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BLACKNESS IN OTHELLO:
An Aspect of Thematic Texture
L. C. Milledge

The disquieting interrogations of the *Sein-Schein* dichotomy inform part of the thematic texture¹ of *Othello*, one of Shakespeare's more Sophoclean tragedies. This study will examine the use and nature of "blackness" in character, language, setting, and idea in the tragedy in an attempt to show that an analysis of even a limited aspect of thematic texture reveals *Othello's* poetic "openness," one of the distinctive features of universal art.

Some of the contrarities and paradoxes inherent in the thematic texture of *Othello* arise from Shakespeare's appropriation and use of the color black,² the etymology of which reveals semantic complexity. *The New English Dictionary* cites the OE forms *blaec*, *blac*, and the forms *blace* and *blacan*, the latter often confused with OE *bla'c*, which meant *shining* or *white*.³ In Middle English, the forms *blac*, *blak*, and *blake* often meant "pale, colourless, wan, livid" as well as "black, dark."⁴ It is not surprising, then, that the foremost dramatist of linguistically conscious Elizabethan England made literary capital of the rich associations of the word *black*.

That the physical blackness of Othello is a source of critical speculation is evident in the apologia and acrimony in *Othello* scholarship on this point. Critics whose proclivities prohibit their acknowledgement of Othello's blackness but whose *acumen* impels their acknowledgment of *Othello's* power present palliations ranging from Coleridge's convoluted assurances that Othello is not a "veritable negro" to Given's anxious assertion that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona remains unconsum-

¹The critical approach of this study is an adaptation of that used by Edgar A. Dryden in his *Melville's Thematics of Form* (Baltimore, 1968). Professor Dryden explores fictional point of view as a controlling motive in Melville's art. My provenance is the examination of the reality-appearance motif as it is elaborated and projected by four textural elements in *Othello* (character, language, setting, and idea). Cf. Heilman's treatment of the love-motif in "Wit and Witchcraft: Thematic Form in *Othello*," *Arizona Quarterly*, XII (Spring, 1956), 5-16.

²Shakespeare's appropriation and use of the multiple associations of *black* are evident in the sonnets and in the plays, especially *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Such works as *The Masque of Blackness* and *The White Devil* evince the interest of other dramatists in "the mystery of black." Some insight into the semantic extensions of *black* (and other colors) is available in A. E. Swaen, "The Palette Set," *Englische Studien* LXXIV (1940-41).

³*NED* (Oxford, 1888).

⁴*loc. cit.*

mated, like that of Joseph and Mary in the Mystery plays.⁵ Aligned with this type of critical response to Othello's blackness is Lamb's rationalization of Othello's representation as "a coal-black Moor" as being the result of "the imperfect state of knowledge respecting foreign countries in those days, compared with our own."⁶ Critics of Rymer's orientation who view the play as farcical or melodramatic largely because of the black protagonist differ in the magnitude, but not in the quality, of their aversion to the notion that love between ethnic and cultural opposites is possible. Blanche Cole, Simon De Moor, and an anonymous woman critic cited in the Arden *Othello* reflect this attitude. De Moor, perhaps, the mildest of the three on this issue; he states: "Black Othello? No! Othello is as white as Hamlet. Blackness is his mask, a black skin and black psychological whiskers. The sooner the actors understand it, the sooner shall we get rid on the stage of a melodrama."⁷ For some critics, then, the blackness of the Moor is neither socially nor dramatically tenable; thus, a trend toward the gilding of the Moor is discernible in the stage history of the play.

On the other hand, critics who pay fealty to the textual and the textural ontology of *Othello* are likely to hold with Heilman, who maintains that "Othello's blackness . . . is always before us as a theatrical fact; yet the fact is not ignored (nor its possible meaningfulness left to chance), but is constantly given special dramatic life by the language."⁸ Textual references to Othello's obvious blackness of complexion are integral; they range thematically from the bawdy allusions to miscegenation to the ambivalent implications of societal chaos accompanying alterations in the calibrated scheme of order. Iago's use of "black ram," Brabantio's note of Othello's sooty bosom," the

⁵Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism* ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, I, (New York, 1960), p. 42, and Welker Given, *A Further Study of the Othello* (London, 1899), especially Chapter III, "Palliation for the Marriage and the Moor," 41-66. On the question of Othello's color, Ridley says, in his introduction to the Arden Shakespeare: "I feel . . . that Othello should be imagined in reading and presented on the stage, as coal-black, a negro [sic], though not at all necessarily of the particular negroid [sic] type which Coleridge had in mind when he spoke of a 'veritable' negro," p. iii.

Othello's racial identity is not central to this study; whether Moor or Negro, is he *black*? This is the dramatic question, it seems to me.

⁶Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare," in F. E. Halliday, *Shakespeare and His Critics* (New York, 1963, p. 246.)

In his *Othello's Countrymen* and "The Physical Representation of African Characters on the English Stage during the 16th and 17th Centuries," *Theatre Notebook*, XVII, Elder Jones offers evidence that the Elizabethans had opportunity to know African people and countries both through actual experience and through the published accounts of the English voyagers. The interweaving of fact and myth in Pliny, Roger Bacon, Mandeville's *Travels*, Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*, John Leo's *The History and Description of Africa* (translated in England in 1600), and similar accounts forged an image-cluster of the African from which Shakespeare drew and to which he contributed, Jones feels. See also William E. Miller, "Negroes in Elizabethan London," *NQ*, 8 (1961).

⁷Simon De Moor, *All Length Is Torture: Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Amsterdam, 1960), p. 30.

⁸Robert B. Heilman, "Light and Dark in Othello," *Essays in Criticism* (October 1951), 321.

Duke's assumption that the Moor may be more fair than black," and Othello's own "Haply I am black" present evidence of Othello's complexion and prefigure *Othello's* ambivalence.

Asserting that he believes Shakespeare "imagined Othello as a black man, and not as a light brown one," Bradley avers that the color question is integral to the character of Desdemona.⁹ I hold that it is, in addition, integral to the *Sein-Schein* theme. Although, perhaps, we cannot accept, without qualification, G. M. Matthews' contention that "The most important feature of *Othello* is the colour of the hero's skin,"¹⁰ we might acknowledge that Shakespeare's use of a black protagonist enriches the thematic texture of the tragedy; in fact, a microcosmic reflection of the *Sein-Schein* motif inheres in the very title of the play, with its almost oxymoronic implications. Something of the thematic suggestiveness of the immemorial drama of black as it appears in Othello's color emerges in the paradoxes of the seamaiads' "Song" from Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*:¹¹

Sound, sound aloud
The welcome of the orient flood,
 Into the west;
Fair Niger, son to great Oceanus,
 Now honour'd this,
 with all his beauteous race:
Who, though but black in face,
 Yet are they bright,
 And full of life and light.
 To prove that beauty best,
Which, not the colour, but the feature
 Assures unto the creature.

An Othello of any other color than black could not intensify the dichotomy between reality and appearance, one of the salient themes of *Othello*. The confusion of the inner and the outer, the dangers and limitations of sensory perception, the mysteries of human nature, and the mystique of cosmic purpose—these are but a few of the concepts which Othello's bright blackness intimates.

To move from the *Sein-Schein* of physiognomy in *Othello* to that of language is not to make a discrete movement in the analysis of this tragedy, which exhibits that ineluctable commingling of textural elements Coleridge terms organic unity. Verbal density in the play also has that duality of effect discernible in Othello's color; for, as used in the play, language conceals and reveals, just as skin hue does. Man's noblest achievement, language, can mask the charnel house beneath the place, the rose on the harlot's cheek, the iniquity of a devil. In *Othello*, linguistic masquerade is socially mandatory, even salutary; for "if men should" give [their] worst of thoughts the worst of words," then chaos comes. For in the supersubtle

⁹A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York, 1968), p. 168.

¹⁰G. M. Matthews, "Othello and the Dignity of Man," in Arnold Kettle, ed., *Shakespeare in a Changing World* (London, 1964), p. 123.

¹¹*The Works of Ben Jonson, With a Biographical Memoir* by William Gifford. (London, 1873), p. 545.

structure of society, language can be a civilizing force as well as a corrosive agent. If language can be used to fascinate and win the fair Venetian, it can also be made to plant a doubt, to command a proof, to attempt to wrench a confession. Linguistic *felix culpa* produces verbal ambivalence; possible alike are transcendence and degeneration via language.

The witchery of words is one of the darker aspects of the reality-appearance theme in *Othello*; treachery in the use of language renders innocence guilty and baseness pristine. Through language, the tragedy seems to imply, man can surmount his bestial nature; yet, with language, he can deceive people and pervert truth. Hamlet's ironic iteration of "Words" in response to Polonius' query about his reading matter reflects a part of the linguistic cosmos of *Othello*, in which "words" fraught with humorous, minatory, and horrifying implications comprise part of the thematic texture. Puns on words, such as "lie," "honesty," and "black" are integral to the *Sein-Schein* dichotomy; the levels of humor, danger, and horror are multiple. Brabantio encapsulates one aspect of the ambivalence in language in *Othello* when he says:

So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile,
We lose it not so long as we can smile.
He bears the sentence well that nothing bears
But the free comfort which from thence he hears.
But he bears both the sentence and the sorrow
That, to pay grief, must of poor patience borrow.
These sentences, to sugar or to gall,
Being strong on both sides, are equivocal.
But words are words. I never yet did hear
That the bruised heart was pierced through
the ear.¹²

However, throughout the tragedy, "the bruised heart" is "pierced through the ear";¹³ just as the squat toad injected the verbal venom into Eve's ear, so language purveys some of the thematic darkness in *Othello*. The power of the lie protean, the play suggests; what Kenneth Burke labels the "summarizing word," or the "Say the Word" device, is productive of much of the exquisite agony of the *Sein-Schein* motif in the tragedy, Othello's depreciation of the more physical aspects of his love for Desdemona in his defense before the Signiory represents a kind of semantic camouflage; later he reminds Desdemona, "That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you." Transcending the ocular proof which Othello exacts of Iago is the verbal mystery that shrouds the apparent reality. Revealed in the following

¹²I, iii, 210-219, G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York, 1968), p. 1065. Further textual references are from the *Pelican Shakespeare*: Gerald E. Bentley, ed., *Othello*. The Harrison text was used for this passage because the Pelican has *pieced*, evidently a misprint, for *pierced* in the last line cited.

¹³Harold C. Goddard sees the motif of "pouring pestilence in the ear" as one of the psychological links between *Hamlet* and *Othello*. See *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Vol. 2, (Chicago, 1951), p. 69.

*See "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," *Hudson Review* IV (1951), 193. Also M. N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 111-133.

passage are the mystery and the terror of the adamant vow, the "word" becoming an emblem of Satanic implacability of will and Ahab-like avoidance of multiple-choice:

Like to the Pontiac sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on . . .
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. (III, iii, 453-459)

The discrepancy between verbal reality and appearance also causes some anguish in Desdemona. Her primordial fear of the word as thing-in-itself emerges in the lines: "I cannot say 'whore.' It doth abhor me now I speak the word." But "speak the word" man must; just as physical blackness can lead to perceptual imprecision, so language use can cause conceptual confusion. Just as men can put "an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains" by physical means, so also they can fashion words to their own uses, as the Chorus of *Antigone* comments. Wit, that "depends on dilatory time," has to confront the complexity and the deceptive potential inherent in language. As Iago puts it: "Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, which at the first are scarce found to distaste, But with a little act upon the blood Burn like the mines of sulphur" (III, iii, 326-329). The "old fond paradoxes" not only "make fools laugh i' th' alehouse"; they also embody the dualism between reality and appearance. For "when devils will the blackest sins put on, They do suggest at first with heavenly shows" (II, iii, 334-335).

Hoffman gives us some insight into the nature of the linguistic duplicity apparent in *Othello* when he writes:

The relation of language to motive is a very subtle one; one might say that there is a war going on constantly between the two. While language gives motive a form of finality and order, every verbal expression is a compromise, and is incomplete. . . . Language both gives order to man's wishes and leaves a margin of interpretation in which that order might be circumvented or abused.¹⁴

Contrarities in color and language are contrapuntal to and synchronous with the physical and psychic milieu of *Othello*. Night envelops most of the action of the play, imbuing it now with minatory, now with insulating aura. For example, night obscures Desdemona's defiance of Venetian mores; Roderigo's crude arousal of Brabantio occurs "At this odd-even and dull watch o' th' night." In the brooding night, the Venetian council convenes, its puny tapers emitting a feeble flicker against the

¹⁴"The Rhetoric of Evasion," *The Sewanee Review* LVIII (Spring, 1949), 227.

Turkish threat. The isolating night shrouds Iago's intrigues. As Heilman asserts: "Iago picks the nighttime for all of his main operations; indeed, at least half of the action of the play takes place during the hours of darkness that give the most scope to Iago and are powerful symbols of the darkness of life represented: "Iago's planned evil and the groping ignorance and misunderstanding of the others."¹⁵

The insulating night surrounds the cunnubial revelry, but nocturnal clarity and charity are short-lived, and "the fruits [that] are to ensue" disintegrate into the lees of outrage and chaos. The sensate night is changed into a transcendent aura. "Night is not passive but active," Heilman states; "its reality is ever pressed upon us; it means not merely physical darkness but spiritual darkness."¹⁶ This symbolic darkness is the milieu of the execution scene. Prepared for by Desdemona's premonitory request for her wedding linen and by her poignant recollection and singing of the "song of Willow," this night scene is preceded by scenes which comprise a miasma of instructiveness, of accident, of mystery. The deeds which Desdemona would never do "by this heavenly light," Emilia might do "as well i' the dark." The violence committed in the "heavy night" is unrestrained; human concern and communion are withheld, for "These [groans] may be counterfeits." The anonymity encouraged by night allows bestial man to capitalize on accident and confusion. The mystery of night reverberates to the nadir of despair and the apogee of universal enigma resounding in Othello's judicial questing over the sleeping Desdemona:

Put out the light, and then put out the light.
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me: but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. (V, ii, 7-13)

The puny "flaming minister," subject to man's will for its kindling, can disclose the terror and mystery of primeval darkness, but it cannot illuminate that darkness. Light should sharpen visual perception; it can obfuscate human communion. It, too, can be illusory, and can become a disquietening reminder of the terrible perplexities of human existence and essence. In the gloaming created out of the merging of night and man's flickering assault upon it in *Othello*, man, nihilist and aspirant, judge and maker, Achilles and Ulysses, moves in impotency and ignorance, in power and majesty.

On the other hand, he may move in malice and iniquity. The character to whom "Hell and Night" are most felicitous is, of course, Iago. The diabolical machinations latent in the unscrupulous human intellect inform the acts which Iago perpetrates

¹⁵Heilman, *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in Othello* (Lexington, 1956), p. 69

¹⁶"Light and Dark," *op. cit.*, 328.

under the concealment of night. Transcending the Spivackian formula of the Elizabethan Vice, Iago seems to be devil or a demon, but his diabolism is, at base, human. He himself emphasizes his mortality when he says:

How poor are they that have not patience!
What wound did ever heal but be degrees?
Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by
witchcraft;
And wit depends on dilatory time. (II, iii, 352-355)

In his discussion of the nature of Iago's iniquity, West describes Iago as follows: "He is Shakespeare's furthestmost reach toward the delineation of a human being glowing with the cold heart of evil's fire, with an iniquity needing no overt juncture with the superhuman to achieve advantageously its effect of cosmic mystery. He is a known abomination seen in an icy extreme that makes it unfamiliar and so throws the mystery of iniquity into high relief."¹⁷

The dramatic dichotomy in Iago's diabolic humanity contributes to his being an archetype of the Psychomachia and or the Machiavellian, and places him in that galaxy of repulsive-fascinating characters in world letters, to which Ahab, Mephistopheles, and Satan belong. Perhaps what is most archetypal about Iago's blackness is its protean quality. Paradoxically, this evil character seems honest to all the *dramatis personae* except Roderigo. From the ironies and accidents of his speech and action emanates an effect which both conceals and reveals his villainy. As Joseph maintains, in the asides, the scenes with Roderigo, and the soliloquies juxtaposed with the scenes with other characters, Shakespeare "discloses consummate villainy at work and yet preserves the intellectual calibre of the other characters by showing how credible Iago appears to them and how inevitably they were deceived by this smoothest master of insinuation and intrigue."¹⁸

Contrapuntal to the darkness of Iago's duplicity are the richer associations of blackness in Othello's character. The complex entanglements of physical *Sein-Schein* have their moral counterparts in the dramatic pattern of *Othello's* action, which Hibbard describes as "that of a whirlpool, with its center in the poisoned mind of the hero which reshapes, distorts, and degrades objective reality. At the heart of Othello there is a kind of darkness."¹⁹ This darkness is a composite of Othello's innate depravity and of Iago's extrinsic urgings. The much-cited lines "Then must you speak of one that loved not wisely but too well" epitomizes the complexity of Othello's nature. In his extreme, Othello images the concept of man revealed in Goethe's

¹⁷Robert H. West, *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* (Lexington, 1968), p. 103. Cf. Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York, 1958).

¹⁸Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York, 1947), p. 283.

¹⁹See "Othello" and the Pattern of Shakespearean Tragedy," *Shakespeare Survey*, 21.

Faust when the Lord acknowledges that "Man is doomed to err as long as he is striving" and when he admits that "A good man, struggling in his darkness, Will always be aware of the true course."²⁰ As Seaman says: "Othello's nature is a universal paradox which Shakespeare's classical-Christian tradition recognizes as Everyman; he has a noble and rational spirit capable of winning Desdemona in the first place, and an animal nature which makes it possible for him to become jealous of her and to destroy what he has gained."²¹

Thus, the Moor's "constant, loving, noble nature" is but one facet of his nature. What some critics call "the darker side of the Moor" comes out in Warnken's contention that "Othello is, in fact, the source of Iago's diabolical inspiration," for he contains within himself a potential for evil in his predisposition to mistrust.²² Certainly, the ambivalence in the textural elaborations of Othello's character aids in preventing it from being mere stereotype. As Kirschbaum states: "It is not the hero's nobility in Shakespeare's tragedies, but the flaw, the sin or error that all flesh is heir to, that destroys him. It is the close interweaving of great man, mere man and base man that makes of Othello the peculiarly powerful and mysterious figure he is. In him Shakespeare shows the possible greatness, the possible baseness, not only closely allied in what is after all mere man but also so casually connected that one must perforce wonder and weep."²³

The wonder and the woe commingled in Othello conjure up the immemorial question of man's Sein-Schein—a supernal interrogation posed by Zeus in *Odyssey*, by David in song, by Hamlet in his mercurial *agon*, by Pascal in paradoxical *pensee*, by Zhivago in the frozen Urals. Now "all in all sufficient," now "blacker devil," Othello epitomizes the contrary elements warring in every mortal.

Some quantum of Othello's moral blackness resides in Desdemona's whiteness, for her purity and innocence foster a kind of darkness, both in herself and in others. This "maid so tender, fair, and happy" did manage, as her father phrases it, "To fall in love with what she feared to look on!" The "practices of cunning hell" may not explain her attraction to Othello, but she acknowledges her fascination by the exotic in his word and deed. Having seen "Othello's visage in his mind," she, nevertheless, fails to enter that mind through the communicative potential of language. Without focus and responsibility in worldly context, Desdemona's purity fades into pallidness, her innocence degenerates into vacuity.

²⁰Faust, Part I, tr. C. F. MacIntyre in George K. Anderson and Robert Warnock, ed. *The World in Literature*, Vol. 2, Rev. Ed., (Glenview, Ill.: 1967), p. 473.

²¹"Othello's Pearl," *Shakespeare Quarterly* XIX (Winter 1968), 84.

²²"Iago as a Projection of Othello," in Anne Paolucci, ed., *Shakespeare Encomium* (New York, 1964), p. 1. Cf. Kirschbaum, *Character and Characterization in Shakespeare*, and F. R. Leavis, "Othello," from *The Common Pursuit*, in F. E. Halliday, *Shakespeare and His Critics*, *op. cit.*, for further explorations of the view that Othello's nature is compounded of mixed elements.

²³See *Character and Characterization in Shakespeare* (Detroit, 1962), p. 158

That she is aware of the more complex linguistic (and, by extension, societal) posturings is evident in the quay scene when she tells Iago: "I am not merry; but I do beguile the thing I am by seeming otherwise." While it is impossible to view Desdemona in the profane manner in which Iago sometimes sees her, one must admit that "The wine she drinks is made of grapes, but she does not savor their earthy genesis." Her linguistic dubiety in Act III, when she fails to admit to Othello the loss of the handkerchief is mirror image of her linguistic dexterity in the banter with Iago in the quay scene. The "magic in the web" of the napkin suggests the linguistic sorcery which suffuses the texture of *Othello*. As Prager says: "The moral chaos which engulfs Othello is largely effected through lying."²⁴ In socially accepted forms, linguistic deception may be constructive, but when it creates a barrier between two people to whom communication is crucial, it becomes malignant. The "horrifying ambiguity about Desdemona's judgment of Othello"²⁵ emanates, in part, from verbal chicanery.

What Desdemona seems to be varies according to the imagings of the perceiver. To Cassio, she is minion of heaven, for the very tempests are stilled so that "the divine Desdemona can go safely by." When she arrives at Cyprus, the marialotry of his conception of her is evident; he salutes her thus: "Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven, Before, behind thee, and on every hand, Enwheel thee round!" Iago's view of woman, encompassing Emilia and Desdemona, is frankly realistic and worldly; but it is not conducive to social harmony, as these lines suggest:

You are pictures out of doors,
Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your
kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being
offended,
Players in your housewifery, and house-
wives in your beds.
(II, i, 109-112)

The tensions of Othello's ambivalent conception of Desdemona emerge in the following passage:

Othello. . . . A fine woman! a
fair woman! a sweet woman!
Iago. Nay, you must forget that.
Othello. Ay, let her rot, and perish, and
be damned tonight; for she shall not
live. No, my heart is turned to stone;
I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O,
the world hath not a sweeter creature!
She might lie by an emperor's side and
command him tasks.

²⁴"The Clown in Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly* XI (Winter 1960), 96.

²⁵See Honor Matthews, *Character and Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 135.

Othello's juxtaposition of a cataloguing of Desdemona's higher capacities with what he conceives to be her iniquity reveals his contradictory imagings of her.

These imagings are not merely the results of the Moor's changeable will; they, as well as Cassio's and Iago's conceptions, help to project Desdemona's character in an almost cubist perspective. Iago's "most lame and impotent conclusion" to his encomium of "a deserving woman" seems felicitously descriptive of one facet of Desdemona's prismatic character, the one which reveals the tangled skeins of reality-appearance in her relationship with the Moor. The "fair warrior" longs for increase of love and comforts, but when domestic war rages, she is not militant. What Iago pictures to Cassio as her goodness becomes, in effect, vicious; for, to her doom, she does "more that she is requested" in regard to Cassio's plight. The faith she asserts in Othello's lack of jealousy is not unalloyed. Speaking of the loss of the handkerchief, she tells Emilia:

Believe me, I had rather have lost
 my purse
Full of crusadoes; and but my noble Moor
Is true of mind, and made of no such
 baseness
As jealous creatures are, it were enough
To put him to ill thinking. (III, iv, 25-29)

A Desdemona who perceives the potential danger in such a situation and one who can advise Emilia, though lightly, "Do not learn of him . . . , though he be thy husband," may not be a supersubtle Venetian, but she is not an unsophisticated one. Desdemona's complex humanity is texturally evident; like Iago's, her ultramundane qualities are intrinsically enmeshed in the substantial coils of mortality.

The contradictions in human nature reflected in the Desdemona-Othello nexus intensify the *Sein-Schein* motif of the tragedy most critically in the infamous brothel scene. When Othello dispatches Emilia with "Your mystery, your mystery," and confronts his perplexed wife, Desdemona asks: "Upon my knees, what doth your speech import? I understand a fury in your words, [But not the words]." The difficulties inherent in verbal communication even between persons apparently united in the closest of human relationships manifest themselves in Desdemona's anguished query. For words have a *Schein*; their signification and their intonation are not always conjoined. The "fair warrior" coalesces into the "fair devil" and "Chaos is come again." A "child to chiding," Desdemona is unable to utilize her linguistic acumen to discover the reasons for Othello's abuse of her. When Othello calls her "a weed, Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet," Desdemona naively asks: "Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed." Her supernal innocence becomes temporally minatory, such as that in Melville's *Billy Budd*, for it ignores, allows, or encourages evil. Her predicament is reminiscent of that expressed in the choric comment of *Oedipus Rex*: "We cannot believe, we cannot deny; all's dark. We fear, but

we cannot see, what is before us."²⁶ The perilous nature of the impotency of celestial virtue in the real world emerges in Desdemona's plight; she is aware of some of the more debased human actions, such as those set forth in the Willow song, but she perceives them through the insulated vision of innocence and is unable to see the assault of evil upon her own life. Acknowledging her temporal blindness in her reply to Emilia's ineluctable question, Desdemona says: "Nobody—I myself." I do not see this as a divine lie, but as a human truth, for, in large measure, Desdemona's virtue is a secular failure, albeit a spiritually redemptive power. Too much whiteness, as Ishmael muses in *Moby-Dick*, may terrify man just as too much blackness does.

So Desdemona's crystalline purity informs her selfknowledge and the conceptions of her which other *dramatis personae* form, and thus aids in moving this stark tragedy to its inexorable end. Salt tears cannot really soften stones; *caritas* does not always transform the human heart. So in the terrible blackness of whiteness, in the horror at the heart of innocence, in "the heavy hour" when man faces the awesome spectacle of his soul is the vortex of textural *Sein-Schein* in Desdemona's goodness. Only a few can "die in music"; most must face the stark Sophoclean inquiry: "Who can control his fate?" The doleful associations of Othello's penultimate monologue embody the terrible ambivalences of innocence in a fallen world:

Cold, cold, my girl?
Even like thy chastity.
O cursed, cursed slave! Whip me, ye devils,
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona, Desdemona! dead!
O! O! O!

This monologue and the suicide monologue embody some of the more complex ironies of the *Sein-Schein* motif in the drama. When Othello realizes the horrors to which suspicion and suggestion have impelled him, he pleads:

. . . When you shall these unlucky deeds
relate,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must
you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose
subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their med'cinable gum.

²⁶Sophocles, King Oedipus, tr. by E. F. Watling, *The Theban Plays* (New York, 1947), in Carl Benson and Taylor Littleton, *The Idea of Tragedy* (Glenview, Ill., 1966), p. 83

On those who remain, the painful, Horatian task of telling the truth in this harsh world redounds; we will not know, nor do we need to know, how Lodovico will express "this heavy act," for we have plumbed the depths and explored the heights of linguistic felicity and realize that truth is amorphous and multifaceted, that it cannot be frozen into thought nor fossilized into language.

The rich ^{pearl} ~~pear~~ of Desdemona's love gleams from the death-bed to light Othello to recognition which, as Schackford maintains, "implies a re-awakening, a renaissance of spirit; it is the result of memory and takes one into the realm where reflection reigns over past experience."²⁷ The catalytic power of Desdemona's love, in mortality an *agent provocateur* of malignity, in death transforms that evil into self-awareness and -analysis; the brightness of the blackness shines forth.

Eliot's strictures against the "bovarysme"²⁸ of Othello's final speech are not the complete proportions of the monologue. Othello is doing more than just "cheering himself up."²⁹ He has reached his journey's end"; he has ranged the emotional gamut in his quest for the profundities. From the depths of tragic despair, he rises to tragic glory and does "die upon a kiss." Holloway asserts that the speech "is no mere self-indulgent reenactment of a supreme or any other moment in Othello's past," but is a metaphorically microcosmic clarification of his life.³⁰

Othello's kaleidoscopic view of himself in the final monologues displays itself in vibrant and far-ranging poetry; on the other hand, Iago maintains a stony silence at the end of the tragedy. This silence, a type of verbal nihilism, is ineluctable. Stempel views it as "the logical fulfillment of Iago's boast to Roderigo in the opening scene."³¹ Iago says:

For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at; I am not what I am.

The "Spartan dog" no longer needs words; though his feet be uncloven, his tongue has not been. His nemesis is in his genesis; to abjure the gift which he has abused satanically is dramatically felicitous. Iago has served what Heilman calls the "verbal drama" of *Othello*; that is, he has turned virtue into baseness, light into darkness—"a principle of corruption to which humanity is always susceptible."³²

The dichotomy between reality and appearance is mystifying and terrifying. One stalks truth, only to stare into the eyeless skull of error. Tranquility erupts into suspicion and introspec-

²⁷Martha Hale Shackford, *Shakespeare, Sophocles; Dramatic Themes and Modes* (New York, 1960), p. 58.

²⁸"Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York, 1932), p. 111.

²⁹*loc. cit.*

³⁰*The Story of the Night* (London, 1961), p. 56.

³¹See "The Silence of Iago," *PMLA* LXXIV (March 1969), 252.

³²*Magic in the Web*, p. 67.

tion disintegrates into inspection when one attempts to pierce the veil of reality. In spite of temporal accomplishment and worldly status, one sees only through a glass darkly and knows only in part. The *Sein-Schein* motif is one facet of the power and the terror of *Othello*; life, as Ishmael conceives it, is an "ungraspable phantom." Probability is at the core of what West terms "the inner mystery, the mystery of the human heart."³³

This is the terror from which Ethan Brand and Marlowe shrink. This is the spectral self which Othello himself, even at his journey's end, cannot confront, the archetypal inversion of that more resplendent self. Can man really be what he seems? How can we know the dancer from the dance, asks Yeats. How can we know the reality, *Othello* inquires. Gratiano "keep [s] the house, And seize [s] upon the fortunes of the Moor." But Desdemona is dead. Or is she? Are Christ and Judas equally confounded? One aspect of the *Weltanschauung* presented in *Othello* suggests some paradoxical answers to the timeless question of reality and appearance.

³³Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery. p. 4.