Explore Shakespeare’s presentation of Desdemona in *Othello*.

You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

[The term ‘presentation’ means that you must focus on what Shakespeare does as a **dramatist** to present to character **(AO2)**. How does he show his writer’s craft as a dramatist in using dialogue (both about Desdemona and by her); the dramatic interactions between Desdemona and other characters; the use of staging and stage direction; the structural development of the play: the significance of placing scenes in different parts of the play and the tragic development of the story; the use of language and imagery; the effects of the verse; the decision to use either verse or prose and switching between them?]

**Possible areas of contextual discussion (AO3):**

* The way she illuminates the workings of a patriarchal society and how Shakespeare’s audience might view this differently (more conservatively) than a modern audience.
* The way she heightens the sense of tragic injustice at the end of the play.
* The way she represents the ‘domestic’ sphere of the play as distinct from the ‘professional’, military sphere and how her participation and attempt to interfere in the military world is arguably problematic.
* The way she is presented as typical of the stereotype in England of the wealthy Venetian ruling class – simultaneously susceptible to sensuality and as rational and enlightened.
* The way she is used to exemplify Christ-like self-sacrifice in the face of evil and injustice or becomes the object of chivalric, objectifying versions of the ‘maid’ or the ‘lady’ (Brabantio, Cassio).

Find some quotations from the text (either **about**, **by** or **with** Desdemona) and think about how these might be linked to one of the contexts above:

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| --- | --- |
| **Part of the play** | **Contexts** |
| References to Desdemona by Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio (1.1.68-139; 1.1.158-182) |  |
| **Part of the play** | **Contexts** |
| Othello, Brabantio and Desdemona speak to the Senate (1.3.94-196; 1.3.226-295) |  |
| Iago continues his duping of Roderigo (1.3.326-347) |  |
| D. arrives in Cyprus; Iago and Cassio discuss D.; Iago persuades Cassio to seek her help (2.1.60-265; 2.3.13-25; 2.3.285-382) |  |
| Othello’s changing idea about D. as Iago poisons his mind (3.3) |  |
| **Part of the play** | **Contexts** |
| D. laments the change in Othello (4.2.1-166) |  |
| The ‘Willow’ scene (4.3) |  |
| D.’s murder and Othello’s suicide (5.2) |  |

Critical comments on Desdemona **(AO5)**

“[Desdemona]…is in grave danger of being canonised”

Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*

“[Desdemona]…is ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint”

A.C.Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*

“…the significance of the play is deepened by what it shows her individual experience to be – especially what it shows in her love for Othello and her ways of responding to him…”

J. Adamson, *‘Othello’ as Tragedy*

[Desdemona has the strength that….] enables her to bear the public humiliation of a blow, to insist to the raging Othello that she is indeed honest, and to argue her innocence with considerable passion.”

A.J.Cook, ‘The design of Desdemona, doubt raised and resolved.’

**Feminist reading: ‘a maiden never bold’**

Feminist critics highlight the ways Shakespeare portrays gender roles. In Act 1, Scene 3, Brabantio describes his daughter Desdemona as ‘a maiden never bold’, yet in choosing a foreigner she has violated the Venetian norm of arranged endogamous marriages (the practice of marrying within a local community or ethnic group) and rejected her father’s authority. Still, she honours the patriarchal dictum that, once married, the wife owes her husband the same respect and duty she had shown her father. Emilia, too, defers to her husband Iago’s wishes. Even after she realises the full extent of his villainy, she admits, ‘’Tis proper I obey him, but not now’ (5.2.194). At the same time, romances, poems and plays often countered patriarchal authority in favour of romantic love. Just as the Duke overrules Brabantio’s demands in Act 1, Scene 3, in fictional narratives the blocking father figure cannot prevail and young lovers marry. If *Othello* ended after Act 1, it would be, as many commentators have observed, a romantic comedy.

Alas, Desdemona and Othello’s love is no match for Iago’s plots and the green-eyed monster jealousy. Infidelity was the ultimate marital crime in early modern England. The prospect of illegitimate children subverted the bedrock of the era’s social and economic system, the inheritance of property from father to son

As she nears death in the play’s final moments, she exonerates Othello by claiming no one has murdered her except herself.

From the play’s earliest performances, audiences responded sympathetically to Desdemona’s plight. After a 1610 production at Oxford, Henry Jackson recalled that Desdemona ‘entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance’.[[4]](https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/critical-approaches-to-othello#footnote4) That changed in the late 20th century, however, when feminist critics underscored Desdemona’s initial independence and Emilia’s eventual strength, and outlined the ways both women – as well as the courtesan Bianca – were constrained by the male characters’ patriarchal suppositions. From a feminist perspective, early modern England’s preoccupation with cuckoldry demonstrates a basic male insecurity about women’s sexuality.

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