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Did Othello love Desdemona?

It is a common knowledge that love makes people better. However, there are cases when lovers harm people. It can hardly be classified as a classic act of a loving person in a traditional sense. People in love state that love makes them uncontrolled and subjected to jealousy, envy, anger, and frustration. On the other hand, such negative emotions can show not the reverse side of love but just people's egotism hiding behind a mask of love. The present research aims to study whether Shakespeare's Othello experienced the force of love that in turn produced powerful emotion of hate resulting in a homicide, or he was simply egotistic and blind to the personality of his wife, who was in fact unable to cheat.

The important issue here is to study the nature of Othello's love. The basis of Othello's and Desdemona's love is pity (Adamson 117). It began when Othello told Desdemona about his exploits with eloquence: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/ And I loved her, that she did pity them"(I, iii, 160-167). Othello's power of speech turns to be very important for him. With it, he constructs his image for other people to see but, first of all, for himself (Adamson 118). Through eloquent speech Othello has "a self-glamorizing habit," and it is important for the understanding of the relationship between him and Desdemona (119). Othello got used to himself as a warrior, a self-composed and unruffled soldier.

In his speech before Senate, Othello puts himself so high as an outstanding military man that it becomes difficult for him to live up to that image in his personal life. Despite the

fact that Othello refers to himself in his speech twice as frequently as he does to Desdemona, Adamson insists that it is not a sign of his “complacent egotism” (125). Rather, when Othello speaks about Desdemona to the Senators, his tone is tender, and the case of their love is further proved by the arrival of Desdemona to testify in his favor, which is a loving and kind gesture that certifies her love for him (126). Being in love and newly married, Desdemona assumes that love ensures generosity, that is why she advocates for Cassio and makes her request to return Cassio as a test of Othello’s love for her: “If I have any grace or power to move you” (III, iii, 50).

In Act III, Iago is assured that his libel against Desdemona produced those powerful emotions in Othello when he wanted to kill her. However, Adamson argues that the reason for them was rather “the dynamics of Othello’s inner state, his shifting sense of his bond with Desdemona, and his turbulent, shifting sense of himself that conditions and accompanies it” (113). Othello is subdued by Desdemona’s power over him and his own ability to be hurt by her: “My life upon her faith!” (I, iii, 295) and “...when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (III, iii, 91-92). Having said that, Othello actually reveals his love to his wife and his need to love her. Desdemona now means everything to him because she gives his life and his whole self purpose, cohesion and order. She secures his life and does not let it fall apart (Adamson 141).

Another shock for Othello came as a realization of Desdemona’s earthliness. Cavell argues that “dirty banter” between her and Iago as they wait for Othello at Cyprus reveals that Desdemona is “flesh and blood” (40). By that moment, Desdemona becomes very important for Othello and he equates her with himself. Therefore, if she is flesh and blood then he is too. According to Cavell, Othello cannot forgive Desdemona for “existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain’s captain” (40).

As Othello rushed into the relationship with Desdemona he did not know very well either her or his feelings for her. When the basis – his glorious image – was shaken, he thought there was nothing left. Othello believed that Desdemona has nothing left to love him for. By the middle of the play, “the gap visibly widens between what he rhetorically claims to be, and what his feelings (and denials of feelings) inexorably push him to recognize he actually is”(Adamson 119). Othello blames Desdemona:

O perjur'd woman! thou dost stone my heart,  
 And mak'st me call what I intend to do  
 A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.

(V, ii, 63-65)

After looking into Othello's story of how this love came to be, how quickly he believed Iago, and how their final encounter is handled, one may think that Othello never truly loved Desdemona. Indeed, there were so many 'mistakes' from Othello's part. He blindly succumbed to Iago's lies, humiliated Desdemona in public and hit her, and finally murdered Desdemona. From one side, no one can truly love someone, and then kill one's lover over a dispute without even listening to the others side. If we call it love then that love consists of ignorance of self as well as ignorance of the beloved side. John Holloway calls it “a matter of self-centred and self-regarding satisfaction – pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite, love of loving” (Adamson 157). However, from the other side, it would be a very primitive understanding of life to believe that love should be only 'positive.' If human nature is distorted, then such human being's love will go awry, too. Adamson objects that it is a “basic assumption” that 'love' must necessarily express itself in 'positive' feelings while “violent revulsion, vindictiveness, destructive curses, crude self-pity, and all such negative feelings, must indicate a lack of real 'love'” (157). Therefore, *Othello* explores the matter of a

turbulent love. Hoping to love quietly and happily Othello and Desdemona had their expectations shattered in a tragic way.

Despite demonstrating his ardent feelings to Desdemona at the beginning and in the middle of the play, Othello could not go beyond his passion and truly and deeply learn what kind of person Desdemona is. Othello is seen in a number of scenes where he demonstrates his insecurities. Both Roderigo and Cassio reject Iago's accusations of Desdemona's infidelity as absurd, while Othello's insecurity and readiness to satiate his fears makes him believe Iago completely. Iago simply uses Othello's predisposition, who is very confident professionally but seems to be very insecure personally. Iago only hints and Othello makes conclusions that it is 'unnatural' for a woman to fall in love and marry someone like him (III, iii, 186). Iago is not a cause of why Othello acted the way he did, but just a catalyst. Othello believes Iago's insinuations against Desdemona because they correspond to his fears concerning her. Iago himself was surprised to see Othello react so vehemently. However, such a readiness to respond in Othello is explained by his fear to hear such things that Iago says or implies.

Not having overcome his insecurities, Othello kills Desdemona without even listening to her version of the story. Murray argues that the reason for that might be "the psycho-structure of a patriarchal subjectivity, ideology, and economy whose motivation is the displacement of the Other and the subsequent domination of the Other" (62). Cavell insists that displacement and dominance are both present in Othello as the inability "to know or be known by the Other" (27). He suggests that Othello is unwilling to believe Desdemona, or equally is willing not to believe her, because he refuses to acknowledge her as his partner and is unable to see her for what she is. For Othello it is tormenting to know that the Other has such a great power on him. Because of it, even before Iago began to scheme, Desdemona has been "loss as well as gain" for the previously fearless soldier (Bloom 13). Othello sounds

rueful when he speaks of having exchanged his “unhoused free condition” for his love of “the gentle Desdemona” (I, ii, 27-28).

The blend of insecurity and fear begets jealousy. “Jealousy in Shakespeare... is a mask for the fear of death, since what the jealous lover fears is that there will not be time or space enough for himself”(Bloom 14).The case of Othello distorting and blowing things up is so violent that there was found a medical term for it – *laesa imagination*, imagination infected (Werner von Koppenfels 185). For example, Desdemona’s willingness to elope with him is regarded by Othello not as a sign of her loyalty to him but as a premonitory symptom of her infidelity. Othello’s “both mental and erotic derangement” is “the classical case of *laesa imaginatio*, a corruption of fancy induced by jealous love that will prove a sickness unto death” (187).

Othello and Desdemona had their great moments but each had a different idea of the way they should love. Othello is a romantic but masculine hero who is ready to die for his love (“If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy” – II, i, 184) while Desdemona is romantic too but she intends to live long happily ever after (“our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow” – II, i, 223- 25). With the development of the play the protagonists do not come closer to each other. Each is trapped in his or her understanding of life and love but Othello’s vision of love is being transformed at that.

In fact, one of the central concerns of the play is the ability of quite genuine and profound love to release destructive energies as naturally as positive ones; and this Shakespeare’s play traces that ability through the development of Othello’s crisis, and especially in those moments when ‘negative’ feelings mount up most potently and uncontrollably in Othello’s heart. At the end of the day, Othello is “one who love’d not wisely but too well” (V, ii, 353).

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