Act III, Scene Iii Of Othello: Essay, Research Paper

In this

piece of course work I was told to look in depth at scene III of the play

?Othello?. I will begin by telling you the outline of the scene, then a closer

look in to the scene. Desdemona

decides that she wants to advocate for Cassio. She tells Emilia so, and that

she believes Cassio is a good person, and has been wronged in this case; she

pledges to do everything she can to persuade her husband to take Cassio back.

Cassio speaks with her briefly, but leaves just as Othello enters because he

does not wish for a confrontation. Iago seizes on this opportunity to play on

Othello’s insecurities, and make Cassio’s exit seem guilty and incriminating.

Othello then speaks to Desdemona, and Desdemona expresses her concern for

Cassio; she is persistent in his suit, which Othello is not too pleased about.

Othello says he will humour her, and the subject is dropped for a while. Iago then

plays on Othello’s insecurities about Desdemona, and gets Othello to believe,

through insinuation, that there is something going on between Desdemona and

Cassio. Othello seizes on this, and then Iago works at building up his

suspicions. Soon, Othello begins to doubt his wife, as Iago lets his

insinuations gain the force of an accusation against her. Othello begins to

voice his insecurities when it comes to Desdemona, and himself as well.

Desdemona enters, and they have a brief conversation; Othello admits that he is

troubled, though he will not state the cause. Desdemona

drops the handkerchief that Othello gave her on their honeymoon; Emilia knew

that her husband had wanted it for something, so she doesn’t feel too guilty

about taking it. Emilia gives it to Iago, who decides to use the handkerchief

for his own devices. Othello re-enters, and tells Iago that he now doubts his

wife; Othello demands "ocular proof" of Desdemona’s dishonesty, so

Iago sets about making stories up about Cassio talking in his sleep, and says

that Cassio has the handkerchief that Othello gave to Desdemona. Iago knows how

important this handkerchief is to Othello; it was his first gift to Desdemona,

and was given to him by his mother. Othello is incensed to hear that Desdemona

would give away something so valuable, and is persuaded by Iago’s insinuations

and claims to believe that Desdemona is guilty. Othello then swears to have

Cassio dead, and to be revenged upon Desdemona for the non-existent affair. A more

detailed look into the play "His

bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift," Desdemona says of Othello;

these paradoxes highlight Desdemona’s determination to set things right.

Ironically, it is this determination to "intermingle everything Othello

does with Cassio’s suit" that fuels Othello’s jealousy, which is the cause

of her death. Had Desdemona not felt such a sense of justice or been good

enough to advocate for a case in which she was not involved, she might have

survived. Though it is very ironic, and a paradox, Desdemona is undone by her

own goodness, and her need to step into affairs on a public level, which

Othello is uncomfortable with. In this

scene, Iago begins his machinations to make it seem like Cassio and Desdemona

are having an affair. However, Iago refrains from saying very much; "I

cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like" is the most

incriminating thing he says about Cassio. He makes Othello start to think

uneasy thoughts by saying "I like not that" about Cassio’s exit;

Othello immediately seizes the bait, his jealousy playing off of Iago’s

calculated insinuations. Desdemona’s

choice of words to describe Cassio is unfortunate; she calls him a

"suitor," not meaning it in a romantic sense, although Othello could

certainly take it that way. Desdemona binds her reputation to Cassio’s in an

unfortunate way; she says that if Cassio is wrong, "I have no judgment in

an honest face". Of course Desdemona means well, but she gambles too much

on another person’s honour. Iago begins

to echo Othello, which makes Othello even more uneasy. He asks questions that

are basically related to the issues at hand, such as whether Desdemona and

Cassio have known each other for a while. In Othello’s state, he believes

Iago’s statements of nothing to be a real attempt to hide the truth about what

is going on; he does not realize that Iago’s statements are all feigned to make

Othello jealous. "Thou echoest me, as if there was some monster in thy

thought, too hideous to be shown"; Othello creates this simile based

merely on Iago’s echoing and unrelated questions, showing how Othello begins to

feed off the insinuations of Iago’s words. Iago says

that he believes Cassio is "honest"; yet again, this word sets

Othello off, and Iago’s fake uncertainty in his tone makes Othello think that

Cassio lies. Iago then asks "who has that breast so pure that some unclean

apprehensions keep leets and law days." In the context in which it is

spoken, Othello takes it to mean that Cassio is flawed, which is true; but

notice how Iago says no names, and doesn’t explicitly apply the statement to

any one person. Iago’s fakery reaches a peak when he speaks of how "good

name is the immediate jewel" that people possess. Othello takes the

statement to mean that Iago is protecting Cassio’s good name by not telling

Othello all; but Iago is not strictly saying more than his statements suggest,

and all the connections are done by Othello’s grasping mind. Jealousy, a

major theme, especially with regards to Othello, is soon addressed specifically

by Iago. "It is the green-eyed monster," Iago tells him, in that

now-famous statement; the "green-eyed monster" becomes a symbol

representing Othello’s dark feelings, a spectre lurking in his mind and

beginning to steer his behaviour. Iago’s speech is also deeply ironic, since it

points out Othello’s flaws, and the root of his tragedy; Othello has no idea of

the significance of these statements, and so neglects to take them to heart.

Othello then begins to say that he believes his wife is virtuous, which means

that Iago finally addresses her directly, and further misleads Othello. Othello is

deeply insecure about his personal qualities and his marriage, as insecurity

becomes a theme that weakens his resolve not to doubt Desdemona. Othello uses

his black skin as a symbol for how poorly spoken and unattractive he thinks he

is. All of his claims are very much beside the point; his words are actually

more complex and beautiful than those spoken by any other character in the

play. Othello doubts that Desdemona could love him, because of his

misconception of himself as being uncouth, poorly spoken, and old; and because

he begins to believe that Desdemona cannot love him, he starts to believe her

guilty of infidelity. The leap is great, but it is all a product of Othello’s

own insecurities and his incorrect conception of himself, another theme of the

play. How Othello sees himself directly influences how he views Desdemona’s

love, though there should be a disconnection between these two things. Othello

begins to use the black/ white imagery found throughout the play, to express

his grief and rage at Desdemona’s alleged treachery. "My name, that was as

fresh as Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face,"

Othello says. Although the allegations against Desdemona are personally hurtful

to him, Othello focuses more on the public ramifications, rather than the

private; there is great irony in this concern, since this rumoured betrayal is

a private one, and also since Othello’s name is highly regarded, because

nothing has really happened. Iago’s "proofs" also rely on the animal

imagery which has run throughout the play; he makes Desdemona and Cassio seem

like lustful lovers, by describing them as "prime as goats, as hot as

monkeys" (line 400). This comparison is calculated, since Iago knows that

thinking of Desdemona as lusting after another man disturbs Othello greatly. The

handkerchief, the most crucial symbol and object in the play, first appears

here. The handkerchief, to Desdemona, symbolizes Othello’s love, since it was

his first gift to her. Othello thinks that the handkerchief, quite literally,

is Desdemona’s love; and when she has lost it, that must clearly mean that she

does not love him any longer. The handkerchief also becomes a symbol of

Desdemona’s alleged betrayal; Othello takes it as the "ocular proof"

of her dishonesty, which is a grave mistake. "Proof"

is a key word in this scene; Othello demands that Iago prove Desdemona

unfaithful by actually seeing evidence of her guilt. But Iago, ever clever and

persuasive, manages to work around this completely; he plays off of Othello’s

jealousy, telling him stories that damn Cassio and mention the handkerchief,

which makes Othello angry and distracts him from the fact that he has seen no

proofs at all. Othello trusts Iago’s words to convey proof, and is

disillusioned by Iago’s dishonesty; yet, Othello only realizes later that he

has been tricked and has seen no proof, when it is too late for him to take his

actions back. Iago

subverts Othello’s wish for "ocular proof" by making it seem painful

and impossible to achieve; they would have to catch Desdemona and Cassio

actually being unfaithful, which Othello cannot bear to imagine. So, instead,

Iago offers up other "proof," thus clearing him of the impossible

charge of "ocular proof"; "if imputation and strong

circumstances which lead directly to the door of truth will give you

satisfaction, you might have had," he tells Othello (lines 403-5).

Naturally, Othello, already in doubt of his wife’s honour, falls into this

rhetorical trap; Iago is now free to condemn Desdemona through suspicion, with

only the smallest bit of "ocular" evidence. This act

represents the beginning of Othello’s giving up language; until this point in

the play, Othello has spoken with beautiful images, convincing speechifying,

and used his language to express the eloquence and beauty in his soul. From

this point forward, notice how Othello’s use of imagery and story become less

and less frequent, and how he begins to rely upon Iago for speech and

explanation. And just as language is the power with which Othello was able to

persuade Desdemona, his loss of it is a resignation of this power that

attracted her to him. Othello suspects his wife’s language, and Cassio’s as

well; he is distracted from suspicion of Iago, even though it is Iago’s

language, which has taken away Othello’s ability to speak because of

overwhelming grief and jealousy. Othello begins to lose his power over himself,

and over others, when he loses his beautiful language; and this resignation

marks a huge shift in the balance of power between Othello and Iago, as Iago becomes

more dominant in the relationship, and begins to steer Othello. Iago’s

assumption of Othello’s image-filled powers of language, and the beginning of

his dominance, is shown by the story he tells of Cassio talking in his sleep.

He describes in detail Cassio’s actions, making them all too vivid for Othello

to dismiss; indeed, they are so vivid that Othello forgets that they are merely

words, and seizes them as true evidence against Desdemona. Othello’s language,

from this point on, is bent by anger; he has his last bit of eloquence in this

act, and then in Act IV, cedes his powers and his language to Iago, as Iago

drives the events toward their conclusion. In the

battle between order and chaos, chaos seems to be winning out. Othello abandons

his reason in judging Iago’s "proofs," and his abandonment of

language also marks a descent into chaos. Although it is a chaos controlled by

Iago, still, order and reason are on the losing side; raging emotions and

speculations begin to rule Othello’s fate, as he comes closer and closer to his

tragic end.

342