. As the reader observes the hero in the early action of the play, it is apparent that Othello has achieved a confident control over his emotion and intellect. He is never nervous or rattled in the face of tension or emergency. In his first appearance he is told by Iago that he must avoid a confrontation with Brabantio. However, Othello in his confidence and courage is never an avoider, and he tells us immediately that he is willing to face and deal with any situation in life: "Not I; I must be found." (I,ii,30) When Brabantio and his men confront Othello's train, it appears as if disorder and chaos rule the emotions of everyone. Sharp accusations are thrown, and swords are drawn on both sides. Othello, however, remains courageously cool and honestly logical:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.  
 Good signior, you shall more command with years  
 Than with your weapons. (I,ii,59-61)

The voice of authority and respect having spoken, the disturbance is quelled immediately.

Obviously, throughout his life Othello has been a man totally in the position of confident control. As a man of clear thought and immediate, logical action, he has coolly taken command in every situation. His good fortune and position of respect have been obtained through honest evaluation of every situation, and he has always emerged as victor because he analyzed and dealt with the truth of each event. A great portion of Iago's hatred for Othello is firmly based upon the villain's realization that the Moor possesses a controlled personality. Therefore, he plans his scheme to break Othello's confidence and emotional stability.

Iago comes to the realization early in the play that he has no hope of discrediting Othello in the eyes of the Duke and senators. Toward this end he had employed Brabantio as his agent, but the Moor's military reputation and personal strength were found to be beyond reproach. Therefore, Iago decides maliciously to attack the Moor from the flank of his least experience; he designs to rend the fabric of love before the eyes of Othello.

All the evidence contributing to the character of Othello justifies the fact that the Moor has totally been a servant to truth and reality in his life. During the first two acts of the play, this commander of men never equivocates the facts of any situation. Before the Duke and senate he relates the facts confidently and bases his statements and arguments fully upon what is. In his investigation and judgment of the brawl between Cassio and Montano, he again searches out the truth. When Othello enters and views the disorderly situation, his command and respect are again evident. With one statement, "Hold for your lives!" (II,iii, 165) everyone stands at attention. When Othello examines everyone to determine the facts, Iago plays the crafty equivocator, Cassio, fearing that he will seem ridiculous, is not willing to speak, and Montano testifies in truth to the event as he know it. When Iago makes an obvious effort to protect Cassio, Othello acts justly with the limited evidence that he has received. With honest surety he removes Cassio from the rank of lieutenant:

Cassio, I love thee;  
But never more be officer of mine. (II,iii,248-249)

The desire to distinguish truth from falsehood is prevalent in the

justice of Othello, and, as a man who has always acted immediately, he is offered no other alternative than the dismissal of Cassio.

The confident control and honest desire to realize truth in the character of Othello is an aspect which repulses the villain. In searching for a way to destroy the honest Moor, Iago recognizes and employs Othello's innocence as a judge of human nature:

The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;  
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose  
As asses are. (I,iii,405-408)

In his own personal honor and servitude to truth, Othello fails to realize that all other men do not necessarily possess the same high qualities. Of the fifty-two repetitions of the words "honest" and "honesty" in the play, thirteen are spoken by Othello in referring to Iago. Iago convinces everyone in the play partially that he is an honest man, but Othello almost stands in awe of the villain's seeming honesty. Thus, part of Iago's evil scheme is based upon his knowledge that the Moor is less than a competent judge of human nature. The villain realizes that if he can make Othello conscious of his inexperience as a judge, then he can lead Othello away from reality and truth to illusion and falsehood. Again, he will seek to dismantle the Moor's confident sense of control and set Othello's intellect on the defensive.

In the famous Act III Scene iii, Iago begins his devilishly intelligent plan. Of course, Iago's flirtations with Othello's honest evaluative powers begin with, "Ha! I like not that." (III,iii,34) However, this statement passes the unconcerned, confident Othello without remark. The villain does raise the

curiosity of the Moor a few lines later when he first sends Othello into a minor state of confusion concerning his evaluation of Cassio:

Iago: Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,  
Know of your love?  
Othello: He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?  
Iago: But for a satisfaction of my thought;  
No further harm.  
Othello: Why of thy thought, Iago?  
Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.  
Othello: O, yes, and went between us very oft.  
Iago: Indeed?  
Othello: Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou aught in that?  
Is he not honest?  
Iago: Honest, my lord?  
Othello: Honest. Ay, honest.  
Iago: My lord, for aught I know.  
Othello: What dost thou think?  
Iago: Think, my lord? (III,iii,94-105)

For the first time in the play Othello is disturbed and confused about reality. Iago is successfully unbalancing Othello. The Moor is beginning to doubt his prior opinions of Cassio, and he sheds some of his natural confidence immediately in seeking the opinion of Iago.

Once the villain has established an element of confusion within Othello concerning his evaluation of others and has seriously unbalanced the Moor's opinion of Cassio, the next malicious step is to set Othello into doubt concerning Desdemona's character. First he casually points out Desdemona's connection with all female attributes:

Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio;  
Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure:  
I would not have your free and noble nature,  
Out of self-bounty, be abused. Look to't.  
I know our country disposition well:  
In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience  
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.  
(III,iii,197-204)

Here are attributes of Venetian women that had been hitherto unknown by Othello. The Moor begins to contemplate with concern that he is ignorant in his knowledge of others. He is amazed by Iago's revelation concerning women and is concerned that he is losing his sense of control: "Dost thou say so?" (III,iii,205)

Iago, sensing the fact that he has crippled the Moor's confident control, presses steadily forward and flashes illusion before Othello eyes:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;  
And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,  
She loved them most. (III,iii,206-208)

One realizes clearly that Desdemona deceived no one, and these statements of Iago are not based upon fact. Othello, on the other hand, is traumatically disturbed and unbalanced. That which Iago dangles before him seems probable, even affirms Brabantio's warning, and for the first time the Moor exhibits fear that he is not in control: "And so she did." (III,iii,209)

The Moor is thrown into emotional turmoil and anxiety just as Cassio, Emilia, and Desdemona were. The man who had stood with courage and confidence in the face of violent death finds himself lost in the thought of no control. In such a state he is ripe to receive the illusions and falsehoods that Iago offers plentifully. As did Cassio, Emilia, and Desdemona, he becomes dependent upon the prince of illusion: "I am bound to thee for ever." (III,iii,212) No longer does Othello search out fact and truth. Instead, he turns to Iago and accepts the villain's clouded picture of reality:

Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless  
Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds.  
(III,iii,242-243)

Rather than reserving judgment for a time when all facts are in the open, Othello fears acutely that he is impotent as a judge of human nature and establishes a strong dependence upon another that seems to have the answers:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,  
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit  
Of human dealing. (III,iii,258-260)

Iago revels with malicious delight in his progress to this point. He realizes that in planting the seeds of doubt and concern in the mind of Othello, he has seriously shaken the Moor's firm hold upon reality. He departs from the Moor in order to allow his victim to consider what has passed before his mind's eye. When good fortune aids the devil in his scheme and Emilia delivers the famous handkerchief to him, Iago realizes that success looms in the near future:

The Moor already changes with my poison:  
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons,  
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,  
But with a little act upon the blood  
Burn like the mines of sulphur. (III,iii,325-329)

Iago realizes that the Moor had been a servant to fact and truth in prior judgments, and he knows that he will be called upon to produce some type of tangible evidence to prove his accusations. The handkerchief provides the villain with the substance needed to fabricate reality.

Immediately upon reentering, Othello again shows the signs of a man tortured upon an emotional rack. However, when he turns halfheartedly upon Iago, the villain exhibits reckless confidence in his semi-belligerent reply to the Moor: "Why, how now, general? No more of that!" (III,iii,334) The Othello that the reader sees

now is no longer a rational, confident, and clear-headed leader. Conversely, he is emotionally torn between the desire to repel Iago's accusations and the confused belief that Iago's falsehoods are true. In one sentence he weakly attempts to repel illusion, "Avaunt! be gone!" (III,iii,335) and in the next he proves that he is ever more fully becoming servile to what is not:

What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?  
 I saw't not, thought it not, it harmed not me;  
 I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry;  
 I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips. (III,iii,338-341)

Othello is now for the most part a completely changed man; however, he still retains remnants of the desire to weigh facts. He tells Iago that he must have ocular proof:

Make me to see't; or at the least so prove it  
 That the probation bear no hinge nor loop  
 To hang a doubt on -- or woe upon thy life!  
 (III,iii,364-366)

The tragedy of course lies in the fact that Othello, in his emotionally chaotic state, is no longer a servant of reality. He will accept the illusion that Iago will offer as truth. When Iago produces hearsay as evidence, Othello finally seals a kneeling oath with the prince of illusion and pledges himself completely as a servant to falsehood. Othello accepts readily the illusions that the villain offers plenteously because the Moor desires fervently to regain control. In order to stabilize the confusion and turmoil that plague his mind, he devours the medicine of falsehood ravenously. Once convinced of an exact course of action, he is comforted in the aura of control:

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her!  
 Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw



To furnish me with some swift means of death  
 For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.  
 (III,iii,475-478)

In the same manner as the others, Othello first pledged his servitude to falsehood and illusion because he was suddenly thrown into emotional turmoil. As a man who had always retained confident control, the sudden awareness that he has lost his firm grip is a devastating realization. The illusions of Iago run rampant through his imagination, and the overwhelming terror of no control causes the Moor to mistake illusion for reality. Having once pledged himself to Iago and the falsehood which the villain produces, Othello is suddenly further motivated to immediate action by the second fear that he has seemed ridiculous in the eyes of others. He is convinced by the lies of Iago that everyone around has been chuckling at the great cuckold. Each time the Moor glances upon Desdemona, his imagination, which is already aligned to illusion, conjures a picture of "stol'n hours of lust." Finally, the fear of losing control and the fear of being an object of ridicule cause his overloaded mind to explode. He does in fact lose physical and mental control, and, in falling into a trance, he is open for ridicule of everyone. The mental confusion is openly apparent in his garbled speech:

Lie with her? lie on her? -- We say lie on her  
 when they belie her. -- Lie with her! Zounds,  
 that's fulsome. -- Handkerchief -- confessions --  
 handkerchief! -- To confess, and be hanged for  
 his labor -- first to be hanged, and then to  
 confess! I tremble at it. Nature would not  
 invest herself in such shadowing passion  
 without some instruction. It is not words that  
 shakes me thus. -- Pish! Noses, ears and lips?  
 Is't possible? -- Confess? -- Handkerchief? --  
 O devil! (IV,i,35-44)

As Othello regains consciousness he is immediately and strongly ridiculed by the now totally confident Iago: "How is it, general? Have you not hurt your head?" (IV,i,60) Othello senses the absurdity of his posture and asks Iago: "Dost thou mock me?" (IV, i,61) However, his total dependence upon the crafty Iago causes Othello to excuse the villain's biting remark. His only concern is to seek a remedy for his situation in the villain's illusion of wisdom.

As the reader enters into the devastating fifth act, he sees that all the major characters within the play have completely abandoned truth and reality and have leagued themselves to falsehood and illusion. Cassio, Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello are at this point initiated servants of falsehood; they each have openly established a dependence upon and vocally solicited the aid of Iago, the princely perpetrator of illusion. Cassio and Desdemona depend upon Iago for a plan to reinstate them in the favor of Othello; Emilia yearns only to please her husband; Othello solicits the aid of the villain in the executions. Each of the four had found himself in sudden, unbalanced turmoil and had turned from truth to regain a position of control and alleviate the emotional pain of seeming ridiculous. Each has been motivated by the same fears and has pledged total servitude to falsehood, illusion, and what is not.

When one rejects reality and truth, as have Iago, Cassio, Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello, he becomes a disciple to what is not. The open denial or equivocation of truth implies a desire to exist in the seeming peace of nothingness. Rather than accepting and living within the boundaries of reality, the servant of falsehood



The truth of course is that Desdemona did in fact seal her own death when she failed in one instance to express a desire to live the total life of truth.

Emilia's reverence of falsehood in her love for and conformity to Iago leads to her final destruction at the hands of the prince of illusion. In her last words she makes the truth known courageously, but she is cut off from life by the very agent that has carefully led her to falsehood. In the end she turned to truth; however, her realization and reversal came too late to avoid the tragedy.

Iago, the most blatant and aware servant of falsehood, will seal his own coffin rather than accommodate truth in his person. His personal sense of control and manipulation of life have crumbled in the face of reality. Even at the option of preserving, or at least prolonging, life, the villain will not succumb to truth. Realizing that his lies are no longer effective, he will say nothing rather than utter a word of truth:

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.  
From this time forth I never will speak word.  
(V,ii,303-304)

Truth has rendered the devil impotent; however, through the servitude of the others to falsehood, truth has come too late. Iago will no longer allure any victims to falsehood, but he will endure the pains of torture before he will face reality.

Othello, the hero who had once respected truth above all, has so fully pledged his being to falsehood that he too finds it impossible to exist within the limits of reality. Before the hero falls at his own hand, he recognizes ultimately his own separation

from reality:

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,  
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe. (V,ii,342-348)

The invaluable pearl of which Othello speaks is that of truth. The alliance with reality is irretrievable, and finally Othello inflicts self-imposed annihilation because he has negligently discarded his reverence of life.

Othello is not the tragedy of a man who "loved too well" or who was deluded into jealousy. Rather, it is an exposition of the disastrous ramifications to be faced by those who fail to declare fully a love for truth and live within the limits of reality.

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