CURRENT TRENDS IN THE INTERPRETATION

OF OTHELLO

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CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND OF OTHELLO

Othello, one of the most controversial creations of William Shakespeare, is also one of the most romantic of Shakespeare's heroes. Othello is romantic partly from the strange life of war and adventure which he has lived from childhood. There is something mysterious in his wanderings in vast deserts and among marvellous peoples; in his tales of magic handkerchiefs; in the sudden vague glimpses of numberless battles and sieges in which he has played the hero and has borne a charmed life; and even in chance references to his baptism, his being sold to slavery, and his sojourn in Aleppo.¹ The very strength and greatness of his nature--his love, his imagination, his lack of suspicion, and his modesty--give Iago his villainous opportunity. "His error lies not in being foolishly ignorant of evil in the world, but in failing to identify Iago with that evil."² He has been called an illusion of life, not a translation. Although his character may seem inconsistent, he is not an illusion, but a paradox.

¹A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London, 1914), pp. 187-188.

There have been many different interpretations of Othello. Bradley says he comes to us almost as if from wonderland. Knight writes, "Othello as he appears in the action of the play may be considered the high priest of human endeavor, robed in vestments of Romance, whom we watch serving in the Temple of War at the Altar of Love's divinity. Desdemona is his divinity." However, not all criticisms have been so fulsome.

Elmer Edgar Stoll suggests that Othello is not a personality, not a psychological entity—unless, indeed, a badly gullible, jealous one—but a tabula rasa, or changing the figure, clay in the potter's hands, that Iago's arts may prosper and prevail. Although Othello is not completely blameless, critics have offered some very convincing points on the justification of his actions. Consideration will be given to his justification later in this thesis.

This thesis will be mostly concerned with the twentieth-century criticism of Othello; some attention will be given to earlier criticism to determine to what extent twentieth-century criticism fits into patterns of thinking before the

3 Bradley, p. 187.


5 Elmer Edgar Stoll, Othello: An Historical and Comparative Study (Minneapolis, 1915), p. 21.
twentieth century. Some consideration will be given to the background of Othello before taking up the various aspects and periods of criticism.

Most critics agree that Shakespeare used Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1584) as source material for *Othello*; however, Shakespeare's tragedy is so different from Cinthio's novel that it would be more accurate to say he was inspired by Cinthio. In Shakespeare all the characters are sharpened and accentuated. The evil ones are more evil, and the noble ones are more noble. Shakespeare adds two characters, Brabantio and Roderigo, who are not in Cinthio's tale.

In Cinthio's novel and in Shakespeare's play, the hero is the Moor of Venice, a military leader who is sent to Cyprus to take command. The perfect initial harmony between Othello and his new wife is depicted in both works by Desdemona's decision to go to Cyprus with her husband. As Draper points out, "Desdemona is a crucial figure in Shakespeare's plot, introduced to the audience with elaborate care and greatly developed beyond the pale figure in the Italian source." 6

In Cinthio's novel, the wicked Ensign is passionately in love with Desdemona; and when all his attempts to win

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her love are unsuccessful, he imagines that the reason must be that she is in love with the Lieutenant. The wicked Ensign is determined to rid himself of his rival. His love for Desdemona is changed into the bitterest hatred; from this time forward, he is determined to bring about the death of the Lieutenant and to prevent the Moor from finding in Desdemona's love the pleasure which is denied to himself. In Shakespeare, however, the Ensign is portrayed so wickedly that some writers have called him a demi-devil. He does not love Desdemona any more than he does any other woman. His main motive is to get revenge on Othello for giving the lieutenantcy to Cassio and to take Cassio's place.

Cinthio's Ensign has a little girl three years old. Desdemona comes to visit the Ensign's wife; and while she is there, the Ensign gives her the little girl to hold. When she takes the little girl, he slips the handkerchief from her waist. The Ensign purposely drops the handkerchief in the Lieutenant's bedroom. The Lieutenant knows that it is Desdemona's and knocks at her back door to return it; but Othello answers the door, causing the Lieutenant to slink away. The Lieutenant, thus thwarted, gives the handkerchief to his wife to copy the design. She copies the design while standing in a window where she can be seen by passers-by. The wicked Ensign has only to point her out to the Moor to convince him that all the lies he has been telling are true.
In Shakespeare the plot is more complicated. Iago had to persuade Emilia to take the handkerchief; otherwise, Iago's cunning treachery would never be revealed at the end of the play. It is Emilia who unravels the mystery.

Cassio does not know to whom the handkerchief belongs; he gives it to Bianca, a prostitute. After Bianca has taken it home to re-copy (here again fate takes sides with villainy), she decides that she is being mocked and brings the handkerchief back to Cassio. Othello is nearby and sees her return the handkerchief to Cassio. Only a fool could doubt what he sees with his own eyes. Othello's only alternative was to believe in Honest Iago!

Desdemona's death scene is more horrible in Cinthio's novel than it is in the tragedy, and the character of the Moor is less noble in the novel. Cinthio's Moor commands the Ensign to hide himself in a room adjoining Desdemona and the Moor's bedchamber. When the Ensign makes a noise, the Moor tells Desdemona to rise and see what it is. She very obediently rises to see what it is, and the Ensign gives her a violent blow on the head with a stocking filled with sand. When she calls to her husband for help, he accuses her of infidelity and refuses to help her. The murder is concealed by pulling the ceiling down and making it appear to be an accident. Afterwards, the Moor begins to hate the Ensign and finally banishes him.
In Shakespeare, Othello himself kills Desdemona by strangling her. At the same time, he is waging a great conflict within himself. While she is sleeping, he kisses her and says: "Ah, balmy breath, that doth almost persuade/ Justice to break her sword!" The tempest within his breast continues to mount. Finally, in the death scene, he gives us a little insight into his feelings. He does not realize that the storm is raging within his own breast, and he projects his feelings onto the physical world. After he thinks he has killed her, he immediately says:

My wife! my wife! what wife? I have no wife:
O, insupportable! O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.  

These lines are Shakespeare's masterpiece in depicting a noble character and his unyielding devotion to duty and honor. Othello clings tightly to his sense of values, thereby making it impossible for him to forgive Desdemona when he is still so passionately in love with her that he says, "Thou smell'st so sweet/That the sense aches at thee." 

7William Shakespeare, Othello, V, 16-17. This and all subsequent textual references to Shakespeare's plays are based on The Complete Works of Shakespeare, edited by Hardin Craig (Chicago, 1951), unless otherwise noted.

8Ibid., II. 97-101.

9Ibid., IV, II, 68-69.
Othello does not kill Desdemona sneakingly; he warns her in advance that he is going to kill her. He tells her why he is going to kill her and asks her to confess her guilt. Desdemona faces an ironic crisis; she is a victim of fate. It is in vain that she denies the guilt, because Othello has mistaken Roderigo's dying words to be Cassio's confession of guilt. Nor does Othello try to conceal the murder of Desdemona. He readily confesses to Emilia that he has killed Desdemona. Later, he tells Lodovico that he has done it all in honor.

Cinthio's novel ends on a note of displeasure. No satisfaction of justice is attained. The Moor is banished for life and is finally killed by Desdemona's relatives. The wicked Ensign lives to commit another evil. This leaves the reader with the feeling that he should die a double death. He is not killed, but dies as a result of torment, and that for the lesser of the two evils he committed.10 It appears that there are "no stones left in Heaven," but that by accident fate has turned traitor when only the Ensign is left to be destroyed.

In Shakespeare's tragedy, after Othello has stifled Desdemona, Emilia unravels the complicated plot of her husband, but it is too late. Heilman writes,

Othello appears before the court of his own conscience, is sentenced to death by himself. He takes on the same multiplicity of roles that had led to gross injustice in his dealing with Desdemona; his incompetence in the earlier case he purges by his sentencing himself now: justice is served finally by the death of the judge.

Othello does not hesitate in judging himself by the same rules he has applied to Desdemona. He says, "In my sense 'tis happiness to die," because, like the base Indian, he has thrown a pearl away richer than all his tribe. He realizes it soon after he has killed Desdemona.

Although Shakespeare acquired some of the main ideas of his plot from Cinthio's novel, Shakespeare protrudes himself into his writing to such an extent that Othello is a continuation of his previous writings. Goddard even suggests that Othello grew out of Hamlet.

On the principle of analogy between the successive works of a poet and the successive dreams of a dreamer, a character with a double personality in an earlier work may appear as two characters in a later one, as the promise of both Julius Caesar and Brutus may be traced into the man who was, variously, Hal, Prince Henry, and King Henry V.  

Goddard points out that Hamlet is the paradoxical mixture of good and evil. It is as if the tension between these poles of his nature sought an equilibrium too unstable.

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11 Robert B. Heilman, Magic in the Web (Lexington, 1956), 163.

to be maintained, so that, like a cell that bifurcates, 
Hamlet in the next world—in Othello—divides into Desdemona 
and Iago.

Hamlet’s most endearing traits—his ingenuousness, his 
modesty, his trustfulness, his freedom, his courage, his 
love, and his sympathetic imagination—are all Desdemona’s. 
His darker and more detestable ones, which are his suspicion, 
his coarseness, his cruelty, his sensuality, his savage 
hatred, his bloodiness, and his revenge are all Iago’s.

Othello and Cassio, standing between the extremes, in 
a way inherit and continue the divided nature of Hamlet. 
Both of them are much like Desdemona in firmness of im-
pulse, in tenderness, in trustfulness, and in openness and 
freedom. “Shakespeare had to endow all three with these 
qualities to make the machinations of Iago credible.”13 His 
plot would have been frustrated if any one of them had been 
lacking in faith. In a sense, Iago is contrasted with 
Desdemona, Othello and Cassio. Their weaknesses are Iago’s 
opportunities.

According to Goddard, the ignoble qualities of Hamlet— 
his melancholy, his brooding, his hesitancy, his hysteria— 
which neither Desdemona nor Iago inherits are the result of

13 Ibid., p. 457.
the strife between his two selves, and when the two have been split apart the strife naturally ceases. It is replaced by the strife between Iago and Desdemona for the possession of Othello.

The main criticism of Othello is against the conduct of its hero. McCloskey writes, "The tragedy lies in the fact that Othello allows his emotions to usurp his reason, and judging, therefore, by appearances and hearsay evidence he confronts neither of the accused parties with their alleged crimes."\footnote{14}

Many critics feel that a real Othello would have gone to his wife for an explanation, and a real Desdemona would have found a chance to explain, but it is with cunning insight that Iago counts on the fact that Othello cannot go directly to Desdemona with his suspicions. Jordan points out, "If one's wife is honest, one does not casually bring charges of infidelity against her."\footnote{15} It must be done in a subtle way, which is the method Othello tried to use when he demanded the handkerchief of Desdemona.

Critics have given various reasons for Desdemona's denial of the loss of the handkerchief. Stoll writes, "Desdemona, importunate in Cassio's favor, is deceitful in
\footnote{15}Jordan, p. 151.
denying the loss of the handkerchief. Another critic says that her extreme timidity leads her in a moment of extreme confusion and terror to prevaricate about the fatal handkerchief.

Goddard proclaims that Desdemona's most divine act was dropping the handkerchief. She did not lie when she told Othello she did not lose the handkerchief because when Desdemona placed the handkerchief on Othello's forehead to ease his headache, he pushed her hand away; therefore, Othello had actually dropped it. Goddard reminds us that she valued love more than a token of love or she would have unconsciously stooped down to pick up the handkerchief. Every fiber of her soul and body, conscious or unconscious, is so totally devoted to Othello that the handkerchief ceases to exist for the moment. Desdemona probably thought the handkerchief had been misplaced in the house somewhere, and that it would be found later. She was used to having a maid, Emilia, take care of her things. She expected to find it safe in the drawer with her other things after the next laundry day. There was no reason for Desdemona to


18 Goddard, p. 471.
suspect that a handkerchief would be stolen and carried away.
Desdemona's losing the handkerchief was an ordinary situation;
anyone might be guilty of the act almost any day of his life.

Godard vindicates Othello on the basis of his age, his
brief acquaintance with his wife, and his ignorance of
Venetian society—resulting in his self distrust and willing-
ness to accept Iago's account of its habits. Othello re-
garded Desdemona's love for him as a dream too beautiful to
be true. When it was suggested to him that it was not true,
this was what he had been ready to believe all the time.

Iago uses Othello's most prized possession to bring
about the downfall. Othello could have controlled himself
even in a crisis had it involved anything other than his
wife. Only his love for Desdemona could have provoked
Othello to such jealousy.

In one respect Othello is unusual among Shakespeare's
tragedies. Othello does not act at once upon the theme of
the play; till toward its close he is acted on, and that by
an enemy. Johnson says, "Through the whole play he is
rather an instrument than an agent."¹⁹ Throughout most of
the drama, the field of action is in the hero's mind. "The
hero is not, like Macbeth, driven into his fatal cause by
an ungovernable trait of his own character; nor does he

¹⁹Elmer Edgar Stoll, "Mainly Controversy: Hamlet,
wage war against a powerful adversary, as Hamlet does."20
In Othello the doubtful conflict between contrary passions,
though dreadful, continues only for a short time.

Hamlet, a man of thought, has been condemned for not
rushing out immediately after the Ghost's disclosure and
killing Claudius; instead he waited for proof. Othello, a
man of action, aroused by a far more substantial being than
a ghost, is in his turn condemned because he makes up his
mind too quickly, and as Jordan points out, does not pro-
crastinate while awaiting genuine proof. "The spirit of
such criticism is that of the historian who derides a medi-
eval man for believing the world to be flat."21

Othello is certainly culpable in one thing: his emo-
tional conviction that Desdemona has no right to her own
defense, and that he himself is judge, prosecuting attorney,
jury, and executioner. Othello tells Desdemona that he is
killing her because she has been false to him, and then he
refuses to believe her when she denies the charge of un-
faithfulness. Some critics suggest that Othello's actions
are indications of immaturity and incompleteness of love
on his part. There is some failure of response to, and

20 Hazelton Spencer, The Art and Life of William
Shakespeare (N. Y., 1940), p. 317.

21 Jordan, p. 150.
potential acceptance of, the whole being of the loved one, and there is probably a hint of self-pity.

To understand and sympathize with Othello, it is necessary to understand Iago also, because the entire play hinges on the manner in which Iago is presented. "The reasonableness of Othello's belief in Iago's insinuations and assertions depends on the reputation and personality of Iago." It is not enough for appearance to make it possible for some to trust him, but it must make it unreasonable for anyone not to trust him.

In our play one may see Iago as close to pure evil. Yet he has a military record unspotted. He has convinced all of his friends and Othello that he is an honest fellow.

Hallet says of Iago:

He has seen much hard fighting, and is considered a tried soldier. He has extraordinary cunning, of a low, narrow-minded sort, but is not intellectual and can boast of little education. He is grossly cynical, but serves up this cynicism with a sauce of honesty which conveys the idea that he is trying to make himself out worse than he is. He uses coarse language and blunt speech, which suggests a man who is too honest to conceal his thoughts. He is always ready with sympathy and practical advice for friends in trouble.23

Hoderigo consults Iago about his love affairs, Cassio gains advice about how to regain his lieutenancy, Desdemona

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23 Ibid., p. 279.
asks him to help her regain Othello's affection, and Othello consults him always. Iago is not a gentleman, true, but then he is always such an honest fellow!

Up to the scene which immediately precedes the play, Iago's life has run on a straight course with no rival to remove and no injury to avenge; nothing has occurred to bring out the evil below the surface.

In the scene immediately preceding the play, Iago has been done an injustice in that preferment has been given by "letter and affection" and not by "old gradation." Cassio has been given the lieutenancy which Iago expected for himself. Masefield says, "Iago is a man of fine natural intellect who has not been trained in the personal qualities that bring preferment. An educated man is advanced above him." Bowman feels that the victory of Cassio and defeat of Iago had been determined by social and cultural differences, and that Cassio's receiving the lieutenancy is the direct outgrowth of Othello's sense of class differences. Some writers feel that Othello chose Cassio because Othello owed him a good turn for assisting during love affairs. However, Goddard insists, our awareness of injustice should not induce

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sympathy for Iago or detract from our essential compassion for Othello, because the giving of preferment by letter and affection and not by old gradation is too universal a fault.

A great deal has been written about the motives of Iago. Coleridge called Iago's thoughts "the motive hunting of a motiveless malignity." It is not "motiveless malignity"; it is malignity sharpened and accentuated by a keen sense of personal danger. Iago does not become villainous all in a moment. He is unaccustomed to knavery. He first tries a piece of mischief in arousing Brabantio against Othello. He knows that nothing serious will come of it, because Othello's service is too valuable to the state. But it satisfies his obsession to manipulate his superiors in rank and birth.

It is obvious that Iago's first motive was revenge. He planned to get Othello to make him lieutenant to take Cassio's place. This he accomplished. When Othello tells Cassio "nevermore be officer of mine," a few lines later he turns to Iago and says, "Iago, look with care about the town."

Tannenbaum says Iago's second motive for revenge was the rumors of an affair between Emilia and Othello. Iago

does not merely say that he suspects Othello of adultery with Emilia, but he says that "it is thought abroad."
Coleridge calls it "rationalization," but Tannenbaum justifies Iago because Iago confesses he does not know whether there is any truth in the rumor but that "for mere suspicion of that kind [he] will do as if for surety."
Tannenbaum argues that "no person indulging in 'rationalization' would admit such a thought to his conscious mind." He will not confess himself a villain and admit to himself that there is a flaw in his "rationalization" if he is so ethically constituted that he needs to "rationalize" his motives. Therefore, Iago does think that his wife has been "seduced" (Tannenbaum's word) by his general.

Tannenbaum insists that Iago's accusation cannot be regarded as a "rationalization" or an after-thought because it occurs in the first act of the play. Chambers also notes that it is given in a soliloquy; however, he maintains, "It is hardly to be supposed that this suspicion is meant to have any foundation. Othello's behavior to Emilia certainly lends it no credence, . . . it is clear that for Iago himself it is an occasion rather than a motive for treachery."

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Tannenbaum presents a very provocative argument when he says that if Shakespeare wanted us to dismiss Iago's "suspicions" as an "impossibility," he would have portrayed Emilia as a woman regarding whose chastity there could have been no doubt. Instead, she is portrayed as a lewd and filthy-speaking harlot. In her conversation with Desdemona, in reply to a direct question, she does not repudiate the possibility of cuckolding her husband. Everything she says indicates that she regards a life of wantonness as a very trivial matter which can be easily defended. Bradley notes the coarseness of her nature without condemning her seriously. "She nowhere shows any sign of having a bad heart; but she is common, sometimes vulgar, in minor matters far from scrupulous, blunt in perception and feeling and quite destitute of imagination."

Some writers consider her language to be typical of ladies-in-waiting of Elizabethan drama. Emilia's private conversation with Cassio and Othello suggests neither the intimacy of lovers nor the embarrassed formality of those who were once lovers. Draper agrees that conversation between Emilia and Othello indicates a mutual respect until Othello has committed the murder; but "after the discovery

\[30\] Ibid., p. 60.

\[31\] Bradley, p. 239.
of the murder, the relations show a strain that snaps the amenities of politeness: he calls her 'woman' with an occasional contemptous thou. 32

It is questionable as to whether Othello would have entrusted his wife to the companionship of Emilia if he had known her to be a lewd woman. Tannenbaum points out that under the circumstances he had no alternative. Also, he knew that Emilia could be trusted to be discreet, and he knew that Desdemona could be trusted.

True, there is nothing in the play to contradict the rumor of Emilia's infidelity or make it seem improbable. Even though Othello is a middle-aged man, it is clearly evident that he is not devoid of sexual "appetite." Tannenbaum charges Othello with a lack of delicacy and reticence that chamberers have when, at the first meeting of the lovers in Cyprus, Othello says to his bride:

Come, my dear love,
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;
That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you. 33

Elliott 34 and Tannenbaum both agree that Othello's fury at Cassio later in the scene is aggravated by the interruption of his amatory rites.

32Draper, pp. 78-80.
33Othello, II, iii, 8-9.
34G. R. Elliott, Flaming Minister (Durham, 1953), p. 92.
It is because Cassio, for whom he had not long since overridden military rule, had now poisoned his delight, that Othello is so unforgiving and so ready to accept Iago's cunningly distorted version of the night brawl.35

In a man thus constituted, the accusation of his guilty relations with Emilia is more plausible. However, even though it is clearly evident that the Othello-Desdemona marriage was not a Platonic, or non-sexual, union, that is not sufficient evidence to convict Othello of adultery with his ancient's wife.

Tannenbaum asserts that Othello's interview with Emilia, especially the last five lines where Othello says,

Bid her come hither. Go. She says enough; yet she's a simple bawd That cannot say as much. This is a subtle whore, And yet she'll kneel and pray; I have seen her do't.36

furnishes irrefutable proof not only of the latter's character but of Othello's guilty relations with her; and that when he thinks of her as "a subtle whore," he speaks from experience.

There are some important factors which Tannenbaum overlooks in his criticism of Othello. When he suggests that if Emilia had not been "a subtle whore," she would have called her husband to avenge the insult, he has apparently overlooked the fact that Emilia is not on the stage. She has been sent to bring Desdemona to Othello; therefore she has no opportunity to take offense at Othello's speech.

35Tannenbaum, p. 59. 36Othello, IV, ii, 19-23.
Most critics agree that Othello's remarks are directed to Desdemona when he begins "This is a subtle whore," and not to Emilia. This does seem to be the most logical conclusion since it is not likely that Othello would have had the opportunity to see Emilia "kneel and pray." Othello and Iago were usually together in military campaigns; consequently, it would have been difficult for Othello to be alone with Emilia for a very long period of time. On the other hand, even the brief, turbulent honeymoon would have afforded Othello some opportunity to see Desdemona kneel and pray. Harrison says, "The word 'bawd' stirs up in his mind the thought that these two are in partnership, Desdemona the whore, and Emilia the keeper of the door." 37

Even though Draper does not uphold Tannenbaum's criticism of Othello's guilt, he points out that Iago is not inherently wicked, but that his revenge was dictated to him by the code of his society. "The drama of the time shows that a wife's adultery, real or suspected, was supposed to be revenged with death." 38 Othello and Iago both seem to have accepted circumstantial evidence. The fact that such

a disgrace was merely "thought abroad" obliged any honorable man as Iago says, "for mere suspicion in that kind" to "do as if for surety."\textsuperscript{39}

According to the moral code of that time, some action on Iago's part was due. He could kill both offenders. This might offer Iago an attractive solution except for the fact that Othello was Iago's superior officer, and even though civil law might overlook the stabbing of one's wife's lover, martial law would hardly overlook the stabbing of the commander-in-chief, regardless of Iago's motive. It seems that the only course for Iago to choose was dissimulation and secret plots. Draper not only approves of Iago's course, but asserts that it is a course that any authority on conduct of the day would have approved. "Is Iago then so black a villain? Is he not a commonplace Renaissance soldier, 'honest as this world goes,' caught in the full grip of circumstance and attempting along conventional lines to vindicate his honor?"\textsuperscript{40} If honesty and honor be the same, is he not from first to last "honest Iago"? This gives an even richer irony to Othello's reiterated phrase; it was this very honesty that caused Othello's ruin.

Draper's argument for Honest Iago would perhaps vindicate Iago completely if it were not for the fact that even Iago mentions the rumor as a second motive. He clearly

\textsuperscript{39}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{40}Ibid., p. 736.
states that his first motive is to get revenge on Othello for preferring Cassio before him.

Iago had no foresight; he did not anticipate the outcome. He intended only to make Othello love and thank him, but when he tells Othello of the handkerchief, Othello, in an outburst of fury, demands proof; therefore, some critics believe Iago's third motive was fear. His life was at stake; he must win. He must kill Cassio before there is time for explanation. Iago does not want Desdemona to die. In Act III he pleads "let her live," but after he has time to think, he begins to wonder if perhaps Othello will believe Desdemona; so he plans Desdemona's death warrant. He was selfish at the beginning, but not malignant; he was "driven" into unforeseen crime by successive impulses of resentment, jealousy and fear.

When Desdemona sends for Iago to ask for advice about her husband's estrangement, Iago soothes her with words of consolation. Even though he is uncomfortable, there is no possibility of his relenting. He is beyond the reach of true pity. He has reached the point of no return. Every step forces him on until he reaches a point where he dares not recede or hesitate on the peril of his life.

Sitwell calls Iago "a subterranean devil . . . he is so shut off from the world of ordinary men that he cannot

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{41}} \text{Hadow, p. 678.} \]
reach them by any words save those with a jet of poison in them." When Othello says,

I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable.
If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee. 43

Iago answers:

"I bleed, sir; but not killed."

She quotes Bradley as saying: "He is saying, you see, he is right, I am a devil." 44 Many writers agree with Bradley that Iago's ability to prey on the moral strength of others is beyond human capabilities.

Bowman takes the opposite view and says, "Iago does not have the ability of incarnate evil, because he makes unprofitable as well as profitable decisions in furthering his aims." 45 Iago places his safety in his wife's silence, never doubting that in a conflict of loyalties to husband and mistress, to evil and good, Emilia will choose the former. Iago commits an act of utter folly when he sends Emilia to the citadel with a message. Only a brain overwrought by scheming could overlook the fact that if the crime had been committed, she would discover it, and if not, she would prevent it. He even follows her, and when she

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42 Edith Sitwell, A Poet's Notebook (Boston, 1950), p. 103.
43 Othello, V, ii, 286-287.
44 Sitwell, p. 104.
45 Bowman, p. 463.
confronts him by Desdemona's death-bed, all his strength is gone. He loses all his self-control and, in panic, admits his guilt by stabbing her. Iago has lost his sense of reason and, forgetting that he is in the center of the citadel and that he will be apprehended before he reaches the gates, he tries to escape by flying from the room.

To make such a grievous error in strategy, to disregard his knowledge of the character of those he handles, to substitute reckless self-confidence for caution—these, according to Bowman, absolve Iago from the charge of human diabolism. A demi-devil would not have been so erring.

McCloskey points out that there is something magnificent about Iago, namely, that he has a magnificently one-track mind, a faithfulness to purpose that, were it concerned with good instead of evil, would be admirable. Iago never relents, and he never repents. When he knows he is defeated, he attempts no justification, defense, or explanation; he even refuses to pray. His last words were:

Demand me nothing; what you know, you know. From this time forth, I will never speak a word.

Iago is what he is, and no failure or success can change him.

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46 McCloskey, p. 30.
47 Othello, V, ii, 303-304.
With these criticisms of the source of the plot and the factors influencing the actions of Othello forming a frame of reference, the criticism of Othello can now be taken up. This criticism will be mainly concerned with twentieth-century interpretations but will include some from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
CHAPTER II

EARLY CRITICISM

During the eighteenth century people began to realize that there was some great power in Shakespeare's work which found no parallel in their own time, and that it must be praised blindly, accounted for, or explained away. Hughes refers to this period as a time of trial when Shakespeare's title to fame is weighed judicially, and, he adds, "is not found wanting."¹

Since most of the eighteenth-century interpretations discussed Shakespeare's genius and style in his writings rather than his characters, there is little critical interpretation of Othello in that period. Perhaps the most prominent figure of eighteenth-century criticism of Othello is Samuel Johnson. Johnson regards the Moor as a man who is open, magnanimous, credulous, and artless; as one whose confidence has no bounds and whose affection is ardent; and as an individual inflexible in his resolution and unyielding in his revenge.² Johnson feels a sense of pity for Othello when he is "perplexed in the extreme" by Iago's

¹C. E. Hughes, The Praise of Shakespeare (London, 1904), p. 3.

artfully natural progress. However, Johnson blames the "disproportionate marriage" as being partially responsible for the Moor's downfall. Because Desdemona deceived her father in marrying Othello, "when the first heat of passion is over," Othello will have reason to believe "that the same violence of inclination which caused one irregularity, may stimulate to another." Since she could not control her passions through prudence in the case of her marrying Othello, it is conceivable that she could not control her passions through virtue in regard to adultery. Then Desdemona does not lie in her death scene when she answers Emilia's question by saying that she herself has done the murderous act. According to Johnson she is right. Othello has been caught in the web of his own suspicions aroused by Desdemona's failure to govern her passions no less than through the workings of Iago.

The first notable critic of the nineteenth century was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Charles Johnson says of him, "Rational appreciation may be said to begin in England with Coleridge early in the nineteenth century, but

\[^{3}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 198.}\]

\[^{4}\text{Ibid.}\]
unreasoning admiration existed from the appearance of the
plays, or at least from the printing of the folio."\(^5\)

Coleridge asserts that Othello did not kill Desdemona
in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the
almost superhuman art of Iago.\(^6\) The critic does not be-
lieve Othello is jealous by nature because "there is no
predisposition to suspicion. . . . which is\(^7\) an essential
term in the definition of the word."\(^7\) Coleridge also points
out that Desdemona told Emilia that he was not jealous, or
of a jealous habit, and Othello says the same of himself.
In fact, Othello is portrayed as the very opposite of a
jealous man. "He was noble, generous, open-hearted; unsus-
picious and unsuspecting; and who, even after the exhibition
of the handkerchief as evidence of his wife's guilt, bursts
out in her praise."\(^8\) Coleridge sees him as struggling not
with jealousy, but with moral indignation and regret "that
the creature, whom he had believed angelic, with whom he had
garnered up his heart, and whom he could not help still
loving, should be proved impure and worthless."\(^9\)

\(^5\)Charles F. Johnson, *Shakespeare and His Critics*

\(^6\)Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures and Notes on Shake-

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 530.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 477.

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 529.
Coleridge says Othello could not act other than he did under the circumstances. Even though the audience knows that Iago is a villain from the beginning, he has given Othello no room for suspicion. As the critic says, Othello's "nature was wrought on, not by a fellow with a countenance predestined for the gallows, . . . but by an accomplished and artful villain, who was indefatigable in his exertions to poison the mind of the brave and swarthy Moor."\(^\text{10}\) He convinces Othello that his honor is at stake. Othello's mind is majestic and composed, and in the end, he deliberately determines to die. Death is the only noble escape for him.

Hermann Ulrici agrees with Coleridge that Othello kills Desdemona and himself because of honor. He describes Othello as a born warrior, a general, and a military genius.\(^\text{11}\) This fact is repeated so often that Shakespeare seems to have placed great stress upon it, and Ulrici thinks it must contain "the main clue for comprehending the tragedy."\(^\text{12}\) Since Othello is a warrior and general, honor forms the basis of his personal existence. Honor is the condition by which he can fulfill his natural destiny, and satisfy the

\(^{10}\text{Ibid.}, p. 477.}\)

\(^{11}\text{Hermann Ulrici, Shakespeare's Dramatic Art, translated by L. Dora Schmitz (London, 1911), p. 399.}\)

\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}\)
thirst of his genius for performing heroic deeds and endur-
ing heroic sufferings. Othello is not merely ambitious in
the common sense of the word; he possesses a love for honor.
His love of honor is the determining principle of his re-
solves and actions. When he believes his honor to be de-
stroyed, he exclaims:

Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone! 13

Othello's love of honor, by becoming a passion, is also
mixed with a thirst for honor. He realizes that there is no
virtue in the thirst for honor, and that war alone could
give it the appearance, the semblance of true honor. His
self-sacrificing activity for the general welfare is mixed
with the desire for fame, and with the selfishness of passion.
As a result, restlessness, vehemence, and violent mental agi-
tation take possession of him at the first, faintest sus-
picion of Desdemona's infidelity, and at the mere thought
of his honor being affected. 14

Othello is not only a warrior; he is also a man.

Ulrici considers his love for Desdemona as the "purest and

13 Othello, III, iii, 349-357.
14 Ulrici, p. 400.
noblest kind, genuine manly love." Ulrici attributes Shakespeare's motives for creating Othello a Moor to his desire to exhibit Othello's moral greatness in its most glorious light. Othello had to overcome not only his general weakness and general proneness to evil, but in addition, the violence of his temperament and the passionateness of his race before he could attain to the eminent stage of human virtue which he occupies.

Othello's truly moral greatness, which is not merely warlike and based upon innate talent, makes his fall more tragic, and we are more deeply affected by his fall.

Othello's mind, deprived of its sole stay, reels and totters and is near shipwreck when the supposed infidelity of his wife and the treachery of his friend Cassio have robbed him of love and everything else in life which is dear to him. Then he clings convulsively with all his might to the other and only tie that still remains to him--honor. He will preserve his honor at least. Ulrici concludes that Othello's soul, once out of tune, "is unable to

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15 Ibid., p. 401.
16 Ibid., p. 406.
resume its self-possession: in passionate blindness he
deems the deaths of Cassio and Desdemona necessary for the
vindication of his honour." Thus he ruins what he wishes
to save; and when his love and honor, the only two ties
which attached him to existence, are gone, death alone re-
 mains for him.

Another critic of the nineteenth century who agrees
with Coleridge that Othello's actions are motivated not
by love and jealousy but by love and honor is Henry Norman
Hudson. Hudson even says that it is indeed the Moor's
freedom from a jealous temper that enables the villain to
gain mastery of him. "Such a nature as his, so open, so
generous, so confiding, is just the one to be taken in
Iago's strong toils; to have escaped them would have argued
him a partaker of the strategy under which he falls." 19

Iago is a man whom Othello has known for a long time
and never caught in a lie; he has often trusted Iago and
has never seen cause to regret it. Othello is a noble
character, and it is not only the law but also the impulse
of a high and delicate honor to rely on another's word
unless there is proof to the contrary. For Othello not
to presume that things and persons are what they seem and

18 Ibid.

19 Henry N. Hudson, Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and
Characters, II (New York, 1872), 477.
for him to suspect falsehood in one who bears a character for truth would be an attainder of himself. Hudson advocates that in judging Othello critics ought to proceed very much as if his wife were indeed guilty of what she is charged with; because were Desdemona ever so guilty, Othello could scarce have stronger proof than he has. As Hudson points out, surely it is no sin in him that the evidence owes all its force to the plotting and lying of another.

Hudson does not support the argument that the Moor does not show signs of passion; in fact, the critic feels that this passion exists in the clearest and healthiest minds. However, he does affirm that jealousy is not the leading feature of Othello's character itself. It is true that Othello doubts without proof, but then he does not act upon his doubt until proof has turned it into conviction.

Hudson classifies the killing of Desdemona a judicial as distinguished from a revengeful act. "The Moor goes about her death calmly and religiously, as a duty from which he would gladly escape by his own death, if he could." The noble hero prefers Desdemona to himself, but when he feels that she has mocked and profaned his

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 478.
22 Ibid.
honor, he contemplates her death as a sacrifice for his honor.

Richard Grant White treats perhaps one of the most trivial, though not the least interesting points in Othello's character when he depicts him as one "who would have wrested a crown from a king, or laid his mailed hand upon the green turban of a sultan," yet who timidly shrank back from lifting to his arms the beautiful enamored daughter of a Venetian senator. The critic insists that Othello was magnanimous, high-minded, but not quite a European gentleman, because in the Senate scene, Othello implied that Desdemona, who had slighted the admiration of so many young Venetian nobles, had been half the wooer. In his semi-barbarian freedom from the conventionalism of European society, Othello did not conceal the fact that he had not asked Desdemona to be his wife until she had plainly hinted that she longed to have him do so.

White says of Othello that he was not really jealous, but that his pang was that which was inflicted by the consciousness of a monstrous, hideous wrong "inflicted by the hand he most loved--of the sight of that which he held purest and best, self-fouled and smirched before his eyes."23

24Ibid., p. 110. 25Ibid., p. 118.
White suggests that if Desdemona had only remained in Othello's thoughts still chaste, she might have admired the handsome Cassio to the utmost, and she might have even ceased to love her husband, but the depths of Othello's soul still would have been untroubled. Othello, undoubt-edly, would have given his heart and trust wholly to Desde-mona and would have spurned her accuser to destruction if Iago had failed to prove his accusation by an accumulation of evidence that would have convinced any mind.26

According to White, when Othello went to Desdemona's chamber to accuse her of adultery, the blood in his half-savage veins was running fire; but later, when he entered his wife's bed-chamber to put her to death, the turbulence of his passion had subsided, and before her death-bed he stood rather heart-broken, as a minister of justice called upon to execute judgment upon the best loved of his soul, rather than vengeanceful. Had Othello not been a noble char-acter, he might have rushed upon Desdemona and smothered her while she was sleeping; instead, he went quietly to her and kissed her until she awoke. When Othello finally re-vealed his suspicion that she had given the handkerchief to Cassio, she entreated him to send for Cassio and ask him. White assumes that here the turning point of the story is hopelessly passed when Othello answers Desdemona

26 Ibid.
that Cassio had confessed his guilt with her, and that Iago has stopped Cassio's mouth forever.27

Othello soon learned that he was the murderer of an innocent, loving wife, for whose life he would have given his own ten times over. White points out the irony of the situation when he emphasizes the fact that Othello rushed at Iago with his sword, "but the man who a few days before would have slain or scattered a company of Iagos missed his aim."28 Othello cleverly disarmed the suspicions of those around him by the calm delivery of a message to the Venetian Senate, "and by the relation of a vengeance he had taken upon a malignant Turk, with his own hand he pierced his bursting heart, and dying by Desdemona's side breathed his last breath upon her lips."29 White, agreeing with most critics of the nineteenth century, believes that death was the only noble escape for Othello.

William Hazlitt, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, agrees that Othello is noble, confiding, tender, and generous; but he believes that his blood is of the most inflammable kind.30 Once Othello is roused by a sense of wrongs, he is stopped by no considerations of

27Ibid., p. 120. 28Ibid., p. 125.

29Ibid., p. 126.

remorse or pity until he has given vent to all the dictates of his rage and his despair. Hazlitt states, perhaps without giving sufficient evidence, that Othello broods over his suspicions by himself. When his smothered jealousy breaks out into open fury, he returns to demand satisfaction of Iago like a "wild beast stung with the envenomed shaft of the hunters." The critic says that Iago's false aspersions turn the storm of passion from Iago to Desdemona and cause Othello to abandon all his love and hopes in a breath when he says:

Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago; All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. 'Tis gone.

Hazlitt says that he never looks back until his revenge is sure of its object, and that the recollections of past circumstances which cross his mind amidst the dim trances of passion aggravate the sense of his wrongs but do not shake his purpose.

Edward Dowden, a later nineteenth-century critic, feels constrained to repeat after Coleridge that the passion of the Moor is not altogether jealousy--"it is rather the agony of being compelled to hate that which he supremely

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31Ibid., p. 31. 32Ibid.
33Othello, III, iii, 448-450.
34Ibid., p. 32.
loved." Dowden agrees with Coleridge and other critics of the time that Othello is of a free and open nature, and that "he looks on men with a gaze too large and royal to suspect them of malignity and fraud." He is not innately jealous, but is a free and lordly creature taken in the toils of Iago. He is made weak by his very strength.

However, as Dowden points out, he does have a sense of his own inefficiency in dealing with the complex and subtle conditions of life in his adopted country. Also, his hot Mauritanian blood mounts quickly to the point of boiling. If he becomes infected, the poison hurry through his veins, and he rages in his agony.

Othello is enraged by Cassio's supposed ignoble thought respecting Desdemona even more than by jealousy. Othello, as Iago planned, overheard Iago and Cassio talking about Bianca; but Othello supposed that Cassio had been speaking of Desdemona, and that his laugh was a profane mockery of her fall. Dowden notes that Othello thinks little about Cassio; he is agonized by the thought that the fairest thing on earth should foul, that the fountain from which

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36 Ibid., p. 209.

37 Ibid., p. 205.

38 Ibid., p. 209.
the current of his life had seemed to run so pure and free should be infected.

Dowden agrees with most of the nineteenth-century critics when he says, "It is with a sense of justice that Othello destroys the creature who is dearest to him in the world."\footnote{39Ibid., p. 215.} However, Dowden goes a step further and attributes another motive to Othello's actions. He argues that Othello knew before he killed his wife that he must kill himself also, because he had lost faith in the "purity and goodness which were to him the highest and most real things upon earth."\footnote{40Ibid., p. 216.}

Critics have given various reasons why Othello is impatient for assurance of his wife's fidelity. Dowden says it is not because he is eager to convict his wife of infidelity, but because he will not allow his passionate desire to believe her pure to abuse him, and retain him in a fool's paradise, while a great agony may possibly remain before him.\footnote{41Ibid.} Snider, a contemporary of Dowden, presents a different motive for Othello's impatience. He feels that the only reason that a man as open and unsuspecting as Othello could be made extremely jealous is that there must be present in the man's mind the germ of disbelief in the faithfulness of his wife. Othello has been guilty of adultery
with Emilia; consequently, he is aware that the infidelity of wives is a fact. Even though Othello is naturally unsuspecting, "guilt has furnished the most fruitful soil for one kind of suspicion." Snider finds nothing in the tragedy to prove that Othello is innocent of Iago's charges; in fact, he finds a great deal of evidence pointing toward the fact that he is guilty. Iago's plots are successful because Othello's mind is preoccupied with the suspicions of the infidelity of his wife, and the scheming of Iago never enters the field of his suspicions. Snider agrees that Othello is fundamentally free from jealousy, but thinks that he is thrown into a situation which causes him to become jealous and which "turns him into his own triumphant enemy."

George Brandes agrees with Ulrici that Othello is truly noble and great in spite of his "fiery African temperament." Brandes believes that it is not Othello's jealousy, but his credulity that is the prime cause of the disaster. Othello is not naturally jealous, but has become so "through the working of the base but devilishly subtle slanders which he is too simple to penetrate and


43 Ibid., p. 110. 44 Ibid., p. 81.


46 Ibid., p. 446.
Brandes describes him as unsuspicious, confiding, and stupid. Othello is a great man who is at the same time a great child; he has a noble though impetuous nature. According to the critic, he is ruined by the simplicity which makes him an easy prey to wickedness.

Bernhard ten Brink, Elmer Edgar Stoll, and Walter Raleigh agree that the passion aroused in Othello is foreign to his nature. Stoll points out that instead of breeding the poison as the jealous do, Othello is infected with it. Although Bernhard ten Brink believes that Othello's unfounded suspicion can be explained on the ground of his having an open, high-minded, and confiding nature, he still affirms that it is Othello's own action—the abduction of Desdemona—that prepares the ground where his jealousy may take root and that causes the tragic catastrophe.

The last influential critic of the nineteenth century is Stopford A. Brooke. A few critics of the nineteenth century have felt compelled to admit signs of jealousy in

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47Ibid., p. 443.  48Ibid., p. 449.
49Walter Raleigh, Shakespeare (New York, 1907), p. 204.
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Othello's character; he has been described as semi-barbarian or credited with having a fiery African temperament, but Brooke inspires a new school of thought when he asserts that the character of Othello is so full of contradictions and inconsistencies that "nothing . . . can be more improbable." 52

Brooke admires Othello as he is portrayed in the first two acts. Othello is a great and experienced soldier with a grave and noble character; he is a man who has won the trust and respect of the most jealous and difficult of governments. All men honor his skill in war, his ability for governing men, his temperate nature, his self-discipline and his integrity. 53 Brooke feels that Shakespeare created Othello as a man not liable to give his trust rashly, to act on mere suspicion, without inquiry, or to be ignorant of the evil which is in man; however, after the second act, there is a shocking change in Othello. The critic reminds the reader that Othello places his unquestioning trust, to the ignoring of everyone else, in a young man of twenty-eight whom he has put in a lower position than his lieutenant, Cassio. He entrusts his wife to Iago's charge; and, on the report of Iago, cashiers Cassio, who has fought with him as a faithful comrade. 54 On the mere hearsay evidence

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53 Ibid., p. 173.

54 Ibid., p. 174.
of Iago, Othello attributes to his wife "coarse and common lustfulness, revolting appetite"; in his thoughts, Desdemona is turned into a common harlot. Still his belief in Iago is so unshaken that he slays Desdemona.

Brooke thinks it is an improbability that a man like Othello, so magnanimous and noble of thought and character, should not have felt the innocence of Desdemona, and that Iago's subtle hints, "I do not like that" and his "Indeed," should torture Othello into distrust of the woman who had given up all for him, broken with her father, violated the customs of her society, and followed him to the war. The critic also feels that the matter of the handkerchief bristles with improbabilities, but Othello—this temperate, grave man—never looks into it. By Othello's violence, he drives his wife into a lie about the handkerchief and "takes his only refuge in his hopeless trust in Iago."

Brooke defends Othello's becoming suspicious of Desdemona so quickly; he states that it is a result of Othello's modesty. Othello has never quite understood why Desdemona loved him. The accusation of Brabantio that he must have practiced with drugs on Desdemona makes Othello even more

55 Ibid. 56 Ibid., pp. 174-175.
57 Ibid., p. 175. 58 Ibid., p. 190.
aware of the strangeness of their marriage. His nerves are over-tense because he is in love. Brooke also justifies Othello on the basis of his being a middle-aged man. For one his age, a natural reaction to love is that the whole nature is upturned. It throws every element of his character into new positions and new relations to life. Such a disturbance would have settled down into a peaceful rearrangement if the path of life had been smooth; but, unfortunately, Othello is lashed into the extremity of jealousy. Brooke says that those critics who suggest that Othello was not the victim of vulgar jealousy are trying to save the noble nature of the man. Brooke asserts that both forms of jealousy—rage that Desdemona's love and thought should be given to Cassio, and fury that her body should be his—are in Othello. When both mix together, jealousy reaches its extremity. Brooke describes it:

The man is not mad, but he is running at full speed, with disordered hair and torn clothes and flaming eyes, on the waving line which divides sanity from insanity. It is a border-land where every breath is torment, and Othello was wild and whirling in it.

Brooke states that Othello's love is not love, but self-love; his love changes into hatred, his faith into suspicion and distrust. All goodness is temporarily reversed.

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59 Ibid.  
60 Ibid., p. 191.  
61 Ibid., pp. 191-192.  
62 Ibid., p. 192.
His intelligence becomes stupidity, his stately quiet the blind fury which strikes his wife. His free and noble nature becomes the slave of an ignoble passion, and his balanced judgment becomes blind revenge.

In the last scene before Othello kills Desdemona, he speaks tenderly and quietly because he is resolved to kill. "In that fixed resolve jealousy is for the moment half-asleep, and he lets his memory slip back into praise of her perfection and into pity for her fate."

In Othello's confused mental state, he attempts to prove that his killing Desdemona is a sacrifice, a judicial act, the execution of a weak and wicked woman, who must die lest she should betray more men. In Brooke's opinion, "there's no sacrifice offered up to honour, no judicial calm"; it is simply extreme jealousy that slays.

Interpretations and criticisms of Othello in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been so varied that Brooke closes those periods of criticism with the statement that "Men have never yet satisfied themselves with regard to what he [Shakespeare] meant Othello ... to be." Some critics have attributed to Othello an innately jealous nature, while others have argued that jealousy was

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 194.
65 Ibid., p. 195.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., p. 181.
foreign to his nature, as a main point in the vindication of his honor. There is one point, however, upon which probably all of the critics agree: that Othello is a noble character caught in the toils of the wicked Iago. Brooke, writing at the last of the nineteenth century, marks a turning point in Shakespearean criticism. His interpretations and criticisms correspond more closely with twentieth-century criticism, which offers a more critical interpretation of Othello's actions and motives.
CHAPTER III

TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICISM

Twentieth-century criticism of Othello marks a period of change from the acceptance of Othello as the "noble Moor" throughout, to the opinion that Othello has serious defects of character which cause his downfall. Twentieth-century critics can be divided into three chronological groups. The first group, or early writers, is comprised of A. C. Bradley, Walter Raleigh, Joan Hasefield, and others who wrote in the period from the turn of the century to World War I. This group followed and expanded the eighteenth-and nineteenth-century views of such critics as Johnson, Coleridge, and Hudson, that Othello is a victim of Iago; that he is guilty only of being too innocent or foolish or simple or trusting or of losing his usual self-control. The second group of critics consists of Elmer Edgar Stoll, E. K. Chambers, Henry B. Charlton, Mark Van Doren, and others who were the leading Shakespearean critics between World War I and World War II. The last group of writers consists of such critics as Hardin Craig, Sitwell, and Heilman, who wrote in the post-war period.

The opinions of the twentieth-century critics will be considered in the chronological order as outlined above.
However, since there seem to be three main views to the problem of Othello's character, most of the critics will be indicated as belonging to one of these schools of thought, regardless of date. Some writers cannot be so easily classified under a particular point of view since they may agree in part but not completely with a definite school of thought; these deviations will be noted when they are discussed.

The older tradition, upheld by one of the most prominent scholars, A. C. Bradley, is that Othello is the victim of Iago and remains the "noble Moor" throughout. The second point of view, advocated by another prominent scholar, Elmer Edgar Stoll, is that Othello believes Iago only by virtue of the convention of the calumniator credited. The other main approach through character, by such critics as Elliott, Allardyce Nicoll, and Mark Van Doren, is that Othello is not the "noble Moor" at all but has serious defects of character which cause his downfall—defects such as pride and habitual flight from reality.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the recent and unique criticisms of Harold Goddard and Harold S. Wilson.

The lectures and writings of A. C. Bradley mark the beginning of modern Shakespearean criticism. He is acknowledged to be one of the greatest Shakespearean critics.
because he combines "wide philosophic outlook with grasp of detail." He never forgets the relation of even a single character to the impression produced by the whole play.

Bradley says of the play that "Of all Shakespeare's tragedies . . . not even excepting King Lear, Othello is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible." He also points out that Othello is the most masterly of the tragedies in point of construction. Its method of construction is unusual. The conflict begins late and advances with amazing velocity to the catastrophe. The reader's heart and mind are held in a vice experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation from the moment when the temptation begins. After the conflict has begun, there is very little relief by way of the ridiculous. Bradley points out that Iago's humor never raises a smile, that the clown is hardly noticed and quickly forgotten.

The action and catastrophe of Othello depend largely on intrigue; however, Bradley asserts that we must not call the play a tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character, because Iago's plot is Iago's

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2Bradley, p. 175. 3Ibid.
character in action, and it is built on his knowledge of Othello's character.

Othello experiences a jealousy which "converts human nature into chaos and liberates the beast in man."\textsuperscript{4} This conversion touches one of the most intense and also the most ideal of human feelings. The "golden purity" of passion is split by poison into fragments, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness in naked grossness; and he, writing before it but powerless to deny it entrance, gasping inarticulate images of pollution, finds relief only in a bestial thirst for blood.\textsuperscript{5} Bradley asks, "what spectacle can be more painful than that of a great nature suffering the torment of this passion, and driven by it to a crime which is also a hideous blunder?"\textsuperscript{6} This is made more painful by the fact that Othello is indeed "great of heart" and no less pure and tender than he was great.

According to Bradley, there is no escape from fate for Othello and Desdemona, these star-crossed mortals. Iago's skill was extraordinary, but as Bradley says, "so was his good fortune."\textsuperscript{7} Fate takes sides with villainy when again and again a chance word from Desdemona, a chance meeting

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., p. 178. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{5}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{6}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{7}Ibid., p. 182.
of Othello and Cassio, a question which starts to our lips and which anyone but Othello would have asked, would have destroyed Iago's plot and ended his life. In their stead, Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the moment most favorable to him, Cassio blunders into the presence of Othello only to find him in a swoon, Bianca arrives precisely when she is wanted to complete Othello's deception and incense his anger into fury.

Bradley agrees with Mr. Swinburne's statement that the reader pities Othello even more than Desdemona; however, he expresses more unmitigated distress for Desdemona because her suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being she adores.

The major criticism of the play, according to Bradley, is against the part which appears shocking or even horrible --that where Othello strikes Desdemona. He asserts that some readers think Shakespeare has sinned against the canons of art by representing on the stage a violence or brutality, the effect of which is unnecessarily painful and more sensational than tragic, as in the scene where he affects to treat her as an inmate of a house of ill fame, and finally the scene of her death. Bradley justifies the last two scenes by pointing out that if the inward tragedy in the souls of both characters is fully imagined, 

\[8\text{Ibid., p. 184.}\]
the more obvious and almost physical sensations of pain and horror do not appear in their own likeness, and only serve to intensify the tragic feelings in which they are absorbed; however, Bradley adds, this would perhaps be doubtful in the murder scene if it were not quite clear that the bed where she was stifled was within the curtains, and so, presumably, in part concealed.

Bradley describes the character of Othello as being comparatively simple. The critic says that Othello is a man exceptionally noble and trustful, and that he endures the shock of a terrible disillusionment. His tragedy lies in the fact that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet he was unusually open to deception, and if once wrought to passion, "likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable." 9

Some critics feel that Othello was not jealous by temperament, but that he was a noble barbarian who became a Christian and imbibed some of the civilization of his employers, and who retained beneath the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood and the suspicions regarding female chastity common among Oriental peoples. Bradley disagrees with this idea and suggests that it is completely un-Shakespearean; however, he feels that Othello's race is important in the play, because it influences our idea of him,

9Ibid., p. 185.
and it makes a difference to the action and catastrophe.
But it is not important in regard to the essentials of his
cracter.10

Bradley compares Othello with Hamlet by pointing out
that although Othello does not have the meditative or specu-
lative imagination of Hamlet, he is more poetic than Hamlet.
Bradley writes:

Indeed, if one recalls Othello's most famous
speeches—those that begin, "Her father loved me;"
"O now for ever," "Never, Iago," "Had it pleased
Heaven," "It is the cause," "Behold, I have a wea-
pon," "Soft you, a word or two before you go"—and
if one places side by side with these speeches an
equal number by any other hero, one will not doubt
that Othello is the greatest poet of them all.11

One is made to feel that this imagination has accom-
panied Othello's whole life. Othello has evidently felt
the poetry of the pride, pomp, and circumstances of glori-
ous war, because he speaks of it as none other ever did.
As Bradley describes it,

He has watched with a poet's eye the Arabian
trees dropping their medicinable gum, and the Indian
throwing away his chance-found pearl; and has gazed
in a fascinated dream at the Pontic Sea rushing
never to return to the Propontic and the Hellespont.12

Bradley sees Othello as one who comes before us, dark
and grand, with a light upon him from the sun where he was
born; he is no longer young, but is now grave, self-controlled,

10Ibid., p. 187.  11Ibid., p. 188.
12Ibid., p. 189.
and steeled by the experience of countless perils and hardships. Othello is simple and stately in bearing and in speech, a great man naturally modest, but fully conscious of his worth, proud of his services to the state, unawed by dignitaries and unelated by honors. He seems to be secure against all dangers from without and all rebellion from within. Bradley asserts that there is no love, not even that of Romeo in his youth, more steeped in imagination than Othello's. The critic romantically adds, "He comes to have his life crowned with the final glory of love, a love as strange, adventurous and romantic as any passage of his eventful history, filling his heart with tenderness and his imagination with ecstasy."¹³

Some of the danger spots or flaws in Othello's character, as pointed out by the critic, are the simpleness of his mind, and his being unobservant. His nature tends outward; consequently, he is quite free from introspection, and is not given to reflection. His imagination is excited by emotion, but his intellect is confused and dulled by it. "He has had little experience of the corrupt products of civilized life, and is ignorant of European women."¹⁴ In spite of all his dignity and massive calm, he is by nature

full of the most vehement passion. The critic feels that Shakespeare emphasizes his self control, not only by the way in which Othello is portrayed in the first act, but also by references to the past. Lodovico, amazed at Othello's violence, exclaims:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?15

Iago, who, Bradley insists, has here no motive for lying, asks:

Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon
When it hath blown his ranks into the air,
And, like the devil, from his very arm
Puffed his own brother—and is he angry?16

Bradley contends that Shakespeare exhibits these aspects of Othello's character more clearly in the single line by which Othello silences, in a moment, the night-brawl between his attendants and those of Brabantio:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.17

Othello's nature is all of one piece; that is, his trust, where he trusts, is absolute. Hesitation is almost impossible to him. He is extremely self-reliant; he decides and acts instantaneously. If Othello loves, love must be

15 Othello, IV, 1, 275-278.
16 Ibid., III, iv, 134-139. 17 Ibid., I, 11, 60.
to him the heaven where either he must live or bear no
life. Bradley explains that if a passion such as jeal-
ousy seizes him it will swell into an almost incontroll-
able flood. He will press for immediate conviction or
immediate relief, and when he is convinced, he will act
with the authority of a judge and the swiftness of a man
in mortal pain.

Bradley feels that Othello can be vindicated of his
crime on the basis that the Moor was trustful and thorough
in his trust. He put entire confidence in the honesty of
Iago, who had not only been his companion in arms, but, as
he believed, had just proved his faithfulness in the matter
of the marriage. This confidence was misplaced, and we
happen to know it; but it was no sign of stupidity in
Othello. For his opinion of Iago was the opinion of prac-
tically everyone who knew him, and that opinion was that
Iago was before all things "honest," his very faults being
those of excess in honesty. It would have been quite un-
natural in Othello to be unmoved by the warnings of so
honest a friend, warnings offered with extreme reluctance
and manifestly from a sense of a friend's duty, even if
Othello had not been trustful and simple. Bradley states
that any husband would have been troubled by them.  

18 Bradley, p. 190.
19 Ibid., p. 92.
The second point Bradley brings out in the vindication of Othello is that Iago does not bring these warnings to a husband who had lived with a wife for months and years and known her like his sister of his bosom friend. Nor is there any ground in Othello's character for supposing that, if he had been such a man, he would have felt and acted as he does in the play. He was newly married; in the circumstances he cannot have known much about Desdemona before his marriage. Furthermore, he was conscious of being under the spell of a feeling which can give glory to the truth but can also give it to a dream. This consciousness in any imaginative man is enough, in such circumstances, to destroy his confidence in his powers of perception. In Othello's case, after a long and most artful preparation, there now comes to reinforce its effect, the suggestions that he is not an Italian, not even a European; that he is totally ignorant of the thoughts of the customary morality of Venetian woman; that he had himself seen in Desdemona's deception of her father how perfect an actress she could be. As he listens in horror, for a moment at least, the past is revealed to him in a new and dreadful light, and the ground seems to sink under his feet. These suggestions are followed by a tentative but hideous and humiliating insinuation

20 Ibid., p. 193.
of what his honest and much-experienced friend fears may be the true explanation of Desdemona's rejection of acceptable suitors, and of her strange, and naturally temporary, preference for a black man.\textsuperscript{21}

Any man situated as Othello was would have been disturbed by Iago's communications, and many men would have been made wildly jealous. Iago reminds Othello that Desdemona's better judgment may overrule her will and she will repent that she married him. Othello sends Iago away here, but Othello is not jealous. His confidence is shaken, he is confused and deeply troubled, he feels even horror; but he is not yet "jealous in the proper sense of that word."\textsuperscript{22}

Iago is afraid he has not driven his point home; consequently, he returns to entreat Othello to leave it to time. Iago takes his leave again, then Othello begins his soliloquy in which he ponders over his own shortcomings which Iago has mentioned earlier, and he even curses marriage. It is in this soliloquy that the beginning of the passion of jealousy may be traced; but it is only after an interval of solitude when he has had time to dwell on the idea presented to him, and especially after statements of fact, not mere general grounds of suspicion, are offered, that the passion lays hold of him. Even then, however, he is quite

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.} \quad \textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 194.
unlike the essentially jealous man. No doubt the thought of another man's possessing the woman he loves is intolerable to him, the sense of insult and the impulse of revenge are at times most violent; and these are the "feelings of jealousy proper." But the deepest source of Othello's suffering is the wreck of his faith and his love, the feeling that if Desdemona is false... then heaven mocks itself." Othello states it thus:

But there where I have garner'd up my heart,
Where either I must live, or bear no life;
The fountain from the which my current rung,
Or else dries up; to be discarded thence?

Bradley says the Othello of the Fourth Act is Othello in his fall. Although his fall is never complete, he is much changed. His mind is dazed, and he is physically exhausted. He sees everything blurred through a mist of blood and tears. A slight interval of time may be admitted here, but it must be very slight, because Iago must hurry on; it would be terribly dangerous to leave a chance for a meeting of Cassio with Othello. His plan was to deliver blow on blow, and never to allow his victim to recover from the confusion of the first shock.

When Iago is certain that he can now risk almost any lie, he tells Othello that Cassio has confessed his guilt;

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Othello, IV, ii, 57-60.
Othello trembles all over and mutters disjointed words. A blackness suddenly intervenes between his eyes and the world; he takes it for the shuddering testimony of nature to the horror he has just heard, and he falls senseless to the ground. When he recovers, he imagines Cassio is laughing over his shame. His self-control has wholly deserted him, and he strikes his wife in the presence of a Venetian envoy. The delay until nightfall is torture to him. Bradley feels that it is an ineradicable instinct of justice, rather than any last quiver of hope that leads him to question Emilia.

The Othello near the end of the play is changed again, as Bradley points out. The supposed death of Cassio satiates the thirst for vengeance. When Othello enters the bedchamber, the deed he is bound to do is no murder, but a sacrifice: "He is to save Desdemona from herself, not in hate but in honour; in honour, and also in love." Bradley says his anger has passed, and a boundless sorrow has taken its place. Even when Desdemona tries to explain that Cassio is not guilty, thereby reassuring Othello of her guilt, Othello experiences feelings of righteous indignation rather than guilt. Pity itself vanishes, Bradley asserts, and love and admiration alone remain in the

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26 Bradley, p. 196. 
27 Ibid., p. 197.
majestic dignity and sovereign ascendency of the close. Chaos has come and gone, and a still greater and nobler Othello returns.\textsuperscript{28}

Bradley implicitly describes the final words of Othello in which all the glory and agony of his life—long ago in India, Arabia, Aleppo, afterwards in Venice, and now in Cyprus—provide a relief in the tragedy by a feeling of triumphant scorn for the "fetters of the flesh" and the littleness of all the lives that must survive him.\textsuperscript{29} Bradley concludes that the most painful of all tragedies leaves us for the moment free from pain and exulting in the power of "love and man's unconquerable mind" when Othello dies upon a kiss.

Walter Raleigh agrees with Bradley that Othello is a man after Shakespeare's own heart, tender, generous, brave, and utterly magnanimous. Raleigh says Othello is a man of a high and passionate nature, ready in action, and generous in thought. "Othello has lived all his life by faith—not by sight."\textsuperscript{30} He cannot observe and interpret trifles; he brushes them aside and ignores them. Othello, the critic believes, is impatient of all that is subtle and devious as if it were a dishonor. Raleigh

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., p. 198. \hfil \textsuperscript{29}Ibid. \hfil \textsuperscript{30}Walter Raleigh, \textit{Shakespeare} (New York, 1907), p. 204.
states that "Character is not destiny; Othello is not jealous by nature."
Even Desdemona knows that jealousy and suspicion are foreign to Othello's nature, and he credits others freely with all his own noblest qualities. Othello shows how he hates even the show of concealment when Iago urges him to retire to escape the search-party of Brabantio by replying:

Not I; I must be found.
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly.32

Raleigh proves his admiration for Othello when he writes, "If he were less credulous, more cautious and alert and observant, he would be a lesser man than he is, and less worthy of our love."33

Raleigh admits that Othello entertained false suspicions on the testimony of slander "against his young and innocent wife, who had left her home and her country to follow him."34 However, he explains that circumstance is not Othello's undoing. Even though by slow and legitimate means, circumstance is added to circumstance until a net is woven to take Othello in its toils, if he were left to himself, even when the toils were closing in upon him,

31 Ibid., p. 248.  32 Othello, I, ii, 30-32.
33 Raleigh, p. 204.  34 Ibid., p. 140.
Othello would have rent them asunder and shaken them off. But Iago is at hand to keep him still and to compel him to think when he grows impatient and seems likely to break free. Raleigh and most Shakespearean critics agree that on matters like these Othello cannot think; he is accustomed to "impulse, instinct, and action." These tedious processes of arguing on dishonor are torture to him, and when he tries to think, he thinks wrong.

Raleigh is convinced that the game of the adversary was won when Othello first listened. He suggests that Othello should have struck Iago "at the bare hint, as he smote the turban'd Turk in Aleppo." He also notices that Iago was well aware of this danger and bent all the powers of his mind to the crisis. Iago gave his victim no chance for indignation.

Raleigh closes his criticism on a note of triumph when he says, "Desdemona and Othello are both made perfect in the act of death, so that the idea of murder is lost and forgotten in the sense of sacrifice." Othello is almost overcome when he enters into the bedchamber of his sleeping wife and looks upon that picture of innocence and

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35Ibid., p. 141.
36Ibid.
37Ibid., p. 142.
38Ibid., p. 205.
39Ibid., p. 208.
beauty. It is then that Othello clutches at his failing resolve:

   It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
   Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—
   It is the cause.  

According to John Masefield, Othello has too much passion to be anything but blind under passionate influence like love or jealousy. He is obsessed with a jealous suspicion. It is an obsession which upsets the balance of life and betrays life to evil because life seeks to preserve a balance.

Abernethy charges that Othello signifies his own simplicity and capacity for being fooled by his use of the word "honest" in referring to Iago. He also feels that there is no rational explanation for Othello's credulity, and that such characters as Othello and Iago transcend human experience as we know it. He classifies both Othello and Iago as pathological exhibits of perverted nature. He defines Othello's perverted nature as the insanity of jealousy and Iago's as the insanity of malignity.

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40 Othello, V, i, 1-3.
43 Ibid.
In referring to Othello and Iago he says, "... they are essentially monsters, vast repudiations rather than exemplifications of human nature..." He calls them marvellous creations, but monstrous creations, Frankenstein's of a high order that produce shuddering and horror.

Elmer Edgar Stoll opposes the "noble Moor" point of view. He points out that many critics feel that Othello is made to believe in his wife's guilt too rapidly. Stoll says, "Othello... succumbs with incredible facility." According to the critic, Othello is suspicious because he is guilty; Iago's doubts concerning Othello and Emilia are reasonable ones. Stoll notices that Othello's friends and acquaintances throughout the tragedy, as well as he himself at the beginning and at the end, explicitly and repeatedly declare Othello to be free of any seed or germ of jealousy or distrust in his make-up before Iago plays upon him. He is led to hearken to Iago, "not with a psychological justification, but by means of a time-honored convention in order to precipitate a more effective situation," that

44Ibid.
46Stoll, Shakespearian Studies, p. 93.
47Stoll, Shakespeare and Other Masters, p. 190.
of a hero not jealous by nature, but noble and lovable becoming jealous. It is by an external influence that his passion is brought to a height which is foreign to his nature. Instead of breeding the poison as the jealous do, Othello is infected with it. Stoll contends that "though he is not asleep in an orchard, it is poured into his ear." Until near the close of the play Othello is acted upon and that by an enemy. Stoll quotes Johnson as saying of Othello that "through the whole play he is rather an instrument than an agent."

Stoll points out that numerous other authors have found difficulty in explaining Othello's actions. The explanations vary from Schlegel, who sees the Moor's dignity as a "crust of discipline" through which the "lava of passion" might at any moment break, to those seeing fate as that which seals Othello's eyes from Iago's plot. The chief contention lying between these poles is simply that Iago is supremely evil and that Othello is supremely innocent, and by a meeting of the two, the inevitable must arise.

Stoll is not content with the above explanation because Othello is described as a great and self-respecting

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50 Stoll, *Othello*, p. 3.
51 Ibid., p. 3.
personality, dignified and intelligent; therefore, a man of this nature could not be held fascinated "... as a bird or a monkey by a serpent."\(^{52}\) If one does not accept the view that Othello is guilty, and that the guilty are more suspicious and the innocent are less capable of distrust, then Othello becomes merely an innocent sufferer who has been duped by a villain.\(^{53}\) The critic states further that if Shakespeare had intended for us to accept Othello as a dupe, he would have made this meaning clearer from the beginning.\(^{54}\)

August Goll refers to Othello as grand, high-minded, and unsuspecting. He feels that Iago owes his ability to instill confidence in Othello to the Moor's hatred of all that is counterfeit and his fear of being ensnared by deceit.\(^{55}\) He also notes that when Othello begins to suspect Desdemona, a deep, immeasurable pain takes possession of him; his suspicion does not immediately lead to terrible fits of anger or mistreatment of Desdemona. At this point, the critic asks the question: What is it, then, that makes Othello stand out so great and dignified, the conspicuous general, the protector of the State, the hero without fear

\(^{52}\)Ibid., p. 4. \(^{53}\)Ibid.  
\(^{54}\)Ibid.  
or blemish, the devoted husband, the truest of friends? In answer to his question he says that it is the confidence he rests in others, the confidence that others have in him. Othello is not short-sighted or superficial, but trusting.\(^56\)

In the death scene, the critic sees Othello as being possessed of but one thought, one fear—that Desdemona may yet be able to fascinate him and rob him of the only thing that he believes now, that he can trust no one, now that even Desdemona is unworthy of confidence.

Lily Bess Campbell opposes the theory that Othello remains the "noble Moor" throughout the play. The critic agrees that at the beginning of the play, Othello is simple and noble, but believes that he is one of a race to whom it is natural to be jealous. She points out that "Othello is given over to passion from the time he demands proof from Iago that his love is unfaithful."\(^57\) He is no longer capable of reasoning but acts on impulses, then is sorry. Othello's epilepsy is a result of passion. It leads to fury and rage and finally ends in murder:

When that simplicity and nobility begin to be contaminated, then Othello becomes an alteration of mighty opposites, not gray, but black and white—the poet—barbarian, the hero—murderer, the paragon of self-control gone mad, the harmonious nature to whom chaos comes again.\(^58\)

\(^56\)Ibid., p. 49.
\(^58\)Ibid.
Campbell and Mark Van Doren accept the view that Othello is both enslaved by passion and made superior to it. Van Doren says that Othello is the best and the worst of men, and that there is a precarious balance in his nature between the monstrous and the tender, the giant and the lover, the soldier and the man. He is not a murderer, but "he is a man, gentle and godlike"; that is why his killing Desdemona terrifies us.

Van Doren characterizes Othello as one who has a deep voice, a husky throat, and a tone which is difficult, reluctant, and forced. He is overpowered and engulfed by his own eloquence. "One whose life has been all silent acts, poisons his own peace now with bursts of speech, with the clangor of huge sounds." The clown at Cyprus points out that the general does not greatly care to hear music, but prefers stillness because his ears are sensitive to noise. Othello cries, "Silence that dreadful bell," when the island rings with alarms of Cassio's misdeeds. Yet, as the critic points out, he loses himself in the dark music of his own voice. He says things he should not say; he is swept away on a current of uncontrolled sound.

60 Ibid., p. 236.
61 Ibid., p. 232.
62 Ibid.
Van Doren says that Othello imperfectly understands his love for Desdemona and will never absorb it, even though she is his world, his one entire and perfect chrysolite. When he rejoins her at Cyprus, it seems to him that his life is at last complete; yet, it is not complete and she is not his world. There is a wilderness that will not be organized; therefore, in one breath he calls his old life free and in another he calls it chaotic. He does not know which one it is because he is not intelligent. In one sentence the critic calls him a gentleman; in the next he compares him to an animal whose cage is inadequately barred. Othello blows all his fond love to heaven before an ordinary man would have taken breath, and in a single scene he destroys his reputation.

Van Doren asserts that Othello was no better armed against the perfection of Desdemona than against the cunning of Iago. Desdemona's was a new perfection, too fine and small for one large Moor to master. "He failed pitifully, but there was grandeur in the fall of one who at his death took pains to make it clear that he had been a man." "For he was great of heart," said Cassio. "Had Desdemona been alive she would have said the same thing."

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63 Ibid., p. 236.  
64 Ibid., p. 237.  
65 Ibid.
Knight also states that Othello was great of heart. He says the human heart has shown in Othello its great capacity for good, and for evil. 

"Love, when humble, is its chief good; when proud, its chief evil, particularly in great persons." 

Knight notes that although Othello does have pride in his past deeds and in his capability for future achievements, his pride has no touch of ignobility or undue confidence.

Chambers, a continuer of the "noble Othello" tradition, completely disagrees with Stoll on the guilt of Othello. He points out that the charge of Othello's relationship with Emilia was given by Iago in a soliloquy; however, he maintains, "It is hardly to be supposed that this suspicion is meant to have any foundation. Othello's behaviour to Emilia certainly lends it no credence . . . " 

It is clear that for Iago himself it is an occasion rather than a motive for treachery.

Chambers agrees with Stoll that Othello and Desdemona are easy victims; the simple, open-hearted soldier and the tender woman who loves him prove to have nothing to oppose the forces that beset them. However, he points out, if Othello were not considered noble and gracious, his fate

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would have lacked that exalted interest which is essential even to pathetic tragedy; but there is nothing of the titanic about Othello.

Chambers sees in Othello's fall not merely the degeneration of a good man, but the purposed and inevitable defeat of "goodness" itself. That failure is presented as a result of destiny rather than of character. By his simplicity he falls, but his nobility of soul must remain unstained. The critic portrays him as a gracious and doomed creature, walking on the abyss, and "the tragic pity slowly gathers as he moves on with eyes to the sudden disaster which Iago has prepared."

Henry B. Charlton, also a follower of Bradley and continuer of the "noble Othello" tradition, writes of Othello: "... living has been for him a continuity of passionate experience and not a series of intellectual states." In Othello the simple and unadulterated elements of moral manhood exhibit themselves in their primitive purity and strength. Othello's response to life is simple, according to the critic, because he is not civilized. "Othello is a

\[71\text{Ibid., p. 220.}\]  \[72\text{Ibid., p. 225.}\]  
\[73\text{Ibid.}\]  
\[74\text{Henry B. Charlton, \textit{Shakespearian Tragedy} (Cambridge, 1948), p. 121.}\]  \[75\text{Ibid., p. 121.}\]
man formed by nature, so simply, so obviously gullible in 
his guilelessness, that he is a perfect woodcock for any 
sort of simple springs." 76  Othello's tragedy, as Charlton 
explains, is the result of the rigorous law of nature which 
condemns to extinction the last relics of an outworn world. 
This is the inevitable fate of one who is an alien not only 
to our customs, our habits and our shores, but to the very 
spirit of our times, another lamentable but familiar example 
of the evolutionary might which destroys the unadapted sur-
vivors of the past; therefore, Charlton says, "the tragedy 
creates only a mildly pathetic regret." 77

Allardyce Nicoll attributes Othello's disaster to his 
own flaws. He says Coleridge and Bradley rest their judg-
ment that any husband would have fallen victim to Iago's 
insinuations on a misconception of Shakespearean tragedy--
that tragic themes are general. 78  According to Nicoll, 
the real truth is that Othello is deceived by Iago because 
he has just those qualities which form suitable soil for 
the implanting and flourishing of Iago's suggestions. 79 
The first and most important reason for his succumbing to 
Iago's insinuations lies in his lack of intellect. 80

76  Ibid., p. 124.  
77  Ibid.  
78  Allardyce Nicoll, Studies in Shakespeare (London, 
79  Ibid., p. 104.  
80  Ibid.  

lacks Iago's native talent and Cassio's scholarly education. Nicoll says his strength is physical rather than mental. "He is a fine soldier, brave, honest, but by no means clever or having the power of reading men's thoughts." Nicoll sees in Othello an idealist's tendency to exalt what he loves and to fix his life wholly upon that. He notes how Othello answers Brabantio's warnings with "My life upon her faith!" When this faith seems shattered, his whole occupation is gone.

Opposed to this tendency to idealize is his knowledge of a certain part of reality. He knows the part of life which is associated with women of Emilia's and Bianca's character, and because of his lack of intellect, according to Nicoll, this portion of life clashes with his romanticism.

Nicoll quotes Othello's own words, "and when I love thee not," to prove his theory that Othello's suspicions were in embryo even before Iago spoke. He feels that Othello is deceiving himself again. According to Nicoll, the keynotes to Othello are deception and self-deception intermingled with the theme of idealism and reality. Othello appears to be deceiving himself, or the auditors, in the first act with his declaration that he is "rude of

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81 Ibid., p. 105.  
82 Ibid., p. 106.  
83 Ibid., p. 108.
speech"—"presenting instead of a 'round unvarnish'd tale' one of the most subtle pieces of oratory outside of Antony's similar harangue." Nicoll concludes that Othello dies with a misconception of his own nature.

Leo Kirschbaum says the Othello of the last scene is not quite so strong a character as critics have made him out to be. "He is understandably human—but he is not greatly noble." He describes it as the trait of self-idealization, the refusal to face reality, which makes Othello a psychologically consistent character and which explains why he falls so quickly into Iago's trap.

Kirschbaum disagrees with Stoll that Othello is a psychologically inconsistent character. He explains that human behavior can be so irrational that in order to create probability, the dramatist has to make his characters more consistent than people are in real life. He also states that when Shakespeare created Othello, he was merely imitating a life that produces a Rousseau or a William Blake, romantic idealists who swing from overtrust to unjust suspicion in a twinkling. He feels that Othello is too much of a

84 Ibid., p. 109.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., p. 289.
romantic idealist concerning himself and others from the very beginning. Othello considers human nature superior to what it really is. The critic writes paradoxically, "To Othello his wife is not a woman but the matrix of his universe." He does not love Desdemona, but his image of her. Kirschbaum says it is questionable in human terms whether he loves her at all.

Prior says the killing of Desdemona was alien to Othello's nature. Under Emilia's protests he realizes his error in murdering Desdemona. The knowledge of it, though it ends his conflict and division of spirit, "leaves him now void of resources." When he sees the murder in its proper light, he is no longer himself—he has destroyed himself in the act.

Wilcox interprets the close with a different viewpoint. To him the selection of a noble suicide for Othello gives Othello opportunity for a "magnificent, emotional, lofty close." He also states that the noble suicide and quick torture for Iago reveal Othello's nobility from the

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88 Ibid., p. 292.
90 Ibid.
beginning to the end, make Desdemona's marriage to him reasonable, and give the audience "two fine, high-minded characters to admire and pity for their dreadful mistakes." 92

Hardin Craig introduces a new school of thought when he says that not only a man's faults, but also his virtues may involve him in tragic consequences. 93 Craig describes Othello as a romantic hero, a warrior, a traveler, and a leader of men. His life is crowned with the glory of love; he has the nature of an elemental, simple person who has lived by faith alone. His faith has eventuated in love, according to the critic, and it is the wreck of the two that is his tragedy. "He is not jealous by nature, and his sudden attack is bolstered up by a psychology which we might call incredible if the news did not give us daily records of just such unexpected obsessions." 94

Although Craig states that Othello suffers from his virtues, he also declares that Othello is a tragic hero with a fatal pride. He says that Othello simply loses his own pride and purposes and turns his back on justice when he prefers Cassio to Iago. He even doubts the wisdom of

92 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
Othello's choice in not placing the perfect tactician Iago in high military command. Iago is nothing as a strategist; his plots are at once vague and limited, but his actions are unerring.95

Othello has an auto-revelation, but it is too late. Craig says he takes on himself the justice of God, the acme of tragic madness in both ancient and modern drama, and destroys Desdemona. Then he realizes what he has done as the calm floods of a sane, objective world overcome him.96

Kenneth Burke says that Othello is referring to himself in the farewell speech when he alludes to the "base Indian," and to Desdemona as the "pearl" he threw away.97 When Othello refers to the "turban'd Turk that he seized by the throat and smote, he was again referring to himself, the author says. Heilman agrees that Othello was referring to Desdemona when he says he threw away a pearl. He notes that Brabantio called Desdemona "jewel" in acknowledging her departure.98

95Ibid., p. 200. 96Ibid., p. 204.

97Kenneth Burke, "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," The Hudson Review, IV (Summer, 1951), 165.

Sitwell attributes to Othello "the greatness and simplicity . . . of Nature before it was altered by civilization." She says Othello's utterances have in them, sometimes the noble heat of the sun under which he was born, sometimes a grave and planetary splendor, sometimes a sonorous and oceanic strength of harmony. "When not goaded by that gadfly Iago into some hurried utterance even in the depths of his misery, his speeches have that grave and planetary measure, that unhurried splendor of utterance which seems a part of his nature." 

According to Sitwell, Othello seems to have taken farewell of himself forever from the time he first begins to doubt Desdemona's fidelity. Instead of saying "I" he says "Othello," as if the "Othello he had once known, the Othello whom the world had known, were a person divided from him." Sitwell says his noble nature must be brought to ruin "for no reason but that his grandeur offended the baseness of a cloud born from foul vapors."

Paul Jorgensen declares that Othello is led to ruin simply because he "thinks men honest that but seem to be so." Martin Wangh disagreeingly points out the

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99 Sitwell, p. 94.  
100 Ibid.  
101 Ibid., p. 97.  
102 Ibid., p. 94.  
irrationality of the Moor's jealousy. To him, Othello is only a victim and the tool of Iago's machinations, even though he is a noble Moor who has done great service for Venice as a general.

Samuel Kilger disagrees with Jorgensen. He states that Othello succumbs to Iago's schemes, not because of Iago's cleverness, but precisely because he loves Desdemona too well. "Othello has merged his whole life, as soldier and lover both, and he consequently has lost his particular judicial capacity; he is indeed perplexed." In Othello's perplexity he becomes jealous and eventually a murderer. The critic says Othello is perplexed not because he was jealous but jealous because he was perplexed.

John Robert Moore also states that it is Othello's love for Desdemona which lays him open to the insinuations of Iago, to which he would otherwise have been totally indifferent, but he also proclaims that it has made no alteration in the nobility of Othello's character. "He is perfectly poised in danger, and he refuses to be drawn into a street brawl." 


Frank Prentice Rand does not consider Othello noble, but he does say that Othello has a certain greatness of spirit, and that he emerges from his bloody blunders enlightened, chastened, even uplifted.107

Some critics feel that Arthur Sewell, who is clear about Othello's decline, seems to overrate Othello's initial status as a man of the world of spirit. Sewell says Othello's distinction among men is "that he treads the earth with all the authority of a man who belongs elsewhere."108 Othello seems to have no need of ghosts or supernatural beings to prove his acquaintance with this universe; he habitually assumes his membership of a universe beyond and often invisible to this world.109

Sewell writes that the Fall of Man is re-enacted in Othello. At the beginning of the play Othello's thought and feeling are free from the pressures of temporal things; "they have a purity and spontaneity which remind us of an early innocence."110 During the play "Chaos is come again" to Othello just as to Adam. Othello is brought by Iago and in a measure by Desdemona to surrender


109Ibid., pp. 77-78. 110Ibid., p. 94.
himself to self-regarding impulses which are all infected and diseased by the meaner expectations and vanities which society may breed in our flesh.\textsuperscript{111} "He becomes subject to the very itches of the flesh, and jealousy degrades his love so that it becomes no more than lust."\textsuperscript{112} The critic says he leaves the true domain of value and comes down, shedding all the bravery of his spirit, into Iago's world, where value is unknown.

Sewell also detects a great change in the character of Othello near the end of the play. In the closing scene, Othello loses both innocence and grace when he seeks to restore the proper love of himself by recalling what he has been in the past, thus bringing himself down to the level of the Venetians as Iago had planned.\textsuperscript{113} "The tale of fallen man is complete";\textsuperscript{114} the glory and the grandeur of the universe to which we had once thought that Othello had belonged, has vanished like a dream. In the end Sewell finds no hint of Othello's regeneration or redemption.

Heilman also notes a great change in Othello. He says Othello is a sick man in the last three acts. He implies that Othello's violence of language and conduct is evidence

\textsuperscript{111}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 95. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{112}\textit{Ibid.}  
\textsuperscript{113}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 96. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{114}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 97.
of a serious disorder. "In one scene Othello has a literal illness; in two other scenes he suffers from a malaise on the borderline between the physic and the physical, and between the assumed and the real." G. R. Elliott, who belongs to the third group, believes that Othello's pride causes his downfall. He portrays Othello as an unpoetic poet, a gentleman charmingly unaware of his great and distinctive charm, deprecating his own basic reserve and plain simplicity, and as one who is fascinated, yet hiddenly shocked by his wife's freedom and buoyancy.

Elliott says that Iago deceives Othello and Cassio far less than they deceive themselves. "Their self-concealed pride, not his concealed deviltry, is the main cause of the rupture of their friendship." He also agrees in part with Hardin Craig's theory that Othello suffers from his virtues. Othello's pride, in the service of jealous love, has become utterly blinding, while his virtuous habit of self-control is converted into a vice; therefore, he is

115 Robert B. Heilman, "Dr. Iago and His Potions," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XXVIII (Autumn, 1952), 569.
116 Ibid., p. 570.
117 Elliott, p. 120.
118 Ibid., p. 92.
no longer Iago's opposite. 119 "Iagoan egoism and hypocrisy, latent in all men, are now active in Othello." 120

Elliott depicts Othello and Iago as the complement of each other in the finale of the temptation scene. The hero and the villain of the play are mysteriously coalescing under pressure of the powers of evil. 121 "Iago has the wariness, Othello the furor of jealous, proud, vengeful hate." 122 Elliott realizes that each from the beginning of the drama has had a latent capacity for the other's distinctive vice. Iago, who is too small and hard of heart to experience real furor, has a cold mental fury and a "fire" of malicious fancy. Othello's strong self-control enables him now, at the very height of his rage, to attain a wary "patience" analogous to Iago's, though far more dreadful. 123

Elliott says that Othello's very modesty regarding his own social merits is feeding his jealousy. He thinks that Othello's jealousy could be cured if openly vented, because his dissimulation, not his rage in itself, is inevitably tragic. The essence of the tragedy, according to the critic, is Othello's proud, jealous control, both patient and violent, of the violence of his jealousy.
Elliott says that one sees Othello's love for his wife swiftly growing in quantity though not in quality, in profuse romantic emotion, not in real depth. "His kind of jealousy has intensified his kind of love."\textsuperscript{124} The self-centered intenseness of his love has rendered him incapable of giving it up without wrecking his very life.

In his conclusion Elliott points out that Othello was certainly "great of heart." In Othello the human heart has shown its great capacity for good and for evil.\textsuperscript{125} The critic refers to Iago as the small person, fettered, rigid, dumb, amazed by his master's happiness to die, and appalled by the supernatural strength of the love he had sought to destroy.\textsuperscript{126} Iago is a figure symbolizing the evil power of proud self-love; the greater the tragedy, the more this self-centered love works its evil power in greatly human persons.\textsuperscript{127}

Elliott notes that Cassio said he "was" but that we say he "is" great of heart. In contrast to Sewell's theory of the unredemption of the hero, Elliott contends that Othello has found life in death, through humble love and new greatness of heart, instead of the death in life

\textsuperscript{124}Ibid., p. 130. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{125}Ibid., p. 240.
\textsuperscript{126}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{127}Ibid., p. 241.
which had obsessed him and which Iago remains to repre-
sent.128

Bertram Jessup avers that the tragedy is not a struggle
between good and evil, but is a conflict between good and
good. The inevitable end result is the sacrifice of an
ideal but unattainable greater good to an attainable but
lesser good. The tragedy lies in the sense (realization)
that one good must be lost. However, the loss of a lesser
good to a greater good is reconcilable; but the loss of a
greater good to a lesser good is not. "The conflict is
thus between the ideal and the real, and the real wins, as
is to be expected in the real world." Tragedy as an art
form uses evil, but it does not solve evil. Good con-
quered by evil cannot be tragic, but it may be terrifying.129

Jessup presents another orthodox way of providing a
solution to the tragedy—to invoke the moral ideas of re-
tributive justice and recovered balance. According to this
philosophy Othello generates the tragedy by his own fault
or tragic flaw—gullibility.130 Through this fault he
becomes the agent of his own destruction and that of others.
The state of affairs in which he acts becomes resultantly

128Ibid.

129Bertram Jessup, Philosophy in Shakespeare (Eugene,

130Ibid., p. 13.
and grievously unbalanced, and in the outcome he is, along with others, violently removed. Up to this point Jessup agrees, but he does not agree with the conclusion that, in this removal, order is restored and justice done. Jessup concludes with the tragic paradox that if Othello had been worse than he was, he would have been better than he was. He could not yield in feeling, action, or thought. He does not think or act in submission to the facts, but holds to the hard course of his own imperatives, moral and intellectual.\textsuperscript{131} Of all the tragic characters this is their common story, their common excellence, and their common failing.

D. A. Traversi expresses his sentiments along with Elliott that Othello's sufferings are explicitly related to his own failings, but that Othello manages in spite of these failings to attain tragic dignity.\textsuperscript{132} In comparing the sentiments and actions of Othello with those of his opposite, Hamlet, the critic finds Othello's to be perfectly intelligible throughout, perfectly consistent with the character as defined; his emotions are always strictly related to their causes as dramatically presented. He is fully and continuously a person.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131}Ibid., p. 15.


\textsuperscript{133}Ibid.
Traversi characterizes Othello's failings as being self-centered, naive, even egoistic. To the critic, Othello's account of his wooing Desdemona makes this clear. It was by his "passionate, simple-minded delight in his own magnificent career that he won her"; he valued her because she ministered to his self-esteem. Othello says:

She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.

As Othello's ruin proceeds, the egoism which had always been a part of the character comes more and more to the fore, not in connection with military glory, but rather in his attitude toward his own folly. Traversi says the intensity of sensual feeling which was never fully gratified in his relations with Desdemona is now to be exercised in exacting retribution for the ruin of his integrity. Because he is thwarted in love, his egoism will be consistent in revenge, and the type of passion which was not exemplified in his declarations of love, reveals itself in a craving for destruction. In spite of all his folly, his egoism contains a considerable degree of tragic dignity. "The great speeches in which he attains tragic structure by expressing his 'nobility' are, at the same time, merciless exposures of weakness."
The critic notes that Othello admits to Desdemona that if life had presented a problem which could have been met by a noble creation which would have been flattering to his self-esteem, all would have been well. In the last part of his speech, Othello reveals the true source of his suffering:

\[\text{but, alas, to make me}\]
\[\text{A fixed figure for the time of scorn}\]
\[\text{To point his slow, unmoving finger at!}\]

Othello is to become an object of ridicule without being able to react, to assert his own nobility--this is the shame from which Othello feels that there is no escape; it accompanies him to his tragic end.\(^{139}\)

Traversi says Othello's last speech is not only a piece of splendid self-centered poetry, but is also the dupe's attempt at self-justification. It is the revelation of a character . . .

"perplexed," betrayed by emotions he has never really understood. Othello's last words are a pathetic return to his original simplicity of nature. Unable to cope effectively with the complicated business of living, he recalls his generous past and commits the simple act of suicide.\(^{140}\)

Traversi concludes by saying that the critical acid applied by Iago has already destroyed the structure of

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\(^{138}\) Othello, IV, ii, 53-55.  
\(^{139}\) Traversi, p. 146.  
\(^{140}\) Ibid., p. 149.
Othello's greatness. However, he adds that in spite of all of Othello's shortcomings, he is felt to be connected with love and natural emotion, and that there is nothing grudging about the nobility which Shakespeare confers upon Othello at his best moments.\textsuperscript{141}

Heilman also sees signs of immaturity, histrionism, and incompleteness of love in the history of Othello's romance.\textsuperscript{142} The critic says that there is a hint of self-pity or of aptitude for self-pity when the lover can define his emotions as a product of the loved one's pity for him. He detects in Othello some failure of response to Desdemona and lack of acceptance of the whole being of the loved one.\textsuperscript{143} Heilman compares Othello and Iago and concludes that in the end both feel the world which they have built collapsing, and both act in a fury of revenge. Othello kills Desdemona because she seems to prove that she is betraying him in her defense of Cassio. Iago kills Emilia because she is betraying him in her defense of Desdemona.\textsuperscript{144}

Paul Siegel agrees with Sewell and others that Othello's fall was reminiscent of that of Adam. He explains that Othello's choice was between Christian love and forgiveness

\textsuperscript{141}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{142}Robert B. Heilman, \textit{Magic in the Web} (Lexington, 1956), p. 141.

\textsuperscript{143}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{144}Ibid.
and Satanic hate and vengefulness. Othello was succumbing to the devil when he exclaimed,

Arise black vengeance, from the hollow hell.
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate.  

The critic compares the oath between Othello and Iago when Iago kneels side by side with Othello and vows to be at his service in "what bloody business ever," to Faustus' oath: "It is a pact with the devil that Othello has made." In promising to be Othello's own forever, Iago becomes Othello's Mephistopheles, and by making the devil his servant Othello gives himself up into his power.  

In contrast to the opinions of Burke and Heilman, Siegel asserts that Othello refers to the pearl he cast away as the loss of his own immortal soul to the devil.  

Siegel says Othello "has indeed brought chaos to his moral being and perdition to his soul, having traduced divine goodness and violated the law of God." He feels that Othello loses his own claim to God's mercy when he


146 Othello, III, iii, 447-449.

147 Siegel, p. 1070.

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid., p. 1078.
refuses to forgive Desdemona in the death scene when she cries for mercy.

In a subsequent article by Siegel, he further states that Othello's final anguish is an overwhelming sense of guilt without faith in the mercy of God.\textsuperscript{150} It is a Judas-type of repentance, and the author states that Othello is following Judas's example in committing self-murder. Othello's behavior here is a confirmation of the impression of Othello's damnation given earlier when he offers Desdemona an opportunity for salvation through prayer and then withdraws it in a rage, "not realizing that his own salvation is at issue and forgetting that those who do not forgive will not be forgiven."\textsuperscript{151}

Siegel, with his twentieth-century set of values, interprets Othello's fall as an exemplification of the possibilities of human nature for greatness and weakness.\textsuperscript{152} To the critic, the fact that a man of Othello's nobility could fall as he did was a terrifying reminder of the fall of Adam and of man's subsequent proneness to soul-destroying sin.


\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{152} Siegel, "The Damnation of Othello," p. 1070.
John Arthos avows that the crime or the deed that most calls forth the tragic sense is the violation of Othello's love and his humanity, not the killing of a life. He writes that Othello has been enlarged by love, and then has proved not quite equal to the demands. It appears to the critic that Othello's integrity depended on something other than honor and that he was indeed abused. He points out that it was Othello's love that brought the richest fulfillment of his self; consequently, the suspicions that undermined his happiness sapped his sufficiency. The spoiling of his love brought about his fall. To take the word of a liar was a foolish fault which dishonored Othello, but the spoiling of the capacity of the soul to grow in the love of another was disastrous.

Goddard claims that the major criticism of Othello is against the conduct of the hero. He says "a real Othello would have gone to his wife for an explanation." Othello is almost as susceptible to the influence of Desdemona as to that of Iago. "First Desdemona wins him, then Iago; then Desdemona, dead, wins him back." The critic points out that Othello's defenders are compelled to plead his

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154 Ibid., p. 100.

155 Ibid.

156 Goddard, p. 474.

157 Ibid.
age, his brief acquaintance with his wife, his ignorance of Venetian society and consequent self-distrust and willingness to accept Iago's account of Venetian habits.

In view of the various criticisms and defenses of Othello, Goddard insists that this much is true at least, that Othello regarded Desdemona's love for him as a dream too beautiful to be true; therefore, when it is suggested to him that it is not true, it is in a sense what he has been ready to believe all along.\(^{158}\) As Goddard puts it, "What wonder that it is easy for him to dismiss his happiness as an illusion! 'Desdemona love me! Impossible!'\(^{159}\) The critic feels that these ideas of Desdemona's infidelity were so real, and to Othello so obvious, that it never entered his mind to question or ask for evidence any more than we would awaken from a dream and then go about searching for material evidence that it was not a dream after all.\(^{160}\) Goddard finds in Othello the same fineness of impulse, tenderness, trustfulness, openness, and freedom that Desdemona possesses.

Harold S. Wilson finds it hard to sympathize much with Othello if one considers him dispassionately, or if one stops to reflect.\(^{161}\) He regards Othello as a simpleton, "so

\(^{158}\)Ibid. \(^{159}\)Ibid. \(^{160}\)Ibid. 

easily hoodwinked, so childishly carried away by passion, so utterly incapable of taking thought." The critic detects a remarkable transformation in Othello from the man of judgment, the commander "whom passion could not shake," to a credulous fool transported with jealous fury. He is so infatuated that while he demands evidence of Desdemona's guilt, he never sees anything save through Iago's suggestion. When he echoes "honest, honest Iago," it is a refrain to his folly because he is so beguiled.

Wilson makes the interesting suggestion that Othello is the victim of evil, though he shares responsibility for the evil that befalls him. Although Othello is greatly at fault himself, he is also the victim of an evil power. "Iago wills the evil and Othello, in his blindness, with him."

Wilson's opinion of Othello's nobility does not differ substantially from that of Goddard and others. He holds that Othello is great by virtue of his suffering. He also describes Othello as great in himself. Othello's perfect self-command and command over others is epitomized in his speech to Brabantio. His courteous dignity is displayed finely in his speech to the Venetian senators, and

162 Ibid., p. 55. 163 Ibid. 164 Ibid., p. 10. 165 Ibid., p. 10. 166 Ibid., p. 55.
by his frank and deep love for Desdemona. Othello kills Desdemona to save her soul. He awakens her that she may repent and find mercy in heaven. Her death would be a sacrifice of her life to save her soul if she repented. Othello pleads with Desdemona to confess her sins freely. He assures her that Cassio has confessed.

When Othello realizes the terrible mistake he has committed, he punishes himself by inviting the damnation which, in his remorse, he judges to be the just penalty of his offence. Wilson reminds us that Othello tells us himself that he is damned.

Twentieth-century criticism made an important contribution in the field of character interpretation. The critics no longer blindly accepted the opinion that Othello was the "noble Moor" from beginning to the end. They began to recognize that Othello has some serious defects of character; they also realized that Iago's cunning devilry had an unusual amount of good luck on its side. Although there are many diverse opinions concerning the character of Othello, there is one point upon which most critics agree—that, regardless of the failures and shortcomings of Othello throughout the play, he nevertheless redeems himself in the

167 ibid. 
168 ibid. 
169 ibid., p. 66.
end by his noble act and stately speech when he proves his love for Desdemona and preserves his honor by dying upon a kiss.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The criticisms of Othello's character in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries show distinct changes in the critics' opinions from the lavish praises of Othello by the eighteenth-century critics to the more diversified and meaningful opinions of the nineteenth-century writers finally to the prolific criticisms of each complex part of his nature in the twentieth century. The chief emphasis of this thesis, however, has been placed on the interpretations of the twentieth-century critics.

In the eighteenth century Othello was admired complaisantly by the critics. He was proclaimed the noble Moor duped by a villain—Johnson even expresses a sense of pity for him. His downfall is credited to an unwise marriage.

The interpretations of Othello began to be more realistic and meaningful with the beginning of Coleridgian criticism in the nineteenth century. Most critics expressed a particular point of view in relation to the controversial character of Othello. National appreciation of the character of Othello is said to begin with Coleridge; the outstanding critics who wrote in the first half of the nineteenth century—Coleridge and Hermann Ulrici—felt that
Othello was noble, generous, open-hearted, and unsuspicious; however, these critics did not praise him unreservedly as the earlier critics had done, nor did they ignore the seeming contradictions in his character; on the contrary, most of the writers of this period admitted Othello's faults, but they justified his actions by saying that they were forced upon him by circumstances.

Two of the later critics, Hudson and White, agree that Othello does show some signs of passion, but it is only that which is natural to all men, and it is not a predominant characteristic. White also charges that though Othello is noble, he is not a European gentleman.

William Hazlitt, who wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Edward Dowden, a later critic of that century, agree with Coleridge and the earlier writers on the nobility of Othello. In disagreeing with the earlier writers, these two critics agree that Othello's hot Mauritanian blood is of the most inflammable kind.

George Brandes, Bernhard ten Brink, Johnson, Stoll, and Snider—all writing in the last of the nineteenth century—accept Othello as the noble Moor. Brandes says that he is noble and great in spite of his fiery temperament, and that the cause of his disaster is his simplicity. Stoll says Othello does not breed the poison, but is infected with it.
Stopford A. Brooke, the last influential critic of the nineteenth century, interprets the character of Othello as a gross improbability. He admires the Othello of the first part of the play, but after the second act finds his character full of contradictions and inconsistencies, the victim of vulgar jealousy filled with rage and fury. When Othello's jealousy reaches its extremity (just before the death scene), Brooke portrays him on the borderline which divides sanity from insanity running wildly at full speed.

As has been indicated earlier, most critics of the twentieth century can be classified as belonging to one of the three main approaches to the problem of Othello's character. The critics of the first group--Bradley, Raleigh, Goll, Knight, Chambers, Wilcox, Jorgensen, Kilger, and Moore--extended the "noble Moor" theory, the older tradition advocated by most critics in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

A. C. Bradley and Walter Raleigh, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, uphold the older tradition of Othello's nobility. Bradley strongly disagrees with those critics who suggest that Othello is a noble barbarian who has retained some of his savage passions after being converted to Christianity. He feels that Othello is an imaginative and poetic person whose actions have often been misinterpreted. Both critics admit that Othello does have
some flaws of character. Bradley says he is simple and trustful to the point that he is easily deceived, but he also reminds us that Othello and Desdemona are star-crossed mortals and that fate takes sides with villainy. Raleigh says that the mistakes Othello makes are not his undoing. His tragedy lies in the net that was woven by circumstance being added to circumstance until Othello is taken in its toils. Whatever Othello may have done wrong, Raleigh feels that he and Desdemona are both made perfect in the act of death.

Goll and Knight are both continuers of the "noble Othello" tradition. Knight says that Othello does exhibit some pride, but it is not ignoble pride. He feels that it is due to Othello's hatred of deceit that Iago convinces him that he is "honest Iago."

Chambers and H. B. Charlton, critics who wrote in the middle of the twentieth century, also proclaim Othello's nobility. Chambers' theory is that the defeat of "goodness" itself is a result of destiny rather than of character, and even though Othello falls because of his own simplicity, still his soul remains noble. Charlton agrees that Othello is simple and also says Othello is not civilized. Another critic who wrote in the same period, John Wilcox, states the same theory that Chambers has stated, that Othello has
made some dreadful mistakes, but yet he remains noble in the end.

Jorgensen, Kilger, Moore, and Sitwell, writing after World War II, agree on the nobility of Othello; however, they do not agree concerning the reasons for his fall. Jorgensen credits it to Othello's being too trusting, but Kilger and Moore say it is Othello's love for Desdemona which makes him gullible to Iago's insinuations, and according to Sitwell, he is brought to ruin for no other reason but that his greatness offended the baseness of Iago.

The second approach to the problem of Othello's character could probably best be classified as that advocated by Stoll and perhaps a few followers. His theory is that Othello believes Iago because it has been conveniently planned that way by the author. Stoll and Abernethy wrote in the beginning of the twentieth century in the post-World War I period. Stoll states clearly his disagreement with the "noble Moor" point of view. He feels that the incredible facility with which Othello is led to hearken to Iago's accusations against Desdemona cannot be justified psychologically. However, Stoll feels a compulsion to explain why Othello did succumb so quickly. First he assumes that Othello is easily made jealous because he is guilty also. If this cannot be assumed, Stoll leaves but
one alternative, and that is the assumption that Othello has been duped by a villain. Stoll does not think that Shakespeare intended for us to accept Othello as a dupe.

Abernethy, who wrote a little later than Stoll but in the same period of time, was a follower of Stoll. He states further that Othello is a vast repudiation rather than an exemplification of human nature, that he has a perverted nature which is the jealousy of insanity.

The third main approach through character is that Othello has tragic flaws in his character which cause his downfall, and that he is not noble in the proper sense of the word; however, some critics may use the term nobility loosely to describe Othello's plausible actions at the beginning of the play.

Masefield wrote in the pre-war period at the beginning of the twentieth century. He held the view that Othello was obsessed with a jealous suspicion.

Campbell, who wrote in the period between World War I and World War II, is one of the critics who states that Othello is simple and noble at the beginning of the play, but she feels that he is one of a race to whom it is natural to be jealous. Campbell and Mark Van Doren both agree that Othello is the best and the worst of men. Van Doren also credits part of Othello's difficulty to his race. He says that there is a wilderness in Othello which
will not be tamed. Van Doren and Nicoll, both writers of the same period, offer Othello's lack of intellect as the reason he is so easily taken in by Iago. Nicoll says Othello's strength is physical rather than mental, and that the keynotes to his character are deception and self-deception intermingled with idealism and reality.

Kirschbaum, writing at the end of the period between the wars, disagrees with Stoll. He says Othello is understandably human. He falls quickly into Iago's trap because of his own character traits—self idealization and the refusal to face reality—but he is not greatly noble; he is a romantic idealist. Frank Rand also says he is not noble, but that he does have a certain greatness of spirit.

Hardin Craig, George Elliott, and D. A. Traversi—all critics who wrote in the middle of the twentieth century—agree up to a point on the theory that Othello suffers from his virtues. Craig says Othello's jealousy is an unexpected obsession; both critics agree that he is a tragic hero with a fatal pride. Elliott says Othello's habit of self-control is converted into a vice and his virtuous pride has become blinding when his jealous love obsesses him. Traversi agrees with Elliott that Othello retains his tragic dignity in spite of his failings.

A recent critic, Heilman, agrees with Elliott, Craig, Traversi, and others who believe that Othello is mad near
the end of the play; however, he considers the madness a result of Iago's machinations and not the initial motivating factor in Othello's actions.

The most recent critic whose interpretations have been considered, Bertram Jessup, also agrees in part with the opinion of the third group of critics. He believes that Othello becomes the agent of his own destruction by his gullibility, but that his virtues, not his faults, keep him from acting or thinking in submission to the facts. Othello is holding to an unattainable good which must be lost to an obtainable good.

There are some critics who state at the beginning of their criticisms that Othello is noble, generous, open-hearted, and magnanimous, but who in the process of developing their theories attribute character flaws to Othello which rob him of some of his nobility according to the orthodox meaning of the word. The critics who will be discussed in this group are contemporary writers who wrote from the middle of the twentieth century to date.

Arthur Sewell and Paul Siegel express the opinion that Othello's fall was symbolical of the fall of Adam. Siegel also compares his act of committing self-murder to that of Judas's example. Sewell, Siegel, and Prior all express their belief that Othello has destroyed himself and has no chance for redemption in the end.
John Arthos also belongs to this group, because, although he admits that Othello has some foolish faults, he does not think that these are the cause of his fall. He says that Othello was made great by love and then proved to be unequal to meet the demands.

Harold Goddard and Harold S. Wilson are discussed separately as not adhering to any previously established view, because even though they both agree on the greatness and nobility of Othello, they also limit his nobility. Goddard defends Othello's actions on the basis that Desdemona's love for him was a dream too beautiful for his human mind to comprehend.

Wilson makes a distinction between the actions of Othello and the man himself. He feels that Othello is great in himself, and that he is made great by his suffering. Although he admits that Othello is the victim of an evil power, the critic also thinks Othello is greatly at fault himself. Wilson makes the interesting assumption that when Othello realizes the mistake he has made, because he is noble, he invites the damnation which he has decided would be a just penalty for his offence. Wilson's Othello is in the end—though not profitably noble—yet a "noble, damned Othello."
The mere fact that so many critics have been concerned with the interpretation of the character of Othello attests the greatness and lasting interest of what has often been called Shakespeare's most typical and perfect play. That the opinions of the critics vary so widely evinces that Shakespeare, in portraying Othello, was truly "holding the mirror up to nature" so that each reader could in this jealousy-ridden character empathetically feel some of the emotions of a deeply loving and pained Othello.
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