

ENGLISH ADVANCED: *OTHELLO*

The play “Othello” is one of Shakespeare’s most renowned and compelling tragedies that has resonated throughout history, having a profound impact on audiences through its strong reflection of the human psyche. One Critic John Bayley argues that “Othello is a tragedy of incomprehension, not on the level of intrigue, but at the very deepest level of human dealings.” This is true in many aspects as the power of “Othello” lies not only in its universal themes and facets of human existence such as the forever innate power struggle between the sexes, and the human condition susceptible to the temptation of evil and jealousy; but also in the portrayal of the characters who become vehicles for the manifestation of these ideas, creating a much more realistic and in depth depiction of the human condition.

Shakespeare utilizes the status, position, race, and passionate nature of the character of Othello as a means to portray the idea of the human condition susceptible to the temptation of evil and jealousy and to further elucidate the negative consequences and ramifications in succumbing to such a temptation. A critic of the work -----suggests that “Othello is a tragic hero, exemplifying Aristotles’ archetypal blueprint, because of his partially flawed fall from happiness to misery, his error in judgement and his agreement with the modern definition of heroism.” In which Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello as a character of two natures is evident in Othello’s identity as a tragic hero, incorporating two juxtaposed notions of nobility/heroism and downfall. His articulate speech manner, nobility and respectable position as a General, conjectures the notion of being an exemplary member of Elizabethan society, whilst his race, conflict (in regards to Elizabethan prejudices against blacks and negroes), and the detrimental flaw of his passionate nature suggests Othello’s savage, barbaric, and more base character, further implying that all humans, regardless of status, race, position or personality is vulnerable to the forever present temptation of jealousy, as he succumbs to such emotions.

This inherent human condition is evidently portrayed in the lines “O beware, my lord, of jealousy: It is the green eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on,” where jealousy is personified into its figurative form of the green-eyed monster to exemplify its ability in consuming the individual. This is further emphasized with the word “feed” where the negative connotations associated with this word are used to imply how this emotion manifests itself in a way that will undoubtedly have negative ramifications. Such consequences then become evident in “Lie with her? Lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her. Lie with her! Zounds, that’s fulsome!” where Othello’s articulate speech manner has changed into a barbaric and base rambling, as he adopts Iago’s use of vulgar sexual imagery, and the more prominent change from verse to prose, exemplifying the negative ramifications as Othello becomes more savage.

Hence, by completely exposing the character of Othello to the full manifestation of jealousy and the negative consequences of such a submission, Shakespeare is in fact exposing both sides (higher /lower class) of the human race, and thus suggesting that all people harbor the human condition susceptible to the temptation of evil and jealousy, creating a deeper impact across audiences, and hence transcending the barriers of time, as he appeals to our inherent human nature.

Subsequently, the human concern of an innate power struggle and the condition in the tendency to stereotype women as the lesser sex is further explored in the play through the characters of Othello and Desdemona, where the implications associated with their traits and positions further deepens our understanding of this idea. Both characters are out of context in that a black man in the position of a General was unprecedented if not unheard of and as Desdemona as the seemingly innocent and pure Elizabethan stereotype defies her father and the expectations of society by marrying a black man. The breach of stereotypes and diverse traits emphasize how such a struggle is an innate part of our human condition and existence, despite context, circumstance, time, or character as

Shakespeare incorporates incongruities and opposite to see how power struggles between sexes manifest, regardless to the situation.

This is exemplified through the relationship between Othello and Desdemona, in which Desdemona is dominated and degraded by Othello, as shown in “Hath she forsook so many noble matches, her father, and her country, and her friends to be called a whore?” where Emilia’s character in voicing open, straightforward and often accurate views and opinions on society are used to clearly exemplify the racial prejudice of the Elizabethan audience. This is further emphasized as Shakespeare uses accumulation in the reference to the various members of society, all of which have been “forsaken” by Desdemona in her choice of Othello as a husband, suggesting that these people are all in accordance with the views that Emilia holds. Thus it is evident that Othello is considered as inferior to the white race due to the colour of his skin, and hence Desdemona is degraded to a greater degree when she is dominated by a figure that is looked down upon and labeled as unworthy by her race. Furthermore “do it not with poison: strangle her in bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” uses juxtaposition where Desdemona is dominated through death by strangulation, a much more savage and barbaric death much unsuited to her innocence and virtue, emphasizing the extent of her degradation. Thus it can be said that “Othello” has profoundly resonated with its audiences through its reflection of the power struggle, an innate part of our existence as human, further creating meaning and value through the depiction of the characters.

Thus it can be said that the power of Shakespeare’s “Othello” lies in its strong analysis of the humanity’s concern, these including the power struggles that forever exist with our human existence, and our readiness in succumbing to the ever-present temptation of evil and jealousy, exploring these themes through the vehicles of the characters, and creating a more powerful impact as the traits and personalities of these characters create a much more realistic and in depth portrayal of the human psyche.