Shakespeare’s Othello Islamic Perspective: 2005 - 2015

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Foreword

This book presents two papers I prepared on Shakespeare’s *Othello* from the perspective of Islam. They were written ten years apart.

The first version was written while I taught Literature in English at the Islamic Science University of Malaysia in 2004 and again in 2005. The paper essentially relates the insights taken up in class.

The second version was prepared in 2015, at IAIS Malaysia, the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies. The latter version appears to be polished in relation to the earlier version.

When I initially proposed to the CEO, Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali to produce this paper, I intended to revise and expand the USIM version. However, when I mentioned in passing that Islam offers protection against slanderous accusation, he replied, “Why do you want to take such a legalistic perspective?”

So, in response, I wrote completely separate version, without a dwelling on the legal aspect of slanderous accusations. I wrote it from memory, without referring to the earlier version.

The latter version appeared on the IAIS Website. It comes without footnotes and resembles an essay rather than a research paper.
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Here I present both. The USIM version has been edited. The two versions provide alternative perspectives. Together, they perhaps provide a fuller portrait of Othello from the perspective of Islam.

The reader may judge for himself or herself about the relative merits or otherwise of each version, as well as their relationship to each other.

The two versions explore the conflict between Othello and Desdemona as well as the “clash” between two civilizations, that forms the background of the play. Hopefully, tensions may be alleviated by a recourse to reason and fairness.

The initial 2005 version takes a detailed approach. It quotes the Quran where appropriate. It is furnished with footnotes and thus appears as a research paper. The 2015 version resembles more of a bird’s eye view.

Both versions explore the issue of adultery, that has also been treated by Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* and Gustave Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*. All treatments teach that adultery brings demise to all who participate in it. As the Quran puts it:

> And come not near unto adultery. Lo! it is an abomination and an evil way.¹

*Othello* is a tale of a marital union based on love rather than tradition. The marriage turned out to be highly unstable, much like the groom and, to a lesser extent, the bride. In other words, people should not allow themselves to be carried by their emotions. As the Quran puts it:

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¹ *Al Qur’an*, 17:32, Pickthall.
Hast thou seen him who has taken his caprice to be his god, and God has led him astray out of a knowledge, and set a seal upon his hearing and his heart, and laid a covering on his eyes? Who shall guide him after God? What, will you not remember?²

In the 2005 version in particular I tried to present literary analysis from the Islamic perspective. The actions of characters are evaluated against an ethical background. In the case of these papers, this ethical compass is provided by the Quran.

The theme common to both papers is how to deal with injustice, in this case the injustice of a false accusation which led to Desdemona’s murder. While the USIM version highlights the benefits of Islamic law in protecting women against slanderous accusations, the IAIS version focuses upon the geopolitical background of the play and attempts to draw from the play insights of contemporary relevance.

Shakespeare’s Othello 2015

Introduction

When Muslim students take up the study of English literature, they typically do so for the purpose of improving their English, much in demand in today’s world. While this is

² Quran, 45: 43, translated by Arberry.
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no doubt a worthy motivation, a systematic study of literature can bring additional benefits.

A focused study of literature can, for example, help develop what are known as “higher order or critical thinking skills.” The higher order thinking skills include the recollection and application of knowledge. They also include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These skills are developed within the discipline known as literary criticism.

Moreover, literature can assist in the spiritual growth of readers. It can help readers become better human beings by presenting them with good role models. In literature, this takes place by means of story telling.

Stories narrate events that are either fictional, based on real occurrences, or comprise a mixture of both. By tracing the lives of the protagonists in their interaction with their respective antagonists in real-life settings, literature can teach valuable lessons in ethics. By showing the triumph of good over evil, literature can motivate readers to become good or better persons. Every good story teaches a moral or an ethical lesson.

Literature can show the consequences of various choices made by various characters. Each choice is made on the basis of a particular system of ethics of what constitutes success as well as how one goes about achieving it.

In this way, literature can complement the teaching of religion. Religion highlights the benefits of being a good person and the price of performing evil deeds. Indeed, good literature should—as in the case of great literature does—take its inspiration from religion.
**Tragedy**

Tragedy is the occurrence of misfortune in one way or another. A tragic experience brings harm and sometimes death or disability to its victims. Tragedies generally occur in the form of natural or man-made disasters. The occurrence of tragedy implies *loss of control* over one’s life. Tragedies can often be prevented. Not a few tragedies are caused by human error or weakness of one kind or another.

Tragedy seldom takes place without injustice. Sometimes the injustice is caused by the victim and sometimes by other parties. In some cases, the victim may share the responsibility for causing a tragedy with another party or parties.

Tragedies are caused by various factors. They may include carelessness, impulsiveness, pride, an addiction or some other vice. For example, according to a saying popular during wartime, “loose lips can sink ships.”

Tragedies can take place on a personal, national and even a global level. A loss of a loved one, an automobile accident, or a terminal illness, all constitute examples of *personal* tragedies. Famine, wars or civil wars constitute examples of *national* tragedies. An epidemic, a flood of refugees from a war zone or a world war are examples of *global* tragedies.

Significant events that caused a great deal of harm also qualify as tragedies. Examples include the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 and the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The 9/11 attacks and their geopolitical effects also represent recent and ongoing tragedies.
Similarly, various conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere can hardly be described in terms other than tragic. Oppression of people, regardless of where this takes place, is likewise tragic. Customs resulting from ignorance, such as the burying female infants alive, also constitute tragedies.

The experience of tragedy affects how a person looks at life. It can help a person become more compassionate. A tragedy can make a person realise the essential vulnerability of all to misfortune, and the fragility of human existence. Matters that previously seemed valuable may appear less significant after an experience of tragedy, while concerns that previously appeared insignificant, may take on a new importance.

Experience of tragedy can enable a witness or victim to gain insight into the vicissitudes of existence from a unique – tragic – perspective. As a result, complacency may give way to a realisation that little in life may be taken for granted, and that man is not the only disposer of his affairs.

Perspectives can change even on a social level and have political consequences. For example, the suffering imposed on millions of people worldwide during the Great Depression resulted in the implementation of new policies designed to help the poor to overcome unemployment.

In such cases – essentially crises – the policies and even responsibilities of government can change, obliging governments to take a far greater responsibility for protecting and ensuring the welfare of the people than was the case until then.

Because of the suffering and harm they bring, it is imperative to avoid tragedies. It is better to prevent a tragedy than to
address its consequences. Thus, it is necessary to be pro-active to minimise the occurrence of tragedies.

There are many theories of tragedy. Ordinary tragedies can be caused by mistakes or simply a failure to follow rules. Tragedies can also take place as a consequence of ignorance. According to another view, tragedies are also caused by transgressions of divine prohibitions, or a failure to comply with divine commands. In other words, they arise when man ignores the signs of God or even adopts the attitude of an adversary (Qur’an, 16:04, 36:77).

**Tragedy and religion**

A comprehensive articulation of tragedy may be found in the Qur’an. The religious conception posits tragedy as arising from man’s alienation from his Creator. This separation, if not overcome, brings loss. Conversely, man’s rapprochement with his Creator brings rewards. To succeed in life is to become God-conscious. Thus, success in life – whether in this or the next life – requires living in accordance with the will of the Creator. Man charts his future by the choices he makes.

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, caused by their defiance of the command not to approach the forbidden tree, may be seen as a “tragedy.” Despite being warned in advance, Adam allowed himself to be deceived into approaching the forbidden tree by a false promise of immortality and power. His flaws included gullibility, disobedience and weakness.

Another example of tragedy is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The latter murdered his brother out of jealousy,
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as Abel’s offering of sacrifice was accepted while that of Cain was rejected. Cain’s tragic flaw appears to have been his jealousy, coupled with a proclivity to commit violence.

Divine retribution brings punishment to wrongdoers. By committing injustice, perpetrators bring retribution on themselves. As the Qur’an puts it, *God did not do any injustice to them, but they wronged themselves* (3:117, 9:70, 10:44, 16:33, 29:40, 30:9).

Historical experience confirms that transgressors are vanquished in the longer term. Napoleon and Hitler were both defeated in Russia. Japan’s aggression against China at the beginning of WWII, and later against other nations, was thoroughly defeated.

However, even in the aftermath of misfortune, there is hope for redemption. This requires repentance and reform. In such cases, man may hope for a return to divine favour. Thus, tragedy followed by regret can act as a catalyst – a wake-up call as it were – and alert the victim to the need for change. Various crises in the history of different communities constitute examples of “tragedies” that served as such “wake up calls.”

In the history of Islam, examples of such crises include the respective collapses of the Umayyad, Abbasid and the Ottoman dynasties. In order to prevent a repeat of a given crisis or tragedy, it is necessary to identify the weakness or weaknesses that caused the crisis in the first place. This requires analysis of significant historical events, a kind of “post mortem.” Subsequently, the weakness or weaknesses need to be overcome.
Indeed, the ethical and legal part of the teaching of Islam in the form of the commands and prohibitions may be seen as intended to prevent various kinds of tragedies. Thus, the prohibition of adultery is designed to protect the family, while the prohibition of slander is to protect the reputation of innocent people. Similarly, the prohibition of murder is designed to protect life while the prohibition of stealing is intended to protect private and public property.

The command to protect the orphans is to protect vulnerable groups of society, while the command to practice charity is to alleviate poverty. The command to act with justice is to prevent conflicts from arising between people, and in this way to maintain peace. The command to fear God is to ensure that all other commands and prohibitions will be respected.

**Modernity and tradition**

The difference between tradition and modernity corresponds roughly to the difference between the past and the future, between the familiar and what is new. While tradition preserves custom and heritage, modernity demands adjustment and change. Thus, a certain degree of tension can always be expected to exist between tradition and modernity.

The emergence of modern notions is linked to the rise of Industrialization and the attendant invention and widespread utilization of new technologies. For example, the invention of the printing press enabled more people to become knowledgeable, and in that way facilitated a greater acceptance of the idea of equality.
By contrast, “traditional” perspectives portray a hierarchical vision of society, with emphasis on continuity, stability, and harmony. A “traditional” person may be reluctant to change and may prefer to follow “traditional” ways of doing things.

Stability is an important characteristic of a “traditional” way of life, and comprises much of its appeal. Ritual is an important part of tradition. It provides a visible expression of the identity of a particular community. Another important characteristic of “tradition” is loyalty, not least to the tradition itself.

Every tradition reflects a particular worldview. This worldview is typically derived from a narrative of one kind or another, such as a scripture or a Constitution. Disagreements between modernizers and traditionally minded persons may arise if attempts at “modernization” come to be viewed as little more than attempts to undermine, if not outright to destroy “tradition.”

There is no reason to doubt that a successful integration of tradition and modernity is possible. The reason is that what is best in tradition can be preserved even in the modern age, because the core of what is best in a tradition invariably comprises values. By definition, values are intangible and cannot in principle be affected by a mere passage of time or a changing historical environment. Thus, “traditional” values need not be affected by characteristically “modern” developments, such as the invention of the printing press or the Internet.

Technology in itself is morally neutral. It is how we use technology than can be treated as morally acceptable or reprehensible. From the perspective of Islam, if modern
technologies are used in ways that agree with the teaching of religion, then they are acceptable. If they are used in ways that violate the ethical norms of Islam, then their use is reprehensible and cannot be condoned.

The tension between tradition and modernity is sometimes expressed in the difference between “conservatives” and “progressives.” In Elizabethan England, the contest between tradition and modernity is cast as a contest between what was perceived as the arbitrary rule of the monarchy and those calling for the rule of law, greater personal autonomy, and a more representative, democratic form of government.

**Ideological and Social Context**

Shakespeare’s Othello was written and performed on stage during the English Renaissance. This was a time of the emergence of European modernity. A transformation was taking place, away from a fatalistic, passive outlook, to an active attitude where man would take greater control over his own destiny than was the case under the old regime. The emancipation of the spirit from the constraints of dogma was bringing a sense of relief. There was a willingness to sail into uncharted waters, both metaphorically and literally.

The spirit of the Renaissance, inherited from the world of Islam, brimmed with optimism and confidence. It engaged its supporters in new and daring pursuits. Exploration of new lands was accompanied by a flowering of the arts: literature, music and drama.

Art and science, as means for the acquisition of knowledge or expression of spiritual awareness, began to acquire a higher
status. Rightly or wrongly, reason came to be seen as a source of “enlightenment” or knowledge in its own right. Industrialization would soon become a leading catalyst of change.

There were calls for a greater autonomy of the individual. It would not be long before slavery was abolished in a number of countries. There was a new focus on “how people lived rather than how they ought to live.” Idealism was giving way to realism. This new “realism” also found an expression in Shakespeare’s work.

The Elizabethan era, named after Elizabeth I, the daughter of Henry the VIII, is known as the golden age of English history. It spanned the period from the beginning of the English Reformation (1534) to the start of the English Civil Wars in 1642, a power struggle between Charles I and the supporters of Parliament. The transition from tradition to modernity was characterised by a great deal of political instability.

Protestantism was introduced into England by Henry VIII in 1534, only 17 years after Martin Luther’s publication of the 95 Theses that sparked the Reformation in continental Europe. Mary I restored Catholicism in 1553. Elizabeth I, who ruled from 1558 until her death in 1603, re-established a moderate form of Protestantism in 1559. An attempt by Spain to restore Catholicism in England in 1588 with the help of the Armada failed.

The Civil Wars between the King and Parliament ended in 1649 with the trial and execution of Charles I, and the establishment of republican government during the Interregnum (1649 – 1660). The republican government was
dominated by Puritans, who enforced severe rules, which included the closure of theatres.

The republican government gave way to rule by Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army (1653 – 1658). The inability of Richard Cromwell, the successor of Oliver Cromwell to rule after his father’s death, helped to usher in the Restoration of the Catholic monarchy under Charles II in 1660. Protestantism was once again re-established during the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

Economically, feudalism was in decline. England, Venice and other nations began to benefit from rising trade. Some powers, such as Venice, were coming into confrontation with the Ottoman Empire.

Venice – a cosmopolitan city-state – came into the possession of Cyprus in 1473, nineteen years before the fall of Granada in 1492, the year that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Selim II conquered Cyprus in 1571, two months before the Battle of Lepanto, in which a Turkish fleet was defeated by the Venetians. These events form the historical background of the action of play, which would therefore have taken place sometime between 1473 and 1571.

**Othello**

Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616. In England, Shakespeare occupies a place comparable to that of Rumi in the Islamic civilisation. It appears that Shakespeare was prompted to cast Othello as a Moor by Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, who was the Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I in 1600.
The first performance took place on the 1st of November 1604, at the Banqueting House at the Whitehall Palace in London. It was first published in 1622, six years after Shakespeare died. Since then the play has been staged in many nations in the form of theatre performances, films and television dramas.

The action of the play takes place in Venice, an independent republic, sometime between the 15th and the 16th centuries, against the background of the competition between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Venice over control of the Mediterranean.

Venice was a rich, cosmopolitan city-state, able to afford hiring a mercenary army to defend it and its colonies against its enemies. In the Mediterranean the Ottoman Empire was still expanding, despite having suffered a setback in Europe at the Battle of Vienna in 1529.

The play explores the relationships between Desdemona and Othello, Cassio and Iago, and between Iago and his wife Emilia. At the political level, the play reflects the competition between Christendom and the Ottoman civilisation over trade routes and colonies.

Othello and his warriors are mercenaries. Othello was esteemed in Venice for his military prowess. He was a man of courage. Venetians hired Othello and his mercenaries to defend Cyprus – at that time a Venetian colony – from the Turks who were threatening to conquer the strategically located Mediterranean island.

While waiting in Venice for his military assignment in Cyprus, Othello falls in love with Desdemona, the daughter of a prominent Venetian. She reciprocates his love. However,
Desdemona marries Othello surreptitiously, without the knowledge of her father.

By secretly eloping with Othello, and marrying a foreigner, Desdemona breaks with tradition. On account of making the decision to marry Othello on her own initiative, Desdemona’s marriage could be seen as prototype of a “modern” marriage.

She could even be viewed as a “liberated” woman, a representative and forerunner of the women’s liberation movement. Desdemona’s father becomes upset when he hears the news of his daughter’s marriage from Roderigo, egged on to do so by Iago.

The marriage of Othello and Desdemona departs from tradition not only because Desdemona marries Othello secretly, but also because theirs is an interracial, and even inter-religious marriage, as there is reason to believe that Othello was Muslim.

The fact that the Venetians would hire a Muslim to command a force of mercenaries against a threat to their colonial interests posed by other Muslims – the Ottoman Turks – reflects a more cosmopolitan society.

Additional complications arise from the fact that Othello’s assistant Iago is also in love with Desdemona. As Iago’s plans were frustrated, he plans to take revenge against Othello. Iago, to whom Othello refers as “honest Iago,” is the archetypal villain. His reasons for hating Othello also include being passed up for promotion in favour of Iago’s rival, Cassio, Othello’s captain.
While Iago has occasionally been characterised as a “realist,” it is more accurate to view him as “evil.” He is a master of deception. He insinuates to Othello that Desdemona is guilty of adultery with Cassio.

Othello becomes jealous. He becomes convinced of Desdemona’s guilt when she is unable to produce a handkerchief that Othello gave Desdemona as a gift. The handkerchief was stolen and planted in Cassio’s house by Iago’s wife Emilia, who was asked to do so by her husband.

In a fit of rage Othello murders Desdemona. The murder is a form of “honour killing.” When he finds out from Emilia, Iago’s wife, that Desdemona was innocent Othello realizes his mistake and kills himself.

*Othello* illustrates how different people choose from among the options open to them, and the consequences of those choices. Desdemona disobeyed her father. She is not as innocent as is commonly held. She came to a tragic end caused by Iago and the very object of her love, Othello himself.

Desdemona’s murder is a miscarriage of justice. The play shows the moral failings of various characters and their demise: jealousy and gullibility in the case of Othello, disobedience in the case of Desdemona, and slander in the case of Iago.

From an ethical perspective, the play conveys warning against suspicion, jealousy and ambition. It also cautions against condemning people on the basis of minimal evidence. The play illustrates the consequences of ignorance, and emphasizes the need to act on the basis of knowledge rather than mere
suspicion. It also advises caution in the face of baseless accusations.

**Conclusion**

Revelation teaches man the difference between good and evil, and why it is important to do good and refrain from evil. This knowledge is required for living well. History confirms that success or the lack of it depends on how well man is able to understand, retain, and follow this guidance.

A significant challenge to the medieval worldview arose some years prior to the time of Shakespeare. As a result of this challenge – widely known as the Reformation – traditional beliefs and practices started to be questioned and eventually to give way to a new outlook and new practices.

This challenge was linked to the rise of a new, *scientific or empirical method*, for acquiring knowledge. The new – *modern* – method boldly advocated a mechanistic view of the universe. For better or worse, it was also applied to the study of morality and ethics. The results the empirical method brought in the area of ethics, however, departed significantly from “traditional” notions about morality.

The emergence of the new world was facilitated by the emergence of a new *worldview*. This worldview sought to emancipate man from the shackles imposed by traditional dogma and open new possibilities. In many ways, the arrival of modernity represented a *transformation* of tradition. However, in some ways, modernity also represented a *departure* from tradition.
Modernity brought greater autonomy in matters of faith. In politics, it manifested itself in the demise of autocratic government, and the emergence of the rule of law. In the new, cosmopolitan society, there was room for the arts and sciences, including the theatre. Man was to enjoy greater rights than previously. The rule of law was to supplant the rule of men.

In the new world, man was no longer seen as striving to gain the pleasure of God. Rather, he came to be seen as struggling for power after power, over nature as well as other people. Man was increasingly becoming a “measure of all things.”

While Othello and Desdemona departed from “tradition” in the way they married, at the social level, society departed from “tradition” in the way it came to be governed. Practices that were previously forbidden, such as usury, were legalised. There is no doubt that a change of this magnitude in what is considered acceptable from an ethical point of view is bound to have a major long-term impact. Only time can tell whether this impact may, at the level of society, turn out to be comparable in any way to the impact a departure from “tradition” had on the marriage of Othello and Desdemona.
Literature and Globalization

Literature or storytelling speaks to us more directly than intellectual discourse teeming with abstract concepts. It has a powerful effect on the thinking, emotions, and perceptions of people. Literature plays a significant role in the preservation and dissemination of culture. Folk tales give a deeper expression to the identity of a given people than external manifestations such as clothing, architectural designs or food.

Popular culture such as movies and literature abound in negative stereotypes of Muslims. Muslims need to counter the proliferation of negative stereotypes by generating motion pictures, music and literature that provide accurate and positive representations of Muslims.

Muslims should write more of their own, specifically Islamic literature. In fact, literature may serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of Islam all over the world. While it is true that the Qur’an states that, “only the ignorant people follow the poets,” perhaps it is safe to say that the reference here is to the pre-Islamic poets and storytellers. The pre-Islamic period is known among the Muslims as the period of ignorance.

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3 I would like to express my appreciation to the students of “Literature in English,” a course I have conducted at the Islamic University College of Malaysia, between July and October 2004, and again between July and October 2005. Their input has been invaluable.

4 Qur’an, Surah 22, the Poets.
The writing of poetry or storytelling is not explicitly prohibited in the Qur’an. Indeed, the language of the Qur’an displays universally acknowledged beauty. Its text takes the form of verses. This does not make, however, the Qur’an a work of poetry.

Poets, as the Greek thinkers already pointed out, have a propensity to lie or as we could also say, to write fiction. The Qur’an by contrast tells the truth. And it does so, in large measure, by telling stories in language that rhymes, language that resembles poetry.

Perhaps God revealed the Quran using beautiful language to deny poets any advantage they might think they could derive by using beautiful language. The Qur’an is thus a recitation that both true and beautiful. Indeed, it makes the truth attractive by expressing it in a beautiful manner.

These two qualities were studied in both ancient Greece as well as latter-day Europe. Epistemology focuses on truth while aesthetics focuses on beauty.

What are the distinguishing features of Islamic literature? What useful functions can Islamic literature fulfill for Muslims and perhaps non-Muslims? Islamic literature should portray positive characters that would serve as role models for the young generation. Islamic literature should be written drawing on the heritage of the Muslim civilization.

Much of the world literature has been written by non-Muslims. Authors such as William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, James Fenimore Cooper and Leo Tolstoy are easily recognizable by many all over the world.
The appeal of literature, no doubt, stems from the fact that it touches on universal themes. Everyone can relate to universal themes. In What Is Art, Leo Tolstoy observed that the prophet Joseph, may peace be with him, whose story has been related in the Old Testament and reiterated in the Qur’an, is a story with universal appeal and significance. Anyone may understand and be touched by it, no matter in which part of the world he or she may reside.

Few Muslims find literature appealing. Perhaps they feel they have little if anything to learn from literature, especially literature written by non-Muslims. There is some truth in this view. However, world literature has been influenced by the Old and New Testaments. Thus, we can perceive echoes of the earlier revelations in western literature, too. We just need to recall Thomas Mann’s Joseph and his Brothers, Henry Sienkiewicz’s Quo Vadis, or the works of Hugo, Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy.

**Literature and Religion**

In the West, literature has effectively replaced faith as a fount of values. Indeed, even the humanities have become endangered species in a few universities, on the grounds that the study of humanities reduces a person’s employability. Not enough attention is paid by the adversaries of humanities to the fact that the study of literature enhances the students’ communication skills, so necessary in the job market.

The risk with the de-emphasizing the arts, however, and adding more technological courses, is that we may educate entire generations of technocrats with minimal humanity.
What good does it do to a person if his education helps him get a job but fails to develop his humanity? In what ways will such a person be different from a mere robot?

The rationalization of the production process requires skilled technicians and engineers. It does not require the sacrifice of humanity. It does not require people to become robot-like. Students can become skilled scientists and good human beings at the same time. But for this we need to teach them not just technical but also people skills. Literature helps develop communication skills by exposing the students to a diversity of reading, as well as the kinds of dilemmas faced by different people.

However, theatre may also have a negative effect on readers, by indirectly propagating questionable ethics. Within the classical tradition, this perspective was expressed by Plato in the Republic in Socrates’ criticism of the poets. Within the romantic tradition, reservations about the corrupting effects of theatre on morality were expressed by Rousseau in his Letter to D’Alembert.

By reading good literature, however, people may be able understand different communities better. They should also be able to understand themselves better. They should also be able to discern some of the reasons for the relative vitality and dynamism of cultures. Moreover, through a better

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5 Indeed, employers require people skills. They need employees who can communicate and work as a team.
understanding of the “other,” the likelihood of a so-called “clash of civilizations” may be mitigated.\(^6\)

**William Shakespeare**

Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon, England. His father was a tanner and glove-maker. His mother came from a wealthy family. Shakespeare did not attend university. Some commentators attribute to this fact Shakespeare’s occasional vulgar humor. On November 27, 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married a woman eight years older than himself. His first child was baptized on May 26, 1583.

The time between his marriage and the birth of his daughter was six months. This means that his wife must have been about three months pregnant before the marriage took place:

> It should be recognized, however... that premarital relations were not unusual or frowned upon when an engagement had already taken place.\(^7\)

Additional information about his life is sketchy:

> There are stories... of stealing deer and getting into trouble with a local magnate... of earning his living as a schoolmaster in the country; of going to London and gaining entry to the world of theatre by minding the horses of theatre


\(^7\) Coles Editorial Board, *Othello*, p. 2.
goers; it has also been conjectured that Shakespeare... was a soldier.8

Shakespeare wrote at a time when traditional notions about behavior and social norms were still dominant, but new ideas began to appear and challenge tradition. The printing press had already been invented, heralding the beginning of the age of mass communication. English was beginning to replace Latin and Greek as the language of learning. Only the Puritans did not attend theatre.

Queen Elizabeth I was God's deputy on earth, and lords and commons had their due places in society under her ... The order of things, however, did not go unquestioned. Atheism was still considered a challenge to the beliefs and way of life ... but the Christian faith was no longer single – Rome's authority had been challenged by Martin Luther, John Calvin, a multitude of small religious sects, and, indeed, the English church itself. Royal prerogative was challenged in Parliament; the economic and social orders were disturbed by the rise of capitalism, by the redistribution of monastic lands under Henry VIII, by the expansion of education, and by the influx of new wealth from discovery of new lands.9

Changes were beginning to take place also in people’s outlook.

8 Encyclopedia Britannica, Shakespeare the Man (William Shakespeare)

An interplay of new and old ideas was typical of the time: official homilies exhorted the people to obedience, the Italian political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli was expounding a new practical code of politics that caused Englishmen to fear the Italian “Machiavillain” and yet prompted them to ask what men do, rather than what they should do ... In philosophical inquiry the question “how?” became the impulse for advance, rather than the traditional “why?” of Aristotle.\textsuperscript{10}

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, at the age of 52, a mere twenty-six years before the beginning of the first of the three English civil wars in 1642. By the time that the third English civil war, between the supporters of King Charles II and the supporters of the Parliament ended in 1651, the English monarchy was replaced by the Commonwealth of England.

\textbf{Giraldi Cinthio’ \textit{Hecatommithi}}

Shakespeare’s \textit{Othello} is an adaptation. Thus, the play is not entirely original. The plot and the substance of \textit{Othello} came from \textit{Hecatommithi}, an Italian novella by Giraldi Cinthio.\textsuperscript{11} Shakespeare does not give credit to Cinthio. Shakespeare develops the characters in Cinthio’s novella more fully, giving each character a name. Except for Desdemona, all characters in the novella are identified by occupation, such as “the Moor” or “the ensign.” Shakespeare adds the character of Roderigo and drops the character of the ensign’s little daughter. Two

\textsuperscript{10} Loc. Cit.

\textsuperscript{11} Coles Editorial Board, \textit{Othello}, p. 18.
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women in the novella become a single person, Bianca. In the novella, Desdemona married Othello despite the objections of her parents. In Shakespeare’s play, Desdemona elopes with Othello.

In Cinthio’s novella, Venice is not at war with Turkey. Othello is sent to Cyprus by Venice as part of the changing of the guard. Another difference is that in Cinthio’s novella, the ensign hates Desdemona because she turned down his advances. In Othello, however, Iago hates Othello because he did not give him a coveted promotion.¹²

**Themes**

*Othello* is a story of jealousy, conflict, marital breakdown and honor killing. Marital breakdown is a problem all over the world, perhaps more so in some parts of the world than others. *Othello* is also about love, hate, frustrated ambitions, revenge, and murder.

Islam has a solution to every ill illustrated in the play. A significant part of the teaching of Islam may be illustrated by pointing out Islam’s response to various problems in the play.

**Lessons of Othello**

*Othello* illustrates what can happen to people who have forgotten a part of the message from God.

> And with those who say Lo! “we are Christians,”
> We made a covenant, but they forgot a part of

¹² Ibid, pp. 18-19.
that whereof they were admonished. Therefore, We have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when Allah will inform them of their handiwork. 13

Othello is a tale of two persons who fall in love, Othello and Desdemona. Subsequently they become ensnared by the intrigues of an evil whisperer, liar, thief, and fool – Iago. Othello is a story of people who failed to guard against evil. Their fate is a result of this failure.

The fate of Othello and Desdemona is instructive. After witnessing it, we would be wise to act differently. Shakespeare provides a negative lesson in morality. He exposes the machinations of evil characters, in order that we may guard against them better. One might say that Othello is an immorality play. Shakespeare presents us with a range of scoundrels. He presents us with the kind of characters we should never aspire to be or befriend.

**Historical Background**

Some years before Shakespeare’s time, Ottoman expansion in the eastern Mediterranean was interfering with Venice’s trade in areas covering parts of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Turkey. Venice was fomenting uprisings against Ottoman rule in Greece and in present day Croatia and Albania. 14

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13 *Al Qur’an*, 5:14, translation by Pickthall

14 Encyclopedia Britannica, History, Early modern Italy (16th to 18th centuries), from the 1490s through the 17th-century crisis, Spanish Italy, the republic of Venice:
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The Venetians captured Cyprus from the Ottomans in 1489 and constructed a base there. The Venetians refused to allow sultan Bayezid to use this base against the Mamluks. Instead, they launched pirate attacks against Ottoman ships and shores.

A four-year war between Venice and the Ottomans under sultan Bayezid followed in 1499. By the end of this war in 1503, Venice had given up all its possessions except Cyprus. The Ottoman emirate emerged as a major power in the Mediterranean for the first time. Venice managed to hold Cyprus until 1571, a period of eighty-two years, when Muslim forces finally re-captured the island. 15

The action of the play takes place during the time when Venice controlled Cyprus, sometime between 1489 and 1571. The play was first performed on 1st November 1604, at Whitehall Palace, exactly thirty-three years after the Venetians lost possession of Cyprus. 16 By the time Othello was first performed, Venice no longer counted Cyprus among its colonies. The Ottoman emirate ruled Cyprus.

Location

The play takes place in Venice and on Cyprus. The Mediterranean island has been a scene of confrontation between the Muslim Ottoman emirate and Christian Greece until quite recently. Even to this day there is a Turkish and

15 Encyclopedia Britannica, The peak of Ottoman power, 1481–1566, Domination of southeastern Europe and the Middle East

16 Coles Editorial Board, Othello, p. 17
Greek enclave on the island. An uneasy truce prevails between the two communities. If the historical background of the play is formed by a clash of civilizations,\textsuperscript{17} in the play we witness a clash of personalities.

It is common for writers to use conflicts between nations as the historical background of their work. The larger conflicts serve as the background for the lesser, personal conflicts.

Homer wrote about the conflict over Helen against the background of the war between the Trojans and the Greeks in the \textit{Iliad}. A conflict between two families escalated into a conflict between two nations. The former Greek general and historian Thucydides used the civil war between Athens and Sparta, the two foremost Greek city-states at the time, as the setting for his \textit{Peloponnesian War}. Leo Tolstoy made the Napoleonic war on Russia the background of his acclaimed masterpiece, \textit{War and Peace}. The novels of James Fenimore Cooper, such as \textit{The Last of the Mohicans}, are set against the background of the war between the French and the English over the possession of North America. The novels of Karl May, enormously popular among young readers in Europe, are set against the wars between the newly arrived Europeans and the native North America Indians, defending their land from the colonists.

Othello

The play consists of five acts. Each act contains several scenes. Othello is a general hired by the Venetian government to defend Cyprus – a Venetian colony – from the Ottoman Turks. The drama is heightened by news of an enemy fleet approaching Cyprus.

Othello is the only black man in the play. He is identified as the “Moor.” Who were the Moors? One view is that a Moor was:

A Moroccan or, formerly a member of the Muslim population of Spain, of mixed Arab, Spanish, and Berber origins who created the Arab Andalusian civilization and subsequently settled as refugees in North Africa between the 11th and 12th centuries. 18

The Moors living in Spain and in North Africa were Muslims. This means that Othello would have been Muslim. If that is the case, how do we explain the fact that he was hired by Christians from Venice to lead a Christian army against the Ottoman Turks, who were Muslims? Would the Venetians have trusted a Muslim general to lead their army against other Muslims? And why would a Muslim accept such an unpatriotic assignment in the first place?

One plausible explanation is that some Moors were not Muslims. Accordingly, it would not have been surprising that the Venetians hired Othello. Certainly, in the play Othello

18 Quoted in http://www.stormfront.org/whitehistory/moors.htm
gives no indication that he was Muslim, either by anything he says, nor by anything he does.\textsuperscript{19}

**Iago and Roderigo**

Iago and Roderigo are disappointed men. Each hates Othello, but for different reasons. Roderigo, a wealthy Venetian, wants to marry Desdemona, but was rejected by Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, a well-respected senator in Venice. Roderigo both envies and is jealous of Othello.

Iago, on the other hand, Othello’s staff sergeant and personal attendant, was hoping to obtain a promotion from Othello to become his lieutenant. His hopes were dashed, however, when Othello appointed another person, Michael Cassio, as lieutenant.

In Iago’s view, Cassio has little military experience and is thus not deserving of the appointment. Iago envies Cassio and feels an injustice has been done to him. Iago has an additional reason to hate Othello: he suspects Othello of having committed adultery with his wife, Emilia. Islam, however, teaches us to avoid suspicion.

\begin{quote}
O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother that ye would
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Another possible explanation is that Othello was a Muslim, and that the army he was leading against the Ottoman Turks was also Muslim, but not on good terms with the Ottoman Turks. Wars between rival Muslim factions are not entirely unheard of.
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abhors it? And keep your duty (to Allah). Lo! Allah is Relenting, Merciful.\textsuperscript{20}

In order to get their revenge, Iago and Roderigo conspire against Othello and Cassio. Both Iago and Roderigo made a mistake. Roderigo should also have swallowed his pride and accepted Brabantio’s decision. Iago likewise should have swallowed his pride, forgiven Othello and accepted Cassio as his superior officer.

Iago was proud, the way Satan was proud when God asked him to prostrate himself before man.

\begin{quote}
He said: What hindered thee that thou didst not fall prostrate when I bade thee? (Iblis) said: I am better than him. Thou createdst me of fire while him Thou didst create of mud.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

As a result of his pride, Satan swore to be man’s enemy until Resurrection Day. Iago likewise swore to be Othello’s enemy. Just as Iblis considered himself better than Adam, so Iago considered himself better than Cassio. As a result, Iago vowed to destroy Othello as Satan vowed to destroy man. In the end, however, Iago destroyed not only Othello and Desdemona, but also Roderigo and himself.

Iago and Roderigo inform Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, that Othello had secretly married Desdemona. Brabantio is shocked. He looks for Desdemona and he finds her missing. He becomes very worried and sets out straightaway to find her. He proceeds to Othello’s residence.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Al Qur’an}, 49:12, Pickthall.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Al Qur’an} 49: 12, Pickthall.


**Othello’s Marriage to Desdemona**

Othello acted less than honorably by marrying Desdemona secretly, without asking her father’s permission to do so. We witness the beginning of romanticism, where love takes precedence at the expense of family responsibilities, good manners and reason.

Desdemona shows herself to be ungrateful. She did not seek her father’s permission before she married Othello. It may be that Desdemona did not seek her father’s permission to marry Othello because she did not expect to obtain it. Her father already rejected Roderigo as a suitor beforehand. Would he also reject Othello? Did Desdemona feel imprisoned in her father’s house and thus sought an escape?

The fact that Desdemona did not seek her father’s permission to marry because she did not expect to obtain it may not be entirely irrelevant. Under normal circumstances, however, a daughter should always seek her parent or guardian’s permission to marry.

**Brabantio Confronts Othello**

News arrives that an enemy fleet is approaching Cyprus. Members of the Venetian government urgently look for Othello. It is ironic that Othello busies himself with falling in love at a time when a more important duty awaits him, that of defending Cyprus from the enemy. He is caught between the demands of love and war. Was Othello neglecting the responsibilities for which he was hired?
A fight nearly ensues when Brabantio orders his men to arrest Othello. Othello pleads that the Duke wants to see him. They all proceed to the Duke’s residence.

**Desdemona Confirms She Married Othello**

At the Duke’s residence a war-council is in progress. Brabantio interrupts the council – impatiently putting personal matters ahead of state matters – and accuses Othello of having “stolen” his daughter. This theft, according to Brabantio, took place with the help of magic.

Othello admits he married Desdemona secretly but denies having used magic. Desdemona fell in love with him, he says, because of the stories of his bravery he narrated to her. He fought in many battles, was taken captive and even sold into slavery once. Desdemona confirms she married Othello willingly.

Brabantio is heartbroken. He feels deceived. She did not ask his permission to marry Othello. She did not even inform him. Brabantio advises Othello to be on guard against her:

> Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father and may thee.\(^22\)

By failing to ask his permission, by not even bothering to inform him of her marriage, Desdemona showed disrespect towards her father. She acted in a selfish way. Islam teaches kindness to our parents.

\(^{22}\) *Othello*, 1: 3: 321-322.
And We have commanded man kindness towards his parents ...\(^{23}\)

Thy Lord hath decreed, that ye worship none save Him, and (that ye show) kindness to parents. If one of them or both of them to attain old age with thee, say not "Fie" unto them nor repulse them, but speak unto them a gracious word. \(^{24}\)

Desdemona acted very differently from the way in which a Muslim young lady is expected to act. A Muslim young lady requires the permission of her guardian, her father or paternal grandfather, to get married. The fact that Desdemona deceived her father shows that Desdemona’s character is not entirely noble. She loved Othello enough to marry him but did not love and respect her father enough to ask his permission and blessing for her marriage. There is an inconsistency in her character and actions. She was to pay a heavy price for her rebellion.

**Iago Forms his Evil Plan**

As he could not marry Desdemona, Roderigo becomes despondent and wants to drown himself. He cannot accept rejection. He shows himself to be a weak person. Iago advises him to be a man, to make money and get his revenge. Iago here takes on the air of a man of reason. Othello’s feelings for Desdemona, Iago assures Roderigo, amount to no more than

\(^{23}\) *Al Qur’an*, 46: 15 Pickthall.

\(^{24}\) *Al Qur’an*, 17: 23 Pickthall.
mere lust. Iago suggests that Roderigo can still have Desdemona because she will soon get tired of Othello.

Roderigo leaves and Iago announces his plan to the audience. He wants it to have an evil effect. His plan is to slander Desdemona and make Othello think that Cassio, his right-hand man, is committing adultery with her. In other words, Iago is planning to vilify both Desdemona and Cassio.

Slander is saying something about a person that is false. Slander is a transgression. It can damage or destroy a person’s reputation. Slander may engender related vices: lying and aggression. God has forbidden slander.25

Iago’s plan confirms that not only his plan, but that he himself is evil. An evil plan is a product of an evil person. Iago’s behavior departs dramatically from the behavior expected of a Muslim, or any decent human being, for that matter. Iago should have forgiven Othello and accepted his decision. He should not have felt jealous of Cassio.

By being unable to forgive Othello and bearing a grudge against him, Iago shows himself to be a weak person. Iago should not have been offended by Othello’s decision to appoint Cassio as his right-hand man.

In his speech, Iago also reveals that he plans to cheat Roderigo out of his wealth. He then reveals an additional reason for hating Othello. Iago suspects Othello of having committed adultery with his wife.

25 *Al Qur’an*, 49:12.
I hate the Moor, and it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets he’s done my office. I know not if’t be true but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety.26

The rumor troubles Iago. Once again, we see a difference between Shakespeare’s characters and Muslims, who are commanded not to be too suspicious. Muslims should never give credence to rumors without confirming them first. Iago should have given his wife and Othello the benefit of doubt. He should have verified the rumor and thus, hopefully, have put it out of his mind.

O ye who believe! If an evil liver bring you tidings, verify it, lest ye smite some folk in ignorance and afterward repent of what ye did. 27

In Islam, four reliable witnesses are required before a person may be convicted of adultery or fornication. If a Muslim intends to accuse his wife of adultery and does not have four witnesses, he can swear four times to that effect, plus an additional oath calling the curse of God on himself if he is lying.

The wife, for her part, can avert punishment from her by swearing four times that what her husband said is false, plus one additional oath calling for the curse of God to fall on her if he is speaking the truth.

As for those who accuse their wives but have no witnesses except themselves; let the testimony of

26 Othello, 1: 3: 411 - 415.
27 Al Qur’an, 49: 6, Pickthall.
one of them be four testimonies, (swearing) by Allah that he is of those who speak the truth;

And yet a fifth, invoking the curse of Allah on him if he is of those who lie.

And it shall avert the punishment from her if she bear witness before Allah four times that the thing he saith is indeed false;

And a fifth (time) that the wrath of Allah be upon her if he speaketh truth. 28

A person accused of adultery or fornication without four witnesses is given the benefit of doubt and is effectively assumed innocent until proven guilty.

Roderigo likewise should not have harbored evil intentions towards Othello. He should have accepted his loss and moved on with his life. Much as Satan does to people, Iago held up false hopes to Roderigo and he strayed. Indeed, in the end Roderigo himself is robbed, betrayed and murdered by Iago, the very man he put his trust in. Roderigo should have guarded against evil, especially the evil whisperings of Iago.

**Storm Destroys the Turkish Fleet**

A storm destroys the Turkish fleet. The prospect of imminent war fades. Iago’s wife Emilia and Iago join Montano. Cassio arrives and kisses Emilia, rekindling Iago’s suspicions. Cassio then takes Desdemona by the hand. Iago mutters how all this kissing will help him ensnare Cassio.

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28 *Al Qur’an*, 24: 6-9, Pickthall.
Cassio acts improperly with people’s wives, including his own wife. He should not be kissing other people’s wives, holding their hands or touching them at all. The fact that Cassio keeps a mistress, Bianca, indicates that he is unfaithful to his wife.

Islam teaches that no physical contact should take place between men and women who are not related. That even a handshake may be misinterpreted is well demonstrated in Othello. Cassio’s kissing of Emilia and his touching of Desdemona make it easier for Iago to sow doubt in Othello’s mind about Desdemona’s fidelity.

Desdemona should not have allowed herself to be kissed or taken by the hand by Cassio. By keeping men and women at a safe distance from one another, Islam keeps gossiping and slander at bay, and thus safeguards the reputation, unity, and well-being of people and their families.  

Othello arrives. He asks Iago, calling him “good,” to fetch his luggage from the ship. Before he leaves, Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. This confirms that Iago is a liar, something we already know about him from his stated intention to slander Desdemona. Islam teaches that God withholds guidance from liars.

Lo! Allah guideth not one who is a prodigal, a liar.  

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29 Interestingly, a recent study in the United States confirmed that boys learn more when there are no girls in class.

30 Al Qur’an, 40: 28.
Iago urges Roderigo to discredit Cassio in Othello’s eyes. This is to take place by Roderigo provoking a brawl with Cassio. Iago then reminds us of an additional reason he hates Othello: he suspects Othello of adultery with Emilia.

I do suspect the lustful Moor hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards, and nothing can, nor shall, content my soul till I am evened with him, wife for wife; or failing so, yet that I put the Moor, at least, into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure.\(^{31}\)

He resolves to get even with Othello or at least to make him insanely jealous. Iago then informs the audience that he also suspects Cassio of having committed adultery with Emilia.\(^{32}\) Iago is a troubled person. He has suspicions but no proof. He shows weakness by being unable to put such suspicions out of his mind and by resorting to lies and slander.

**Celebration**

A herald, on behalf of Othello, orders everyone to celebrate the marriage of Othello and Desdemona and the destruction of the Turkish fleet. Little does Othello suspect that his own marriage and life, as well as Desdemona’s, are about to be destroyed by the storm of his jealous rage, kindled by Iago’s false allegations.


\(^{32}\) *Othello*, 2: 2: 324.
Othello Dismisses Cassio

Iago invites Cassio to drink wine. At first Cassio hesitates. After coaxing by Iago, however, Cassio joins the drinking party. By agreeing to join the drinking, Cassio again displays weakness. He is unable to say “no.” He allows himself to be bullied by Iago.

Iago begins to implement the second part of his evil plan, to sow discord between Othello and Cassio. Iago wants Cassio to get drunk and then use Roderigo to provoke a brawl. Cassio easily falls into Iago’s trap. Muslims are forbidden to consume alcohol. It helps to save them from a fate similar to that of Cassio.

O ye who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are only an infamy of Satan’s handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed.\(^{33}\)

Roderigo provokes Cassio as planned by Iago. When Montano, the Governor of Cyprus, tries to stop them, Cassio wounds him. Othello arrives and stops the fight. He asks Iago what happened.

Iago obliges but leaves out much. Othello does not realize that Iago’s account of the brawl is less than complete. As might be expected, Iago makes no mention of the fact that it was he who instigated Roderigo to fight Cassio.

After hearing Iago’s account of the fight, Othello dismisses Cassio as his lieutenant. It was wrong for Cassio to get

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\(^{33}\) Qur’an, 5: 90, Pickthall.
involved in a brawl. It was worse still to attack and wound Montano, the highest-ranking official in Cyprus.

Cassio regrets his foolishness and lack of self-control. Ironically, he confides in Iago, the instigator of his misfortune. Iago consoles Cassio by holding out to him the hope that he can get back into Othello’s favor. Iago advises Cassio to appeal Desdemona, as Othello will do whatever she asks.

Cassio leaves and Iago addresses the audience. He says that when Desdemona begins to plead Cassio’s cause, he will suggest to Othello that she pleads for Cassio because of her lust for him. The more she pleads, the more she will make Othello suspicious. This way, Iago expects to “turn her virtue” into vice.34

Musicians

To get Desdemona’s attention, Cassio hires musicians to serenade her. He informs Iago that he asked his wife, Emilia, to arrange a meeting with Desdemona. Iago promises Cassio to arrange for Othello’s absence during the meeting between Desdemona and Cassio.

Iago Slanders Desdemona

Desdemona assures Cassio that she will do all she can to help him get his job back. She unwisely offers a “guarantee”35 that he will get his job back. Iago and Othello arrive just as Cassio

34 Othello, 2: 3: 360.

35 Othello, 3: 3: 22.
is leaving. Iago remarks to Othello that there is something suspicious about the way Cassio departed.

Soon Desdemona asks Othello about Cassio. He puts her off. After she leaves, Iago returns and pretends to suspect that something is amiss between Desdemona and Cassio. Othello asks him to say what is on his mind. Pretending to be unwilling, Iago advises Othello to beware of jealousy, “the green-eyed monster.”

Othello replies that he trusts Desdemona. He adds that if he ever suspected her of infidelity, he would want proof. Iago advises Othello to keep an eye on his wife, especially when she is with Cassio. Iago reminds Othello that she deceived her father when she married him. Iago reminds Othello of what Brabantio said earlier, that Desdemona could deceive Othello, too.

Othello becomes depressed. He weakly contends that Desdemona is chaste. Sensing Othello’s weakness, Iago says that there was something wrong in Desdemona’s choice of Othello, a person of a different race. After all, she rejected other offers of marriage from respected suitors. He adds she may one day repent her decision and thus betray Othello.

By implying that he is not worthy of Desdemona, Iago insults Othello. Othello does not appear to see this, confirming that he is not very bright. Neither does he point out to Iago – as he did when he first met Brabantio at the Duke’s residence – that he is from a distinguished family.

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\textit{Othello, 3: 3: 192.}
Othello asks Iago to leave. Before he goes, Iago advises Othello to be patient and to observe Desdemona. He urges Othello to pay attention to whether Desdemona tries to have Cassio re-instated. If she tries to do that it will prove – Iago asserts – that she worries more about Cassio than Othello.

Iago leaves and Othello shares his thoughts with the audience. Ironically, he considers Iago to be an honest man. He shows that he is beginning to believe Iago’s insinuations. He thinks Desdemona may have betrayed him because he is black or because he is not polished talker.

He declares that he has been deceived and that his only relief is to loathe her. This contrasts sharply with what he says at the end of the play, where he says that he was motivated not by hate but by honor.

For naught I did in hate but all in honor.  

He curses marriage and expresses the pessimistic view that men are fated to be betrayed by women.

**Emilia Steals Desdemona’s Handkerchief**

Desdemona loses a handkerchief that Othello had given her as a present. Emilia finds the handkerchief in Desdemona’s room and steals it. This makes Emilia a thief. We can add Emilia to the gallery of Shakespeare’s villains, people who show vices and few virtues.

Emilia informs the audience that Iago asked her many times to steal this handkerchief from Desdemona. She intends to

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Othello, 5: 2: 347.
give it to him “to please his fantasy.” As soon as Iago obtains the handkerchief, he announces his intention to plant it in Cassio’s residence.

Stealing Desdemona’s handkerchief was wrong. Regarding theft the Qur’an states:

As for the thief, both male and female, cut off their hands. It is the reward of their own deeds, an exemplary punishment from Allah. Allah is Mighty, Wise.

Had Emilia believed, as Muslims do, that the punishment for stealing is the loss of a hand, she might have refrained from stealing the handkerchief. The outcome of the play might have been very different. Had Emilia not stolen the handkerchief, it would have been harder for Iago to convince Othello that Desdemona was guilty of adultery with Cassio.

Cutting off of the hand for stealing a handkerchief may strike readers as excessive punishment. But the potential loss of the hand must be contrasted to the loss of life that took place, in great part, as a result of this theft. The loss of life is a greater loss than the loss of a hand. Indeed, altogether five lives were lost, partly as a result of Emilia’s theft.

This illustrates that dealing firmly with a lesser crime helps prevent greater crimes. Failure to deal firmly with lesser transgressions opens the door to greater transgressions. Had

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38 Othello, 3: 3: 332- 333
39 Al Qur’an, 5: 38, Pickthall.
40 Desdemona, Othello, Iago, Emilia and Roderigo.
Leslie Terebessy

had Emilia refrained from stealing Desdemona’s handkerchief, the chain of events that resulted in the deaths of five people might have been stopped early in its tracks. A greater disaster than the loss of a hand could have been averted – four murders and a suicide.

We must recall that Desdemona’s inability to produce the handkerchief was the key factor that convinced Othello that she was unfaithful. Seeing Cassio wipe his face with Desdemona’s handkerchief enraged Othello. It was the turning point in his decision to kill Cassio and Desdemona. “How shall I murder him, Iago?” Othello exclaims almost immediately after saying, “By heaven, that should be my handkerchief!”

When we next encounter Othello, he warns Iago to produce incontrovertible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity or else suffer consequences. This is something that Othello should have done the very first time that Iago suggested to him that Desdemona was unfaithful. Islam, as we have seen, requires four witnesses to convict someone of adultery. The fact that Othello procrastinated with his request for proof of Desdemona’s infidelity once again shows his weakness.

Iago pretends to feel hurt. He says he now sorry for being “honest.” He implies that “honesty does not pay.” Othello insists that Iago should be honest but that he should also

41 Othello, 4: 1: 184.
42 Othello, 4: 1: 173.
produce proof. Instead of proof, Iago offers Othello “imputation and strong circumstance.”

The “strong circumstance” turns out to be another lie. Iago claims he overheard Cassio calling for Desdemona in his sleep and warning her to be cautious. Iago then tells another lie. He says he saw Cassio wipe his face with the handkerchief Othello gave Desdemona. At this point, Othello becomes enraged. He demands vengeance. Iago offers assistance, even if it means shedding blood. Othello then asks Iago to kill Cassio within three days. Iago obliges without hesitation: “My friend is dead. Tis done at your request.” It is astonishing how easily Iago volunteers to take Cassio’s life. Islam forbids taking human life without just cause.

For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killeth a human being for other than man slaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if be had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had: saved the life of all mankind.

Thus, Othello and Iago conspire to murder Cassio. Othello informs Iago that he is now his lieutenant. Iago at last receives the promotion he coveted. Othello then announces his intention to kill Desdemona.

Othello finds Desdemona guilty on the basis of very little proof. This shows he is hasty, easily influenced and unjust to his

\[\text{\footnotesize 43 Othello, 3: 3: 457.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 44 Othello, 3: 3: 532.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 45 Al Qur’an, 5: 32, Pickthall.}\]
wife. He shows he is willing to stoop to murder without hearing out what his wife had to say in defense of herself. Othello denies his wife the opportunity to respond to the accusation against her and to clear her name.

We are witnessing here the actions of a fool. Contrary to popular as well as his perception that he loved Desdemona too well, Othello did not love Desdemona enough. If he had truly loved her, he would have trusted her, given her the benefit of doubt, and he would have given her the opportunity to clear her name.

Islam requires four reliable witnesses to convict someone of adultery. Iago would have been lashed eighty times had he been a Muslims for the falsehoods he uttered against Desdemona.

And those who accuse honorable women but bring not four witnesses, scourge them (with) eighty stripes and never (afterward) accept their testimony. They indeed are evildoers.  

In the case of a husband accusing his wife of adultery, four oaths with an additional request for the curse of God to fall on him should he be lying, can replace four reliable witnesses. Yet the wife can avert the punishment from her if she likewise declares four times, under oath, that what her husband said is false, and likewise calls for the curse of God to fall on her husband spoke the truth.

46 Al Qur’an, 24: 4, Pickthall.
Islam affords a very high degree of protection to women from baseless and malicious accusations of adultery. It also shows that men and women are treated as equals in Islamic justice.

If Othello had been a Muslim, he would not have had enough proof to convict Desdemona. He could, under oath, have accused his wife four times along with making the fifth oath. But Desdemona, if she been Muslim, could have saved herself from punishment by swearing four times that she was innocent of what her husband accused her, along with the fifth required oath, calling for the curse of God to fall on her if the husband was telling the truth.

Iago, a third party and not the husband of the accused woman, would have received eighty lashes for making a false accusation. Had Othello and Desdemona been Muslims and Islamic justice were applied, the tragedy that befell them could have been prevented. This shows that Islam helps to prevent tragedy.

We conclude, also, that Islamic justice – when properly interpreted and applied – protects people from baseless accusations and safeguards the family from slander. This helps to strengthen the family and provides a proper environment for children during their formative years.

**Othello Requests the Handkerchief**

Desdemona asks Othello to meet Cassio. Othello responds by asking for the handkerchief stolen earlier by Emilia. The fact that Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief confirms Othello’s suspicion. The more Desdemona pleads on behalf of Cassio, the more Othello demands to see the handkerchief. A
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confrontation ensues. It escalates and Othello leaves in a fit of anger.

Surprisingly and hypocritically Emilia keeps quiet when Desdemona says that she is very upset about losing the handkerchief. Emilia keeps quiet despite knowing that Desdemona’s inability to find the handkerchief is causing Othello’s jealousy. It is cruel on Emilia’s part to keep quiet when she knows better.

Emilia should have confessed to Desdemona that she had stolen the handkerchief, asked for forgiveness and promised to return it. The fact that Emilia did not do this confirms that here she acted basely. In addition to being a thief, Emilia now appears dishonest, cruel and hypocritical. These vices contrast sharply with her courage in defending Desdemona at the end of the play, even if it meant incriminating her husband Iago and exposing herself to his wrath.

Emilia’s behavior is inconsistent. The inconsistency in Emilia’s actions shows that she is not truly noble. Shakespeare once again misses an opportunity to provide us with a truly virtuous character. Perhaps he would say that he was merely describing people as they are rather than as they should be. Perhaps he would say that his intention was to display people’s actions as they happen in reality rather than educate his audience in morality by displaying the actions of rare characters. Many would argue that the task of the playwright is to portray people as they are rather than to educate. Literature, according to this view, need not have a didactic function. Indeed, it is better off without it.
Iago places Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s lodgings. Cassio finds the handkerchief and, not knowing it belongs to Desdemona, gives it to his mistress. Bianca suspects that the handkerchief is a gift from another girlfriend and becomes jealous. Since Cassio is a married,\textsuperscript{47} it is clear that he is carrying on an adulterous relationship with Bianca. His moral standards are low. He is deceiving his own wife by violating his marriage vow to her. He is also unjust to his mistress, by agreeing to have a relationship without marriage. Cassio is therefore neither trustworthy nor admirable. Cassio, like Emilia, is another morally defective character.

**Othello Strikes Desdemona**

Iago reminds Othello of the missing handkerchief. Then he adds new lies to old lies. He tells Othello that he heard Cassio boasting about his encounters with Desdemona. Othello now collapses in a fit. Iago then promises Othello to arrange a meeting with Cassio, with Othello hidden nearby, to witness Cassio bragging about Desdemona. Once again, we need to recall what Islam teaches about suspicion and spying on each other.

\begin{quote}
O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother that ye would
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Othello, 1: 1: 21.
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abhor it? And keep your duty (to Allah). Lo!
Allah is Relenting, Merciful.48

Iago leads Cassio to discuss his relationship with Bianca. Othello is close enough to see Cassio’s demeanor, but not close enough to realize that Cassio is referring to Bianca rather than Desdemona. Othello misconstrues Cassio’s boasts about his illicit relationship with Bianca as proof that he committed adultery with Desdemona.

Bianca arrives and returns Desdemona’s handkerchief to Cassio. Upon seeing Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s hands, Othello becomes enraged. The Quran counsels us to restrain our anger.

Those who spend (that which Allah hath given them) in ease and in adversity, those who control their wrath and are forgiving toward mankind; Allah loveth the good; 49

When Cassio leaves Othello emerges – enraged – from his hiding place. Iago asks him if he saw the handkerchief. Othello confirms that he did and resolves to kill Desdemona. Islam, as all faiths, prohibits murder.

For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killeth a human being for other than man  slaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if be had killed all mankind,

48 Al Qur'an, 49:12, Pickthall. Cf. also the relevant hadith quoted earlier.
49 Al Qur'an, 3: 134, Pickthall.
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and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had: saved the life of all mankind.\(^{50}\)

Othello again acts unjustly and hastily. Just as earlier he wanted Iago to kill Cassio without having any proof of Cassio’s wrongdoing, Othello resolves to kill Desdemona. He is planning what is known as an “honour killing.”

The thought that even if Desdemona were guilty of adultery he would still have no right to kill her does not seem to cross his mind. He acts impulsively and emotionally. He shows an astonishing lack of judgment. Islam teaches us to judge with justice.

\[\ldots\text{ if thou judgest, judge between them with equity. Lo! Allah loveth the equitable.}\]\(^{51}\)

Othello does not judge with justice; he is emotional and driven by rage. He asks Iago for poison. Iago advises him to strangle her and offers to “look after” Cassio himself – meaning murder him – by midnight.

Neither Othello nor Iago hesitated before resolving to murder Desdemona and Cassio. The thought that they might doing wrong does not cross their minds. Blinded by anger and desire for revenge, they resolved to kill two people without any thought to justice.

Lodovico, a member of Brabantio’s family, arrives from Venice. When Desdemona tries to enlist Lodovico’s help in getting Cassio back into Othello’s employment, Othello becomes

\(^{50}\) Al Qur’an, 5: 32, Pickthall.

\(^{51}\) Al Qur’an, 5: 42, Pickthall.
angry. To the shock of everyone present, he strikes her and leaves. Lodovico asks Iago whether Othello has gone mad.

**Iago and Roderigo Conspire to Murder Cassio**

Othello asks Emilia if she saw Desdemona and Cassio do anything inappropriate. Emilia assures him that she always heard every word they spoke to each other. They never whispered to each other, nor did they ever ask her to go away in order to be alone. Othello, however, remains unconvinced by Emilia’s defense of Desdemona.

Emilia knows that Othello suspects his wife of infidelity and asks God to curse whoever is the source of the rumors about Desdemona. She is unaware that the source is her own husband, Iago. Ironically, she unknowingly curses her own husband.

When they meet again, Othello asks Desdemona to swear that she is honest. She replies, “Heaven doeth truly know it.”\(^{52}\) Desdemona does not say *God* knows it. She says *heaven*. By using *heaven* instead of *God*, Desdemona betrays a drifting from God. We have seen before how she distanced herself from her father. Desdemona distanced herself from both her religion and her family.

Othello replies angrily, “Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell.”\(^{53}\) Like his wife, Othello refers to *heaven* instead of *God*. Like his wife, Othello too shows a distancing from God.

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\(^{52}\) *Othello*, 4: 2: 48.

\(^{53}\) *Othello*, 4: 2: 49.
Desdemona asked with whom or how she was supposedly false. Othello pushes her away and begins to cry. He then calls her a strumpet. Desdemona is shocked, “By heaven, you do me wrong.” Once again, Desdemona refers to heaven rather than God. She protests that she is a Christian, not a whore, as “I shall be saved.”

She does not say, “I hope to be saved.” By using the future tense, she shows a great deal of confidence in her prospects in the afterlife. Islam teaches that no one except God knows who shall be saved. This is why believers say, “God willing,” whenever they express an expectation relating to the future. This attitude shows humility.

Othello is wrong to accuse Desdemona of adultery without proof. As noted earlier, in Islam four reliable witnesses are required to convict someone of adultery. In the case of spouses, four oaths are required plus a fifth, calling for the curse of God to fall on the person telling a lie.

After Othello departs, Emilia returns and inquires about Othello. Desdemona, in low spirits, replies that she has no husband. She blames herself for what happened and asks what made Othello call her a whore.

Iago arrives. Emilia informs him that Othello referred to Desdemona as a whore. Iago pretends to be dismayed. Emilia asserts that some villain slandered Desdemona for personal gain. She curses the villain, again unaware that she is cursing

\[54\] *Othello*, 4: 2: 95.

\[55\] *Othello*, 4: 2: 102.
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her husband. Emilia wishes that “heaven”\(^{56}\) would expose and punish such rascals. Indeed, she herself will expose the villain, who will turn out to be none other than her husband Iago. Unhappy to hear his wife cursing him, Iago asks her to lower her voice.

Desdemona asks Iago how to get her husband back. There is irony in Desdemona’s asking help from the very person responsible for her woes. Iago, the wolf in sheep’s clothing, assures her that state business has upset Othello and that he was just taking it out on her.

Desdemona should not be confiding about her problems to someone who is not a member of her immediate family. She should be asking a family member for help. Because she disobeyed and deceived her father, however, she made herself an outcast from her own family. She is consequently forced to rely on the specious assistance of outsiders such as Iago and Emilia.

In Desdemona’s woes we see a confirmation of the practicality of asking one’s parent or guardian for the permission to marry. This custom is also followed by many non-Muslims. The immediate families of the spouses protect the newlyweds from the kind of dangers illustrated in *Othello*, posed by opportunists and evildoers such as Iago.

In Islam, when there is a family dispute, two just family members from the two families are appointed to mediate in a dispute and hopefully arrange a reconciliation.

\(^{56}\) *Othello*, 4: 2: 166.
And if ye fear a breech between them twain (the man and wife), appoint an arbiter from his folk and an arbiter from her folk. If they desire amendment Allah will make them of one mind. Lo! Allah is ever Knower, Aware.\textsuperscript{57}

Emilia and Desdemona leave, and Roderigo arrives. He is upset because he (rightly) suspects that Iago is deceiving him. Roderigo declares himself a bankrupt. He no longer possesses the jewels he gave to Iago to pass on to Desdemona, nor the land he sold in order to obtain the money to purchase them.

Instead of passing the jewels on to Desdemona, as he promised, Iago kept the jewels for himself, effectively robbing Roderigo. In addition to being a liar and slanderer, Iago is also a thief.

Roderigo informs Iago that if Desdemona will return his jewels, he will withdraw his suit and apologize. Otherwise he will seek revenge from Iago. Roderigo is lowering his expectations. Iago regains Roderigo’s confidence by flattering him. Roderigo again shows himself to be a weak, easily manipulated person.

Iago assures Roderigo that he can have Desdemona. Only he must kill Cassio first. He must do this in order to force Othello to remain in Cyprus. Othello has just been relieved of his command, and Cassio was appointed to replace him. With Cassio dead, Othello would be forced to remain in Cyprus until another person is appointed to replace Cassio. Otherwise, Othello would be sailing back to Mauritania with

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Al Qur’an, 4: 35}, Pickthall.
Desdemona's Talk with Emilia

Desdemona gets ready for bed. She asks Emilia whether some women really commit adultery. Desdemona appears very innocent here. This appearance contrasts with the willingness with which she deceived her father by secretly marrying Othello.

Emilia assures Desdemona that some women indeed commit adultery. Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would “do such a deed, for all the world.” Emilia is surprised. “Why, would not you?” She asks Desdemona. Emilia has a problematic attitude to adultery, characterizing it as a small vice: “The world is a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice.”

This remark shows that Emilia’s morals are doubtful. She subsequently offers a thinly disguised justification of adultery. She squarely lays the blame for adulteries on men. According to Emilia, men drive women to adultery by committing adulteries themselves, neglecting their wives, being jealous, restricting their wives’ freedom, abusing them or by not giving them enough money for housekeeping purposes. Emilia’s twisted reasoning reveals itself further in her question as to

58 Othello, 4: 3: 80.
59 Othello, 4: 3: 82
which woman would not deceive her husband “to make him a monarch?”

To Emilia the end justifies the means. Making a husband a king justifies deceiving him. It does not occur to her that some husbands would not want to be monarchs. Neither does it occur to her that even if some men would like to be monarchs, some of them might decline such a post if it meant being deceived by their wives first. Neither does it occur to Emilia that some wives would not want to make their husbands kings if they had to deceive them first.

It is disappointing that Shakespeare allows Emilia to express such an alarming view of marriage. Regrettably, Shakespeare does not consider it important to provide a moral counterweight to his Emilia’s abhorrent justification of adultery. It matters little that she only described how some people act. The alternative point of view, a strong defense of marital fidelity, was not given the hearing it deserves. This shows that Shakespeare is biased. Shakespeare could easily have made one of his characters speak in defense of marital fidelity. This would have strengthened his play. As it is, we get to hear evil speeches without the antidote of good replies. For this reason, we must conclude that Othello is sorely lacking moral balance and thus does little to express disapproval of immoral behavior.

By contrast, we are reminded of the pagan Homer’s extolling the virtue of marital fidelity in the Odyssey. Penelope, the faithful wife of the unwilling warrior Odysseus, waited

60 Othello, 4: 3: 90.
patiently for twenty years for him to return from the war the coalition of the Greek city-states fought against Troy. How is it that the pagan Homer, who did not have the benefit of the teaching of the prophets of God, may peace be on them all, could do better in extolling marital fidelity than Shakespeare to whom a degree of such knowledge must surely have been available?

From the educational point of view, the absence of moral balance is regrettable. It can only have adverse effects on readers, especially young readers. For this reason, Shakespeare’s *Othello* is defective education. We cannot recommend that it be included in the curricula of educational institutions that care about the moral development of their protégés. If we are going to teach literature to young people, it is necessary to select literature with higher moral standards than what Shakespeare can offer.

Desdemona’s reply that she would not commit adultery even for the whole world is not an adequate counterweight to the immoral view expressed by Emilia. Despite Shakespeare’s efforts to make Desdemona appear as an innocent victim, Desdemona herself lacks credibility. On the one hand she claims she would not commit adultery for the whole world. On the other hand, she had no qualms about deceiving her father when she married Othello, without asking her father’s permission or even informing him of the event.

Marrying without the father’s permission and committing adultery, no doubt, are not transgressions of equal gravity. Yet the element of deceit is common to both. We are expected to believe that Desdemona would never deceive her husband
while we know full well that she deceived her father. Is it reasonable to expect that she will find the strength to be honest with her husband when she found no strength to be honest with her father?

**Attempt on Cassio’s Life**

Roderigo and Iago ambush Cassio in a dark alley and attempt to murder him. Their plan goes awry, however. Cassio’s thick coat saves his life. In the dark, Cassio has no idea who his attackers are. During the fight Cassio wounds Roderigo. Iago comes to Roderigo’s aid, but manages only to wound Cassio in the leg. When Cassio shouts for help, Iago runs away. In addition to the other evil traits of his character, Iago shows himself here as a would-be murderer, willing to “hit and run.” Othello appears, followed soon by Gratiano and Lodovico.

Iago returns and hypocritically pretends not to know what happened. Cassio and Roderigo both shout for help. Iago goes up to Roderigo and, pretending not to know who he is, calls him a villain and stabs him. He then turns to Cassio and inquires how he is, addressing him as ‘brother.’

**Othello Murders Desdemona**

Determined to kill Desdemona, Othello enters her bedroom and asks her whether she gave the handkerchief to Cassio. She says she did not. She asks Othello to send for Cassio and confirm whether she is telling the truth. Instead of giving Desdemona the opportunity to clear her name, Othello proceeds with his evil intention to murder her. He experiences another massive failure of judgment.
Islam teaches that we should investigate rumors before acting. Otherwise we could harm an innocent person and then become full of regrets.

O ye who believe! If an evil liver bring you tidings, verify it, lest ye smite some folk in ignorance and afterward repent of what ye did.

Othello failed to investigate the rumors about his wife spread by Iago. Both he and Desdemona were to pay a heavy price for his foolishness. Instead of confronting Cassio, Othello says that he saw Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s hands. He says this as if Cassio’s possession of Desdemona’s handkerchief was proof of her guilt.

Desdemona denies any impropriety in her relationship with Cassio. Othello reiterates that he saw the handkerchief in Cassio’s hands. She asks, once again, to send for Cassio. Again, Othello denies Desdemona’s request. He feels no need to send for Cassio. He thinks Cassio already admitted his guilt in his conversation with Iago about Bianca.

Othello is irrational and unjust. He thinks a few gestures, observed from a distance, without hearing the content of the conversation, constitute proof that Desdemona gave the handkerchief to Cassio.

Othello informs Desdemona that Cassio is already dead and she begins to cry. This enrages Othello further. He thinks she is crying for Cassio. Again, he calls her a strumpet. She asks him to banish but not kill her. He is adamant. She then asks

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61 *Al Qur’an*, 49: 6, Pickthall
him to kill her the following day. He refuses. She then asks for just “half an hour.” Again, he refuses. She then asks just for enough time to pray. He refuses that too and smothers her with a pillow.

Emilia arrives. Othello thinks Desdemona is dead. He hides her body by drawing the curtain on the bed. Emilia informs him that there was a murder, meaning that Cassio killed Roderigo.


Desdemona did not tell the truth about who killed her. She tried to draw the responsibility for her murder on herself. This is supposed to be a noble act on her part – trying to protect her husband from responsibility for his crime. Does this show that her love for Othello was great indeed? No. Covering up the crime committed by a close relative is not noble. It is in fact another crime, commonly known as a “cover up.”

Some people are willing to lie to protect their relatives, friends or superiors. Some people think these kinds of lies are justified by what appears as a good intention. But here again we see the idea that the good end justifies a foul means. Protecting friends, including our closest relatives, if we know they have committed a crime, is not noble. On the contrary,

such protection constitutes another crime, making us accomplices in the cover up of the first crime.

The Qur’an teaches us to stand firmly for justice, even if it is against ourselves or our relatives, including our parents.

O ye who believe! Be ye staunch in justice, witnesses for Allah, even though it be against yourselves or (your) parents or (your) kindred, whether (the case be of) a rich man or a poor man, for Allah is nearer unto both (than ye are). So follow not passion lest ye lapse (from truth) and if ye lapse or fall away, then lo! Allah is ever Informed of what ye do.  

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We should not protect our relatives if we know they committed a crime. Desdemona was wrong to try to draw the blame for her murder on herself. She should have said, “Othello did it, but I am innocent of what he accused me of.” The fact that she tried to protect her murderer husband does not show that her love for him was great; it shows it was misguided.

Othello for his part shows himself a coward. He initially tries to avoid responsibility for the murder. When Emilia discovers the murder, he dishonestly says, “You heard her say herself it was not I.”  

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Under the influence of his rage, however, he instantly changes his attitude. He takes Desdemona’s blaming herself as another proof of her dishonesty. Even on her deathbed, according to him, she remained a liar. To prove that she was

63 Al Qur’an, 4: 135, Pickthall

64 Othello, 5: 2: 158.
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dishonest, he now admits to his crime and says, “She’s like a liar gone to burning hell: ‘twas I that killed her.”

A confrontation between Othello and Emilia ensues. She calls Desdemona an angel and Othello a devil. Othello counters by calling Desdemona a whore. Emilia accuses him of lying. Othello retorts that Desdemona committed adultery with Cassio. “Thy husband knew it all,” he adds. Emilia is startled. “My husband?” She asks. Othello answers in the affirmative, adding it was Iago who first informed him about Desdemona and Cassio. Emilia is shocked. She exclaims again, “My husband!”

Again, she asks him if it was her husband Iago that claimed Desdemona was unfaithful. Othello once again confirms it. Emilia finally grasps what Othello has been saying to her. She declares that if Iago accused Desdemona of infidelity with Cassio, then Iago is a liar.

She calls Othello a “dolt,” “as ignorant as dirt,” and shouts, “Help, help, oh, help! The Moor has killed my mistress. Murder! Murder!” Othello draws his sword, but Emilia is not afraid. Montano, Gratiano and Iago arrive. Montano demands an explanation. Emilia asks her husband Iago if he accused Desdemona of adultery with Cassio. Iago initially tries to

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65 Othello, 5: 2: 160.
66 Othello, 5: 2: 172.
ignore her. She insists, “did you ever tell him she was false?” “I did,” Iago finally admits.68

Upon hearing this, Emilia accuses her husband lying: “She false with Cassio! Did you say with Cassio?” Iago confirms it again and orders her to keep quiet. She refuses.

“My mistress lies here murdered in her bed,” she says.69 She then accuses Iago of having caused Desdemona’s death by his slander. Iago impatiently orders her to go home. She requests permission from the others to speak.

She is allowed to speak. She then accuses Othello of having “killed the sweetest innocent.”70 He retorts by saying, “she was foul.” Othello mentions the handkerchief he gave to Desdemona and which he claims she gave to Cassio.

Upon hearing about the handkerchief, Emilia exclaims. Again, Iago orders her to keep quiet. She refuses. Iago draws his sword, but she is undeterred. She says, “I found (the handkerchief) by fortune and did give my husband; for often … he begged of me to steal it.”71 Iago now becomes furious. “Villainous whore!” he exclaims and accuses his wife of lying.

Emilia denies that she is lying and turns on Othello: “Oh murderous coxcomb! What should such a fool do with so good a wife?” Othello now realizes that Iago had deceived him. He

69 *Othello*, 5: 2: 223.
70 *Othello*, 5; 2: 239.
attempts to attack Iago, but Montano stops him. Iago cowardly stabs his wife and again runs away from the scene of his crime, a second “hit and run.” Montano chases him, leaving Gratiano to keep an eye on Othello.

Lodovico returns with Iago. Upon seeing Iago, Othello lunges at him and wounds him with his sword. Othello is then disarmed. Lodovico wonders out loud what to say.

Othello insists that he did not kill Desdemona out of hatred but for the sake of honor. “For naught I did in hate but all in honor.” This contrasts sharply with what he stated after hearing Iago’s first insinuations that, “my relief must be to loath her.”

Lodovico announces that Iago partly confessed. Lodovico then asks Othello if he and Iago conspired to kill Cassio. Othello confirms it. Cassio is shocked. “Dear General. I never gave you cause.” “I do believe it,” replies Othello, and I ask your pardon.” Othello’s regret, however, comes too late. He should have been more thoughtful before he acted.

Othello then asks Iago why he entrapped him. Iago replies that henceforth he will say nothing. Lodovico is surprised. “What, not to pray?” Gratiano then announces that Iago will be tortured for his crimes.

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72 Othello, 5: 2: 347.
73 Othello, 3: 3: 303-304.
Three Letters

Lodovico informs everyone present that three letters have been found in Roderigo’s pockets. No information is given about the content of the first letter. The second letter says that Cassio should be killed, with Roderigo the assassin. The letter bears no signature. It is likely it was written by Iago, who did not sign his name, as he would have thereby given himself away.

The third letter was written by Roderigo and intended for Iago. In it Roderigo reproaches Iago for having advised Roderigo to pick a quarrel with Cassio.

As people can be identified through handwriting, it is puzzling why either Iago or Roderigo would have taken the risk of incriminating himself by writing any letters. Conspiracies are generally not agreed upon in writing, and conspirators generally do not intentionally leave evidence behind that could be used to incriminate them. It is unclear why Shakespeare included the three letters in his play, as they seem to confuse rather than fulfill any useful purpose in the play.

Iago Partly Confesses

Othello asks Cassio how he came into possession of Desdemona’s handkerchief. Cassio replies that he found it in his lodgings. He adds that Iago had confessed earlier that he planted it there for his own special purposes. Upon hearing

\[74\] Othello, 5: 2: 377- 378.
this, Othello beats his chest and exclaims, “Oh fool, fool, fool!” For once, Othello is right.

It is puzzling why Iago, after murdering his wife out of rage at having been betrayed, would have confessed to having planted the handkerchief in Cassio’s lodgings.

After hearing what transpired, Lodovico, the representative of the Venetian government in Cyprus, relieves Othello of command and appoints Cassio in his place. As for Iago, Lodovico promises him long torture.

**Othello Kills Himself**

Just before he kills himself, Othello makes a speech in which he describes himself as someone “not easily jealous.” In light of what happened before, this claim is absurd. It shows how minimal is Othello’s knowledge of himself. By way of letting those present know as to how he would like to be remembered, Othello refers to a man he once killed in Aleppo, a city in modern day Syria that was at one time under the control of Turkey.

And say, besides, that in Aleppo once Where a malignant and turbaned Turk Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, I took by the throat the circumcised dog and smote him thus.

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75 *Othello*, 5: 2: 380.

76 *Othello*, 5: 2: 02

77 *Othello*, 5: 2: 406 - 413.
The Venetians were permitted to trade freely in Aleppo. Striking a Turk by a foreigner, however, was punishable by death. After this killing, Othello must have become a fugitive in Turkey.

It is puzzling why Othello would refer to this incident in his life, at this particular time in his own life. Is this reference intended to remind the Venetians that he had been a good “friend” of theirs and that therefore they should not judge him too harshly? Moreover, in light of the religious bigotry shown by Othello in uttering these words, it is also puzzling why Shakespeare allowed Othello to say them.

Othello stabs himself. He exclaims melodramatically:

I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this, killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

Lodovico tells Iago to look at what he did.

Look on the tragic loading of this bed. This is thy work.

Lodovico instructs Gratiano to take possession of Othello’s wealth and Cassio to see to it that Iago will get just punishment, including torture. Lodovico announces his intention to go back to Venice and inform the people there about what happened in Cyprus. With this the play ends.

78 http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/othellofaq.html
80 Othello, 5: 2: 422 - 423.
Depiction of Human Nature

Shakespeare writes about problems that most people can relate to. This is one of the major sources of his appeal. Indeed, it is a major source of appeal of all popular literature.

Shakespeare focuses on describing the evil side of human nature. Perhaps this is because he lived at a difficult time in English history. The Civil War was only a few years away.

Shakespeare reflected the view of human nature that prevailed in his time and, through his writing, helped to reinforce it. He was a contemporary of Thomas Hobbes, the author of the Leviathan and Shakespeare’s junior by twenty-four years.\textsuperscript{81}

Hobbes, like Shakespeare, expressed a negative view of human nature. If Hobbes attended any performances of Shakespeare’s plays, he may well have been influenced by Shakespeare’s negative depiction of human nature. Hobbes described man in his natural state as seeking “ceaselessly for power after power.” He described the relationship of human beings with one another outside of civil society as a “war of every man against every man.” He described life as “nasty, solitary, brutish and short.” \textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{81} Shakespeare was born in 1564 and Hobbes in 1588. Shakespeare was twenty-four years old when Hobbes was born. Shakespeare died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two, and Hobbes in 1679, sixty-three years later, at the age of ninety-one. In other words, they were contemporaries from 1588 to 1616, between the time that Hobbes was born, and Shakespeare died, for a period of 28 years.

Appearance and Reality

Shakespeare brings out sharply the difference between appearance and reality. He shows that appearances can be deceiving. He confirms what one of his own characters, Iago, says in the play, “I am not what I seem.”

Othello appeared to be a good person to the Venetians who hired him, yet he turned out otherwise. He appeared a good husband to Desdemona, yet he turned out to be a murderer. Desdemona appeared to be an ideal daughter, yet she deceived and disappointed her father Brabantio. Indeed, he was reported to have died of grief resulting from her marriage. Othello appeared guilty of adultery to Desdemona, yet she was innocent. Cassio also appeared guilty of adultery to Othello, yet he was not guilty of adultery with her. Iago appeared trustworthy to Roderigo, yet he was not trustworthy. Iago appeared good to Emilia, yet he was not. Iago appeared “honest” to Othello and to Cassio, yet he was not. Indeed, he was worse than dishonest. He was evil. One of the lessons Shakespeare teaches is that we should not be deceived by appearances.

Religion

While it has some strengths Shakespeare’s Othello has weaknesses. Shakespeare’s characters frequently mention

\[83\] Othello, 5: 2: 246.
\[84\] Othello, 3: 3: 294,
\[85\] Othello, 2: 3: 335.
“heaven” 86 instead of God. In some instances, God is mentioned directly. 87 Why do Shakespeare’s characters appeal to “heaven” rather than to God? God and heaven are not the same. God created heaven as well as the earth. To appeal to “heaven” instead of God, therefore, is to appeal to something other than God, something that was created by God. Thus, the appeal to heaven instead of God is a form of associating a partner with God. Islam strictly forbids associating any partner with God. Indeed, association of partners with God is the worst offense a believer can commit.

The references to heaven show a distancing from God by Shakespeare’s characters. It appears that they have only a dim recollection of God. A particular verse in the Qur’an explains the consequences of this forgetting:

> And with those who say Lo! we are Christians,”
> We made a covenant, but they forgot a part of that whereof they were admonished. Therefore We have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when Allah will inform them of their handiwork. 88

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88 Al Qur’an, 5:14, translation by Pickthall
Iago at times point even appeals to pagan gods, showing some evidence of reverting to paganism. This may explain to a considerable degree his misguided actions. The same is true to a lesser extent of Cassio when he appeals to a pagan god. Judgment Day is never mentioned in Othello directly. It receives an indirect mention in Othello’s speech to Desdemona in the last Scene of the last Act.

Role Models

Shakespeare’s Othello illustrates how people should not act. It is teeming with bad characters. If the play has any educational value, it shows us what kind of human beings we should not be. All major characters lack true, untainted nobility. This reflects the utilitarian thinking, growing during Shakespeare’s time, that there are no truly noble human beings in this world, that everyone – more or less – has some ulterior motives for doing what on the surface may appear as a noble act.

Because of this preponderance of negative role models, we must conclude that none of the major characters in Othello can serve as a role model for anyone, let alone young people. Accordingly, the value of Shakespeare’s Othello, from the educational point of view, is questionable at best.

89 Othello, 1: 2: 36, 2: 3: 19 and 2: 3: 347.
90 Othello, 2: 1: 86.
91 The reference is to their meeting “at count.” Othello, 5: 2: 324.
Othello

Othello is a very bad husband. He abused and murdered his wife in an “honour killing.” His marriage, to say nothing of his life, was cut short by his own foolish actions. Othello’s major weakness is his foolishness. He himself recognizes this at the end of the play when he exclaims, “Oh fool, fool, fool!”

Othello is gullible, superstitious and weak. He allows Iago to slander his wife without immediately insisting on incontrovertible proof. The warrior with many victories on the battlefield was defeated by a slanderer and his own baseless suspicions.

Othello was not merely gullible and weak. He was also unjust. He denied his own wife a fair hearing she requested and was entitled to. Othello is a loser *par excellence*. He lost his mind, his marriage, his reputation, his fortune, his friends and his life.

Othello could not stand up to Iago in defense of his wife. He could not do this because his faith in God was weak. Because of this weakness, he fell under the influence of Satan, represented by Iago. Had Othello had strong faith in God, he would not have fallen under Iago’s spell. Satan only influences those who listen to his call.

Othello claimed he loved Desdemona. But he was not willing to give his wife an opportunity to exonerate herself from a false accusation. The love of such a person is the love of a fool and weakling. If Othello had really loved Desdemona, he would have given her a chance to prove her innocence.

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92 Othello, 5: 2: 380.
Indeed, Othello loved himself and his reputation more than he loved Desdemona. He was selfish. He could not stand other people thinking she was deceiving him. His pride was more important to him than his wife. He was shallow. He was not his own man. He had poor judgment. Contrary to what might be expected from his warrior past, Othello was a weak man. The problem with Othello is not that he loved too well, but that he did not love well enough. There is no such thing as loving well without loving wisely.

Othello did not act as a man of honor when he did not seek the permission of Desdemona’s father to marry her. An honorable man would have asked for the father’s permission. Othello did not do that. He acted like a thief.

Because Othello did not trust Desdemona, a fundamental prerequisite for a good marriage was lacking. He failed to protect his wife. In the event that he could not get his suspicions out of his mind, he should have divorced her, not killed her. Murder was not the solution.

Othello could not control his anger. He was unstable, mad and confused. His fate confirms that those without guidance from God become losers.

Othello did not think before he acted. While he regretted killing Desdemona, Othello did not ask God for forgiveness for his crime. Indeed, by killing himself subsequently, he committed another crime.

A Muslim husband would not have acted like Othello. Muslims are commanded to be kind to their wives. A Muslim husband would have insisted on the testimony of four witnesses before accepting an accusation of adultery against
his wife. If four witnesses were not produced, a Muslim husband would have insisted on punishment of the slanderer by eighty strokes, witnessed by a group of believers, as prescribed in the Qur’an.

**Desdemona**

Was Desdemona’s love for Othello as pure as most readers assume? Shakespeare portrays her as a woman who would not deceive her husband for “all the world.” Yet she deceived her father to get married. Indeed, she deceived her husband also, although not in the way Iago and later Othello accused her. She deceived her husband when by not telling him the truth about the handkerchief. When Othello inquired about the handkerchief, “Is’t lost? Is’t gone? Speak: is it out o’the way?” She replied, “It is not lost.” “I say it is not lost.” Desdemona did not tell the truth to her husband. But she admitted the loss of the handkerchief to Emilia: “I am most unhappy in the loss of it.”

The view that Desdemona was noble is belied by her deception of her father as well of her husband regarding the handkerchief. Deceiving one’s father and not telling the truth to one’s husband does not show nobility.

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93 *Othello*, 4: 3: 74-75.
94 *Othello*, 3: 4: 93.
95 *Othello*, 3: 4: 96.
By deceiving her father and marrying Othello secretly, Desdemona showed herself a rebel. She rebelled against her father and against the custom of the community she was a part of. When Desdemona eloped with Othello, she trusted a man she barely met and ignored her father who cared for her since her childhood.

By deceiving her father and trusting someone she had barely met, Desdemona showed that she too, like her husband, was a fool. She was “a fool for love.” She was “romantic” in the sense that she placed romance – love – above her filial obligations. She allowed herself to be overcome by her passion for Othello – in defiance of established custom and common sense.

By disregarding established marriage customs, Desdemona cut herself off from her father, her family and from her filial responsibilities. She paid dearly for her rebellion. The period Othello’s courtship of Desdemona was short. Not surprisingly, the marriage – to say nothing of the lives of the newlyweds – also turned out to be short.

Othello and Desdemona were carried away by their feelings. In Othello we witness the beginning of romanticism, the view and way of life according to which following one’s feelings is more important than the fulfillment of one’s duties, including duties to one’s parents.98

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98 Romanticism was to find a fuller expression some centuries later in Europe in the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the politics of the French Revolution and the literature of Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens and others.
Desdemona was a disobedient daughter. She asserted independence from her father and from her community when she married Othello without her father’s permission. She rejected the notion of the traditional marriage and thus became a forerunner of the modern, liberated woman.

The two lovers paid a heavy price for their folly. Othello kills Desdemona in a fit of jealous rage. He becomes regretful when he discovers the truth and then also kills himself.

Desdemona’s fate confirms the risks of marrying without the permission of one’s guardian. She paid with her life for her infatuation with Othello and the contempt she showed for her father.

Her father died because of the grief she caused him. She paved the way not only her own death but her father’s as well. Had she asked her father’s permission to marry and obtained it, her marriage would have been safer and more stable. She would have had her family to protect her from Iago and his slanders. Because she married without permission, she made herself an outcast. This made her more vulnerable. Her family was not there to protect her in her time of need.

There was no shortage of characters ready to exploit Desdemona’s vulnerability. Ironically, she relied for protection on the very people that caused of her misery, Iago and Emilia.

A Muslim female would have acted differently. Desdemona cannot be faulted for not having acted as a Muslim because she was not Muslim. She can be faulted, however, for not

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having acted as a good daughter. It is customary among many ethnic communities to seek the parents’ permission for marriage. This practice makes good sense and helps to safeguard the well being of the newlyweds.

Iago

At the beginning of the play Iago was already embittered, jealous, frustrated, ambitious, greedy, dishonest, vengeful, hypocritical and manipulative. By the end of the play he acquired the additional traits of a slanderer, conspirator, thief and murderer.

Contrary to popular opinion, Iago was not smart. Had Iago been smart, he would not have acted in ways that landed him in the torture chamber. On the contrary, Iago was a person of low intelligence. No intelligent person could have seriously expected to get away with what he had planned. He was also a coward. This is evident from the fact that he murdered not only Roderigo but his wife, and then ran away in each case from his crime in a “hit and run” way. He was also instrumental in the deaths of Desdemona and Othello. Iago was a murderer. Can a murderer ever be smart?

Iago was a weak person. He fell under the influence of Satan and acted accordingly. He did not have the strength to forgive Othello for appointing Cassio as his lieutenant and to move on with his life. Ignorant and without guidance, Roderigo and Othello were too weak to resist Iago and themselves became victims of his as well as their own folly.

Iago was a hypocrite. He pretended to be honest but was dishonest. He was worse than dishonest. He was evil. He
referred to the “divinity of hell”\textsuperscript{100} and defended wine.\textsuperscript{101} He used other people, including Roderigo and his wife, for his own twisted purposes.

Yet Iago utterly failed in his designs. He was the biggest loser in the end. He was ensnared by his own evil designs. For this reason, it is misleading to describe him as “smart.” His fate shows us that a person may plan all he wants, it is God that will dispose. Ironically, Cassio does better than getting his job back. He gets Othello’s job.

The major factor in Iago’s downfall was pride. He could not accept Othello’s appointing Cassio as his lieutenant. He was like Satan who did not acknowledge Adam when commanded to do so by God. When asked why he did not prostrate himself before Adam, Satan replied:

\begin{quote}
...I am better than him. Thou createdst me of fire while him Thou didst create of mud.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

Like Satan plots to bring about the downfall of the heedless, Iago plotted – out of revenge – to bring the downfall of Cassio and Othello. When Iago swore by a two-faced pagan god, he showed his true, pagan colors. A true Muslim would never act as Iago did. Islam forbids polytheism, lying, stealing, slander, conspiracy and murder.

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\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Othello, 2: 3: 350}. \textsuperscript{101} \textit{Othello, 2: 3: 311}. \textsuperscript{102} \textit{Al Qur’an, 7: 12}, Pickthall.
\end{flushright}
Emilia

At the end of the play Emilia defends Desdemona with great courage. Emilia’s bold indictment of her husband Iago shows much strength. Yet early in the play she steals Desdemona’s handkerchief, a base act that reveals weakness. Emilia’s act of stealing was a factor in the tragedy. It was seeing the handkerchief in Cassio’s possession that finally convinced Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful to him.

But Emilia also defended adultery. She acted in an inconsistent manner. Despite bravely defending Desdemona at the end, Emilia herself contributed to Desdemona’s demise by stealing the handkerchief in the first place and then making giving it to Iago. Emilia also kept quiet about the handkerchief despite seeing how desperate Desdemona was on account of having lost it. This was cruel on Emilia’s part.¹⁰³

Had Emilia not stolen the handkerchief, or at least had she confessed to having stolen it when she had the opportunity to do so, Desdemona might have survived Iago’s slanders. Emilia should not have stolen the handkerchief. Indeed, a Muslim female would not have acted as Emilia acted. A Muslim will not steal and will neither commit nor defend adultery.

Emilia was a good wife in that she obeyed her husband Iago. A Muslim wife is obliged to obey her husband too, except when he asks her to do something forbidden. A Muslim wife would not have obeyed her husband if the husband asked her to commit a crime, such as steal something.

¹⁰³ Othello, 3: 4: 120.
Cassio

Cassio is also a weak man. He is unable to say no to drinking wine with Iago. He gets into a drunken brawl. Cassio is also an adulterer. He was married.\textsuperscript{104} Regardless of whether he was married or not, he should not have been carrying on an extramarital relationship with Bianca. He should have also refrained from touching Desdemona and kissing Emilia.

Virtues and Vices

Does \textit{Othello} have any educational value? If so, it is a negative sort of value. Shakespeare shows us many bad characters and the consequences of their evil plots. In \textit{Othello}, as in life, people reap what they sow. Perhaps we are reminded that we should avoid being or becoming like Shakespeare’s characters. Shakespeare presents us with examples of the kind of people we do not want to be. He does not offer, however, any (major) positive role models. As a result, there is a moral vacuum in \textit{Othello}. Good characters are sorely lacking.

In \textit{Othello} Shakespeare presents a skewed view of virtues and vices. While Othello considers adultery a transgression, Emilia, on the contrary, calls adultery a “small vice.”\textsuperscript{105} The fact that Cassio carries on an adulterous relationship with Bianca seems to raise no eyebrows among any of Shakespeare’s characters. Indeed, even in contemporary

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Othello}, 1: 1: 21.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Othello}, 4: 3: 83.
British society adulterous relationships – including among prominent families – hardly raise any eyebrows.

Losing the handkerchief by contrast is deemed to be a most serious offence by Othello. He grossly exaggerates the significance of the handkerchief, declaring melodramatically, “To lose or giv’et away were such perdition as nothing else could match.”

What we see in Othello is a distortion of the gravity of vices. Small vices, such as losing the handkerchief are magnified, while great vices, such as adultery are belittled.

**Adultery**

Shakespeare gives his audience – in the form of Emilia’s speech – a justification of adultery. Yet we find no moral counterweight to this speech in the form of a speech extolling marital fidelity. Instead, with Othello killing faithful Desdemona, we get the message that “fidelity does not pay.” This is a false and demoralizing message. Shakespeare may be a popular playwright, but he is a bad teacher.

How far some people have fallen under the spell of this false teaching is reflected in the popular saying that “nice guys finish last.” The implication is that if we do not want to finish last, we better not be nice.

The advice that “nice guys finish last” is false and unethical. It runs counter to religion, which teaches people to be good and that it pays to be good. Religion teaches that, on the contrary,
nice or good guys finish first. They finish first in the sense that they become successful, if not always in this life, at least in the afterlife. Those who believe in God and do good deeds succeed. They go to paradise. The bad guys go to hell.

The message that “loyalty does not pay” encourages infidelity and immorality. Thus, the play can have a demoralizing effect on the readers. Religion by contrast teaches that God Himself loves and rewards those who do good. We need literature that teaches and shows that “nice guys finish first.”

While it is commendable that Iago’s falsehoods are challenged and exposed at the end by Emilia, and that he comes to a well-deserved bad end, other falsehoods in the play remain unchallenged. An example of such a falsehood is Iago’s statement about who is blessed.

Iago praises ignorance, saying ignorance is bliss. This is another blatant falsehood. It also runs counter to religion. Religion teaches that knowledge is good and ignorance bad.

Shakespeare does not consider it necessary to challenge the falsehoods uttered by his characters. Is it perhaps because he himself believed them? It is necessary to challenge falsehoods. Not to do so may leave the readers with the wrong message.

To what extent are the falsehoods of Shakespeare’s characters the falsehoods of Shakespeare? After all, if Shakespeare is responsible for his characters, is he not also responsible for the falsehoods they utter?

Through his characters, Shakespeare provided a platform for the expression of falsehoods in a publicly performed play. Thus, he bears a degree of responsibility for these falsehoods.
Shakespeare could have easily added other – good characters – to challenge the falsehoods uttered by Iago and Emilia. This would have made his play better and more balanced. He chose not to do so. By doing this, he weakened his play, leaving it one sided and morally misleading.

**Describing People as they Are**

It might be objected that Shakespeare was merely describing people as they are and that it is not fair to blame him for this. It is not his fault if people act in an evil way. He was merely describing that evil.

We do not fault Shakespeare for depicting people as they are. We do, however, fault him for choosing mainly bad people to depict. Was there a shortage of good characters in his time or in history prior to his time? Why did Shakespeare decline to focus on the lives of truly noble, good persons? Are the lives of good persons less interesting than the lives of those who come to a tragic end? On the contrary, truly good characters always have interesting lives. Their goodness manifests itself in their struggles against evil.

**Absence of Balance**

Shakespeare dazzles with the preponderance of evil in his play. Even Desdemona, with her willful disobedience of her father and her lie to Othello, is not entirely good. Whatever good characters there may be such as Gratiano or Lodovico, they play only minor roles.
Because of this preponderance of evil, Shakespeare’s overall presentation of life lacks balance. Shakespeare presents us with a gallery of thieves, liars, slanderers, conspirators, and murderers. *Othello* is not only a tragedy. It is an immorality play.

*Othello* is not a love story either; rather, it is a hate story. It is a story about Iago’s hate for Othello and Othello’s hate for Desdemona.

Shakespeare over-emphasizes the evil side of human beings at the expense of the good side. He does not provide us with any truly noble and admirable characters. He does not provide positive role models. This is a major weakness. Because of this weakness, the play is morally flawed and one-sided. It gives an incomplete view of human nature and its true potential.

Say: “Not equal are the things that are bad and things that are good, even though the abundance of the bad may dazzle thee; so fear God, O ye that understand; that (so) ye may prosper.” 107

We are reminded of the pagan Homer’s account of the faithful Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, who patiently waited for her husband for twenty years. Finding his house full of uninvited occupiers on his return, Odysseus and his son kill the occupiers.

Despite his pagan perspective Homer, unlike Shakespeare, shows that fidelity pays. Penelope was rewarded for her fidelity and patience. Her husband returned in the end. It is ironic

107 *Al Qur’an*, 5: 100. AYA.
that the pagan Homer came closer to articulating a noble view of marriage than Shakespeare, who should have had the benefit of more than a pagan education.

**Wordiness, Melodrama, and Vulgarity**

There are other weaknesses. The play is too wordy. Indeed, it is too long. A number of speeches are pompous. There is also vulgarity. An instance of this takes place in *Act 3, Scene 1*. The clown asks the musicians, hired by Cassio to serenade Desdemona, whether they have been to Naples, a city well known for venereal disease. The clown subsequently makes a vulgar reference to “wind instruments.”

Shakespeare’s *Othello* does not educate well. As such, its didactic value is limited. He was a poet, not a prophet. But in the West, he has come to be treated as something of an icon, a wise man of sorts, while the truly wise – the prophets – are largely ignored. This reflects the extent to which the West has drifted from God.

**Islam and Tragedy**

In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche faulted Socrates for having destroyed tragedy. According to Nietzsche, the destruction of tragedy was caused by Socratic rationalism.

The destruction of tragedy, according to Nietzsche, was a great loss. We disagree. Shakespeare wrote tragedies centuries after Socrates. This shows that Socrates did not succeed in destroying tragedy. He did not succeed in destroying tragedy, either as a literary form or, more importantly, as the
experience of countless numbers of people and nations. Nietzsche’s own nation, Germany, was soon after his death to inflict much tragedy on the world and on itself, under the arrogant and – thank God – short-lived reign of Nazism. One might say that Nietzsche’s wish for the return of tragedy came true, even if the tragedy did not take place in the way he may have hoped for.

Islam prevents tragedy. More accurately, it is God that protects the believers. Islam supplies the means for obtaining that protection. But there are always people who do not want to be protected: they drift from religion and in that way invite tragedy on themselves. Like Othello, they harm others and destroy themselves. It is Islam that succeeds where Socrates failed. Islam prohibits all the vices illustrated in this play: it prohibits lying, stealing, making slanderous accusations, conspiracy and murder.

**Battle of the Books**

In the *Battle of the Books*, Jonathan Swift described the struggle between the ideas of the ancients and the moderns. There is another battle going on, between books that teach the truth and those that teach something other than the truth. The battle between the books that teach the truth and those that teach falsehoods has been continuing and shows no sign of abating.

The book that teaches the truth is the *Qur’an*. It was revealed to the prophet Muhammad, s.a.w., over a twenty-three-year
period. The Qur’an is a book that “confirms” the earlier
creations.108

Nay, but We hurl the true against the false, and
it doth break its head and lo! it vanisheth. And
yours will be woe for that which ye ascribe (unto
Him).109

Shakespeare’s Othello has been extolled as a pinnacle of
literary achievement. We disagree. Othello may be of interest to
adult readers but is not suitable reading for young people. Othello
is no substitute for moral education or instruction in
religion. It matters little if Othello was never intended by
Shakespeare to be so. The fact is that in many schools and
universities students learn Shakespeare instead of religion.
The reason for this is that the secular state has effectively
displaced religion by literature. But literature imparts a weak
morality.

Literature can never take the place of religion. It is incumbent
on all educators and responsible persons to turn the clock
forward and introduce the teaching of religion in schools
where currently religion is not taught. Only persons who have
first received a firm foundation in religion should be allowed to
study Shakespeare, due to the potentially demoralizing effect
of his plays on impressionable young minds.

Othello, as we have seen, is full of bad characters. Young
people may get the impression that Shakespeare presents an

81, 4:47, 5: 48, 6: 92, 10: 37, 12: 111, 35: 31, 37: 37, 41: 43, 46:
12, 46: 30.

accurate picture of the true potential of human beings. They may want to become like the characters in his plays. If they were to do that, they would make a bad choice. They could become demoralized, confused and possibly indulge in self-destructive behavior. People can do a lot better than Shakespeare’s characters do in Othello. But in order to do this, they must first turn to the book that teaches the truth, free of falsehoods. They must turn to the Qur’an.

Young people who have been taught Shakespeare instead of religion have been misled. Because of the displacement of religion by literature, young people have been left stranded in a moral vacuum. It is time to return to true values. Where moral education is concerned, it is time to return to religion. Literature can never take the place of religion. At best, it can be taught as a supplement to religion, never as a substitute.

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