

Hypothesis: Othello was the puppet of Iago's cruel plot but he was equally responsible for Desdemona's murder as Iago was. Desdemona was the innocent victim.

Othello and Desdemona: Innocent Victims or Dictators of their Own Demise?

Characters from Shakespeare's *Othello* have been analysed and scrutinised by critics for years since it was first written in 1603. In this particular report I aim to prove, through the study of various critical essays on Othello, whether or not Othello is just the puppet of Iago's cruel plot or whether or not he is equally if not more responsible for Desdemona's murder as Iago is. I also aim to explore whether or not Desdemona truly is the innocent victim.

After my first reading of Shakespeare's Othello, I had come to the conclusion that Iago was the main cause of Desdemona's death and Othello's suicide. I believed like a lot of 19th-century critics that "Othello was a noble figure and Iago was the ultimate in evil." (Newton:1991). There is no doubt that Iago's intentions and actions were undeniably evil, his main goal being "to destroy Othello" which he successfully managed to do. He was "determined to reveal that Othello's noble qualities are a sham, by reducing him to being a man eaten up with passion". Iago cleverly convinced Othello that his lieutenant Cassio had become too familiar with his wife Desdemona. To begin with, Othello struggled to believe and defended Iago's allegations against his wife. But very rapidly Iago managed to convince Othello "that appearances can be deceptive" and due to Othello's simple, straight forward and trust worthy nature he failed to come to the logical conclusion that this could also apply to Iago too.

However many critics disagree about whether or not Iago was the main cause of Desdemona's murder and Othello's suicide or whether he was simply the catalyst who brought "forth forces" (Newton: 1991) which already existed within Othello himself, "the essential traitor in the gates". Newton believes both Iago and Othello were "central to the tragedy" and were "jointly responsible for her [Desdemona's] death". However Hugh Macrae Richmond disagrees, and believes "that Iago is the central character in the play *Othello* and that his self awareness is the key dramatic device in the play". Lucille P. Fultz supports this idea, referring to Iago's "power in discourse" as the "power that ultimately leads to Desdemona's murder and Othello's suicide" due to Iago's "shrewd insight into the desires and fears of others" around him- mainly Othello's. Margaret Ranald observes Iago also as a "skilful opportunist who turns situations to his own account" and if it wasn't for his knowledge of his own abilities his "fascination with his own manipulation and control" his deceitful, malicious plot may not have succeeded so well it was his "desire to manipulate and destroy Othello" that ultimately lead to Othello's mental downfall. G.M. Matthews (2) comments on how Othello loses his universal human values of love and loyalty but he loses these values "...once he allows himself to become vulnerable to the irrational, un-human forces, embodied in Iago".

In *Shakespearean Criticism* the author explains that Iago lures Othello into his trap by manipulating the gaps between verbal representation and meaning, this idea is supported also by Fultz she believes "*Othello* offers an expansive view of the ways in which language works against certain speakers and is twisted and perverted in the mouth of a dishonest practitioner". (Fultz: 2004) Iago, through his "consciously selective use of language" manages to "distort reality and manipulate others so that they unwittingly play right into his hands" (ibid) he manifests and feeds on their fears, particularly Othello's.

[Due to space restrictions, four of the following paragraphs are not included]

Desdemona's elopement with Othello, Fultz explains, "provides the grounds on which Iago's vengeance operates" (ibid). ...

G.G Gervinus (2) supports the idea that Othello wouldn't have been so easily manipulated by Iago if it wasn't for "the manner of his union with Desdemona" (Gervinus: 1987) as well as the "earlier circumstances of his life" (ibid)

This Gervinus concludes is what left Othello feeling isolated, depreciated and therefore a lot more susceptible to the idea that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. ...

I believe it was a combination of both Othello's insecurities and Iago's dark soul that caused Othello's downfall. Iago's knowledge of Othello's insecurities about his birth and race helped shape Iago's clever constructed discourse which in turn enabled his evil plot to work so well as he used it to play on Othello's insecurities to unleash the oppressed jealous, possessive and unappreciated monster inside of Othello that he had kept caged and controlled for so long.

Othello "knows himself quite free from the empty motives which urge others to jealousy. In himself he is as incapable of groundless suspicion as of groundless anger" (ibid) and due to the evidence he has been spoon feed by Iago "there is no lack of flammable material." ...

Although I understand why Othello believed Iago's carefully, constructed words, I don't agree on how he punished her or with his actions afterwards. I agree with Elliot, when he claims that "Othello was cheering himself up" in his final speech from his point of view it was the honourable thing to do. I believe he dishonoured Desdemona, she was ready to take the blame herself, in order to save him from facing the consequences of his actions, but in trying to take the blame of himself, by arguing he did it out of honour not hatred, it seems like he is trying to gain pity from his audience, by trying to prove he was the victim rather than accepting he had done wrong. Although he had fallen victim to the prejudices held against him by the Venetian people, Desdemona had been the exception. She had married him, despite dishonouring her father in the process- she had forgiven him, though he murdered her unjustly. She had committed nothing, but the sin of ignorance, her sheltered life and child like innocence meant she didn't understand how her actions could be misinterpreted and used against her.

But, in conclusion it is very difficult, if not impossible, to pin the blame entirely on one person for the outcome of the play, there were multiple people, circumstances and situations that affected it. Desdemona's naivety, Iago's manipulative and clever discourse, Cassio's character, the simple, straightforward and trustworthy if not ignorant nature of Othello, as well as his relationship with Venetian society. Along with the fact, that Othello and Desdemona had eloped in spite of Desdemona's father's deep disapproval. Because in his eyes he was a foreign Barbarian, and not deserving of his daughter, despite how faithfully, Othello served his home, like it was his own. All these factors happened "in succession, each one more active and of greater weight than the other" (Gervinus: 1987:) Othello was certainly the puppet of Iago's well conceived plot, but his actions because

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of Iago's manipulation, though understandable, were not completely justified and he is not completely free from blame, nor is the seemingly innocent Desdemona who fell victim to her naivety.

Bibliography:

Fultz, Lucille P. , Devouring Discourses: Desire and Seduction in Othello, [Shakespearean Criticism](#). Ed. Michael L. LaBlanc. Vol. 79. Detroit: Gale, 2004. From *Literature Resource Center*.
[Gervinus](#) G.G, Third Period of Shakespeare's Dramatic Poetry: 'Othello' , [Shakespearean Criticism](#). Ed. Mark W. Scott. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987. From *Literature Resource Center*.

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Newton, K.M [Reference Guide to English Literature](#). Ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick. 2 ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991.
[Shakespearean Criticism](#). Ed. Lynn M. Zott. Vol. 68. Detroit: Gale, 2003. From *Literature Resource Center*.
[Shakespearean Criticism](#). Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 89. Detroit: Gale, 2005. From *Literature Resource Center*.
[Shakespearean Criticism](#). Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 99. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Data Chart: [Note the data chart is an extract of the full chart]

Source	Hypothesis: Othello was the puppet ...	Evaluation
Shakespearean Criticism . Ed. Lynn M. Zott . Vol. 68. Detroit: Gale, 2003. From <i>Literature Resource Center</i> .	Other critics focus on Othello's character and on his relationship with Iago. Arthur M. Eastman (1972), for example, identifies a marked similarity between Othello and Iago in that they both approach the world as ironists. Eastman explains that as ironists, they assert their authority by addressing situations from a position of concealed power. It is this affinity between Othello and Iago, Eastman contends, that allows Iago to manipulate Othello successfully. Derek Cohen (see Further Reading) centers his ...CONTINUED	Supports the idea that Othello, was the puppet of Iago's cruel plot- This source, uses a lot of evidence to support his ideas from various other sources to support his ideas suggesting that the information they give is reasonably reliable CONTINUED
Shakespearean Criticism . Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 99. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From <i>Literature Resource Center</i> .	The critic singles out Anthony Cochrane's venomous, spellbinding Iago for special praise in Richmond's engaging presentation. By contrast, Frank L. Rizzo (see Further Reading) remarks that uneven acting--particularly Firdous Bamji's sometimes emotionally absent Moor--in Coonrod's staging muted the overall tragic scope of the play. Nevertheless, the critic admires David Patrick Kelly's Iago who was "so matter of fact, so chillingly low-key that you could understand how none of his victims might see the demi-devil coming." CONTINUED	Supports the idea that Iago's deceitful plot & his "murderous malice" towards Othello successfully caused the possessive and Jealous monster within Othello to rare it's ugly head (which lead to Desdemona's murder and Othello's suicide) CONTINUED This author also derives a lot of her evidence from other critics, a lot of which studied at university suggesting that the information she has given is quite reliable
Unpinned or Undone?: Desdemona's Critics and the Problem of Sexual Innocence, W. D. Adamson ,	Surveys of Othello criticism have for years noted that most of the opinion about Desdemona's moral significance is lamentably polarized: at one extreme are her idolaters, the readers who see her as a desexualized spirit, "ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint" (A. C. Bradley); and at the opposite one, her attackers, including those who disparage her as "little less than a wanton" (President John Quincy Adams) or even as an outright strumpet.	This article, differs from all the other sources as it dominantly focuses on Desdemona, and her part in the play/plot. In the notes of this critical essay, it appears that Adamson has done quite an extensive amount of research to support and create her argument, this suggests that this source is quite reliable and has looked at various points of views to come to an accurate conclusion. CONTINUED