



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets

with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 5: Othello

Outline:

Othello

- Big picture thematic points:
 - Why does Iago's plot succeed?
 - To what extent is he a victim of unavoidable circumstances?
 - To what extent is it random and unfortunate or Iago's genius?
 - What makes Othello vulnerable? What motivates him?
 - The Aristotelian idea of the tragic hero is of a good person with a character flaw. Othello seems to fit.
- Discussion between Iago and Roderigo:
 - A smart servant serves for himself. You take what you can get from your master.
 - "I am not what I am." This has been read as an inversion of "I am." Iago is negating being. Are you tied to a natural reality? Or can nature be supervened by human will? Maybe being is fluid convention.
 - Othello is about prudence.
- Stirring up of Brabantio:
 - He uses irrationality and passion against people.
- Act I, Scenes II-III
 - Scene II:
 - Othello is accused of having used magic. How is it that Othello comes about it?
 - Shakespeare is playing with the new world mystique.
 - Othello: If you are saying I used magic, I used the magic of storytelling. This only is the witchcraft that I used.
 - What is the real basis of Desdemona's love?
 - Scene III: Very important exchange between Iago and Roderigo:
 - Iago is encouraging Roderigo that he should get over his affection for Desdemona.
 - Virtue at its root is power. Roderigo says he can't help it.
 - Iago gives a speech that is thematic to the entire play. The human soul is a garden to be tended. You are responsible to be able to control yourself and to make wise decisions. You can and must govern yourself.
 - Iago sees ways that people are not self-governed, takes them, and makes use of them.



- The most self-governed character is Iago.
- Ask the students: Does Iago have self-governance?
- Iago has suspicion that Othello sneaked around and cheated with Emilia. This is immediately followed by this picture of person who is so honest that is not capable of noticing deception. These are not portraits of the same person. What does it show?
- Act II, Scene I
 - Othello with Desdemona:
 - Othello is saying, this is perfection. This fits Othello's idealist character.
 - Desdemona says we can love even more than we love now.
 - Ask: Is Desdemona correcting him? What is the meaning of the correction?
- Act II, Scene III
 - The way that Iago plays upon Casio here is the same as the other cases.
 - Iago is very self-governed, he sees the weaknesses in others and targets them.
 - Casio says it is about reputation. Your reputation follows you after death. The part of me that lives forever is lost (Casio).
 - Reputation doesn't matter.
 - Reputation can be recovered.
 - Reputation is often got without merit.
 - Iago is a figure of the devil speaking the truth. Iago understands the importance of acknowledging free will (Iago with ironic moral wisdom).
 - Othello is overly bound to Desdemona. Desdemona controls him. This is a commentary of Othello's idealism.
 - This soliloquy is a commentary of the metaphysical level.
 - The devil doesn't create, but takes what is there and distort it and corrupt it.
 - Iago symbolically is the devil. This is a modernized version of this medieval morality play.
- Act III, Scene III
 - Iago in conversation with Othello:
 - Does the play argue that reputation is important?
 - The way Desdemona importunes Othello:
 - What does it mean it to try to persuade someone to try to conduct a task, while also honoring and respecting the needs of the person?
 - Interaction between Othello and Iago:
 - Othello says he is not the jealous type, he says he will conduct himself rationally.



- Be neutral. Treat it like you are a scientist in a laboratory, just examining the results of an experiment.
- Othello is being idealistic in this epistemological program. It's unrealistic, impractical, and imprudent.
- Iago knows much more than he is saying. There is deep wisdom in him, but he is not saying everything he thinks.
- As the conversation goes on, Othello challenges Iago.
- Iago gives Othello an imaginative picture of Desdemona and Casio. You cannot have ocular proof, you must accept circumstantial evidence.
- This is about being rational.
- At the end of the scene: This is a kind of religious ritual between the two men. This is Othello changing religion, changing faith in one person over another.
- There is an appeal to being in the know.
- Iago is creating an emotional need, and then meets it.
- Act III, Scene IV
 - Emilia makes statements that are in a proto feminist vein.
 - Emilia is one of the most impressive characters in the play. She has wisdom.
- Act IV, Scene I
 - We have the idea of reputation and honor happening again. Honor and reputation are different.
 - Reputation is often false. Ask the students, "What is the logic of this?" If it is hard to see or if it is not acknowledged all the time, does it mean that it isn't attached to the person?
 - Othello wants clarity. Iago says it is better that Othello knows.
 - How do lies work? Why are lies convincing?
- Act IV, Scene II
 - Othello is trying to press Desdemona to swear to her honesty.
 - He wants to take revenge. He isn't trying to get the answer. Othello is furtively trying to look directly into her soul.
- Act IV, Scene III
 - This shows the idealism of Desdemona and the worldly wisdom of Emilia.
 - Iago shows something resembling a conscience.
 - Ask students: "Does Iago ever shows conscience anywhere." He expresses an awareness, but the fact of being bothered by it.
- Act V, Scene II
 - Othello wants to see his act of vengeance as justice.
 - He justifies what he is doing but idealizes her beauty.
 - He tells her to prepare her soul. In his mind he is being just.
 - What does Desdemona mean? Something in me provoked him, that is the cause.



- The truth comes out due to Emilia, she shows courage and humility. She speaks the truth. Othello realizes what he has done. Iago is brought out in custody.
 - Othello wants to see what was physically invisible. He wanted to see the metaphysical.
- Othello was trying to maintain his honor. Don't exaggerate my evil. Did he love too well? Did he love Desdemona too much? He loved with great intensity. Justice in his mind had to be done.
 - He stresses circumcised dog. I defended you with violence. I then killed Desdemona. You didn't mind when I killed for you.
 - Othello saying that you need violence in a certain context, but I understand why I was drawn into this act of horror.
 - This is Othello's plea to be given some grace.