

Shakespeare Lives:

From Othello to Q

ENC 1102

Dr. Ellingham

Yvette Suhor

## Outline

Thesis Statement: The analysis of Q will show how Shakespearean literature can be transformed to modern times, delivering a message that was present four centuries ago and still needed today.

- I. Introduction
- II. Analysis
  - A. Characters' Names
  - B. Setting
  - C. Movie and Play
- III. Othello's and Odin's last words
- IV. Modern day issues presented in Q

Conclusion

## Shakespeare Lives: From Othello to O

William Shakespeare has written numerous plays and sonnets. Some have been converted into motion pictures that have been modernized and applied to current situations. Some examples of these transitions are Romeo & Juliet starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Claire Danes, Ten things I hate about you (a modern day version of Taming of the Shrew) starring Julia Stiles and Heath Ledger, Hamlet starring Ethan Hawk, and O Based on Othello starring Mekhi Phifer, Josh Harnett, and Julia Stiles. "Shakespeare has been the inspiration for movies since Hollywood's earliest days" (Greg1). "When students are required to read plays by William Shakespeare in school, they complain about the old convoluted language, all those soliloquies the mustiness of the dramatic situations and their general irrelevance to life today" (Inquirer News Service1). That is why some new productions of Shakespeare's dramas and comedies have boiled down the plots and language, and updated the time frame to modern times. One good example of an updated Shakespearean play is O (based on Othello) "It's startling how the themes of the classic story translate so well to the lives of modern young people" (French 2). "O... retells and reconnects audiences with a good old-fashioned story of love, hate, passion, deceit, and tragedy" (Balao). The movie deals with situations that are going on in today's society, such as jealousy, mistrust, race, peer pressure, and many other situations. The analysis of O will show how Shakespearean literature can be transformed to modern times, delivering a message that was present almost four centuries ago and still needed today.

The modern day Othello has many of the same elements as the original play. The elements, though, are transformed into different situations and settings, but the basic theme seems to be the same. The characters' names are different, yet at the same time they seem to show special meanings for some of the characters. The other characters' names are just more updated names. "The main character's nickname 'O' directly invokes

Othello, of course and his name otherwise works on various levels, Odin the Norse God of war, the character's initials O.J. signaling his fateful involvement with a doomed white girl" (Barton1). One significant thing about O's initial's is that they form O.J., probably not coincidentally referring to O.J. Simpson who murdered his wife, a white woman, due to jealousy. Then there is Desi, Odin's white girlfriend. In the original play her name is Desdemona. What is significant about the name Desi is how it is so close to desirable and not just Desdemona. The other characters' names, like Hugo, makes a close resemblance to Iago, also Emily (Hugo's girlfriend/Iago's wife) to Emilia, Roger to Roderigo (Man that is in love with Desi), Michael Cassio (Odin's go to guy) to Cassio. One major difference in the original play and the new adaptation is that the dialogue is updated to modern times. What the filmmakers basically did was strip Othello down to its essentials. Many critics believe that even though it doesn't have the original dialogue, it still did Othello righteousness. "O is a very faithful retelling of Othello, though all the language has been updated" (Traister). With that, it can be shown that the movie compliments the play. "O parallels Othello at every turn with set-ups and relationships modeled after the Bard's timeless tragedy. But in a context modern audiences can identify with" (Smithhouse1).

The story takes place in an Elite Prep school in the South rather than a city in Venice. "Shakespeare's Othello fits so snugly into the social context of a modern American High School" (Barton). Instead of war on the battlefield, the director takes war in O onto the basketball court. "The intense, aggressive, visibly in-your-face game is a good fit for the story's psychological dynamics" (Barton2). "The Long –delayed O turns out to be an exceptionally intelligent and powerful contemporary adaptation of Othello that effectively moves Shakespearean plotting from the Royal Court to the Basketball Court"(Lumenic1). Many of the basketball scenes in O can be viewed as an intense game of war in a high school situation.

In the updated version, Odin James is the star of the basketball team. He is admired by his peers, has the love of the beautiful Desi, and also the respect and love of

his Coach Duke Goulding, who says, "I Love him like my own son" (O-Movie). All these things are what cause Hugo to be jealous, especially since his father is the coach of the Basketball team. Hugo is not only jealous of Odin but also of Michael (Cassio). In the movie, Odin receives an MVP award; while receiving this award, he decides to share it with Michael (who is a sophomore, Odin a senior.) In the original play, the same concept is presented when Othello chooses Cassio to serve as his lieutenant. Odin's choosing Michael to share the MVP award makes Hugo jealous of Michael, which will result in a tragic end for Michael as well as Odin. Hugo decides to ruin Odin by destroying his connection with Desi.

In the original play, Othello and Desdemona are married, but in O since it takes place in high school the two are just dating. It can be seen in the movie that Desi seems to be more important to Odin than anything else, especially basketball. There are many displays of this; in the beginning of the movie, Odin and Desi are dancing at a party, and the connection between them is very clear. In another scene, the two are outside and Odin makes a mock proposal by placing a rubber band on Desi's ring finger telling her that maybe they can pretend for a while (act as if they are married). Like in the original play, Hugo plots O's downfall by falsely suggesting that Desi is cheating on him with one of O's good friends, Michael. Hugo uses two other students, Roger (his roommate) and Emily (his so-called girlfriend), to help in the scheme to slowly drive O mad with jealousy. Like in the original play, Rodrigo is in love with Desdemona as is Roger with Desi. Hugo convinces Roger to help him to break up Desi and Odin. Roger does a few things. One is that he calls Desi's father and says that Odin tried to force himself on her. In another scene, he starts a fight with Michael and from that point Odin gets mad with Michael. That causes tension between Odin and Michael. Hugo will manipulate Michael to spend time and talk with Desi to try to get her to talk to Odin about Michael. That is where Hugo will step in and poison Odin's mind that Desi is cheating with Michael. In the original play, Emilia was a handmaiden to Desdemona, but in the movie O she is Desi's best friend. Emily is used to steal a scarf, which was given to Desi from Odin. The scarf was also an important element

in the original play as in the updated version. In Q, the scarf is very important to Odin because it was his grandmother's scarf, 100 years old. In the scene when Odin gives Desi the scarf, one can see how much he cares about her. In the scene, he says, "It's my great grandmother's scarf and it's always been in my family. It's supposed to stay that way but I feel like we're already family" (Movie). This scene also shows how important the scarf is to Odin, and Emily's stealing the scarf will be another important element to Odin's downfall. Another important thing to look at is that Emily seems to be jealous of Desi and that can be seen in many scenes of the film. That is one of the reasons she decides to steal the scarf from Desi. The disappearance of the scarf is noticed when Hugo mentions the scarf to Odin. Hugo uses this as another characteristic to Odin's downfall by saying that Desi gave the scarf to Michael. Most of the scenes with the scarf are parallel to the original play. The envy, rage, jealousy and lies lead to the tragic end, which leaves five students dead.

In the last scenes of both Q and Othello, the main character's last words seem to display a deep impact on both works; they seem to display almost the same elements even though they are in total complete dialogue. Othello's final words:

Soft you! A word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know't.

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

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 Judian, 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. Set you down this.  
And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog  
And smoth him-thus. (Stabs himself) (Meyer1116)

Odin's final words:

Now somebody here knows the truth.  
Somebody needs to tell the goddamn truth.  
My life is over. That's it.  
But while you're all out here living yours  
Sitting around talking about the nigger who lost it, back in high school.  
You make sure you tell them the truth.  
You tell them I loved that girl. I did.  
But I got played.  
He twisted my head up.  
He fucked it up.  
I ain't no different than none of ya'll.  
My mom's ain't no crack head.  
I wasn't no gangbanger.  
It's wasn't some hood rat drug dealer that tripped me up.  
It was this white, prep school motherfucker standing right there.  
You tell them where I'm from didn't make me do this. (Shoots himself) (Q)

"O did Othello more than justice. The movie's direction and screen writing complement both the play and Shakespeare. They demonstrate that a story line as magnificent as the one Othello possesses is classic and timeless, and can and will be enjoyed by generations to come" (Balao1).

Even though O was based on a piece of literature written almost four centuries ago, it is amazing how the same situations are still going on in today's society. "The Pathological envy, racism, fear and jealousy that drive Shakespeare's Othello make a scary sense in the world of modern teenagers" (Axmaker1). O is a good display of many messages that today's teens need to witness. "The resulting tragedy exposes the social tensions that shape the kids' experiences (these tensions are also, of course, economic, racial, political and above all mediated in televisions, movies, and magazines)" (Fuchs1). The social tensions can be seen throughout the movie such as sexual pressures in a scene where Odin rapes Desi. There is also a racial issue in one scene where the word "nigger" is mentioned between Desi and Odin. In another scene, Hugo tells Odin that Desi and Michael were referring to him as a nigger. "From the eyes of a teenager, this movie was quite good. After the Columbine and Thurston school shootings this movie seems more believable" (Viewer from Oregon1).

The movie O was supposed to come out in 1999, but the events of the Columbine school shooting further delayed the release date. "Maybe these actions say something about the movie's impact and how influential it may become. In that case, why wait to release O if the message is something today's teens need to witness, both inform them on Shakespeare and to demonstrate the dangerous results of envy and jealousy"(French2). The story, though, has nothing to do with Columbine, but there is a tough thing that leads it to be connected to Columbine like the bloody end of the movie that leaves five dead. In the movie, there is also some drug use, which is an important element that sends out a message to teens. Many teens go through all of the same issues in the movie. Drug use is

in almost every high school. In the movie, it shows that drug use is another downfall for both characters Odin and Hugo. "O has things to say about racism, athletics, and popularity that should give teenagers (and their parents) plenty to think about on the way home" (Lumenic).

It is obvious by now that Shakespeare's work will never die out, as his plays continue to be redone time and time again. Even though the many transitions of his plays have been totally changed through dialogue, setting, and other aspects, the basic concept can still be seen. O sets an example for the young audience not only of social issues, but it also shows how magnificent Shakespearean literature can be. Also, it shows how the same issues are still present today as they were centuries ago.

## Works Cited

- Axmaker, Sean. From Seattle Post-Intelligencer "Modern teen world is a good fit for Othello." August 31, 2001 <[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/movies/37138\\_o31q.shtml](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/movies/37138_o31q.shtml). 4-11-03
- Balao, Jennifer. From Sundial Staff "O captures modern Othello" September 6, 2001 <<http://sundial.csun.edu/sun/01f/090601en2.htm> 4-12-03
- Barton, Rick. From Best of New Orleans. "Shakespeare High Film:O" September 18, 2001 <[http://www.bestofneworleans.com/dispatch/2001-09-18/film\\_renew.html](http://www.bestofneworleans.com/dispatch/2001-09-18/film_renew.html) 4-11-03
- French, Blake. From Entertainment Nutz "O" September 6, 2001 <[http://www.entertainmentnutz.com/movies/reviews/O/o\\_as\\_in\\_othello/o.htm](http://www.entertainmentnutz.com/movies/reviews/O/o_as_in_othello/o.htm) 4-9-03
- Fuchs, Cindy. From City Paper.net "O sends Othello to high school, where it all fits too well." August 30-September 6, 2001 <<http://www.citypaper.net/articles0830001.mov.o.shtml> 4-12-03
- Greg, From Greg's Preview thoughts "On the Movie O" March 9, 1999 <<http://boston.k12.ma.us/Brighton/jun/rphal/shakespeare's%20othello.html> 4-12-03
- Inquirer News Service "Othello updated for young viewers" October 15, 2002 <[http://www.inq7.net/ent/2002/oct/16/text/ent\\_20-1-p.htm](http://www.inq7.net/ent/2002/oct/16/text/ent_20-1-p.htm)
- Lumenick, Lou. From NY Post. "DYN-'O'-MITE" August 31, 2001 <<http://www.nypost.com/movies/31910.html> April 11, 2003
- Meyer, Michael. The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature. Sixth Edition, Boston, 2003.
- O. Dir. Tim Blake Nelson DVD. Lion's Gate Film, 2002
- Smithouse, Bob. From Family.org "O" <<http://www.family.org/pplace/P:/films/a0017474.html> 4-11-03
- Traister, Rebecca. From New York Observer. "The story of O, Weinstein

Style: High School Othello Is Held Up." November 13, 2000

< [http://www.nyobserver.com /pages/story.asp?ID=3417](http://www.nyobserver.com/pages/story.asp?ID=3417)

April 11, 2003

Viewer from Oregon "O the modern remake of Shakespeare's Othello"

April 22, 2002. <[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B00003cxdn/104-3534665-5388725?v=glance&s=dvd)

[B00003cxdn/104-3534665-5388725?v=glance&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B00003cxdn/104-3534665-5388725?v=glance&s=dvd)