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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

## **Othello**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Priscilla Beth Baker



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *Othello*

ARGUABLY ONE OF SHAKESPEARE'S most famous tragedies, *Othello* is actually based on a tale called "Un Capitano Moro" ("A Moorish Captain") in Italian writer Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, written in 1565. The basic plot is similar, though in Cinthio's tale, the character of Iago is in love with Desdemona, and his manipulative actions are spurred by her rejection of him. Some readers may wonder at Shakespeare's decision to alter this pivotal plot detail, and the author has often been faulted for providing no clear motivation for Iago's actions. However, this aspect of Iago's character is also what makes him one of the most interesting villains in literature. He wreaks havoc for havoc's sake, and the audience is left fascinated by Iago's inexplicable evil.

The story is a simple one, but *Othello*'s motifs of prejudice, love, jealousy, evil, virtue, and honor have made it meaningful to audiences around the world. The play has been performed numerous times since its first performance in 1604; it has been adapted for film, television, and even ballet and opera.

Similar to the protagonist of Greek tragedies, the title character of *Othello* is a tragic hero who possesses a fatal flaw. Combined with the forces of fate, the tragic flaw leads to the hero's own downfall. Traditional Greek tragedies rely more heavily on the force of fate in determining the hero's outcome. In Shakespeare's tragedy, however, Othello is much less the helpless victim of fate and more the agent of his own undoing. Although his high ideals, his sense of honor, and his ability to administer justice without emotion all serve him well as a military leader, these same attributes also lead Othello to be manipulated by Iago; Othello regards Iago's word and the tenuous "ocular proof" of the handkerchief more than he does the pleas of his own wife. He condemns Desdemona based on supposition and his own insecurities, learning too late that he has "lov'd not wisely but too well."

## Formalist Approach Applied to *Othello*



### Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



## Activity One

### Examining Literary and Narrative Devices as Sources of Unity in the Play

1. Copy and distribute the following handouts:
  - *Othello*: Formalist Activity One, Graphic Organizer One
  - *Othello*: Formalist Activity One, Graphic Organizer Two
  - *Othello*: Formalist Activity One, Graphic Organizer Three
2. Have students individually complete Graphic Organizer One, finding examples of each literary device, symbol, or motif.
3. Put columns on the board with each device/symbol/motif as a heading.
4. Have students report their Graphic Organizer One findings and record additional examples of each device/concept on Graphic Organizer Two.
5. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
6. Have each group compile a tally of the number of occurrences and recurrences of the devices and concepts on Graphic Organizer Three.

*NOTE: Depending on the time available, you may want to redistribute the groups at least one time in order for students to compile as complete a tally as possible.*

7. Reconvene the class and have students answer the following questions:
  - Of the literary devices Shakespeare uses, which are the most prevalent? What particular incidents of these devices are most notable?
  - Which of the devices are related to *cadence* (or rhythm)? How does cadence affect the reader's perception of the play?
  - What do these devices contribute to the *tone* of the play? How does tone affect the reader's perception of the play?
  - What do these devices contribute to the *form* of the play? How does form affect the reader's perception of the work?



## Feminist Approach Applied to *Othello*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



## Activity One

### Examining Marriage and Gender Roles in *Othello* from a Feminist Perspective

1. Copy and distribute the handout *Othello: Feminist Activity One, Graphic Organizer One*.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
3. Have the students complete Graphic Organizer One. They should find

- three examples of men's attitude toward marriage
- three examples of women's attitude toward marriage
- three examples of men's attitude toward gender roles
- three examples of women's attitude toward gender roles

This activity works best if you tell students to find examples concerning only Othello's, Desdemona's, Iago's, or Emilia's perspective.

4. Put columns on the board. The headings should be the same as those on the graphic organizer.
5. Reconvene the class and have students report their Graphic Organizer One findings. Record the examples and Act/Scene/Line numbers on the board.
6. Have students discuss the following with reference to the *Gender Roles* column on the chart:
  - What are the gender roles assigned to women in the play? Are these traditional roles? Why or why not?
  - What are the gender roles assigned to men in the play? Are these traditional roles? Why or why not?
  - How do Othello and Desdemona both exemplify and deviate from the traditional gender stereotypes?
  - How do Iago and Emilia both exemplify and deviate from the traditional gender stereotypes?
  - If the play were set in the present day, do you think the gender roles would be portrayed in the same way? Why?

## Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Othello*



### Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!





## Activity One

### Examining Othello's Quest

1. Copy and distribute the following handouts:
  - *Othello*: Archetypal Activity One Information Sheet: Quest
  - *Othello*: Archetypal Activity One Graphic Organizer
2. Have students, either individually or in pairs, consider Othello's journey as an Archetypal Quest. They should complete the graphic organizer, indicating which events and characters correspond to the elements of the hero's quest.

You could remind students of the following:

- A variation of the traditional Hero's Quest could be the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong.
  - Some of the stages may be represented metaphorically rather than literally.
3. Reconvene the class and have students answer the following questions:
    - What are the motivations for Othello's journey? How does fate play a role?
    - Do Othello's motivations change? If so, how and why?
    - What are the preparations Othello makes for his journey? Consider the following:
      - accumulating essential knowledge
      - forming alliances
      - acquiring a mentor
    - What social and emotional skills must he acquire to be complete his quest?
    - Discuss the obstacles Othello encounters throughout his journey. How do these obstacles advance the plot? How do they contribute to a major theme of the play?
    - At what moment in the play does the reader become sure that Othello's quest will lead to tragedy? In what ways, if any, can his quest be considered successful?
    - What is Othello's tragic flaw, and how does it contribute to his downfall?
    - At the end of his quest, how has Othello changed since the beginning of the play?