

Worksheet 1 – The Handkerchief

Review: Prior knowledge

Answer these questions before watching the video to check how much you already know.

1. In Act 3 Scene 3, we first see the handkerchief; why is Desdemona using it?
2. Later in this scene, Othello drops the handkerchief, but who gives the handkerchief to Iago?
3. After Cassio finds the handkerchief in his bedroom, he gives it to Bianca. In Act 4 Scene 1, Othello overhears Bianca and Cassio arguing. Bianca says that the handkerchief must be a love token from another woman. How does this change the course of the play?

Recall

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.

4. Professor Hopkins presents the ideas from the critic Lynda Boose (Time: 3:05). What does Boose suggest the handkerchief is symbolic of?
a) Bianca
b) The wedding sheets
c) Desdemona
d) England
5. Professor Hopkins presents the ideas from the critic Ian Smith (Time: 6:14). Smith suggests the handkerchief was made from black cloth. How is this relevant?
a) White actors covered their bodies with it
b) Represents evil
c) Synecdochic of Othello
d) Was a military symbol
6. “So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief? What can be more absurd”
Thomas Rymer criticises the use of the handkerchief but Professor Hopkins argues that it is important because (Time: 11:10) ...
a) It connects Bianca to Desdemona.
b) Othello’s father gave it to him.
c) Every woman in the play touches it
d) It passed through the hands of Cassio and Othello.

Analysis

In this extract Othello describes the history of the handkerchief.

Read the extract and then answer the questions that follow.

OTHELLO

50 That’s a fault. That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love, but if she lost it
Or made gift of it, my father’s eye
Should hold her loathèd and his
spirits should hunt
After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me

	55	And bid me, when my fate would have me wived, To give it her. I did so, and take heed on 't, Make it a darling like your precious eye. To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition As nothing else could match.
DESDEMONA		
		Is 't possible?
OTHELLO		
	60	'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it. A sibyl, that had numbered in the world The sun to course two hundred compasses, In her prophetic fury sewed the work. The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
	65	And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful Conserved of maidens' hearts

7. Who does Othello say gave his mother the handkerchief (line 48) and what is the significance of this?
8. What is the impact of the verbs used in line 52 - 54?
9. What image is repeated in lines 50 - 60 and is a motif we see elsewhere in the play?
10. How does Othello's lines 60 - 66 relate to Act 1?

Evaluation

In the Lecture Professor Hopkins presents the views of Lynda Boose. (Time: 3:05)

1. Read through this extract from Lynda Boose article on Othello's handkerchief (1975).
2. Highlight the key ideas that Boose presents about the symbolism of strawberries.
3. Then write a paragraph on each idea, evaluating how the symbolism of strawberries relates to the play.

In taking over Cinthio's handkerchief Shakespeare made a minor but important change. Instead of leaving it a napkin embroidered simply and vaguely "alla moresca," he insistently created for his audience a highly visual picture of a square piece of white linen spotted with strawberry-red fruit. That the strawberries could be emblematic of virgin blood is logical both visually and metaphorically ... Additionally, strawberries had symbolical, received associations growing out of the long emblem tradition which the Renaissance inherited and utilized. According to Lawrence J. Ross, strawberries are among the most frequently found embroidery designs from the period. To the sixteenth century they had a time-honored association with the Virgin,⁷ hence a logical connection with the concept of virginity itself. Considered by Elizabethan gardeners as the purest of fruits, the treble-leafed strawberry plant bore a red fruit from its initially white flower. Furthermore, the plant itself was a part of the generic rose family, the flower most frequently associated with love and desire. These considerations make the details that Shakespeare added to Cinthio's handkerchief seem less arbitrary and the handkerchief itself far more articulate than before. What Shakespeare was representing was a visually recognizable reduction of Othello and Desdemona's wedding-bed sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage, the emblem of the symbolical act of generation so important to our understanding of the measure of the tragedy.

7. This association to the Virgin was a major motif of Catholic commentary and pre-Reformation art. The strawberry was often pictured with a snake lurking menacingly under its leaves; perhaps because of the presence of the snake, it became an emblem commonly associated with the Garden of Eden ... the connections with beautiful women and the ideas of love and seduction.

Boose, Lynda E. (1975)

Glossary

- **Connote** - Makes you think of a particular idea or quality.
E.g. Green connotes jealousy.
- **Emblematic** - Something symbolically represents a quality or idea.
E.g. A light blowing out is emblematic of death.
- **Hymeneal blood** - The hymen is a thin layer of skin inside the vagina which can tear during first penetrative intercourse (or using a tampon), usually results in bleeding.
E.g. The sheets were displayed to prove the lady was a virgin.
- **Synecdoche** - A part is substituted for a whole or vice versa.
E.g. Thick lips is a synecdoche and a racial slur.
- **Alla moresca** - Moorish style.
E.g. The building was alla moresca.