

The Unnatural End of Desdemona at the Hands of Othello

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Abstract

The unnatural killing of Desdemona by husband Othello, is, indeed, a sad commentary on the power of jealousy that can make men kill their wives, who might or might not have been unfaithful! In this paper Shakespeare's Desdemona and the cutting short of her sweet life with the husband she loved so much so as to even cross her powerful father, is considered for a critical analysis. There have been many women throughout history and many more in fiction who have eloped to marry the men of their dreams and lived ever after – a happy married life or not, one can never be sure! Desdemona was not destined to live happily ever after, as we know, due to the wiles of the cunning devilish Iago and the jealous possessive suspicious nature of husband Othello. This paper will make an attempt to show how the bold and independent girl became a victim of treachery and jealous anger.

Keywords: Othello, Desdemona, Unfaithful wife, Suspicion, Jealous husband

Introduction



The heartless killing of **Desdemona** (Shakespeare, *Othello*) is a sad end to a fairy tale, a romantic elopement and marriage for love.

The period of the Renaissance and Reformation was the time when Europeans were coming into increasing contact with the people of darker pigmentation in Africa, Asia and the Americas and were making judgments about them. The play does not focus on the race relations, but the very introduction of Othello is based on his color of the skin, thick lips and so on, even before his name is mentioned.

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, laws were also passed in North America forbidding marriage between Whites and Blacks and discriminating against the mixed offspring of informal liaisons. Such laws implied that Blacks were unalterably alien and inferior.

Desdemona

First, let us consider **DESDEMONA** (from Shakespeare's *Othello*) - the beautiful romantic woman. Desdemna was the daughter of a rich senator BraBantio of Venice. She was a strong minded yet soft hearted woman. She was intuitive - the ability to understand or work by instinct. She was sought after by diverse suitors, both on account of her own virtues and also her rich heritage. But among suitors of her own clime and complexion, she saw none whom she could choose for herself. Desdemona regarded the mind more than the features of men. With a singularity admired by readers, she had chosen for the object of her affections a Moor, a black. She loved the bravery of the black man and the color of his skin did not matter to her. She was excited to listen to the narration of the bloody battle field adventures which the Moor had passed through, the perils he had been exposed to by land and water, and how he had entered a breach, or marched up to the mouth of a cannon. These stories enchanted the mind of Desdemona. The generous lady Desdemona married the hero 'The Moor' privately and she selected him as her husband without the permission of her father BraBantio who may be considered a racist.

Desdemona's Choice and Decision

Neither Othello's colour nor his fortune were such that one could hope BraBantio would accept him for a son-in-law though he liked Othello and used to invite him to his house. He had left his daughter free. It was against his will she had married him. He feels he was deceived by Desdemona when she chose the Moor. Desdemona opts to go with her husband deserting her father. She proves she is strong in her mind. Later the father does agree to the union and he showers his gifts and goodwill upon the couple.

Self-effacing

Later, this bold independent woman became a self-effacing and submissive wife. Unfortunately, the innocent guiltless young wife was killed by her own husband Othello who accuses her of infidelity with terrible jealousy which had been kindled to a great flame by the villain Iago. Othello became insane with blind envy. The main reason for the death of Desdemona was the jealousy of Iago against Cassio who was the close trusted lieutenant of Othello.

Desdemona is a more plausible, well-rounded figure than she has been given credit for. Arguments that see Desdemona as stereotypically weak and submissive ignore the conviction and authority of her first speech ("My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty" [I.iii.179–180]) and her firm declaration after Othello strikes her ("I have not deserved this" [IV.i.236]).

Jesting

Similarly, critics, who argue that Desdemona's slightly bizarre bawdy jesting with Iago in (Act II, scene i,) is either an interpolation not written by Shakespeare, or a mere vulgarity, ignore the fact that Desdemona is young, sexual, and recently married. She later displays the same chiding, almost mischievous wit in Act III, scene iii, lines 61–84, when she attempts to persuade Othello to forgive Cassio.

Submissive

Desdemona is at times a submissive character, most notably in her willingness to take credit for her own murder. In response to Emilia's question, "O, who hath done this deed?" Desdemona's final words are, "*Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell*". (V.ii.133–134) The play, then, depicts Desdemona contradictorily as a self-effacing, faithful wife and as a bold, independent personality. This contradiction may be intentional, meant to portray the way Desdemona herself feels after defending her choice of marriage to her father in Act I, scene iii, and then almost immediately being put in the position of defending her fidelity to her husband.

Supremely Independent

As the play opens, she is shown as a supremely independent person, but midway through, she begins to struggle against all odds to convince Othello that she is not *too* independent. The manner in which Desdemona is murdered - smothered by a pillow in a bed covered by her wedding sheets—is symbolic: she is literally suffocated beneath the demands put on her fidelity by a possessive husband. Since speaking her first lines, Desdemona has seemed capable of meeting or

even rising above those demands. But, finally, through the evil offices of Iago, Othello is pushed to the extreme and he stifles the speech that made Desdemona so alive.

Untainted Love

Desdemona's untainted love is seen here: When Othello becomes insane, he chides and blames the blameless beauty Desdemona. She replies, 'No, I'm a Christian; I'm a child to chiding...it is my wretched fortune; or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense, delighted them in any other form, and his unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love'. With pure innocence like a child she asks Emilia, 'That there be women do abuse their husbands in such gross kind? I don't believe such a woman.' The fact is 'she doesn't know what 'cuckold' means. She was an innocent woman a faithful wife.

Premonition of Imminent Death

Tragically, Desdemona is having some kind of premonition about her imminent death. She, not Othello, asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed, and she asks Emilia to bury her in these sheets should she die first. The last time we see Desdemona before she awakens to find Othello standing over her with murder in his eyes, she sings a song she learned from her mother's maid, in Barbary, "She was in love; and he proved mad / And did forsake her. She had a song of willow. / . . . / And she died singing it. That song tonight / Will not go from my mind". (IV.iii.27–30) Like the audience, Desdemona seems able to merely watch as her husband as he is driven insane with jealousy. Though she maintains to the end that she is "guiltless," Desdemona is proving herself as a good Christian by forgiving her husband. (V.ii.133) Her forgiveness of Othello may help the audience to forgive him as well, as his mind had been poisoned by the heinous Iago.

Reference

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