**[The Structure of “Othello”](http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/structure-of-othello.html)**

Triumph of Craftsmanship

The nature of Shakespeare’s peculiar achievement in *Othello* is reflected in the perceptive remark that whereas Ring *Lear* is Shakespeare’s greatest work, *Othello* is his best play. *Othello* isindeed a brilliant triumph of dramatic art and craftsmanship, and it is in this respect that this play differs from Shakespeare’s other celebrated tragedies. As M. R. Ridley expressively puts it :

                It has neither the variety nor the depth of *Hamlet,* none of the overwhelming power of *Liar,* none of that ‘atmosphere’ which in *Macbeth* keeps us awfully hovering on the confines of a world outside that of our normal experience, none of the sweep and exultant power of *Antony and Cleopatra ;* nor has it the range in time which marks all the other four. But its grip upon the emotions of the audience is more relentless and sustained than that of the others. The plot is completely simple, with no sub­plot and no distractions ; the number of characters presented is small ; above all, from the moment of the landing in Cyprus the action moves fast, and the tension steadily mounts, with hardly an instant’s relaxation, till the moment at which Othello kills himself.

Three-Part Structure

*Othello* is universally recognised as the best constructed of all Shakespearean tragedies. Except for a brief passage of clowning, there is no digression in the play. The action starts moving no later than after the first ten lines of the play. We notice that the tragedy has a three-part structure. The first part consists of the marriage of Othello ; the second part deals with the poisoning of Othello’s mind by Iago, and the third of Othello’s murder of Desdemona and his discovery of how he has been duped by Iago. As is evident, each part arises naturally out of what has preceded it and carries forward the theme to its logical conclusion. Within these three divisions, Shakespeare takes cart of thefour structural phases into which his plays are divisible, i.e. exposition, complication and development, climax and denouement or catastrophe. These are, of course, also the recognised structural divisions of a dramatic work according to classical critical theory.

Exposition

The exposition is the introductory opening of a play which reveals the general situation from which the complication in the plot arises. In Shakespeare’s work the space devoted to each of these structural divisions is not uniform but differs vastly from play to play. The most characteristic expositions of Shakespeare open with a conversation which is seen to have been already in progress. The exposition of *Othello* is extremely skilful, for Shakespeare seems to take great care to delay, the appearance of Othello himself, while making us focus our thoughts on Othello all the time. Instead,’’ it is the villain Iago who is introduced first, in conversation with Roderigo. We get to know Iago well enough to be prepared for the mischief which he is soon to set afoot. Brabantio is then introduced and the key incident––the elopement of Desdemona with Othello––is presented from the hostile point of view of Desdemona’s unsuccessful lover, her father who hates to think of Othello as his son-in-law, and Iago who in public keeps up a facade of being Othello’s well-wisher but is in reality insanely malignant and spiteful. It would seem that in the exposition of *Othello,* Shakespeare deliberately makes the going tough for Othello and Desdemona, so that when they are able to silence their enemies effortlessly, their triumph seems to be all the greater. The expository part closes with Brabantio’s warning to Othello that Desdemona, who has betrayed her father, would some day deceive him also. Though Othello is not conscious of it at the time, this seed of doubts sprouts in his wind and in time becomes a mighty tree of mistrust and suspicion. Thus the exposition itself looks forward, to not only what is to come next, but to the denouement.

Complication

The development or complication of the plot is, of course, the longest part of a play. The nature of the conflict which is the basis of the development is peculiar in *Othello,* in the sense that, given his nature, the mighty but trustful Othello is helpless before the weak but crafty Iago. On the external plane the conflict ends in the Duke’s decision in favour of Othello and Desdemona, with the reunion of the newly-weds marking the climax of the play. This conflict and climax are, however, superficial, for the real action of the play is not the coming together of Othello and Desdemona, but the rupture––though one-sided––in their relationship, and the real climax is the subjugation of Othello’s mind by Iago.

The Real Conflict

The real conflict in *Othello* lies in Iago’s diabolical attempts to poison Othello’s mind, and Othello’s: desperate, though futile, attempts to keep his sanity, and his faith in Desdemona, intact. The lateness of the crisis makes *Othello* preserve its excitement right till the end, for in plays; where the conflict reaches its conclusion, early, e.g. *Julius* *Caesar,* there is bound to be some flagging of interest. The Temptation Scene (Act III, Scene III) is the very heart of the conflict in *Othello,* though it is far from over at the end of this scene. This long scene is a masterpiece of construction and on analysis reveals six successive phases, which might even be viewed as self-contained scenes. In the first phase of it, Cassio meets Desdemona and requests her to use her influence with Othello in her favour so as to reinstate him in his estimation. She, as is her wont, pledges her whole hearted support. In the next phase, we see that Desdemona is as good as her word, and is in fact rather tactless and indiscreet in her insistence, and quite unmindful of her husband’s state of mind. Although Othello’s suspicion and jealousy have not yet been aroused, there is apt material for this, for on seeing Cassio depart just as they arrive, Iago exclaims, “Ha, I like not that”, though when Othello asks him what he said, he is deliberately evasive, though he does not miss the opportunity of making apparently ‘honest’ insinuation’s against him

*Othello.* What dost thou say ?

*Iago.* Nothing, my lord ; or if––I know not what.

                *Othello.* Was not that Cassio parted from my wife ?

*Iago.* Cassio, my lord ! No, sure, I cannot think it,

                                        That he would sneak away so guilty-like, Seeing your coming.

*Othello.* Ido believe ’twas he.

Now comes the most crucial stage of the scene, as Iago sets systematically to poison Othello’s mind. Interestingly enough, one of the arguments used by Iago for this purpose is the same as that of Brabantio, viz. that Desdemona’s rejection of her own countrymen in favour of the Moor, and her betrayal of her father, indicates the fundamental perversity of bar nature :

                She did deceive her father, marryingyou ;

                And when she seem’d to shake, and fear your looks,

                She lov’d them most,

Iago’s cunning suggestions achieve their goal so completely that Othello forms the view that the ‘honest creature’––Iago––knows more than he is willing to reveal, out of consideration for Cassio. It is at this stage that Desdemona happens to drop her handkerchief, which is retrieved by Emilia who, for once, betrays singular credulity about her husband. Iago, to whom she gives the handkerchief plants it in Cassio’s chamber, and tins armed, launches another assault on Othello’s mind. Othello is now as helpless as a fish caught in a net, and his wordsfull reveal the state of his mind :

By the World,

                I think my wife be honest, and think she is not ;

                I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

                I’ll havesome proof : Her name, that was as fresh

                As Dian’s visage, is now begrim’d andblack

                As mine own face.

For the first time, Iago is open and forthright in his accusations, and agrees, with seeming reluctance, to furnish Othello with some swiftmeans of bringing about Desdemona’s death, assuring him : “I am yours for ever.”

Denouement and Resolution

At a certain stop during the rising action of the play, the conflict takes a decisive tam and reaches a climax. In *Othello,* this may be said to happen as the end of the Temptation Scene, i.e. Act III, Scene III. Then the falling action of the play commences, ending in the denouement and resolution, which in this caseconsists of Othello’s tragic murder of Desdemona and, after the discovery that he has been deluded by Iago, the visiting by Othello of retributive justice uponhimself. What is specially noteworthy about the plot construction of Othello is the relentless swiftness of its pace, and the intense concentration of its interest. In both these respects, the construction of *Othello* is unique inShakespearean tragedy.

The Role of Soliloquies

The soliloquies in Shakespearean draws aremainly an instrument of characterisation, since they elucidate motivation, for according to dramatic convention a character necessarily speaks the truth when he .is talking to himself. However, for the same reason, soliloquies have an important bearing on the structure of the play, for clarity and consistency of motivation links the various events of the play in a coherent chain of cause and effect. If the malignity of Iago bad been really ‘motiveless’, as Coleridge maintains, the structure of *Othello* would have been considerably weakened. As it is, the soliloquies of Iago go a long way in expressing his motivation, and the soliloquies of Othello himself reveal the varying states of his mind, first telling us of his intuitive feeling that his reunion with Desdemona constitutes the very acme of his happiness, and that if be were to die now, it would be to die most happily. Quite early in the play, Iago gives goat to his resentment against ; Othello, and declares that he will entangles him is a jealousy which is so strong as to overthrow judgment. Iago calls Cassio “this honest fool”, and announces his plan of construing Desdemona’s advocacy of his cause as evidence of her lustful interest in him. Similarly, Iago is quite implicit why he wants Cassio to be murdered, the strongest reason being that his way of life continually puts the devious villain to shame––­

                He bath a daily beauty in his life

                That makes me ugly.

The most interesting of Othello’s soliloquies, from the point of view of structure, is the one which begins with the words, “It is the cause……” His mood is not one of furious anger now, but that of a deadly quiet, since he believes that he is about to perform an act of sacrifice and save Desdemona from the baser part of herself.

The Use of ‘Double Time’

Shakespeare has used a highly modernistic device to solve an important structural problem in *Othello.* The problem was to manage the plot in such a way as to suggest, simultaneously, that there was no physical possibility, in terms of time and place, for the alleged intrigue between Desdemona and Cassio to have been carried out, and to allow its possibility. Shakespeare has done so by resorting to ‘double time’, that is, by constructing the plot as though the links in time are managed by two different clocks, one indicating ‘long time’, and the other showing the normal passage of time.

Economy and Harmony

The structure of *Othello* is characterised by an impressive economy and beautiful harmony. The economy in the shaping of means to end and end to means, of characters to the action and action to the characters, is especially noted and commended by Granville-Barker. He observes :

Othello’s precipitate fall from height to depth is tragically appropriate to the man he is, as to the man he is made because the fall must be precipitate. And that we may rather feel with Othello in his suffering than despise him for the folly of it, we are speeded through time as unwittingly as he is, and left little more time for reflection. The occasional relaxation of tension is because the strain, in any play highly charged with emotion, would become intolerable.

The beauty and harmony in the structure of *Othello* has been, commented upon by Helen Gardner. According to her a unique distinction of this tragedy is the indispensability of every single scene. except for a trivial passage with the clown. *Othello* thus satisfies the desire of the imagination for order and harmony between the parts and the whole