

# Othello by William Shakespeare

## (A) IMAGES & SYMBOLS

### The Storm

In *Act 2 Scene (I)* there is a violent storm. All the characters are at its mercy.

- ★ It is a **symbol** of the **destructive** forces in nature and by inference in **human** behaviour and in the mind.
- ★ The macrocosmic storm reflects the microcosmic storm in Othello's mind and soul.
- ★ It disposes of the Turkish fleet and so leaves Shakespeare free to explore the **domestic tragedy**.
- ★ The destructive forces in Nature are described -

“The wind-shaked surge with high and monstrous main” *Act 2 Scene (I)*

“The great contention of the sea and skies” *Act 2 Scene (I)*

- ★ But is the storm before **the calm**.

“O my soul's joy!  
If after every tempest comes such calms  
May the wind blow 'till they have wakened Death”

Othello and Desdemona are in love. But there is a **storm of terrifying passion** about to be unleashed through the **awesome manipulation of Iago** that cannot be controlled. It will have terrible consequences. This is the story of the play.

- ★ A **storm of jealousy** is growing in Iago's mind and heart. “The divine Desdemona” will survive this natural storm but not the one that the traitorous Iago is preparing
- ★ Cassio is concerned for Othello's safety and worries that “the great contention” “parted our fellowship” - Act 2 Scene 1. “I have lost him on a

dangerous sea”. But **ironically** it is Othello who will lose his lieutenant through the scheming of Iago.

★ Othello’s love - “the labouring bark” - for Desdemona has reached a **highpoint** - it is “Olympus high” but it will be destroyed and duck “as low as hell’s from heaven”. **Othello’s journey of love** goes from Heaven to Hell - a Hell created in his mind by Iago’s promptings.

★ Later in *Act 3 Scene (iii)* Othello rages. He compares the Black Sea, whose “icy currents and compulsive force” keeps on to the Dordanelles, so his “bloody thoughts, with violent pace” drives him to **revenge**.

★ Finally at the end *Act 5 Scene (ii)* Othello tells us -

“Here is my journeys end, here is my butt,  
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail...”

He has reached the end of his journey in the ship of life.

“Where should Othello go?” *Act 5 Scene (ii)*

★ There is no escape for him.

“Blow me about in the winds! Roast me in sulphur!  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! *Act 5 Scene (ii)*

The sea is now **the fire and brimstone of Hell** and suffering of Othello’s is the eternal loss of the only woman he truly loved.

The storm will be a **Hell** of Iago’s making.

## **(B) HEAVEN & HELL**

These images pervade the play throughout.

- ★ **Desdemona** is heavenly. “The divine D....”  
“May the grace of heaven” protect her - Cassio.

She herself talks about her **affection/love** -  
“The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase  
Even as our days do grow.”

- ★ When she is in trouble she always appeals to “Heaven” -  
“By Heaven you do me wrong...”

- ★ Cassio refers to her **goodness and purity** -  
“Hail to thee lady and the grace of heaven  
Before thee, behind thee and on every hand  
Enwheel thee round” *Act 2 Scene (ii)*

- ★ Iago refers to her personality as  
“she is so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed  
a disposition” *Act 2 Scene (iii)*

- ★ Iago also turns on Desdemona and seeks out evil for its own sake  
**“Divinity of hell!”** - (contradiction/paradox)  
When devils will the **blackest sins** put on,  
They do suggest of first with **heavenly** shows  
As I do now”. *Act 2 Scene (iii)*

- ★ Iago tells Othello “’tis the spite of Hell” to kiss an unfaithful woman and to suppose her chaste when implying that Desdemona and Cassio **had an affair** - he heard Cassio boasting about it.

- ★ **Emilia** when she realises the truth of what happened says -  
“O the more **angel** she  
And you the **blacker devil**,  
O she was heavenly true.” *Act 5 Scene (ii)*

**Diabolical Imagery** is used about Iago throughout. He is **the villain** associated with the Devil.

“I look down towards his feet; but that’s a fable,  
If that thou be’est a devil, I cannot kill thee”

*Act 5 Scene (ii)*

The Devil traditionally had cloven feet and was a spirit - Iago (A man/devil)

- ★ Later Othello asks Cassio to find out why “that **demi-devil**” has “ensnared my heart and soul”. He finds it hard to believe Iago could be so evil.

*Act 5 Scene (ii)*

- ★ Iago calls on the **forces of evil** to assist him in his plot -  
“Hell and night Must bring this monstrous birth to the worlds’ light”
- ★ Iago tells Roderigo that himself and “all the **tribe of Hell**” will get Desdemona for him.
- ★ When the bell is rung in the brawl scene, Iago cries out “**Diablo, ho**” that is “God’s will” when Cassio’s disgrace is immanent.
- ★ Iago is like **Satan**. He tempts people in subtle ways. He succeeds with Evil.
- ★ **Othello’s** relationship with Desdemona disintegrates and his language becomes **Diabolical**.  
He wants to kill “the fair devil” He feels a “young sweeting devil”  
“Ay let her rot and perish and be damned tonight”.

His feelings for her are reduced to  
“Fire and brimstone, Devil, O Devil Devil”

- ★ When she has been killed, he describes her as a devil “gone to burning hell” Emilia disagrees - “the more angel she”
- ★ After Iago is exposed, he is described as a devil with cloven hoof, a demi-devil and a viper.
- ★ The relationship between Othello and Desdemona is a Heavenly one.  
**His ultimate destiny is eternal separation** - Hell - from her and his vision is of his soul being thrown to the evil ones by her look - “to where friends will snatch it”.

*Act 5 Scene (ii)*

“Whip me, you devils,

From the possession of this heavenly sight,  
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire.”

*Act 5 Scene (ii)*

He is condemned to eternal suffering in Hell and tormented with the absence of her “heavenly sight”.

“O Desdemona! Desdemona! Dead!  
Oh! Oh! Oh!

His pain is eternal.

## **(C) ANIMALS**

Mostly repulsive animals

Originating from Iago (Acts 1, 2 and 3)

A reflection of his mind. A **preying** animal.

Also **insects** that annoy and corrupt.

**Othello** takes them up later (Acts 3 and 4) and uses the language of Iago, becoming coarse and poisoned.

### **1. Ram**

“Even now, very now, an old black ram

Is tuppung you white ewe”.

*Act 1 Scene (I)*  
(Iago)

A **sexual** image that also includes the **racist** contrast - Othello is black and Desdemona is white. Brabantio is shocked to the core.

### **2. Horses and Gennets and Beasts**

“You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse .....

You’ll have coursers for cousins and gennets for germans”.

*Act 2 Scene (ii)*

Another **explicit sexual image** with the North African, Barbary (Othello)- the race horses and the sexually neutral gennets or mules for relations.

Once again Brabantio is shocked to the core by Iago - a “profane wretch”.

Iago responds by telling him that his daughter and the Moor are

“now making the beast with two backs” -

i.e. having sexual intercourse in a demeaning and animalistic manner.

### **3. An Ass**

“I’ll make the Moor thank me, love me and reward me

For making him egregiously an ass”

Iago boasts about his ability to manipulate Othello.

“The Moor is of a free and open nature” ..... and will be led “by the nose as asses are.”

*Act 1 Scene (iii)*

4. Iago says he is 28 years old. (*Act 1 Scene (iii)*). Before he would “drown himself for the love of a **guinea - hen**” ( a prostitute) he would rather change “his humanity with a **baboon**”. In other words, love has no value for him. We see this in his attitude to his wife Emilia who ultimately brings about his downfall.

#### 5. Monster

“O beware, my lord, of jealousy;  
It is the green-eyed **monster** which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on”

*Act 3 Scene (iii)*

While making suggestions to Othello about Cassio being “honest”, about a “good name”, he warns him to beware of jealousy because it is destructive. In doing this he is **planting the idea** in Othello’s mind. He is not jealous now. (Yet!)

*Act 3 Scene (iii)*

#### 6. Toad

“I had rather be a toad,  
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
For others’ uses.” (Othello)

*Act 3 Scene (iii)*

Here, during Othello’s soliloquy, he is torn between **his conflicting feelings of love and hate** for Desdemona. Iago has manipulated him in making insinuations about Desdemona with Cassio and about Venetian women in general - he loses all confidence even though he still loves her.

7. “It is impossible you should see this  
Were they as **prime** as goats, as **hot** as monkeys,  
As **salt** as wolves in pride”

*Act 3 Scene (iii)*

The three words - “prime”, “hot” and “salt” mean sexually roused and

Iago is implying to Othello that Desdemona was with Cassio in his Dream.

## 8. Aspics

Othello is so “fraught”, so overcome by the suggestion that he says

“Arise, black vengeance”  
Let “love” yield “to tyrannous hate”  
For ‘tis “of aspics tongues” - it is poisonous  
(Rem. Cleopatra and the Asp)

## 9. “A horned man’s a monster and a beast” *Act 4 Scene (I)*

A cuckold, a deceived husband, loses control just like Othello does. When Rodovico arrives he is shocked that Othello could strike Desdemona and call her “devil”. Othello says “Cassio shall have my place” Cyprus is a place for “goats and monkeys” - sexually perverted animals - symbols for human lechery.

## 10. Dog

“I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him thus” *Act 5 Scene (I)*

Othello remembers that once in Aleppo he took a “malignant and turbaned Turk” and killed him and so he kills himself in like manner.

Also Roderigo (before he is killed by Iago) calls him “O inhuman dog” - a fitting end to their relationship.



## **D** **THE WEB**

Iago is the spider whose poisonous, powerful web will trap the unwieldy fly, Othello.

Goodness is entrapped by Evil.

Beauty is entrapped by Ugliness.

- ★ “As little a web as this  
Will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio”. (Iago) Act 2 Scene (I)
- ★ “I will turn her virtue into pitch  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all”. (Iago) Act 2 Scene (iii)
- ★ “Tis true there’s magic in the web of it”  
(Othello) Act 3 Scene (iii)
- ★ Why has that demi-devil  
“ensnared my soul and my body” (Othello) Act 5 Scene (ii)

## QUOTATIONS

1. Iago
2. Roderigo
3. Brabantio
4. Othello
5. Brabantio
6. Iago
7. Iago
8. Cassio
9. Othello
10. Iago. Envy

## QUOTATIONS

1. Iago: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" *Act 1 Scene (I)*

"In following him, I follow but myself"

His motive from the start is revenge. So he pretends friendship and loyalty but his only interest is self interest. He has become embittered because Cassio was promoted over him.

2. Roderigo: "You fair daughter, transported.....  
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor"

He fancies Desdemona and is exasperated that she married "thick-lips", a black Man.

3. Brabantio: “Are these not charms  
By which the property of youth and maidenhood  
May be abused?”

A father fears his daughter was deceived by magic charms, a “treason of blood” - she did not follow his wishes for her. She eloped.

4. Othello: “I love the gentle Desdemona” *Act 1 Scene (ii)*

His declaration is simple and unconditional. There are no strings attached.

“She loved me for the dangers I had passed  
And I loved her that she did pity them” *Act 1 Scene (iii)*

His stories of adventure and fearlessness won her heart. She admired him for his courage and his “valiant parts.”

“My soul hath her content so absolute” *Act 1 Scene (iii)*

Cassio: “He hath achieved a maid  
That paragons description and wild fame.” *Act 2 Scene (I)*

5. Brabantio: “Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceived her father and may thee”

Desdemona deceived her father and eloped - she may deceive Othello as as wife - an ominous warning in the light of what happens. Othello thinks she deceives him.

6. Iago: “Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains  
I must show out a flag and sign of love  
Which is indeed but sign.” *Act 1 Scene (I)*

His attitude to Othello is one of hate. But his outward appearance is a false one. So he sets out his stall as the villain and we wait to see his next move.

7. Iago: “Faith he tonight hath boarded a land carrock” *Act 1 Scene (iii)*

He, Othello, has married a beautiful - a carrock is a ship full of treasure. A metaphor for Desdemona.

8. Cassio: "O! I have lost my reputation. I have lost the immortal part Of myself".

The drinking session and fight has shamed him, he has lost his position of Officer, has betrayed Othello's trust.

9. Othello: "Cassio, I love thee:  
But never more be officer of mine". *Act 2 Scene (iii)*

Othello asserts his authority as Commander of Cyprus and puts his sense of duty above personal friendship.

- 10 Iago: Envy "like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards" *Act 2 Scene (I)*

Iago resents Othello's honest love, he thinks Cassio was with his wife Emilia and turns his resentment into a desire for revenge on both of them.

11. Othello: "I had rather be a toad  
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
For others' uses." *Act 3 Scene (iii)*

Othello begins to turn against Desdemona. He curses marriage and doesn't know if he loves or hates her.

12. Iago: "Not poppy, nor mandatory,  
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep  
Which thou ow'dst yesterday." *Act 3 Scene (iii)*

Iago gloats over Othello's personality disintegrating in front of him. He is cold and callous and tells us no drugs will help him to sleep in peace ever again.

13. The handkerchief had “magic in the web of it”.  
“A sibyl in her prophetic fury sewed the work”

It is not just a sentimental token of love. It symbolises success or failure in love. Its return becomes a symbol of Desdemona’s fidelity. “To lose it or Give it away” is “perdition” or Hell - consequences too awful to contemplate.

14. Othello says

Desdemona is “so delicate with her needle”  
“an admirable musician”  
“She will sing the savageness out of a bear”

And “O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!” *Act 4 Scene (I)*

He feels ATTRACTION and REPULSION.

His mind is poisoned by Iago’s promptings - “My heart is turned to stone”.

15. Desdemona asks

“What ignorant sin have I committed?” *Act 4 Scene (ii)*

Again her innocence and incredulity is obvious. She does not know in the end why he is so full of anger and fury. She is not a strumpet. She is no whore. She is no callat.

16. Othello: “Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur!  
Wash me in steepdown gulfs of liquid fire!  
O Desdemona! Desdemona! Dead!”

Othello is now in a Hell of his own making and nothing can change that fact. He realised that Iago has deceived him and wants to kill him. But Iago survives and will be punished by the State.

17. Othello sees himself as “one whose hand  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe.”                      *Act 5 Scene (I)*

Desdemona, the love his life, has been thrown away by his own foolishness. He has become self-aware. It's the realisation of his own weakness, his flaw.

18.                      “In Alleppo once  
                              Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
                              Beat a Venetian and produced the State,  
                              I took by the throat the circumcised dog”

Othello is the Turk, the pagan, the black man, the circumcised Moslem, the evil one who has beaten and killed.

Desdemona, the Christian, the Venetian, the loving one.

19.                      “I killed thee ere I killed thee, no way but this  
                              Killing myself to die upon a kiss”.

Othello dies loving Desdemona and attempts a spiritual reconciliation in his own death. He redeems himself through his suffering and death but tragically he is powerless to undo the catastrophe.

20.                      “O she was heavenly true!”                      *Act 5 Scene (ii)*

                              “He was great of heart”.                      *Act 5 Scene (ii)*

It's hard to imagine how things came to this end. It's the nature of Tragedy.

A great one has a FLAW - (Harmertia)  
This will lead to MISFORTUNE and death - CATASTROPHE.

The hero's misfortune is - INEVITABLE.  
The tragic emotions of - PITY and FEAR - are recognised by the audience who are drained emotionally - CATHARSIS.

Othello is a DOMESTIC TRAGEDY.