Othello Essay, Research Paper

“I am not what I am.”

An essay on Othello, question No 4.

I will discuss this quote in relation to Lacan’s ideas about language as the symbolic order. My aim is to show how Othello finds his identity threatened by

Desdemona’s reaction to his tales.

In order to explain Lacan’s ideas very briefly I will quote from Pam Morris: Literature and Feminism, (Blackwell, 1993) where she discusses the resolution of the

Oedipal crisis.

For Freud the outcome of the child’s fear of castration is its submission to the reality principle and hence its entry into the social order. For Lacan this

must coincide with the child’s entry into the language system…..Language is thus the Law of the father; a linguistic system within which our social and

gender identity is always already structured. (p. 104)

Othello’s identity in the Venetian society is his role as “the Moor”. Few people use his real name when talking about him. When speaking the given quote, Othello is

telling the Venetians how he won Desdemona’s heart by telling her the story of his life, and he now retells it to the Venetians. This tale-telling is a way of employing

the linguistic system to reshape for himself a new identity with more positive connotations than “the Moor” can offer. “The Moor” is an expression the Venetians

connect to other expressions in the linguistic system which all have a negative value. Examples are such expressions as “old black ram, a Barbary horse, lascivious,

and a devil.” The negative overtone of these words will reflect back on Othello. He can’t change his origins but he can try to change the connotations of “the Moor”.

He can fill the expression with a new content and thereby give himself an identity he can be more comfortable with. This is what Othello is doing when he is retelling

his history.

Othello is obviously a good narrator; Desdemona can’t get enough of his story. Expressions like “seriously incline”, “with haste” and “greedy ear” show

Desdemona’s eagerness for his storytelling. “And ever…./She’ld come again” shows that this has been happening over a period of time without Desdemona growing

tired of his tales. The given quote implies that Othello feels he has been too clever for his own benefit. Desdemona’s craving for his autobiography is felt as a threat; it

may jeopardize his new identity. Othello says that she would: “Devour up my discourse”. It is in this discourse that his identity exists. If she devours up his discourse,

she devours up his identity and leaves him where he started; as “the Moor”.

Desdemona may represent the all-engulfing mother of the pre-Oedipal stage. This is a stage without structure, language or identity, an opposite to the linguistic

system, the Law of the father. It is with a “greedy ear” she “devours up my discourse”. An ear is sometimes used to symbolize female genitalia and will here

emphasize the fact that Othello feels the threat to be feminine. That he, through his discourse, is devoured shows that this feminine threat is all-engulfing. If Othello

refuses to accept his old role as “the Moor” he will either be without an identity or be dragged by his self-fashioned identity back into the pre-Oedipal stage. These

options are two sides of the same coin, he will lose himself either way. To give up one’s self is the same as suicide. Both death and the pre-Oedipal stage are spheres

without language, structure, intention or identity. To give way to the one or the other will have the same result for Othello; he will no longer be a conscious being.

To save himself, Othello must get control over this “greedy ear”. Female sexuality was considered something scary which could best be controlled through marriage.

A loose tongue was a sign of loose sexuality. Othello extends this notion to include Desdemona’s “greedy ear”. He marries Desdemona and all is well until Iago

implies that Desdemona is unfaithful.

Unfaithfulness in a woman will reflect back on her husband. A cuckold is a ridiculous figure in other people’s eyes. He must be seriously lacking in person for his wife

to run after other men. Othello sees himself in the same situation as before the marriage. Instead of using her ears she is now using her sexuality to destroy the identity

he has built up for himself. I have already pointed out how ears and sexuality are connected in Othello’s mind. Either way the results are the same for Othello’s

identity. He sees his positive image of himself slipping away: “Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars/ That makes ambition virtue!….Farewell: Othello’s

occupation’s gone.” (III, iii, 352-353+360) The one way to control this threat is to passivize Desdemona completely by killing her. He realizes too late the effect this

action will have on his own situation. She was the only person who would accept the identity he had been fronting. He even had difficulties believing in it himself,

which made him an easy victim for Iago. So when he killed Desdemona he killed the positive image of himself. The person he saw as a threat to his identity was the

only person who actually sustained it. Because he had such difficulties in believing in himself he found it impossible that anybody else should do so. This insecurity

proves his undoing. His positive self-image gone, he is left a choice between “the Moor” or nothingness. The moment Emilia realizes Othello is the murderer she

reverts to calling him expressions connected to the negative image of “the Moor”: “And you the blacker devil!…thou art a devil.” (V, ii, 129, 131) He can’t stand

being this person, the only one society and the symbolic order can offer him. To construct his own identity has proven impossible. To be without an identity, a

non-personn implies death. He chooses to free himself of this unwanted identity by stepping out of the social order and the language system by means of suicide.