

THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO

*It is the very error of the Moon;
She comes more nearer Earth than she was wont
And makes men mad.*

Othello, 5.2.135-137

THEMES AND MOTIFS

Shakespeare uses themes (big ideas) and motifs (patterns of imagery or ideas) to tie a play together. Below are some of the themes and motifs you will notice in this play, in addition to racism, love, jealousy, revenge, and repentance.

- Appearance vs. Reality:** Shakespeare plays with appearance versus reality in every play, and Othello is certainly no exception.
- Eyes, sight, ocular proof:** Why is this a motif in this play?
- Honesty:** The word honest is used an excessive 51 times. What is the point? Consider its subtle variations of meanings, including its use as a patronizing epithet of appreciation or praise to inferiors, as in, “Now, now, my honest fellow.”
- Treachery:** Compare the honesty with the treachery.
- Justice:** Watch for characters demanding justice—for what do they insist on justice, why do they deserve justice, is their request reasonable, is it satisfied?
- Beasts:** Note the bestial imagery: who uses it and when do they use it?
- The Moon:** The Moon is mentioned five times, only by one character. Take notice and think about why this might be.
- The Soul:** There are more than forty references to the Soul in this play, many more times than in any other play except Richard 3. The Soul is an interesting contrast to the bestial imagery because if you have a Soul, you are not an animal. The Soul is always female; is there a connection in this play?

PARALLELS

Watch for parallels between Othello and Iago, and also parallels between Othello and Roderigo. Look for other surprising parallels/contrasts.

FOLIO VS. QUARTO

A Quarto (small paperback version) was printed in 1622; a year later it appeared in the large Folio, the collected works of Shakespeare, with more than a thousand minor differences and 160 new lines (Shakespeare died in 1616). There is a spurious account of a performance at court in 1604.

SOURCE OF THE PLAY

In 1565 an Italian writer, Cinthio, published a collection of one hundred stories, *Gli Hecatommithi*, which includes “A Moorish Captain,” the source for Shakespeare’s *Othello* in which Desdemona is the only character with a name. In it, Iago is rejected by Desdemona and seeks revenge; Desdemona has a gruesome death from both Othello and Iago; Othello and Iago live for quite a while afterward, though not friends. The story was not translated into English during Shakespeare’s lifetime.