

# AQA English Literature A-level

## Othello: Themes Love

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Othello* has been a popular play for centuries, because it deals with themes that are still relevant today - including **love, jealousy, and race**. The theme of love is a major component of the play, as Othello and Desdemona's relationship is a central point of **conflict, struggle, and subsequent murder**.

The concept of **romantic love** is expressed in different forms by Shakespeare. Romantic love can be defined as the attraction of two individuals to one another, with the expectation that this is going to last for a long time. This can be seen through Othello and Desdemona's marriage, which **officialates and solidifies their love** in a **traditional** way. Additionally, the theme of love also manifests itself through sex, emphasising the importance of **erotic aspects** in maintaining their relationship.

However, this can also be an issue, as **lust** can lead to **deception and unfaithfulness**; the consequences of this can be seen in Othello's rage when he thinks Desdemona is committing adultery. This can be tied to **social conventions** that regulate the way love can be expressed, especially in the **Jacobean era** where women were pressured to act a certain way. Lastly, the idea of love and the way it is perceived changes over time, meaning that its **historical meaning** has been completely **inverted** between the 16-17th century and contemporary society.

## Love & Hate

Othello is a **domestic tragedy** in which true, romantic love is destroyed by hate. The **binary** of **love/hate** is central to the play. Throughout *Othello*, the audience is presented with different relationships - Emilia and Iago as well as Othello and Desdemona. However, it is clear that Othello's love for Desdemona can be perceived as **'true love'**. The **focal point** of their marriage can be seen to be surrounded by love as a **healing agent**. This is particularly noticeable when Othello claims that **"she loved me for the dangers I had passed / I loved her that she did pity them"** (Act 1, Scene 3). This suggests the **reciprocal nature of love**, highlighting their love is based on **understanding** (**'she did pity them'**), making it a **foundational** aspect to their relationship. This is clear to the audience at the beginning of the play, where their exchanges are **equal**, with both parties holding **power** and **stage-time**. Their **shared lines** and **joint imagery** (such as the **semantic field of religion**) establish their **union** within the makings of the play itself.

The strength of their love is further reaffirmed when they reunite: **'If after every tempest come such calms,/May the winds blow till they have wakened death'** (Act 2, Scene 1). These loving words from Othello suggest how natural disasters cannot shake their love, as her presence calms him. The imagery of a **'tempest'** is used by Shakespeare to show the vigour of true love. This is pervasive in his other texts too, for example in **Sonnet 116** he states that love **'looks on tempests and is never shaken'** (Sonnet 116, line 6). However, it can be inferred that, although natural destruction cannot shake love, **human interventions** can influence it. Shakespeare uses this to introduce the main conflict in the play, where Iago's deceptive love breaks down the understanding and trust that exists between them. This interconnects with the **dichotomy** of the **natural world** vs. the **man-made world**.

## Iago

Iago's character is particularly significant because it is his **'performance' of false love** that **replaces** and **subverts** Desdemona's true love. This is important because it portrays Iago as being unable to love, only being driven by his **obsessive desire** to bring Othello down



and his **deep-rooted hatred** for the Moor. He states this from the start - '**I follow him to serve my turn upon him**' (**Act 1, Scene 1**), where it is clear that he is using Othello's **trusting and loving demeanour** towards him as a strategic advantage to cause his downfall. As the play progresses, Iago utilises this trust Othello has in him, challenging his beliefs that Desdemona is honest and loyal; '**She did deceive her father, marrying you**' (**Act 3, Scene 3**). In this quote, Iago portrays his ability to psychologically manipulate Othello by touching upon his **insecurities** about marrying Desdemona, whose father disapproved of him due to his race. As a result, he manages to plant a seed of doubt, **weaponizing** their love against them. Shakespeare uses another branch of love, through **false friendship**, in order to demonstrate how hatred can overpower love.

However, critics have noted the **ambiguous** nature of Iago's revenge. Some have claimed that his plan to poison Desdemona and Othello's relationship stems from his own **jealousy** at not being able to conjure Othello's desire for himself. This means that there are some **homoerotic undertones** to the way Iago behaves towards Othello, which we will explore more in-depth later on. There are multiple ways in which Iago's character can be **conceptualised**, suggesting the complexity with which he was constructed.

## Individual Ways of Loving

Individual differences in portraying love is what makes love so **diverse and unique**. The idea of **love languages** suggests that many individuals communicate their love through either actions or verbal affirmations, and is testament to the different approaches people take to love. In *Othello*, both Desdemona and Othello start their courtship through **verbal reinforcements** of their love, where they make sure that their partner feels **valued** through their words. Similarly, their actions play a central role in confirming and showing their love; for example, when Desdemona disobeys her father to marry Othello, Shakespeare portrays the **strength of her commitment** to him. Similarly, she accompanies him to Cyprus even though it is much more dangerous there and her life might be under threat. Nevertheless, she **prevails** and stays by his side.

On the contrary, Iago and Emilia can be seen as complete opposites. Iago's **misogynistic** ways lead him to disrespect and abuse Emilia. Her adherence to being a loyal, trusting and loving wife are not reciprocated with the same amount of commitment, as Iago only uses her when he needs her. However, she retains her strength as she **asserts her own voice against him** when she finds out about his evil schemes. This suggests that she rejects his **false love** in favour of herself and Desdemona.

Bianca and Cassio's relationship is also more complicated, as it appears **one sided**. Cassio is a lieutenant, who puts his career before anything else. The audience never really sees any direct **affection** from him towards her but she is completely in love with him. She is also involved in the messy handkerchief plot, thinking that Cassio is entertaining another woman.

Overall, all the characters have their **own love plot** and their own ways of showing it.

**What is the significance of showing these love plots? What is Shakespeare's purpose in showing them?**





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## Love and Race

Othello is **ostracised** from the beginning, continuously being called the **'Moor'** instead of General, although this is his position in the Venetian military. Most of the **racially charged** language is spoken by Iago, who **draws on stereotypes** in order to present Othello as an evil, black man who is only capable of violence. He does this because of a **personal vendetta** against Othello: **'In personal suit to make me his lieutenant / Off-capped to him; and by the faith of man I know my price; I am worth no worse a place'** (Act 1, Scene 1). He wants to destroy Othello's marriage and Cassio's **reputation** because he was not given the position he wanted. In this way, Iago's committed hatred of Othello is the perfect **antithesis to love**; both are strong, personal feelings towards one person, and completely **consume** the individual's attention.

**Jacobean prejudices** around race are prevalent in the play. In particular, Iago constantly uses **animal imagery** to describe Othello - **'Even now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe'** (Act 1, Scene 1). This **sexually and racially charged** image insinuates Othello's **sexual deviance** due to his race is **corrupting** Desdemona. This influences Brabantio to also view Othello in a **hostile light**, as Iago continues to use **salacious language** about Desdemona in order to enrage her father more: **'You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for Germans'** (Act 1, Scene 1). This presents Othello as an **animal** and any offspring they have will also be tainted by such animalistic characteristics. The language used also provokes the **fear** of **miscegenation** (mixed-race marriages) and **exogamy** (marrying outside one's social group). As a result, Othello and Desdemona's love is **undermined** by ideas of race that other people use against them. For example, Brabantio is influenced by Iago to use the same racially-charged language against Othello: **'Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her; / For I'll refer me to all things of sense, / If she in chains of magic were not bound'** (Act 1, Scene 2). He refers to the **'chains of magic'** controlling Desdemona, not being able to fathom the idea that she could **naturally fall in love** with Othello.

Desdemona does not regard Othello's skin colour as important. She falls in love with him after spending hours listening to his adventure stories, suggesting that she started loving him for his character. She draws **strength from their differences** rather than seeing the negatives of their relationship. This might suggest the **naivety and blindness of her love** towards him, because she is willing to **sacrifice** everything for her love – even her own life. It is only through the influence of Iago that Othello **loses faith** in her words and actions, **distorting** them in his mind to see them as **false**.

### AOS Tip – Race and Gender

In *Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery and the Hideous in Othello*, Micheal Neill suggests: **'Othello is the study of an assimilated savage who relapses into primitivism under stress'**. The idea that he is an **assimilated savage** suggests that Othello constantly tries to fit into Venetian society, trying to **hide behind religion** and **social values** in order to be **accepted** by his white counterparts. Through Iago, this savage side emerges as he is **provoked**, seeing and **embracing this violent side** that he thinks he inherited due to his race. Due to this **insecurity** and wanting to conform, he begins to **displace this hatred** onto Desdemona.



## Love & Symbolism

In **Cinthio's *De Gli Hecatommithi*** (1565), which is the text from which Shakespeare took **inspiration** for *Othello*, the handkerchief is highly important for the protagonists. **Signs and symbols** in the play are essential in portraying love or infidelity. Exchanging meaningful gifts shows the love a partner has for their significant other, and Othello's handkerchief plays a central role in this. When first given to Desdemona, Othello explains how the handkerchief functions as a **sign of fidelity** – it holds almost **magical qualities**. During this era, handkerchiefs had different functions in the **private and public sphere**, as they were used for fashionable purposes or dropped by women for men to pick them up. Similarly, as for Othello and Desdemona, they were used as gifts or proof of commitment during marriage and courtship.

However, as the play progresses, the handkerchief passes through the hands of many people. This suggests that its symbol as the couple's love is forcefully transformed to something more sinister and cruel. This is because the handkerchief loses its meaning as a symbol of love and becomes something that **others can easily change**. For example, the handkerchief is possessed by Iago and Emilia, who inevitably transform what it symbolises by handling it with ill intentions. In particular, Desdemona retains its loving qualities, while Othello starts to reject it – this **rejection parallels** a rejection of Desdemona. Her feelings become more anxious as he does so, and she drops this meaningful object of love. Consequently, it is picked up by Emilia, who is unknowingly helping Iago execute his revenge plan. As Emilia passes it on to Iago, the handkerchief **changes** its meaning from **love to hate**: Iago is aware of its importance and turns it into false proof of infidelity. This change is detrimental in initiating the transformation of the couples' marriage, where it becomes a symbol of unfaithfulness. In turn, the handkerchief becomes a **destructive agent** of their marriage, because it is used as '**ocular proof**' (**Act 3, Scene 3**) to inspire **jealousy, doubt and misunderstanding**.

Furthermore, as the handkerchief is handled by Bianca, Cassio, Othello, Iago and Desdemona, it represents the problem of **intervention** in marriage. As marriage was an open, **public spectacle** in which the wife is used as the husband's **possession**, many people would **judge** the relationships of others. Nothing was really private, making it easier for Iago to infiltrate and turn Othello against Desdemona. The involvement of many people in their loving relationship ultimately leads to its disintegration.

In the final act, this disintegration finally reaches its peak. Othello confronts her: '**I saw my handkerchief in [Cassio's] hand**' (**Act 5, Scene 2**). Othello, who saw her as his equal by giving her an **independent voice** to speak for herself, now speaks over and for her. This change suggests how she has lost all **control** and **identity** in this marriage, with Othello overpowering her and not letting her defend herself. This portrays Othello's own anxieties about harbouring and emphasising his **male honour** as well as retaining his **masculinity**. In order to **re-establish his reputation**, Othello **must** kill her.

Valerie Traub in *Desire and Anxiety*, for example, suggests that '**the threat of female erotic power is psychically contained by means of metaphoric and dramatic transformation of women into...corpses**'. By killing her, Othello makes sure that she does not commit more sins, under the **illusion** that he saved her. However, when he recognises her innocence and Iago's villainy, he suffers to the point where he regards himself as an '**Indian**' who '**threw a pearl away**' (**Act 5, Scene 2**). Therefore, *Othello* portrays the **vulnerabilities** and **fragilities** of marriage, highlighted by the **love token** of the handkerchief. Shakespeare illustrates the risks associated with **reducing** a relationship to **material** possessions.



## Male Friendship, Deception & Love



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Male friendship in the play is central in causing the downfall of Othello. Iago, right from **Act 1**, devises a plan to destroy Othello for small and petty reasons. In particular, the banter that is displayed between men is always in relation to women or **female sexuality**, and this **culture** of sexualisation is used by Iago to **foster distrust and disrespect** towards women. The action is **amplified** by the isolated setting of Cyprus, as characters are always in a **state of anxiety**. Furthermore, this setting is important as it is where Iago first notices that Cassio is friendly towards Desdemona, starting his plan: **'With as little a web as this will I / ensnare as great a fly as Cassio' (2.1.164)**.

After hatching this plan, Iago tells it to Roderigo. Roderigo's character is also exploited by Iago, making him feel like they are companions when in reality he was only a **pawn** in Iago's plans. He starts by acting like he is telling Roderigo a grand secret: that Desdemona is, in fact, in love with Cassio. This is especially clear when Roderigo says: **'Pish!**

**But sir, you be ruled by me' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. He thinks he is the dominant one in the pair, showing how Iago is cunning and able to control others. Similarly, Iago uses many **imperatives** to make Roderigo **obey him** by saying things like **'Come hither'** or **'Let thy soul be instructed' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. This sets Iago as the one who speaks the most, while Roderigo is expected to be **silent** throughout. This shows Iago's obsessive nature for **controlling** others, even **linguistically**.

Notably, Iago positions Desdemona as the villain and depicts her as an untrustworthy person, hinting at his misogyny. This can be perceived by his jokes in the scene about women: his language is **saturated** with this **misogynistic attitude** and **hypocrisy** when he calls Cassio a **'knave'**, even though Iago knows that he is the real knave himself: **'Knavery's plain face is never seen till used' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. This shows how Iago uses his position and his awareness of **male doubt** against others.

Throughout the play, Iago wants to achieve **chaos**, which he sums up by using a few **musical metaphors**. He describes Othello and Desdemona's relationship as **'well-tuned' (Act 2, Scene 1)**, utilising a metaphor to show how he can play around with them to undermine their current harmonious marriage. Iago is seen to be using their vulnerabilities against them and their relationships – this is also shown by directors that use uncomfortable music in order to emphasise his evil nature. Furthermore, Iago's exploitation of their vulnerabilities is possible because he **preys** on their most revered traits and turns them against each other - for example, Desdemona's **faithfulness** and Othello's strong outlook on **honour**. The audience feels **complicit** within this plot because only they are aware of Iago's evil plans due to his **asides** and countless **soliloquies**. In one of the asides, he ironically says: **'As honest as I am' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. Perhaps he believes he possesses his own form of 'honesty', or he is aware that he has everyone fooled about how virtuous he truly is. This makes the audience feel **helpless** as they watch him succeed in turning Othello against his own wife and killing her.



As male friendship of the time included the **demonization of women**, Iago consistently refers to their sexual appetite in both a **joking manner** as well as a **manipulative tactic**. He depicts Desdemona as a sexually driven creature who wants Cassio instead of Othello. This misogynistic portrayal of her runs throughout conversations with different men; he convinces Roderigo that she is unfaithful by arguing that Othello is black, making Desdemona desire someone white. He argues that young women should be controlled by their husbands, and should only be confined to the **domestic sphere**. His own **abusive nature** justifies his views, making him **unlikeable** to the audience.

More **ironic** depictions arise because of Iago's deceptive honesty. His ability to speak directly as if he were being honest is the reason why he is able to **manipulate** most of the characters. In comparison, Desdemona's meekness - as opposed to Iago's **blunt speech** - leads to her being less believable. This positions Iago as an **honest advisor** who cares for Othello, and his way of speaking traps Othello as he says: **'give thy worst of thoughts / the worst of words' (Act 3, Scene 3)**. This conveys the power his words hold over Othello, as he gives them a **high degree of legitimacy**.

However, to the audience, Iago's language - aside from being deceptive to his supposed friend - becomes increasingly **cruder** when he starts imagining the sexual intercourse between Cassio and Desdemona. This further suggests the **potency** of Iago's words in creating a scenario that is inherently false. He is skilled at taking something from within his mind and bringing it to life in Othello's mind. He does this by **demonising the feeling of desire** as something **dirty**, saying that Desdemona's love for Othello is like **'violence'** and that **'her eyes must be fed' (Act 2, Scene 1)** through sexual acts that Othello may not account for. He also utilises **animalistic depictions** of female desire, which go against social ideas of female sexuality; he says that she needs someone **'to give satiety a fresh appetite' (Act 2, Scene 1)**, which means that she needs a better, more attractive male to satisfy her. In another piece of imagery, he states, **'Her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. This suggests she is going to be destroyed by Othello but while hinting at the **punishment** she must endure for being overly sexual.

The issue with this **sexualised imagery** and **obscene language** is that they are merely words spoken by Iago, with no actual proof or evidence to show that they are rooted in reality. This is demonstrated when he sees Desdemona **'paddle with the palm of his [Cassio's] hand' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. He focuses on a small part of the whole action, not holding any large significance for other characters either. However, through Iago's **twisting language**, he amplifies this event to suggest a sexual encounter between them, to the point where even Roderigo changes his view of Desdemona. Roderigo tried to deny such allegations against Desdemona by saying: **'I cannot believe that in her. She's full of most blessed condition' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. However, Iago uses the fact that Roderigo sees them play with each other's hands, terming it as a **'sport'**. By changing his language and deploying **insidious connotations** in his words, Iago is able to seem convincing. These tactics are the ones that Othello falls for, due to his masculinity being undermined by the sexual language that Iago attributes to Desdemona, driving him towards madness.

The **credibility of women** being sexual beings reflects the attitudes at that time. **Sexual immorality** was a great fear men had in regards to women, linking back to the idea of **the Fall**, where Eve was the reason for **humanity's downfall**. As a result, when Iago describes Desdemona's sexual appetite, it is more believable to his peers due to **social and religious ideals** surrounding women and the threats they pose. In particular, the categories that women fit in only ranged from either being a **pure saint or a dirty whore** - there was no in-between space for women to occupy. Women were also seen as **reproductive machines**, mostly forced to be mothers - their **ideal role** was in the **home**.



The **male gaze**, which is a form of **surveillance** undertaken by **men to police women** so that they act correctly, is used against Desdemona to portray her as the **evil, fallen woman** that she isn't. Such misogynistic portrayals of women were common at the time, with other pieces such as John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, where women are also punished for having supposed sexual desires.

## Homoerotic Undertones: Iago & Othello

The theme of male friendship carries some homoerotic undertones, suggesting that there is a different way of conceptualising the relationship between Iago and Othello. This homoeroticism is tightly bound up with the idea of **homosocial relationships** – this means that the **military world** of the play is significant in informing homosexuality. There are certain parts within the play that reinforce this, signifying the **complicated** feelings that Iago has towards Othello that go beyond simple hate.

One of these scenes is when Desdemona and Othello try to **consummate** their marriage: **'The profits yet to come 'tween me and you' (Act 2, Scene 3)**. This scene is undercut by Iago instigating a fight between Cassio and Montano, which interrupts Othello's consummation. This interruption may stem from feelings of **betrayal**, specifically of the homosocial bond that Iago feels they have. Their wedding night is further disrupted as other characters, such as Brabantio, enter this **intimate sphere**. Othello is frustrated by such interruptions, but does seem to continue his consummation. This communicates the influence of male bonds, which inherently overpower the relationship Othello has with Desdemona. This is especially visible in the language Iago uses with Othello as the play goes on, drawing Othello closer to himself and further from Desdemona, implying the strengthening sense of male friendship with erotic undertones.

For example, Othello continuously **praises** Iago's love and honesty towards him, and Iago seems to reiterate his admiration for Othello, too. Although the audience may perceive this as a part of the facade Iago displays to bring Othello down, the potency of his words also implies a homosexual motive. As a result, Othello establishes a deep sense of gratitude and trust towards Iago, placing them in a **pseudo-romantic relationship** that is embedded within this **militaristic social sphere**. This culminates in **Act 3**, where both men vow their loyalty to each other: **'Now, by yond marble heaven, / [Kneels] / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words' (Act 3, Scene 3)**. The **body language** employed by both characters symbolises a deep sense of intimacy between the two men. Such gestures are accompanied by **religious** as well as **marital imagery**. For example, the reference to **'heaven'** and a **'sacred vow'** reflect words spoken by spouses during their wedding vows, signifying that the bond they are cementing goes beyond conventional social meanings. Furthermore, Iago reinforces this vow by saying that he gives up his **'his wit, hands, heart, to wronged Othello' (Act 3, Scene 3)**, depicting Iago's 'loyalties' and love for Othello.

This interplay between homosocial and homosexual desires is theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who suggests that non-sexual male friendships can **transform** into erotic, homosexual bonds. However, this desire is **condemned** and seen as **a threat to traditional social structures**. Particularly, Iago is seen to inhabit this world of strong male bonds, identifying as a soldier and distrusting all female figures that **transgress** into this world of manhood. This is evident in his one-sided relationship with his wife, who is blindly obedient to him and pursues his love to no avail. He says to Cassio, **'Would she give you so much of her lips as of her tongue she often bestows on me' (Act 2, Scene 1)**, suggesting the dismissive and trivial nature in the way he perceives Emilia. Iago is constantly denying





women as having any importance in this **political, public sphere**; his lack of affection towards his wife and his demonization of Desdemona disclose this. As a result, Iago perceives females as **disruptive** in the sphere of male friendships.

This may explain why Iago is trying to provoke Othello's jealousy, aiming to divert his attention from his marriage to instead focus it on him and his **homosocial responsibilities**. Different productions have also tried to tease out this element of homoerotic desire, depicting Iago and Othello's relationship in a more intimate way through stage directions and body language. In particular, certain productions portrayed Iago's character as gay. For example, Laurence Olivier (1938, London Old Vic), David Suchet (1985, Royal Shakespeare Company) and Sir Ian McKellen (1989, Royal Shakespeare Company) all played Iago as a gay character.

As such, Shakespeare **complicates the networks of male bonds** through the presence of women, revealing the homoerotic undertones repressed by Iago and other characters.



Image source:  
<https://images.app.goo.gl/7GiesaaJ4Qu19JcYA>

### Female Friendship & Love

As we have seen, male friendship endangers the female characters in the play. In particular, male friendship is central in affecting the way in which men perceive their own wives, being influenced by their peers to the point of murder and doubt. Jacobean England valued male friendship greatly, regarding it as a bond for **greater knowledge**. Shakespeare plays with this idea, making Iago use Othello's trusting disposition by seeing him a good advisor when in reality he is the main villain in Othello's downfall, along with Desdemona's. On the contrary, the friendship that is presented on stage between Desdemona and Emilia is completely different. The audience experiences the way both women deal with their marriages and confide in each other, creating their own **female space of protection** in a **patriarchal** world.

Their friendship is very unusual, however, as ostensibly there are no similarities between them. This is because Emilia is a maid who is older with more sexual experience than Desdemona, her mistress.

Desdemona has little sexual experience due to her young age, making her more naïve about the expectations as a woman. These differences are superficial, however; as they both share the **same experiences of being women in a strict, male dominated sphere** and **of being wives who have to adhere to certain social codes**. Their bond is also emphasised by the location; the fact that they are far away from home in Cyprus suggests that they feel lonely and need each other as **companions**. This push that forces them towards each other allows them to see their similarities, highlighting their equal sense of virtue and intelligence. Throughout the play, their friendship blossoms even more because of the abuse in their marriages and anxieties surrounding the aggression of their husbands. Emilia's experience allows Desdemona to find comfort in her words. This shows the development of love through friendship – **platonic love**.



The advice Emilia gives to Desdemona illuminates the **pressures** of having to be **submissive**, **chaste** and **obedient** wives to their husbands, who **provide** for them financially. Although Desdemona follows these conventional ideals, Othello's jealousy and rising contempt for Desdemona forces Emilia to talk about these unfair expectations: **'They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungrily, and when they are full / They belch us'** (Act 3, Scene 4). This conveys the sexual appetite of men that women must satisfy, while also **repressing** their own desires. Emilia suggests that Desdemona and Othello's love is not as strong as she assumes it is, warning her of the **real nature** of all men. Furthermore, this reveals Emilia's complex nature as a character who understands the problems in marriage, trying to educate her friend to re-imagine married life – she seems to push Desdemona to see the harsh reality of being in a **passive** role. Emilia embodies this: she went through her own abusive marriage yet stands strong and believes in her own worth, seen through the way she speaks with a lot of wit and assertion. This contrast is important, as it suggests that Desdemona's love might not be enough to keep Othello's jealousy down, as his manhood **overpowers** her identity.

The play progresses as Othello becomes more and more violently obsessive about Desdemona's faithfulness, making her friendship with Emilia even more crucial as a form of **comfort**. The Willow Song particularly demonstrates this, showing Desdemona's feelings of fear and anxiety. This scene in **Act 4** is also important because only women can be seen on stage, which never happens outside the home due to men always keeping an eye on them. The song is filled with her pain and sadness, as well as the realisation that her love is being undermined by her own husband. In response, Emilia speaks up for her friend in order to help her through her suffering. This is where some may claim that Emilia is a proto-feminist as her words attack the hypocritical nature of male behaviour: **'Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell, / And have their palates both for sweet and sour, / As husbands have. The ills we do, their ills instruct us so'** (Act 4, Scene 3). Her perspective shows her awareness of the position that women are forced to occupy in society, and she argues that it is **humanity** that makes men and women **equal**. She says that men and women both have **'sense'** and **'smell'**, suggesting that they all have the same experiences of life and they should be regarded as such. She wants to make Desdemona feel better and to see herself as worth much more than what her husband labels her as.

As her friend dies by the hands of her husband, Emilia exclaims the pain she feels as a friend and shows how much she loves Desdemona by discarding her own sense of safety: **'O gull! O dolt, / As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed— / I care not for thy sword, I'll make thee known, / Though I lost twenty lives'** (Act 5, Scene 2). She does not care what happens to her, as she has lost her form of comfort, a friend who was innocent. It is through Emilia that Othello and Iago are held **accountable**, as she re-affirms that Desdemona was an **'angel'** and **'the sweetest innocent / That e'er did lift up eye'** (Act 5, Scene 2). She further blames and highlights Othello's villainy in destroying his wife, as she says: **'Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor. / So come my soul to bliss as I speak true'** (Act 5, Scene 2). Emilia is the voice that Desdemona was not allowed to have, expressing her friend's innocence and **redeeming** her from her alleged unfaithfulness.

At the end of the play, both women are lying side by side after succumbing to the male violence that they were both trying to deal with. Their bodies, which stay on stage as the play concludes, are a reminder for the men that their false allegations lead to the murder of those that loved and cherished them the most. While they are physically gone, their friendship is still strong in death, solidifying a relationship that was stronger than the patriarchal domination they were subject to.



## Love Through the Ages: Then vs. Now

The way **love is expressed, conceptualised and defined** has changed dramatically since Shakespeare's *Othello*. Shakespeare's portrayal of love in plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* may now be considered as **conventional** and almost cliché. The importance of marriage, in particular as a **legitimising** institution of love, has become less significant. Today relationships are more flexible and couples can choose a partnership that suits their **expectations**. Whereas **arranged marriages** were normal during Shakespeare's era, today most people marry out of love rather than **obligation**. Such changes can be linked to the **rise of feminism**, as women's position as submissive and meek has been **contested**, affording them more **dominance** in relationships.

Furthermore, the rise and **emergence of the LGBTQ movement** highlighted how love can come in various forms, diminishing **traditional depictions** of love between only men and women. This has been clear in the way **media representations** have changed; for example, some adverts now include gay couples as opposed to the **traditional nuclear family** which consists of a heterosexual couple with children. Consequently, all of these changes suggest that it has become more difficult to **categorise love**, due to its **subjective nature**. Although there is still a long way to go to achieve **equality** in expressing one's sexuality, the change in the definition of 'love' is very apparent today.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare's depiction of love may still hold some **relevance** today. In particular, the idea of arranged marriage and insignificance of love can be observed in some cultures today. This means that certain groups see this as part of their culture or tradition, enforcing it upon their children to form strategic pacts with other influential families.

Furthermore, some of Shakespeare's characters portray **progressive perspectives** when it comes to issues such as **sexuality and gender equality**. For example, Emilia exclaims: **'Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them'** (Act 4, Scene 3). This echoes **modern feminist** critiques, especially that of **Mary Wollstonecraft** who advocated to **'strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience'** (*A Vindication to the Rights of Women*). As such, Emilia may be considered a **proto-feminist**, for she also asserts that women are intelligent with similar desires that should be addressed by their husbands too. Therefore, there are some concepts within *Othello* that can still be found cross-culturally in contemporary societies.

Overall, the theme of love in *Othello* assumes many different forms. Desdemona and Othello's love towards each other informs the strength of their marriage at the start of the play. This **idealistic** depiction of love is amplified through Othello's racial differences, as Desdemona ignores the **social taboos** concerned with marrying an **Other**. However, the social values and regulations soon **destabilise** their love. As we have seen, Iago's hatred is a direct contrast to the unconditional love portrayed by the protagonists' relationship. His toxic relationship with Emilia embodies this, legitimising his revenge plan as something that is within his nature. Alternatively, love in the form of homosocial relationships may also be a **catalyst** to his rage and jealousy.

Another way that love emerges in the play is through friendship. Male relationships in the play are informed by the world of the military, where being a soldier creates a **strong network of love and loyalty** that Iago later **exploits**. We have seen how the alternative world of female friendship portrays love in a **compassionate** and innocent way, as Emilia and Desdemona develop their own loving bond. Therefore, Shakespeare provides us with many ways to interpret love in the play, which is one of the main driving forces of the overall action.



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