

Desdemona

Victim

Elizabethan Ideal

- ✦ Pure
- ✦ Beautiful
- ✦ Virtuous
- ✦ Loyal and loving wife



Brief Overview

- ✦ Iago is a 'hellish villain'
- ✦ Desdemona is a 'heavenly force'
- ✦ Innocent victim of Othello's misdirected passion
- ✦ In a cruel, selfish, destructive world, she represents selfless love

Pure and Beautiful

- ✦ Inexperienced in the ways of the world
- ✦ 'A maiden never bold' (Brabantio)
- ✦ Was initially frightened of Othello
- ✦ 'a maid / That paragons description and wild fame' (Cassio)
- ✦ 'an exquisite lady' (Cassio)

- ✦ 'the divine Desdemona' (Cassio)
- ✦ 'a most fresh and delicate creature' (Cassio)
- ✦ 'Now I do love her too' (Iago)

Courageous and Loyal

- ✦ Defends her love for Othello in front of the senators
- ✦ 'my heart's subdued / Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord'



Has an Idealised View of Othello

- ✦ She is young and romantic
- ✦ 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate'
- ✦ Cannot see that there is more to Othello than this
- ✦ Utter devotion and loyalty blinds her to the reality

Naive and Inexperienced

- ✦ Iago exploits her innocence: 'And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all.'
- ✦ Asks Emilia if women could really be unfaithful and cannot believe that there could be women who 'abuse their husbands / In such gross kind'
- ✦ Her goodness contributes to her downfall

- ✦ Sincerely wishes to help Cassio
- ✦ Shows immaturity in continuing to plead Cassio's case when Othello is obviously becoming vexed
- ✦ Intrudes on Othello's sphere
- ✦ 'But shall't be shortly? / ...Shall't be tonight at supper?... Tomorrow dinner, then?'
- ✦ Her description of Cassio as a 'suitor' strikes an ominous note as it has a double meaning

Errors of Judgement

- Immaturity
- Relies too heavily on Othello's love
- Stubborn
- Tactless
- We know how Iago will twist her words
- We know Othello is less perfect than she believes



Power Over Othello

- ✦ 'I will refuse you nothing.' (Othello)
- ✦ Othello says that if a time comes when he does not love Desdemona, 'Chaos is come again'. Note of prophecy and danger in his words.
- ✦ Emotional blackmail - reinstating Cassio is proof of Othello's love for her. Tactless and imperceptive.

Important Changes - Temptation Scene

- ✦ Desdemona moves from being active to passive
- ✦ She lies about the handkerchief but still refuses to see Othello's jealousy and excuses his behaviour
- ✦ Othello stops listening to Desdemona and begins to listen instead to Iago



Strong-willed to Passive

- ✦ Believes initially she can 'tame' Othello
- ✦ 'His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift'
- ✦ Teases Othello and is able to hold her own in verbal battles with Iago



Change

- Cannot cope with the change in Othello
- Lies about the handkerchief rather than admitting the truth - very different from earlier girl who stood up to her father and expressed her views in front of the sentators
- Says of Othello's jealousy: 'I never saw this before'
- Bewildered by his anger: 'My lord? / Are you wise? / What, is he angry?'
- Meekly takes the blame when he hits her: 'I will not stay to offend you,' but retains her composure and dignity: 'I have not deserved this'.

Crumbling Marriage

- ✦ Desdemona refuses to believe the relationship is failing
- ✦ Othello now believes it was based on lies from the start



Public Display of Anger

- ✦ Othello's striking Desdemona marks a turning point
- ✦ He humiliates her and speaks crudely of her in front of Ludovico and the other senators
- ✦ 'Sir, she can turn and turn and yet go on.'
- ✦ 'And she's obedient, as you say, / Very obedient'

Tragic Figure

- ✦ Turns to Iago for advice
- ✦ 'What shall I do to win my lord again? / Good friend... I know not how I lost him' (Act IV scene ii)



- ✦ Senses death is close
- ✦ Asks Emilia to put their wedding sheets on the bed, as if this will rekindle the love of the early days of her marriage
- ✦ Tells Emilia 'If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of these sheets'

Death

- ✦ Realises too late that innocence will not save her
- ✦ ‘why I should fear I know not / Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel fear.’
- ✦ Her cry of despair on hearing of Cassio’s death is misinterpreted by Othello: ‘weepst thou for him to my face?’
- ✦ Meekly accepts that she will be murdered: ‘Then heaven / Have mercy on me’.

Final Impression

- ✦ Refuses to blame Othello:
'Nobody, I myself'
- ✦ Life has no meaning
without his love
- ✦ Loved her husband
dearly, but in the end was
undone by her innocence
and goodness

