

'Desdemona is an innocent tragic victim who evokes pity.'

To what extent do you agree with this view?

Remember to include in your answer relevant comment on Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

Shakespeare's *Othello* has only three women, of three distinct social ranks, that are of predominant focus in the plot. All three are wrongfully accused of sexual misconduct, all three although from varying social ranks and experience are vulnerable to accusations of promiscuity. Arguably such accusations and defamations of character make each of these women a victim who evokes pity, however Desdemona is the only woman who is dealt the capital punishment for promiscuity, a whore's death at the hands of her husband, her innocence and purity of heart compounds the tragic nature of her demise.

The structural significance of Desdemona's murder, at the end of the play and upon the bed of the consummation of their marriage, visible to all on stage evokes pathos as the injustice of the 'honour killing' is raw and apparent. The tragic nature of the death is highlighted as she offers no resistance to Othello's abuse and anger and her final words in reply to Emilia questioning who strangled her, 'nobody, I myself. Farewell, commend me to my kind lord' reveal the depth and passion of her sacrificial love, as she refuses to indict him, and blames herself for her death. Her acceptance of her fate which is stoical and her personal integrity, seen earlier in her disbelief that women could be unfaithful to their husbands, 'Tell me, Emilia, that there be a woman do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?' places her above all of the other characters, evoking further pity for her unjust death. Othello's thirst for dominion and control is reflected in the way he killed her, through strangling her graphically and ferociously, he rinses her of breath and words, she had no say, no defence and this evokes further compassion from the audience as a woman once articulate and independent is smote so quickly and passionately, even by the man who supposedly loves her.

Desdemona is a victim of Iago's villainy, a pawn in his plans to incite the demise of Othello and Cassio. Iago uses Othello's profound fear of being capricornified (cuckolded, made to wear the metaphorical horns of the foolish husband) to plant paranoia, jealousy and a thirst for justice. Desdemona is unknowingly enmeshed in his plan, even from her earliest interactions with Cassio, 'he takes her by the palm, .With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her do...very good well kissed. Yet again your finger to you lips? Would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!' Iago's crude mockery of Cassio, combined with his cunning manipulation of platonic affection in this initial interaction between Cassio and Desdemona, proves a significant basis for suspicion. Iago uses Desdemona's kind and loyal nature to Cassio, and her desire to not hurt Othello to feed his suspicion throughout the play. The loss of the handkerchief is the spark that ignites the fire of revenge, jealousy and mania in Othello, and seals the fate of Desdemona, from this point onwards her demise seems inevitable. The fact that Iago's primary weapon against Othello and instrument in inciting Desdemona's downfall is her kind and loyal nature, stresses the tragic and pitiable nature of her death.

Desdemona is a victim of Venetian societies' misogynistic and patriarchal values and prejudices against women. Seen in her lack of agency in Cyprus, and her obedience to Othello as her husband despite his cruel commands, such as for her 'to turn' in front of Gratiano, and the instruction for her to go to bed 'Get you to bed th' instant'. The use of epithets to describe her are at first complimentary and praising, 'gentle Desdemona', 'fair lady', and 'fair warrior', but as suspicions of infidelity are planted and intensified through Iago's cunning genius, the epithets shift to condemning, and accusative exclamations such as 'cunning whore of Venice', 'impudent strumpet', and 'lewd minx'. This abrupt shift in perceptions towards her from her male counterparts, from complimentary speech so abundant in the first acts to public defamations and absence of praise in the final acts, reveals the embedded nature of misogynistic prejudices and paranoia. Once accused publicly Desdemona's reputation is permanently tainted. A pitiable demise for a woman of high-status and respect at the start of the play.

The belief of contemporary Venetian men was that women were 'an excellent ornament of men...granted to man not only to procreate children... but also in possession, and as it were in dominion, over which many may exercise his jurisdiction and authority'. Desdemona is a victim of such misogynistic ideals as throughout the play Othello is preoccupied with the view that Desdemona is his property affirmed through their marriage, this

sense of right and property incited his rage at the thought of her infidelity. Like other Venetian nobles, Othello consistently views his sexual relations with Desdemona as a right and an asset, that he can indulge in whenever he would like, and reject when inconvenient. It's as if his marriage with Desdemona is only actively experienced through sexual intimacy. His companionship with Desdemona lacks passion and attention, she is to him merely a pretty ornament in which he can parade, admire and control. This is seen in his effort to persuade the senate that his commission will take priority over his marriage as he claims if he rejects his work for love 'let housewives make a skillet of my helm' 1: 3. Equally in response to the order to leave Cyprus immediately before the consummation of the marriage (that would seal the marriage covenant) he says 'With all my heart', revealing he places his work and reputation before Desdemona. This evokes sympathy as it is evident Desdemona's passion and love, seen in her sacrifice of reputation by marrying a black man in a racist society and highlighted at the end of the play in her refusal to indict Othello, is not reciprocated. Othello does not share Desdemona's devotion and trust, which leaves him vulnerable to the poison of lies and deceit Iago 'pours into his ear', and ultimately incites Desdemona's downfall.

Sympathy is evoked in the knowledge of Desdemona's loss of reputation and potential. In Act 4 scene 2 Othello publicly defames Desdemona 'I took you for that cunning whore of Venice' and Emilia repeats and circulates the defamation, thus reinforcing the accusation. The percussions are implicit as we see a shift in Desdemona's nature, from the casual impugning honesty amongst male counterparts to a privacy and absence from socialisation, a passiveness. Once a private insult of whoredom becomes a public accusation it becomes a technical defamation of character, a substantial threat to her reputation. Her two remaining scenes, focus on Othello's perceptions of her supposed palpable sexuality, which culminates in her suffocation, a whore's death for an 'innocent angel'. It destroys her potential, as at the start of the play she demonstrates autonomy, independence and tenacity, as she dictated her future by marrying Othello whom she loved despite undermining societal expectations as an upper-class woman. If Othello had not been poisoned with paranoia, jealousy and a thirst for 'moral' justice, in the form of acting against 'adultery', then Desdemona may have lived to be a revolutionary figure for Venetian wives, demonstrating that women can have voices in relationships, and act on their desires. Perhaps Desdemona was too revolutionary for her time, or the misogynistic and patriarchal structures of the time were too potent too ingrained, which suggests there is a sense of inevitability to her fate.

The setting of Venice, and the fact Desdemona is a woman from Venice is significant to understanding the assumptions of the contemporary audience, and the paranoia and suspicions planted in Othello's mind by Iago, that makes Desdemona a victim of false accusations of promiscuity. Venice was renowned as a city full of whores and was often personified as one. Thomas Coryay remarked in 1611, just a couple years after Othello was written in 1602, that there were at 'least twenty thousand (courtesans in Venice) whereof many are esteemed so loose, they are said to open their quivers to every arrow'. This crude view is reflective of the general view of society that Venetian women regardless of their position could convert to 'licentious wantons' when tempted. Robert Burton's criticism of 1616 shares the view that Venetian 'wives are slippery, often unfaithful to their husbands but to old men the most treacherous'. When this view is impressed onto Desdemona's narrative, we see how contemporary audience can condemn Desdemona recognising her betrayal of duty against her father Brabantio, as she marries Othello in secret, and taints the family reputation by marrying a man of African descent. Moreover, with the knowledge that Othello is fifty-two compared to Desdemona's approximate age of sixteen, Desdemona certainly fits the stereotype for a young 'slippery' wife, even described by Iago as 'sport for Jove', a sexually active and lively woman. Therefore, a contemporary audience with the knowledge of the Venetian society would assume that the female characters, including Desdemona may have promiscuous tendencies, perhaps diluting their sympathy for her downfall.

Desdemona's defiance, independence and autonomy in the earlier parts of the play subvert the idea she is a tragic victim. Foremost seen in her defiance of her father in marrying Othello, for which she is admired and applauded by her peers and not pitied. Desdemona explains her recalcitrant case to the senate in Act 1 scene 3, demonstrating an intact respect for her father, but an ultimate loyalty towards her husband ' I do perceive here a divided duty to you I am bound for life and education. You are lord of all my duty, I am hitherto your daughter, But here's my husband, and so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord'. Desdemona's articulate and

thoughtful explanation shows an assured and independent mind this is demonstrated again in her reflective controlled speech in front of the senate. 'To his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate... if I be left behind, a moth of peace, and he go to the war, the rites for which I love him are bereft me, and I a heavy interim shall support by his dear absence, let me go with him', the religious lexis of 'consecrate' shows the extent of devotion, reflected in the fact that she did consecrate her fortune to him, as she went against her father and societal expectations by marrying a black man. Her desire to follow him to Cyprus, a place of war and chaos reveals she has a brave and courageous spirit, and the fact she desires not to be 'a moth of peace', subverts the feminine conventions of being a gentle, passive creature. Desdemona is seen to further undermine societal conventions as she is seen to have autonomy. Othello allows her to not only attend but voice her opinions in male dominated environments, such as the senate and the military expedition to Cyprus. Traditionally it was rare for a Venetian wife, to even be seen public (due to the paranoia that women are eternally dissatisfied and instinctively seek promiscuity) and would only be seen at marriages, the christening of a Jew, or in the late evening in a gondola. Othello initially permits Desdemona abnormal freedoms for a woman of her time and status, as he recognises her angelic and commanding nature, which imbues both loyalty and tenacity.

The interpretation that Desdemona is purely a victim can also be challenged as she displays a confidence, playfulness and compassion that spurs her on to challenge societal expectations as she speaks liberally with her male peers and Othello. This is seen in her public and playful arguing with Iago about the role and nature of women when they reach Cyprus. Desdemona speaks freely and passionately as she condemns the misogyny of Iago's comments, 'O most lame and impotent conclusion! Do not learn of him, Emilia though he be thy husband. How say you Cassio, is he not a most profane and liberal councillor'. Desdemona's liberal and confident speech is somewhat revolutionary as she goes so far as to encourage Emilia to not listen to her husband who she deems a 'profane councillor', in a society that expects wives to submit to their husbands both physically and ideologically. Desdemona's kindness and independence is also seen in her relentless pursuit to make Othello reinstate Cassio, even when he tells her to be quiet, seen in their conversation about the handkerchief amidst Othello's paranoia and suspicion about her fidelity, 'Pray you let Cassio be received again' 'come, come you'll never meet more a sufficient man' 'I pray, talk me of Cassio'. In answer to every question Othello asks about the handkerchief Desdemona replies presenting Cassio's case, which although ironically seals her fate as a tragic victim, it does demonstrate her tenacity and confidence as she disregards her husband's commands to push for her desires and charity.

Arguably, Desdemona can be seen as not completely innocent, seen in her deception of her father in eloping with Othello, which certainly for a contemporary audience would be a shocking action that would present Desdemona as a devious and calculating woman. Moreover, her blatant lying to Othello about the handkerchief, presents her again as a wife that cannot be trusted, as she seeks to placate his unrest rather than tell the truth, which is expected of a good and loyal wife. Ironically if only she had told the truth, her life could have been spared, which perhaps suggests that her faulty judgement and lie made her tragic death inevitable. Therefore, although she was an innocent victim, she was somewhat complicit to her fate, as she chose silence in the moments when she needed to speak out. Equally Desdemona's flirtatious interactions with Cassio and Iago, her shift in nature when she is alone with men, further depicts her as a woman that cannot be trusted. Her remark to Iago, 'What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?', shows that she seeks affirmation from men in the absence of Othello, which to a contemporary audience, and perhaps also to a modern-day audience may provoke feelings of suspicion. Such suspicion about Desdemona's intentions and nature is intensified by Iago's soliloquy that follows, that plants the idea of an affair between Desdemona and Cassio, as they speak together in hushed tones holding each other hands.