

AQA English Literature A-level

Othello Themes: Marriage

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Marriage

Marriage During the Renaissance

The **institution of marriage** was considered a **public affair** between two families, positioning the necessity of family **reputation** above love. During the **Renaissance era**, this **traditional** and narrow view of marriage remained. The **Venetian society** in which *Othello* is set reinforces these views, as the **interracial marriage** between Othello and Desdemona would be regarded as **immoral, unnatural, and scandalous**. This is a reflection of the **social values** of Elizabethan society where the play was performed, which Shakespeare projects onto the play's setting.

The **power dynamic** within marriages was also usually **unbalanced**, as the husband ruled over the wife. This included treating the wife as a **property**, passed down from her father to the husband. For example, Desdemona claims: **'I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband' (Act I Scene III)**, suggesting the prevalence of deeply **patriarchal power structures** that women internalise, seeing themselves as **products of ownership**.

The structuralist theorist **Claude Levi-Strauss** calls this an **exchange**, whereby **patriarchal society** treats women as objects to be transferred from one dominant male to another in order to build **alliances**. This is achieved through weddings where the woman is passed from the father to the groom. For example, before consummating their marriage, Othello says: **'My dear love, the purchase made, the fruits are to ensue' (Act II Scene III)**. The word **'purchase'** is significant, as it depicts an internalised patriarchal view Othello has by viewing Desdemona as an object that he purchased from her father.

Similarly, **social expectations** also required women to remain **virgins** until marriage, as they needed to be **'pure' and 'untainted'**. On the other hand, men were not punished for having sex before marriage, regarding their sexual experiences as **conquests** to boast about. This is evident throughout the play, as the women cannot express their **sexual desires** freely without being **demonised** by society.

Alternative View: Companionate Marriages

However, shortly before the publication of *Othello*, marriage institutions were challenged and questioned. This is a result of **political upheavals** that criticised **absolute monarchy**, which further extended into the **domestic sphere**. Many questioned the **absolute nature of marriage** and rule of the husband. The rise of **puritanism** also emphasised the idea of **conscience** - a concept in which all individuals possess a type of **knowledge** passed onto them by God, allowing them to judge right from wrong. This meant that women had the **right to disobey** their husbands on grounds of conscience due to **religion**. As a result, **companionate marriages** emerged, based on **mutual respect** and romantic love between the couple, but still an extent of male authority.

According to the Puritan **doctrine of conscience**, wives were not merely an **extension** of the husband but had their **own independent identity**. This can be observed at the



beginning of the play, where Desdemona's **disobedience to her father** can be seen as an act of **rebellion** where she asserts her own decision. On the contrary, Emilia is an obedient wife at the start of the play, doing whatever her husband asks of her. This can be seen when she finds Desdemona's handkerchief, giving it to Iago for his plans: **'I am glad I have found this napkin'** (Act III Scene III).

Marriage and Identity

Othello and Desdemona's relationship begins as a companionate marriage, as they choose each other, but she still asserts her **'duty'** (Act I Scene III) to him. This suggests that they view their marriage differently. For Desdemona, Othello becomes part of her identity: **'I saw Othello's visage in my mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate'** (Act I Scene III). As a result, she submerges herself within him, choosing to be **faithful and submissive**.

On the contrary, Othello's view of her as a companion changes as Iago convinces him of the importance of an obedient wife, instilling in his mind an old, patriarchal model of marriage.



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This is evident when he exclaims **'O curse of marriage / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!'** (Act III Scene III). He begins to assert his power over her as the play progresses, wanting to control her apparent **sexual appetite** due a fear of her **sexual freedom**. This portrays the influence of other males (Iago), as their judgement is perceived as a **question of honour** to Othello, who does not want to be thought of as **passive** in his marriage. He uses violence to show this, striking Desdemona in public: **'she's obedient; as you say, obedient / Very obedient'** (Act IV Scene I). Here, he **mocks** her supposed obedience which is based on his assumption that she is being **unfaithful**. Her unfaithfulness is seen as a **betrayal of his role as a husband, and of honour**, gradually causing their marriage to break down. As a result, Desdemona succumbs to his violent assertions,

losing her identity that she had established at the start of their marriage.

On the other hand, while Desdemona lost her identity through the diminishing of her marriage, Emilia gained a **stronger sense of identity**. She recognises her husband's true nature, and does not morally justify it unlike Desdemona's unquestioning acceptance of an abusive marriage. For example, she warns Desdemona that **'they are not ever jealous for the cause / But jealous for they're jealous'** (Act III Scene IV), suggesting a deeper insight into the **complexity** of both her character and her understanding of **patriarchal views on**



marriage. She utilises this knowledge, at the end convicting and **alienating herself** from her villainous husband.

A05 - A Feminist Perspective

The **institution of marriage** has been criticised by feminists all over the world throughout recent years. The play is a product of its time, which means that it is inherently influenced by social taboos regarding marriage and women. Feminists such as **Mary Wollstonecraft** state that "**the divine right of husbands is like the divine right of kings**" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), suggesting that men within marriage are treated like gods that are served by women. The **subservient** way in which women were expected to behave towards both men in general and their husbands can be observed in Desdemona's behaviour towards Othello. She is **passive, meek and submissive** - traits that were expected from wives. *How are these expectations different now? What are the implications of feminism in changing how we view marriage and what we expect from husbands and wives?*

Emilia may be seen as a **proto-feminist**, speaking of marriage as an institution in which equal responsibility should be taken for its success or failure - '**But I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall**' (**Act IV Scene III**). She claims that marriage should be based on **equal responsibility** rather than accusing and **marginalising** women for wrongdoings.

Since the Renaissance, views on marriage have drastically changed, with a decline in the number of marriages and arranged marriages. Most couples choose to **cohabit** now, with domestic duties being performed by both partners. Similarly, more women now participate in the **public sphere of commerce and politics**, reflecting the massive **societal and cultural transformations** that have taken place since Shakespeare's time.

Courtly Love and Marriage

Traditions surrounding courtly love suggested and included the idea that men were supposed to **cater to the women** they were trying to get. In particular, it was normal for men to be almost **submissive** in order to fit what the woman wants as opposed to asserting their authority. This is visible in other literary pieces such as **Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale***, where women were more active and **men passive**. As a result, most men in those stories found true peace in making their wife happy. In *Othello*, Desdemona is seen to have a **voice of her own** as she asserts herself in the face of her father by marrying who she wants, not paying attention to the stereotypes surrounding Othello's race. Similarly, Othello is seen to **listen to Desdemona** and sees her as his equal; this **balance of respect and love** makes their marriage **stable**.

Throughout the play marriage is considered to be central in portraying both **love, betrayal and sexual appetite**. There are two particular moments in the play that are especially significant; the first one is at the **beginning of the play** where Othello and Desdemona are wooing each other, which is in Act I Scene III. The other scene is when they **consummate their marriage** in Act V Scene I. However, while these scenes reflect the **prevalence of marital rituals**, they do not reflect the **complexities of courtly love** that affects a lot of the



action of the play. The adherence to the **principles** set out by courtly love were very important to lovers wanting to adhere to social **conventions and idealising marriage** as something romantic. During the time that Shakespeare was writing, the idea of courtly love was slowly fading away, however, he still incorporated them into his play in order to provide some **conflict as well as emotional vulnerability** into the action. Using such ideas associated with courtly love, Shakespeare is able to introduce **certain themes and tropes**, highlighting them for the audience. For example, by allowing ideas of courtly love to permeate Othello and Desdemona's marriage, he brings out themes such as **cuckoldry, humiliation, and the loss of female voices**.



However, as Iago's **misogynistic influence** starts to poison Othello's mind, he starts to take away his wife's **independent identity**. This is because of her supposed **infidelity**, which he sees as a question to his honour and masculinity. This manifests itself in his **embarrassment of her** and his increasing violence towards her, such as hitting her or **emotionally punishing** her for something she did not do. This goes against his initial adherence to being a courtly lover who handles adultery in a more civilised manner rather than accusing his wife without actually consulting her first. This sets Othello up for his **own downfall** because he loses his patient and **trusting demeanour** that enabled his marriage to be stable in the first place. As a result, his marriage crumbles due to his **own insecurities** of not being manly enough to handle his wife correctly and fears regarding female

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As seen before, the ideas surrounding courtly love were used to emphasise certain themes – in particular, Shakespeare deploys it to highlight **satire** within the play. At the beginning Othello listens to Desdemona about keeping their **courtship a secret**, suggesting how Shakespeare wants them to first comply with the **rules** of courtly love. However, his **mind-set** towards love and marriage changes when Iago insists on an **alternative view of love** – this type of love both **condemns female desire** and emphasises the importance of love informed by **ancient philosophy**. Such **classic ideals** depicted the idea of **desire or passion** as something to be rejected or a sign of infidelity. This affects Othello a lot, as he is seen to start prioritising his **career and reputation** over Desdemona, which slowly leads to him losing his love for her. As he becomes more **consumed with his jealousy and hatred** for her actions, he feels that he must murder her in order to preserve both her and his **social standing**. He uses the word '**sacrifice**' (**Act V Scene I**) to show his intentions.

Shakespeare depicts the **pitfalls** of trying to follow the rules set out by courtly love – he portrays courtly love as **inevitably bad** compared to his contemporaries who still revered the idea of a submissive male and true love. Shakespeare creates a more **realistic outlook**, highlighting how marriage and love is **not always positive** and is not as ideal as social



conventions make them out to be. It is the use of **Renaissance and Middle Age ideas of love** and marriage that Shakespeare contrasts in order to create more **tensions** between Desdemona and Othello. By doing this, Shakespeare highlights how certain attributes associated with love can be drastically influenced by **external forces** – the idea of courtly love is challenged by Iago who is **inherently evil** and wants to break Othello's idea of love in order to destroy his marriage. This is because love makes up the foundation of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, whose **reciprocal and open demeanour** is the source of her downfall.

Through the figure of Iago, the concepts of **wooing, faithfulness, and marriage** are totally turned **up-side-down** and portrayed to be **absurd**. This makes their marriage even more **tragic**, as it was seen to be almost perfect but **destroyed** by inherent evil and deception.

The Petrarchan Lover

Othello fails to adhere to the ideal of the courtly lover because he slowly turns into the **Renaissance idea of a lover** – the **Petrarchan lover**. This type of lover looks for love that is not physical but **spiritual**, condemning sexuality or desire as something that needs to be **repressed**. This is because of the poet Petrarch who during Shakespeare's time wrote very **romantic and melodramatic poetry** about their lover, who was usually a woman. This type of lover is at the mercy of the one he loves, **suffering** in his own state of excessive love. For example, in **Romeo and Juliet**, Shakespeare mocks this type of character by depicting Romeo as trying to imitate Petrarchan language but failing since his love is not sincere. Othello, on the other hand, **descends** to this type of **obsessive lover** in a negative way by becoming too involved with his **wife's sexuality**. This in turn makes Desdemona become **less and less active in their marriage**, portrayed through the **lack of lines** she speaks in his presence as their marriage progresses in the play.



Iago and Emilia

The marriage of Othello and Desdemona starts in a **positive way**, but slowly **disintegrates** into something **sinister and toxic**. Shakespeare depicts Emilia and Iago's relationship as the **contrasting image** of the protagonists' marriage. From the beginning, audiences notice the apparent **lack of affection** that Iago displays towards his wife. In comparison, Othello's **physical and verbal affirmations** portray an **uncommon love dynamic** in which love is the driving force of their relationship. While Emilia **obeys** the **social conventions** surrounding **femininity and ideals of being the 'perfect wife'** by doing whatever he asks of her, Iago also conforms to the role of the **authoritative husband**.

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This is evident in the way he addresses women, his distortion of Desdemona's innocence into **depraved sexuality**, and his physical as well as psychological abuse of Emilia. Shakespeare emphasises that there is **no real, strong and visible bond** that connects Iago and Emilia through love – instead, he objectifies her, using her trusting and obedient nature to his own **advantage**.

This is visible in the way Iago treats Emilia in the **public** as well as **private sphere**. Iago is not worried to be physical or **demeaning** towards her in front of others, suggesting the **comfortability** in being able to look down onto your wife without any **harsh repercussions**. His **misogyny** is further highlighted when he believes that Othello **cuckolded** him, which is a **false accusation** and another justification to bring him down. His **wrath and dismissiveness** due to his **suspensions** is let out on his wife, with lines such as **'Speak within doors' (Act IV Scene II)** and **'You are a fool, go to' (Act IV Scene II)**. These portray the **lack of love** he feels for his wife, **threatening** her constantly with these **short, snappy comments** while also **erasing her voice** and taking her sense of self. He attacks her intelligence constantly, by calling her a 'fool' or confining her to the private sphere where he believes that she belongs. This reflects Elizabethan attitudes towards **female education** and learning, believing them to be unable to process ideas that are outside of the domestic realm. While Iago conforms to such views, it is clear that Emilia goes against this definition of women as unintelligent creatures through her own **monologues and witty manner**.

Furthermore, even though Iago lacks the warmth of being a loving husband, he is very **controlling** of Emilia and sees her as his **property**. He is suspicious of Othello for thinking that he cuckolded him, but also does not like Cassio for taking his position as lieutenant and for the respect he shows towards Emilia. This can be interpreted in two ways: he may be jealous of someone showing attention to his wife or because he thinks she does not deserve it. Either way, it is clear that his **jealousy and controlling nature is not rooted in his love** for her, but it is because his **reputation and position** is being **undermined** by the other male characters, which makes him feel lesser. Whenever they are alone, this **absence of love** is depicted when he calls her **'a foolish wife' (Act III Scene III)** because she interacted with other males. However, as she obeys him, he addresses her in a much more favourable manner, calling her a **'good wench' (Act 3, Scene 3)**. The word **'wench'** can mean both a young woman or a prostitute, but was commonly used during Shakespeare's era to address women.

His **verbal abuse** never changes, as his character **continues** to view her as something less than him. For example, before he murders her because she **exposed** his evil plans, he refers to her as a **'villainous whore'** and as **'filth' (Act V Scene II)**. The **lack of remorse** or change in Iago's character, especially the **lack of sympathy** towards his wife, encompasses the **extent of his evil, misogynistic ways**. The **disrespect** that can be observed through his language and action makes him even more **villainous** in a multitude of ways.



AO5 Tip – Women’s Dependence on Men

The imbalanced marriage dynamic found within Iago and Emilia’s relationship suggests that Emilia only exists when she is of necessity to her husband. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir claims that ‘a woman is what a man says she is’. Iago’s inability to see her as an equal partner partly leaves her within a liminal space in which he has the power to define who and what she is. This depicts the socially constructed nature of the hierarchy that is imposed upon marriage. As Beauvoir asserts: ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. This means that in order to deconstruct Iago’s inherent hatred towards his wife and other women, we have to first dismantle the system that enables the continuous oppression of female voices. Therefore, patriarchy needs to be challenged by changing norms that position women as automatically in a submissive role. *Do you think Emilia retains her own sense of identity before she dies?*

Although their marriage may be termed **abusive**, Emilia portrays her love for Iago through **passionate acts that highlight her devotion** to him. In particular, the **theft of the handkerchief** is essential in showing this because it emphasises her **loyalties** at that point in the play. Instead of returning it to Desdemona who places great value on the material, Emilia uses this as an **opportunity** to gain her husband’s favour. Iago did not feel the need to reveal the plans to his wife, and Emilia did not question him either. For example, she says: ‘**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’ (Act III Scene III)**. This reveals another, **deeper layer** to their marriage as she **blindly follows** what he asks of her. This might be a **similar trait** found in Othello and Desdemona’s marriage, where she is **blindly in love** with her husband without seriously acknowledging his **descent into madness**.

It is **questionable** whether Emilia’s loving nature towards Iago can be a **redeeming quality**. Contemporary readers may consider this to be the response of someone who has been **emotionally manipulated** to the point of **blind devotion**. This is believable as Iago is depicted as the **master of deception**, and it is inevitable that he used such tactics on his wife too. On the other hand, Emilia’s **trusting demeanour and loyalty** can be seen to be a great trait, making her a very **sympathetic character** to the audience. She displays this loyalty towards Desdemona too, where she helps her to cope with her husband’s jealousy by encouraging her to speak out and **advising her** on how to deal with it based on her own experience. For example, she says: ‘**The ills we do, their ills (husbands’) instruct us so?’ (Act IV Scene III)**. This phrase carries a **tone of sadness**, as she suggests that the deed – good or evil – that women are driven to do may be the **product of their husband’s treatment**. Similarly, there might be a **sense of regret** in Emilia’s words, initiating her **process of distancing herself** from her **devotional nature** towards Iago and experiencing a sense of **self-actualisation**. This means that, through the **pure, loving bond** with Desdemona, she was able to create an **identity separate** from her husband – their marriage tainted her **self-image**, instilling a small **sense of evil** in her towards the start of the play. However, by the end, this piece of **evil is replaced by self-assertion and true loyalty**.



This is visible when she finds out that Othello **murdered Desdemona** based on **false accusations** as well scolding him because he did not believe that his wife was faithful. For example, she says: **'If you think other / Remove your thought' (Act 4, Scene 2)**, which means that she is unknowingly trying to remove the **seed of doubt** that Iago placed in his mind. Once Desdemona is dead, however, she does not hesitate to assert her friend's **innocence and condemn his actions** by exclaiming: **'I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives' (Act 5, Scene 2)**. This means that she wants him to be **lawfully convicted** and be brought to **justice**. Furthermore, when she realises that her husband is involved in Desdemona's death, she **demonises him** too, suggesting her transformation in terms of her love towards him. For example, she **publicly exposes** him **'your reports have set the murder on' (Act 5, Scene 2)**. This shows her **growth** as a character in being able to hold her husband **accountable** for his actions, not fearing the consequences in order to pursue justice for her friend. Even though she is threatened by her husband, she perseveres: **'I will speak as liberal as the north' (Act 5, Scene 2)**. This leads her to be stabbed by Iago, dying as a result of telling the **truth**.

While the parallel between Desdemona's death, who also died at the hand of her husband, Emilia's murder reflects a **quest towards redemption**. This is because she may have felt **guilty** for being an accomplice to Iago's **revenge plans** which led to Desdemona's death. She says in her final breaths: **'So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true' (Act 5, Scene 2)**. Nevertheless, the fate for a woman or wife is always **tragic and meagre** – she must either **obey** her husband at all times or die.

Bianca and Cassio

While Iago and Emilia's relationship is presented to be less than ideal, the relationship between Cassio and Bianca is **complicated by problems of occupation and class**. Bianca is presented as a prostitute, seeing Cassio in a more loving way than she would any other 'customer'. Cassio is seen to be a little less interested, only considering her in a more **sexual way** as he complains: **'she haunts me in every place' (Act IV Scene I)**. Unlike the **male jealousy** that we have witnessed so far in the play, Bianca is the only female who has a jealous disposition. This is clear when she finds the **handkerchief** in Cassio's possession, suggesting that it must be **'some minx's token' (Act IV Scene I)**. In some ways, this parallels Othello's jealousy as she becomes **suspicious** after he fails to visit her for a week: **'To the felt absence now I feel a cause' (Act III Scene IV)**. Similarly, Shakespeare is seen to **mirror** this idea of a 'cause' in justifying her suspicions because she believes there must be an actual reason for his absence – **infidelity**. In the final lines of the play when Othello tries to explain why he killed his wife, he says: **'It is the cause' (Act V Scene II)**. This is an interesting **linguistic link** that Shakespeare draws between two seemingly unrelated characters.

Othello and Bianca are both **marginalised characters** in their own rights. Bianca is a female prostitute who is the **epitome of the male, sexualised gaze**. Iago described her as a **'a housewife that by selling her desires / buys herself bread and clothes' (Act IV Scene I)**. She is not taken seriously and her jealousy is not as emphasised as with Othello. Her character, as a result, can be **easily forgotten**. This may reflect the lack of importance placed on female characters who are not **virgins or chaste**. Similarly, Othello's **race alienates** him from the rest of society and makes him more prone to criticism. Due to his **vulnerability**, he is more easily **provoked**, and he has more at stake in terms of his



reputation and honour. On the other hand, Bianca has fewer options as her **insistence** towards Cassio would not be taken seriously.

However, unlike the other couples that experience a tragic end, Cassio and Bianca's relationship has some **hope**. They are seen together before he gets hurt, and she cries out: '**Alas, he faints! O Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!**' (Act V Scene I). This suggests the **strength** of her love for him and his covert love for her – she is not a **crude** prostitute that would have been popular in other plays during Shakespeare's time, but a woman who can be a **faithful partner**.

Marriage today

Shakespeare's depictions of marriage varied between all characters. Othello and Desdemona's love was **unconventional yet true**, persevering through criticisms until Iago reinforced **social critiques on inter-racial marriages**. Othello's **insecurity** about his wife's **sexual desires** reflects the amount of **control** husbands wanted to retain over their spouses. While Iago and Emilia follow **social codes on marriage**, they are unhappy due to the **extreme imbalance** within their relationship. Bianca and Cassio, although not married, **transgress social codes** too with boundaries set by Cassio's reserved manner.

Over the next few centuries, marriage was used as a **political and economic tool** to ensure certain bonds and relationships were kept clear – especially for the **upper class**, marriage was a **divine institution** that enabled them to get certain **advantages**. Love played a small role until the end of the eighteenth century, as love and marriage were not idealised as something that went hand in hand. Women saw marriage as a **necessity** for wealthy men to assume a **social standing** – **financial stability** was the main objective. At the start of the 1900s, marriage and love became equated with each other as partners wanted to feel a sense of **fulfilment** with the person they would spend their entire life with. This can also be linked to the **popularity of romance fiction** and poetry, creating **new expectations** regarding courtships.

However, the **digital revolution** of the 21st century, **socio-economic developments** and changing **cultural norms** have transformed the way marriage is perceived today. The **rise of feminism** and its **pressure to change** the way women are treated has greatly influenced the way marriage functions. Women now **marry much later** than before, prioritising their **career** before settling down. Furthermore, the introduction and **availability of contraception** meant that **reproduction** was an aspect that fewer women felt pressured to obey, as they have greater choice when it comes to having children or starting a family. Similarly, there is a **lower tolerance for empty or unfulfilling marriages** – as **divorce** is easier to attain, and more couples divorced after finding themselves unhappy in their relationship as opposed to staying with their partner in **empty marriage**.

Overview

In conclusion, the **theme of marriage** is central in portraying characters' relationship. For example, Emilia and Iago's marriage is a **direct contrast** to the one of Desdemona and Othello. This is because it is made up of **lies and unequal power dynamics**, where Emilia is only a **spawn** in Iago's twisted games. As we have seen, Emilia's **loyalties** slowly change



in the play - she starts to side with Desdemona more, enabling her to occupy an identity of her own. At the end, she makes her **distance clear** as she exposes Iago's lies. This act of **independence and rebellion** reflect how she has broken free from the **bonds of marriage** that tied her to her husband. This **unhappy atmosphere** that accompanies their marriage becomes gradually evident in Othello's marriage as well.

From the start, readers are made aware of the **loving nature** that is present within Othello's marriage. We have explored the **language and symbols of love** that they both use in order to express this. As the play progresses, these symbols, such as the **handkerchief**, are tarnished and transformed by Iago's revenge plan. Othello becomes consumed with his doubts and jealousy, which he acts on by hitting Desdemona in public. As a result, the tensions in their marriage culminate in Desdemona's murder. The downfall of their marriage is an **inevitable consequence** of Iago's persuasion, positioning him as a third figure that lurks in the shadows of Othello's relationship. Alternatively, some critics have conceptualised Iago's **jealousy** as a **homoerotic desire** for Othello, which introduces a different perspective to his actions. Nevertheless, Othello and Desdemona's marriage went from being **idealistic** to breaking down completely.

Desdemona and Othello's marriage can be seen as **progressive** for the early Jacobean era as their marriage goes against **social norms and boundaries**. Today, marriages are less bound by tradition but are more centred around **individual perceptions of love**. This is perpetuated by different types of love e.g. LGBTQ rights. Marriages are also much more **diverse** now, representing individuals from various **ethnic backgrounds**.

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