

ang070 S/Ü "Introduction to the Critical and Scholarly Discussion of Literature"  
Assignment 2: "Analyzing Drama", Sample Solution

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. Arden Shakespeare, third series. London: Bloomsbury, 1997. 4.1.167-210.

(1) Characterization:

Who characterizes whom and with what techniques? Identify different modes of characterization and analyze their effect.

Cassio:

- Iago invites Othello to draw conclusions about Cassio, pointing out his non-verbal behaviour which allegedly presents Cassio as vicious (figural implicit non-verbal: "how he laughed at his vice" (168)) and downright disrespectful, as he passes Desdemona's valuable handkerchief on to Bianca (figural implicit non-verbal: "he [Cassio] hath given it [the handkerchief] his whore [Bianca]" (173))

Desdemona:

- Iago characterizes Desdemona as deceiving, lacking in virtue/value (figural explicit commentaries by Iago, in a dialogue, in absentia, after her first appearance: "the foolish woman your wife" (173); "her iniquity" (194); and figural implicit non-verbal: "She [Desdemona] gave it [the handkerchief] him [Cassio]"(173))
- Othello is ambivalent/in two minds about Desdemona, condemning her on account of her alleged deception (figural implicit non-verbal "Cuckold me!" (197)), even as he adores her because of her many qualities (e.g. good-looking; sweet-natured; musical; creative; skilful), which ultimately shows that, in and by themselves, Iago's slanders do not suffice to persuade Othello of Desdemona's alleged deception (figural explicit commentary by Othello, in a dialogue, in absentia, after her first appearance: "a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman" (175-6); "the world hath not a sweeter creature" (180); "delicate with a needle, an admirable musician" (185); "so gentle" (190))
- Seeking to subtly direct Othello, Iago now characterizes Desdemona in response to Othello's ambivalent estimate of his wife, thereby confirming her allegedly deceitful character traits (figural explicit commentaries by Iago, in a dialogue, in absentia, after her first appearance: "'tis foul in her" (198)) and disempowering/discrediting her qualities and her virtue by using them against her (figural explicit commentaries by Iago, in a dialogue, in absentia, after her first appearance: "She is the worse for all this" (188); "too gentle" (191)).
- Desdemona is characterized as virtuous through correspondence/contrast: Desdemona vs. Bianca (authorial implicit: "whore" (174))

Othello:

- Othello characterizes himself as completely disillusioned/disaffected (figural explicit self-commentary, in a dialogue: "my heart is turned to stone" (179-80)) as well as offended/insulted/hurt (figural implicit verbal: "Cuckold me!" (197))
- Through verbal behaviour, the passage shows Othello as vacillating/hesitant/indecisive, i.e. torn between his love and adoration for Desdemona on the one hand, and his pain and rage on the other. Othello's verbal behaviour shows that he is conflicted, wavering between a tendency to quick violent action and lamentations (figural implicit verbal: "let her rot [...] Hang her; I do but say what she is: so delicate [...] so gentle" (178-90); "O! Iago, the pity of it, Iago!" (192))

- After having failed to manipulate Othello into despising and condemning Desdemona because of her character, Iago now appeals to Othello's sense of honour and/or his masculinity by characterising him explicitly, if hypothetically, as weak, unmanly, and a potential laughing stock (figural explicit commentary by Iago, in a dialogue, in praesentia: "if you [Othello] are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend, for if it touch not you it comes near nobody" (194)). Othello eventually changes his mind when Iago thus confronts him with the prospect of appearing emasculated and ridiculed/mocked/derided.
- Othello is characterized as superior in rank and status and, hence, as vulnerable and particularly prone to suffering indignity and humiliation through correspondence/contrast: Othello vs. Cassio (authorial implicit: "with mine officer" (199))

Iago:

- Iago's verbal behaviour shows him as manipulative, suggestive, provoking the other to formulate the condemnation (figural implicit verbal: "Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice?" (168); "Did you see the handkerchief?" (170)) and thus to follow his plan of action (figural implicit verbal: "Do it not with poison, strangle her in bed" (214))
- Iago is characterized as calculating and 'cool' through correspondence/contrast: Othello (passionate) vs. Iago (controlled) (authorial implicit)

(2) Dramatic Communication:

How can your findings about characterization be accounted for on the basis of dramatic communication? Against the background of this analysis, divide the passage into sections and give a structured summary of it.

Subdivisions and Summaries:

- 4.1.168-175:  
Iago tries to guide Othello's perception of the characters of Cassio and Desdemona in order to manipulate Othello, e.g. by asking questions ("Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice? (168); "Did you see the handkerchief?" (170)). He is successful in relation to Cassio, as Othello allows his perception to be guided by Iago.
- 4.1.175-193:  
Iago, however, does not succeed in guiding Othello's perception in relation to Desdemona, as Othello is carried off into praising Desdemona in spite of Iago's persistent, yet ultimately not very powerful attempts to discredit her ("Nay, you must forget that" (177); "Nay, that's not your way" (183)).
- 4.1.194-200:  
Changing the topic and introducing a new idea, Iago now confronts Othello with the threat of the public perception of Othello's weakness, i.e. the possibility that Othello might be losing his face as well as his standing/ "masculine" honour/reputation over his wife's infidelity/ "iniquity". This strategy turns out to be successful after all.
- 4.1.201-210:  
In the last part, Iago channels Othello's aggression against Desdemona, even to the extent that Iago – via imperatives – suggests the manner of killing her ("Do it not with poison, strangle her in bed" (214)). Othello agrees/follows plan.
- Overall, Iago has managed to divert Othello's aggression from Cassio onto Desdemona, promising to take over the aggression against Cassio himself.

#### Dialogical/ Monological Tendencies:

- The passage starts out with monological tendencies as both Othello and Iago are (seemingly) of the same opinion with regard to Cassio's character (168-175). However, the passage grows increasingly dialogical in tendency as Iago does not succeed in manipulating Othello into adopting a negative (and in fact implausible) view of Desdemona (175-193). It is only through introducing the threat that Othello's honour/masculinity/reputation might be at stake here that Iago leads Othello to abandon his ambivalent vacillation/indecision/hesitancy. From this point onwards (194-210), the remaining part of the dialogue is clearly monological.

#### (3) Rhetoric:

Describe the dominant stylistic level in the passage (state your evidence). Can you detect changes in the stylistic levels at any point? State the possible reasons for such changes.

- In the beginning, the stylistic level of the passage is *genus humile*, as both characters speak in prose and use short sentences/simple syntactic structures. In doing so, they indicate that they are on close/intimate terms and, moreover, that they make common cause with each other. During the course of the dialogue, however, Othello increasingly betrays tendencies for a higher stylistic level, i.e. *genus grande*: he uses figurative speech ("she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (186); unconventional sentence structure; repetitions ("A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman" (175-6) in order to express his pathos and to appeal – of all things – to Iago's sympathy to exonerate Desdemona ("O! Iago, the pity of it, Iago!" (192)).