Modern Lessons in Relationship Dynamics from Shakespeare's Othello

Mallory Brugger

Intensive reading, discussion, and (in some sections) viewing of plays from the comedy, tragedy, romance, and history genres.

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Modern Lessons in Relationship Dynamics from Shakespeare’s *Othello*

During the formative years of middle and high school, it is crucial for students to learn the social lessons available through the study, discussion, and application of literature. Shakespeare’s *Othello* may be particularly applicable and meaningful to the young adult experience, as it treats themes concerning social transitioning, trust establishment, jealousy avoidance, reputation preservation, and integrity maintenance, among other concerns. Lessons painfully learned by several of the play’s characters—both male and female—may serve as a valuable guide in helping students navigate the social storms common to their experience.

Concerning this guidance, one Shakespeare educator, Dianne Madsen, counseled,

> Students need to come away from reading any Shakespeare play with a deeper appreciation of his insight into human nature. Shakespeare was the greatest of all psychologists! He was a genius in knowing what people will do in virtually all situations. He understood why people act the way they do: what they fear, what they want, and these insights can be useful in the lives of your students. Find ways to help students relate these play to their own lives, their own insecurities. “This above [all]: to thine own self be true.”
Madsen also views *Othello* as the story of a man of tremendous potential who allowed others to poison his perceptions. One of Madsen’s goals in teaching Shakespeare, she says, was “to help [students] understand themselves and others better.” As educational reformer Mortimer Adler once observed, “In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you” (Good Reads).

Social Transitioning

Adolescence is a time in which students find themselves, and determine their place among various social groups, though this is a more modern occurrence. Jack Martin, an educational psychologist from Simon Fraser University, notes that it wasn’t until the 18th century that children started to gain an identity of their own as the focus shifted away from their being just “small adults”:

Whereas previously, children had been treated as small adults and workers, an extended period of childhood now became situated in schools for much of the day. Formal education became responsible for the development of children in ways that respected the child’s status as a child, yet paved the way for a smooth transition to adulthood, through a newly popularized stage of adolescence. (308-9)

Because life expectancy was much shorter during Shakespeare’s day, children had less of what we would consider a traditional childhood. Children also were required to work to support their family, and so had less time to devote to studies. In modernity, however, life expectancy has lengthened; consequently, so has the time allotted to adolescents for the
transition to adulthood. The need for adolescents to work to support their families has also significantly decreased, allowing school to become more of a priority.

Richard A. Young writes, “Transition to adulthood represents a period when people reformulate goals, take steps in different directions and use new strategies, develop, learn and use new behaviors, and use resources differently. . . . A range of approaches and interventions can be effective in assisting young people during the years of late adolescence and early adulthood” (325). One of those approaches can be through Shakespeare. Since Shakespeare is already part of the curriculum for high school English classes, it seems like a practical if not obvious choice for educators to use life lessons from his works in their classes.

Similar to the experience of high school students, many of Shakespeare’s characters have struggles transitioning into, and adapting to, their societies and surroundings—even as adults. If Shakespeare views social establishment as challenging to adults, certainly adolescents cannot reasonably be expected to fare better. Othello, for one, despite his age, experience, and social standing, struggles to interpret—and therefore reconcile—the varied messages he receives from Iago and Desdemona, and even himself. Perhaps it may be said that he has position, but not place; he can capably traverse and navigate physical space, but not emotional space. He is simultaneously established, yet unsettled.

In *Othello*, it may be argued that Shakespeare’s concern was more communal, less individual. Jack Martin writes:

If psychologists wish to speak to what is most noble and distinguished in the human condition, they must give up their preoccupation with the
mental life of individuals in relative isolation from others. They must turn to the activity of human beings within the sociocultural context and process, for it is only within traditions and forms of communal life that the resources necessary to sustain robust conceptions of human functioning and flourishing exist. (308)

Although addressed to psychologists, this concept applies equally well to individuals themselves. It is the age-old struggle of “letting go” of the self while forming healthy attachments to others—the “no-man-is-an-island” notion.

Iago forms attachments to others, but they are not healthy. He displays an inability to let go as he references his plan for revenge against Cassio and Othello numerous times. He says, “He takes her by the palm: ay, well said, whisper: with as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” (2.1), He tells Roderigo, “I hate the Moor; my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our revenge again him” (1.3). He is unable to maintain normal relationships and refuses to let go.

Hopefully high school students are not dealing with emotions of the magnitude that Iago is describing, but on occasion students feel the need to seek revenge for some hurt others have inflicted on them. Educators can use Iago as an example of frustration taken to an unnecessary level, and illustrate other and better ways to resolve the situation.

**Trust Establishment**

One of the prevalent themes in *Othello* is that of trust—earning it, losing it, rebuilding it. Young people are particularly sensitive to the principle of trust, because they are interacting with each other, as well as adults, daily in situations requiring
various degrees of trust. For example, students need to trust their classmates and teachers enough to share their ideas in the classroom. It takes careful preparation on the teacher’s part to build that trust, as well as careful consideration of comments by the students themselves. Trust takes a great deal of time to build, but can be (and sometimes is) destroyed very quickly. Building trust also requires a certain level of vulnerability. Learning to trust someone often includes several moments of vulnerability that would warrant that trust.

Many of Shakespeare’s characters in Othello comment on trust. For instance, Brabantio says, “Adieu, brave Moor; use Desdemona well. / Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3). Although unintentionally, this comment sets the stage for later in the play, when Desdemona asks Othello, “Trust me, I could do much—” (3.3). This is a hint of what is to come, as Othello later accuses her of not being worthy of his trust. This shows the often progressive nature of trust. Othello is counseled not to trust Desdemona, she begs his trust, and he later feels the trust to be violated.

Othello tells the Duke of Venice, “A man he is of honest and trust: / To his conveyance I assign my wife, / With what else needful your good grace shall think / To be sent after me” (1.3). Othello is speaking of Iago, and this language is very typical of his descriptions; Othello often refers to Iago as honest. Ironically, Iago tells Montano, “I fear the trust Othello puts him in. / On some odd time of his infirmity, / Will shake this island” (2.3). Iago is speaking about Cassio, but Othello should fear the trust he puts in Iago, not Cassio.
Trust is a hard concept to learn; even harder to earn because it requires selflessness and vulnerability. Perhaps Othello is a story about a man whose trust in the wrong people was his downfall. It is possible that Shakespeare is teaching by anti-example. He is showing the negative consequences of not trusting the right people. Conversely, however, if lessons of trust are learned well, we become beneficiaries of stronger, more meaningful, and more satisfying relationships. Othello could have been the beneficiary of a happy, fulfilled marriage and career if he had chosen to listen to those who were close to him.

**Jealousy Avoidance**

Teenagers are also aware of competitive feelings that exist in friendships or other interpersonal relationships, and would likely appreciate the burdensome feelings of jealousy that Iago voices in the opening lines of the play: “Nonsuits my mediator; for ‘Certes,’ says he, / ‘I have already chosen my officer.’ / And what was he? / . . . One Michael Cassio … That never a squadron in the field, / Nor the division of a battle knows” (1.1). Iago is voicing common concerns: he feels more qualified for the military position than Cassio is, yet there is nothing that he can do about it, as he is now under Cassio’s command. Tragically, Iago lets the jealousy fester instead of letting it go, and lets his jealous fuel the fire that ultimately destroys the lives of many people, including his own. Critics rarely comment on the destruction that Iago creates in himself, but it is there.

Othello also voices feelings of jealousy. He is unable to deal with the comments that Iago voices regarding the relationship that Cassio is accused of having with Desdemona. He wants to seem in control of the situation, and feels like he isn’t in control if Cassio is with Desdemona. Iago counsels him “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy” (3.3).
Later on, Emilia asks Desdemona, “Is he not jealous?” and Desdemona replies, “Who, he? I think the sun where he was born drew all such humours from him.” However, in this same scene, she seems to change her mind as she says, “Heaven keep that monster from Othello’s mind!” She is referring to the monster of jealousy, something both Iago and Emilia have mentioned. (3.4). His jealousy is beginning to take over at this point, and other characters are beginning to notice.

Situations like these, though not of the same magnitude, arise commonly in school environments: one friend makes the basketball team and another doesn’t, one person gets elected to a student council position and another doesn’t, friends favor other newfound friends to the exclusion or rejection of former ones. Such situations can be used to highlight the relevance and universality of “Shakesperience” (www.bard.com) to situations in students’ lives.

**Reputation Preservation**

Another important theme is the play is the building and maintaining of one’s reputation, as exemplified by the following passage:

> What dost thou mean? / Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of their souls: / Who steals my purse steals trash; ‘t is something, nothing; / ‘T was mine, ‘t is his, and has been slave to thousands; / But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed (3.3).

Shakespeare teaches the importance of a solid, positive reputation, of ensuring that it is impervious to attack. It is ironic that Iago delivers this speech to Othello, because Othello is extremely conscious of how he is perceived. He doesn’t want people
to think that he doesn’t have enough control over his wife to ensure that she is faithful. He is also a military man, and the military is notorious for emphasizing the importance of representing yourself and your organization (your unit, country, etc.) well. This advice is insightful, and would be a passage worth emphasizing to students.

Closely associated with this notion is taking care not to ruin the reputation of others. School environments can be intimidating and sometimes students feel the need to tear others down instead of lifting them up. In this situation, the end of Iago’s speech is particularly applicable. Ironically, Iago is the one who provides these lines, and he concludes by saying that the person who takes away his good name “robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed.” When someone’s good name is “robbed,” it is often more hurtful to the person whose name has been tainted than the other. Robbing someone’s good name does nothing to enrich the person who “robbed” it.

**Integrity Maintenance**

Othello ostensibly believes that “men should be what they seem” (3.3), yet is tragically oblivious when ascertaining honesty or sincerity in others; additionally, he fails to “be” himself, to exhibit personal integrity when it is most needed. Paradoxically, the antagonist seems to understand the concept better than the protagonist (though Iago deliberately chooses not to live by it). Shakespeare has Iago observe, “Poor and content is rich, and rich enough” (3.3). Iago is asserting here that it is important to be aware of oneself and to be comfortable with even the “poor,” or less desirable, aspects of your personality. He is implying that if you are content with who you are, you are enough.

Young people should seek to be content with themselves in spite of imperfection and opposition. In their article about adolescent self-esteem, Jane E. Myers and
colleagues write, “Both boys and girls experience declines in global self-esteem during adolescence . . . Self-esteem has also been studied as multidimensional construct, including social and academic components” (Myers 28). In her quote, Myers is acknowledging that a lack of self-esteem in adolescents is typical and normal. The challenge is to help students accept themselves in spite of their imperfections.

**Conclusion**

Many of Shakespeare’s most impressive characters are those who allowed themselves to be destroyed because of the actions of other people. *Othello* may not be a play so much about Iago’s lack of military appointment as it is about his choice to let a lost opportunity destroy him. Iago’s conscious decision to turn his anger into a self-justified means to destroy the lives of Cassio, Othello, and Desdemona is an example of resentment taken to an extreme.

As for Othello, it may be a circumstance in which tragic consequences result from seemingly insignificant catalysts, destroying not only him, but ultimately several others. His case is tragic largely because it was avoidable: had Othello articulated his suspicions to Desdemona, they wouldn’t have festered into fatalities. Shakespeare’s memorable moral is that an individual’s actions inevitably affect others. Stephen R. Covey said, “Sow a though, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny” (Good Reads). Small thoughts lead to actions that ultimately determine destiny. Shakespeare is illustrating an extreme case in order to warn audiences of the dangers that follow chronic self-concern.

With sincere investment, students will likely learn that the Bard really can apply to their lives and even help them find solutions to their common, though painful,
problems. This is not an easy task by any means, but one that can be facilitated by earnest engagement with Shakespeare’s works. As Madsen instructs, Shakespeare is a master psychologist, and each of us, students especially, can find solutions to what we are facing in his words.
Works Cited


