

# What's in a Symbol?

A motif is a recurrent thematic element in an artistic or literary work. There are symbols and easily identifiable motifs throughout *Othello*. Symbols found in plays can be defined as objects, characters, and figures that are used to represent ideas or concepts.

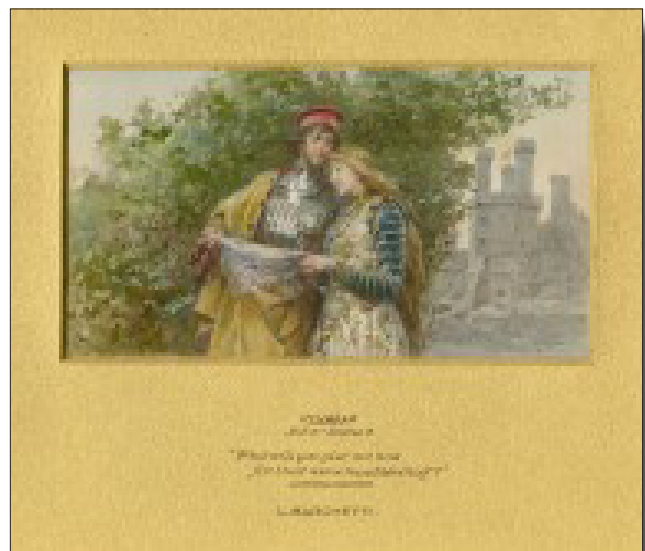
You will notice that, in subject matter, this is a dark play indeed. As Iago spins his web to ensnare Othello, the other characters are literally and figuratively kept in the dark. When Othello demands “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s deception, he is still not able to see things clearly. He is blinded by rage and cannot see the truth. Eventually this motif of light and darkness, of seeing and not seeing, are symbolized in the candle to which Desdemona’s life is compared. “Put out the light, then put out the light.” (5.2.7)

Another literary motif is the use of animals in describing Othello. The terms “Barbary horse,” “black ram,” and “beast,” are all used in reference to Othello. This comparison to animals represents the prejudice that Venetians had towards people of Moorish or African descent at the time. In general, describing a person or group of people in animal terms is a way of defining that person or group as being less than human. This prejudice is manipulated by Iago to paint a subhuman picture of Othello in the eyes of Brabantio and other characters.

The most predominant symbol in *Othello* is the handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona as a token of his love. Othello describes it as a token of love from his mother, who received it from an Egyptian sorceress. The strawberries embroidered on it were known to be a symbol of chastity. But just as Othello has given this gift to Desdemona as a symbol of his unflinching love, Desdemona’s supposed loss of the item is a symbol to Othello of her unfaithfulness.

The creation of the handkerchief itself and the way in which Othello woos Desdemona alludes to another motif that Shakespeare uses, which is mysticism and magic. The handkerchief was thought to hold certain powers because of the way it was made. “There’s magic in the web of it” (3.4.81) Othello says, and was meant to keep Othello’s father close to his mother’s side. Brabantio also says quite plainly that he believes that Desdemona has been bewitched by Othello, and that only supernatural forces would have brought her to love him. Othello argues [quite convincingly] that the only spell he put on Desdemona was through his storytelling.

Can you pick out other symbols throughout the play or identify motifs used by Shakespeare and the production designers?



L. Marchetti. Othello, act 3, scene 3, “What will you give me now for that same handkerchief?” 19th or 20th century. Folger Shakespeare Library.