

Toni Morrison's Desdemona in the light of Dante's Suffering Spirits: Confessions in The Divine Comedy

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The focus of this study is on the metaphorical portrayal of the insistent need of the spirits to confess flaws and actions they once engaged in when they were in earthly bodies, now they are living in a world in the afterlife. This theme is clearly reflected in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1308-1321), a long epic poem. Accordingly, this study deals with Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2011) in light of the confessions of Dante's suffering spirits' who are portrayed as characters in his *Divine Comedy*, shedding light in particular on the subject of individuals who have died and so are prevented in communicating to the living. Therefore, metaphorically converting the setting literarily to the afterlife gives an opportunity to specific individuals to reveal what they want to tell, and this is the best way for authors to communicate and give their viewpoints. Depending on this thread, the character of *Desdemona* is the victim in Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603). This heroine is unjustly accused of infidelity after too few days of marriage to Othello and killed without her truth being told. Morrison attempts to give a voice to this victim to tell what she wants to reveal but from the afterlife, a metaphorical world. The study is divided into several accounts, beginning with an introduction and a background illustrating and preparing the main important relevant points. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is explained in a separate section according to the chosen theme. Then, Morrison's *Desdemona* is analysed in light of the intended purpose. Conclusions are presented to clarify the results.

Key words: *Afterlife, Dante, The Divine Comedy, Morrison, Desdemona.*

Introduction and Background

The existence of an 'Afterlife' is something that not all believe in and can only seem real in the minds and hearts of those who believe in it. However, the various interpretations of the

afterlife are a matter for debates – whether before monotheism or after it, according to the culture of people involved with this idea. This motif is widely present in genres of literature including old, medieval, modern, postmodern, and contemporary literary works.

Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1308-1321), an epic poem, has inspired a number of creative figures in different fields including sociology, politics, art, paintings, and literature. In this epic, Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), describes the afterlife in which he wants to establish a new world based on justice, freedom, serenity, purification and hope. The poet tries to give a social and political message in life. In this work, tormented old souls are heard screaming and seen desperate, each crying out for the second death.

In this research, there is an attempt to analyse Morrison's play *Desdemona* in which the main character is trying to reveal from the afterlife things never being told during life, and to prove the influence of Dante on Morrison in choosing her setting since the character of Desdemona is clearly and widely known in literature, most notably as one of Shakespeare's heroines.

Afterlife as a Literary Setting

Death is the departure of a human being from the concrete world of mankind to pass over into the other world. It is a common fate for all creatures. Every creature must face death; however while still alive it is difficult for anyone to realise the real meaning of the concept of death. In addition, the belief of the existence after death is also a common factor in most religions. The concept of 'afterlife' or 'underworld' or 'netherworld' has been recorded in various ways throughout history. This other world is defined as "the realm of the dead" (Craig, 2008, p. 4). As Katz (2003) describes, the afterlife is a place where "all spirits dwelled in one and the same region; that the domain of the dead was separated from the world of the living" (p. xvi). These images of the underworld, Craig (2008) further observes, are regarded as metaphorical rather than literal; and the texts in which the images are reflected are not real but created for specific thematic purposes. However, the term 'afterlife' is puzzling in the interpretations according to the beliefs of various groups of peoples. In this regard, some of them, like Christians and Muslims, strongly believe in another life after death. But others, like the ancients, believe in the continuation of the existence of the man after death and usually in the form of shades of the images they were in life.

Literature often develops mythology in reflecting what will be encountered when living in the afterlife. This is portrayed according to the perspectives of the authors. In literary works, there are stories that reveal images of the underworld. To follow literature of the world, one can find various texts representing the theme of the afterlife or the underworld, each for a different purpose. These include the Sumerian poems "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld" (3500 B.C. and 1900 B.C) and "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" (2100 BC); the



Akkadian “The Descent of Ishtar into the Underworld,”(720-700 BC), "The Epic of Gilgamesh," (2800 and 2500 BC), “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” and “A Prince’s Vision of the Netherworld” (Craig, 2008).

In the European traditions, texts like Homer's *Odyssey* (675–725 B.C.) , Vergil's *Aeneid* (29 and 19 BC) and Dante's *La Divina Commedia* are the best examples (Descent into the Underworld, 2019).

Dante's *The Divine Comedy*: Characters Depicting the Agonised Spirits

THROUGH me the way is to the city dolent;
Through me the way is to eternal dole;
Through me the way among the people lost.
Justice incited my sublime Creator;
Created me divine Omnipotence,
The highest Wisdom and the primal Love.
Before me there were no created things,
Only eternal, and I eternal last.

“All hope abandon, ye who enter in!”

These words in sombre colour I beheld Written upon the summit of a gate; Whence I: “Their sense is, Master, hard to me!”

(Dante, 2008, Canto 3: ll. 40-50 p. 16).

In the text, Dante Alighieri becomes a pilgrim in a pilgrimage that he creates in his epic poem *The Divine Comedy* (originally entitled *Divina Commedia-La Commedia*) through three stages that he calls *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Heaven). This poetic literary work was completed in 1321, before Dante's death of malaria in Ravenna, Italy (Ruggiers, ed. ,1966).

In this work, Dante weaved his ideas in a fictional metaphorical view of the afterlife in a world combining good as well as evil spirits, according to Christianity. He faces tormented and tortured spirits in two stages of his journey (hell and purgatory). In Hell, Dante lets himself encounter nearly seventy figures before and of his time in an attempt to give messages to his contemporary enemies who angered him or against his religious, political, and personal doctrines (Roth, 2017).

Dante himself wanders throughout his journey to document confessions of sinners and the glories of Heaven. Structurally, the work is divided into three parts. It consists of 14233 verses. It includes 100 Cantos of 34 verses about Hell, 33 about Purgatory, and 33 about Paradise. In setting, it takes a week in its outplay: two days in Hell, four in Purgatory and one day in Paradise. In the *Inferno*, Dante meets shades of persons who have been witnessing



horrible punishments for their sins they once committed; and now are confessing for the intruder (Roth, 2017).

The journey starts in Hell, a place where people are criminals and sinners. The thread of the *Inferno* refers to those who deserve a punishment (Lummus, 2011). In Purgatory, Dante meets the spirits of those who are waiting to go to Heaven as they are doing penitence for their sins, seeking to find the forgiveness before departing. In Heaven, the pilgrim sails through spaces and sees the majesty of God. This is the Paradise in which Dante views the magnificent of the Creator. Then, he returns to Earth to compose what he has witnessed in poetic lines (Roth, 2017). Thus, the poem is an attempt from a poet to take stock of the world's ways and reform it.

Dante is the main character, the pilgrim, who wanders in three metaphysical locations in a week. Throughout his wandering, he meets different types of spirits of persons he once knew or of whom he has heard. In his journey, he meets Beatrice: Dante's late beloved on Earth. She is transformed into an angel and is a handmaid to the Virgin Mary. She represents the divine love. It is she who tells the spirit of the poet Virgil, the great Roman poet and Dante's master, to accompany Dante in his journey to protect him. Virgil guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Other characters include Saint Lucy (Dante's patron saint), Charon (the ferryman of damned souls), Minos (the monstrous judge who dooms sinners to their allotted torments), Paolo and Francesca (devoted lovers, murdered by Paolo's brother, who was Francesca's husband; they arouse Dante's pity), Ciaccio (a Florentine damned for greed, who predicts the civil struggle that engulfed his native land after his death), Filippo Argenti (a noble damned to welter in mud for his uncontrollable temper), Farinata Degli Uberti (the leader of the Ghibelline party of Florence, condemned to rest in an indestructible sepulchre for his heresy; he remains concerned primarily for the fate of his city), Cavalcante (a Guelph leader, the father of Dante's friend Guido; he rises from his tomb to ask about his son), Piero Delle Vigne (the loyal adviser to Emperor Frederick, imprisoned, with others who committed suicide, in a thornbush), Capaneus (a proud, blasphemous tyrant, one of the Seven against Thebes Brunetto Latini), Brunetto Latini (Dante's old teacher, whom the poet treats with great respect; he laments the sin of sodomy that placed him deep in Hell), Guglielmo Borsiere (Florentine citizen who gave in to unnatural lust), and Jason (a classical hero, damned as a seducer) (Dante, 2008).

The poet also shows that his work is a comedy for "the subject matter, at the beginning it is horrible and foul, as being Hell; but at the close it is happy, desirable, and pleasing, as being Paradise" and for the "style is unstudied and lowly" (Minnis and Scott, 1988, p. 461). The content is literally "the state of souls after death," but allegorically it is "man according as by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice" (Minnis and Scott, 1988, p. 461).

Dante's *The Divine Comedy* has had a remarkable influence on the field of literature, especially the first part, *Inferno*, which receives the most critical and literary response. Modern literary figures from Ezra Pound (1885-1972), T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Osip Mandelstam (1891 –1938) in the early twentieth century, to Seamus Heaney (1939 –2013) W. S. Merwin (1927 –2019) and Robert Pinsky (b.1940) at the close of the twentieth century are examples. Modern poets, for instance, have referred to the work in general and *Inferno* in particular, especially in regards to themes referring to spiritual, existential and political exile (Hawkins and Jacoff, eds., 2002).

The prominent American poets who referred to Dante are American/English poet T.S. Eliot, and American poet Ezra Pound who spent a significant period of his life in Europe. In this context, Pound's *Cantos* (1915-1960) deals with the poetry of Hell and Purgatory. This long poem begins with a portrayal of the underworld that politicised and moralised in a way similar to that of the *Inferno*. Pound, then, as Dante, shifts to an earthly paradise in his work ("Notes for Canto CXVII", 1996).

As a poet, Eliot finds in Dante's epic images a way in which he is capable of inserting the world of *Inferno* into his era. This can be seen in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) which begins with an epigraph of Guido da Montefeltro's words to Dante (*Inferno*, Canto 27, pp. 61-66). In addition, Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) has many references to the *Inferno* (Harrison, 1987, 1043-61). In fact, Eliot made use of Dante's *Inferno* to mourn the modern world as a dark universe of Hell full of individuals like Prufrock, the main character in his poem (Lummus, 2011).

Morrison's Desdemona

Morrison uses the character of Desdemona as an opportunity to express her points of view from the afterlife in a metaphorical setting that overpasses a journey to the underworld. As Morrison indicates, this was an artistic technique intensifying the timelessness of the afterlife, where 'there is nothing to lose,' and permits truthful revelations, serious encounters, and honest forgiveness (Carney, 2008).

Who is Desdemona to be Given Another Voice?

Desdemona is a female character that has relatively little to say in Shakespeare's play *Othello* (1603). This character follows her heart, disobeys her father, escapes with her lover, Othello, the Mulatto, and marries against the will of her father in spite of the proposals of several noble suitors for her hand. However, she is brutally and unjustly murdered by her husband, Othello, for whom she leaves her civilized life in Venice Cyprus to sail to the unknown, Cyprus, where she is accused of infidelity (Shakespeare).

In the criticism of Shakespeare's text, some critics see the character of Desdemona as faithful woman who uses "faith as her shield" (Holmer, 2005, p.133). In the same regard, Lewes (1895) sees her as a divine innocent, "a truly saintly vision of inexhaustible tenderness," a "young (and) inexperienced girl . . . by nature shy and silent . . . (with) no opportunity to exercise her imagination" (Lewes, 1895, pp. 279-280). Further, the critic argues that she "knows nothing of the world" and "perishes through pure ignorance" (p. 281). It seems that the focus is on the innocence and faithfulness of the female heroine rather than on her inner being and evocation. However, modern criticism of the character of Desdemona regards the heroine as complex, admirable and outspoken (Holmer, 2005).

The character of Desdemona has become a target for the contemporary American writer Toni Morrison, who has found this character so compelling. In this context, Morrison was inspired to write a play about this character to explore and shine the light on the concept of feminism (Carney, 2014). But the focus in this study is firstly on Desdemona's confession of things, which were not told or were ignored when she was alive, and secondly on the similarity between Morrison's technique with Dante's in his portrayal of the otherworld.

Desdemona is a short play in comparison with Shakespeare's *Othello*. Morrison interweaves the dialogue with music to be, as described by the director Peter Sellars, a "literary and musical collaboration" (Sellars in Morrison, 2012, p.i). Several female characters in the play give their voices in a performance set in the afterlife. This includes the character of Barbary, the African nurse, who taught Desdemona the Willow Song, and she is an absent character in *Othello*, as well as being mentioned by name by Desdemona and Emilia, Iago's wife. Other female characters are Desdemona's mother and Othello's mother. Othello also appears to talk with Desdemona, whereas Iago has no place in Morrison's play.

According to Morrison, the play is "very complicated", in replying to the director, who considered the play "too thin" (Winn, 2011). The writer's epitome of the work is a play that is, in the words of Sciolino (2011), "part play, part concert . . . an interactive narrative of words, music and song about Shakespeare's doomed heroine, who speaks to the audience from the grave about the traumas of race, class, gender, war – and the transformative power of love".

The Character of Desdemona in Morrison's Play

Desdemona is a series of monologues and dialogues by Desdemona directed to the audience and various other characters. It is the story of a tragic heroine who reveals parts of her life story from the afterlife, the other side of the grave in particular. Sellars (2012) shows in his "Foreword" to *Desdemona* that Morrison's fictional play "honors the missing histories of

generations whose courage, struggles, achievements, loves, tragedies, fulfillments and disappointments have gone unrecorded" (p. i).

The setting is in the afterlife where Desdemona has faced her untimely end. In this sphere, from the grave means that the individual is free to express things that were difficult to express while alive, for this place is out of the limitations of mundane fear. ("Desdemona Takes the Microphone," 2011).

The dramatic work starts with the spirit of the dead Desdemona near the edge of her grave presenting the meaning of her name, and the amount of oppression she faced in life. Meanwhile she claims the significance of her name, she rejects its "ill-fated representation (Morrison, 2012, 1)¹:

The word, Desdemona, means misery . . . it means doomed. "Perhaps my parents believed or imagined or knew my fortune at the moment of my birth . . . certainly that was the standard, no, the obligation of females in Venice when I was a girl . . . they were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me" (1).

Desdemona praises her freedom in the after-world as she is in a place where she can speak words that were "sealed or twisted into the language of obedience"(2). Revealing herself as an entity divided between being killed and being alive-dead or between mundane life and heavenly life, the heroine is free to evoke her own life, and to portray it in her own perspectives:

"Is your final summation of me that I was a foolish naif who surrendered to her husband's brutality because she had no choice? Nothing could be more false . . . my earth life held sorrow. Yet none of it, not one moment was 'misery.' Difficulty, yes. Confusion, yes. Error in judgment, yes. Murder, yes. But it was my life and, right or wrong, my life was shaped by my own choices and it was mine" (3-4).

Here, Desdemona appears defiant, reasonable, and once was with a weak personality. She protests against her being a victim murdered unjustly by the hand of her husband. On this occasion, the character of Desdemona is given an opportunity to reveal herself as the character of Beatrice in Dante's epic. She, metaphorically wants to express things instilled in her inner being when she was alive and here is allowed to confess things she only has the right to evaluate away from the others' perspectives.

The rest of Desdemona's monologue is on her social life during her being within the protection of her father. These things were not told by the original character of Desdemona; but here in the afterlife, this character is permitted to reveal hidden memories that may be

considered by her as a sin for not obeying the will of her father and leading to her demise by following her heart.

Shades of Persons Involved in the Confession of Desdemona's Spirit

All the characters are spirits of dead bodies. "They could tell the truth. They could confront, they could change their minds – there are no limits . . . That was part of the joy of writing that play," Morrison says (quoted in "I didn't want to come back," 2015). The dramatist explains that this girl escaped from her home and went to war, inspired by interesting stories told by Othello. Significantly, Morrison expatriates the character of Iago from her text and refers to him as "the white male gaze" to give a space to other characters, saying:

“Suddenly, without him [Iago] there – talking, evaluating, defining himself – other characters said what they thought, spoke freely to each other and changed their minds. I got very excited about that. (quoted. in "I didn't want to come back," 2015).

The following accounts are an illustration of the characters involved with Desdemona's confessions:

Othello

Desdemona, in her monologue, refers to her refusal of marriage to men in Venice under the desire of her father, Brabantio, exposing such greedy suitors as materialistic and interested in her fortune and reputation:

“They came into my father’s house with empty ornate boxes designed to hold coins of dowry gold, or deeds of property. They glanced at me and locked their glistening eyes on my father’s” (9).

The heroine, from her place in the underworld, conceives that the amount of beauty she possessed for Othello as a different man through her looking to her suitors. In her refusal of them, her father feels uncomfortable about the status of his daughter. In her monologue of presenting herself, Desdemona refers indirectly to Othello as she shifted her life from that with her father to that with another man. In this context, she starts her monologue by describing Othello and their first meeting:

“Among those huddled around (Brabantio’s) chair was this mass of a man. Tree tall. Glittering in metal and red wool. A commander’s helmet under his arm . . . a glint in his eyes identical to the light in Barbary’s eyes . . . I looked away, but not before his smile summoned

my own . . . we danced together, our bodies moving in such harmony it was though we had known each other all our lives” (11).

The heroine continues to show, in her monologue, her affection for and fascination of Othello, referring to the first speech between them which was in an invitation on the part of Othello to experience a sensual love. Desdemona also confesses that her love for him was in words and actions, which was the opposite of Othello’s situation who felt he was unable to tell his love for her. Gradually, the spirits of the husband and his wife confront each other face to face for the first time. In their metaphorical meeting in the afterlife, they tell things never told in their life since their marriage which lasted only few days and ended in death and catastrophe without the truth being known.

In the course of the confrontation of their spirits, Othello and Desdemona express things that need to be clarified for each other since there was no time for this to happen when they were alive. However, Desdemona conceives the way Othello regards himself, and focuses on the good that is in him instead of falling in love with him due to his heroic stories. This step is the way her maturity has developed showing how she was inexperienced when she fell in love with a man and left everything behind simply because she admired his adventurous stories. But now she tries to focus on the inner aspect of him.

Desdemona and Othello begin retorting their falling in love with each other. The central theme of their talk is related to the issue of love and murder, especially the crime of a lover killing his beloved: "Who could have thought a military commander, trained to let blood, would be more, could be more, than a brutal arm educated solely to kill? I knew. How did I know?" (18).

Retorting that she cannot forget the softness of his eyes, Othello starts telling his life story as an orphan who was captured by the slavers, put with the animals, given little and bad food, and sold to an army which was better for him than his life before. In the military service, he expresses, he "[o]nly as a soldier could . . . excel and turn the loneliness inside [him] into exhilaration” (19). Othello also keeps on weaving colourful fantastic tales of wonderful places and adventures. He shares his darkest confession with Desdemona including his rape of two elderly women with Iago in front of a child in a grotesque scene. This shows the revelation of several sinful spirits who tell Dante in *The Divine Comedy* of hidden sins they committed when they were alive, such as the case of the devoted lovers Paolo and Francesca, who committed a sin as their relationship was taboo since they betrayed someone who was a brother to Paolo and husband to Francesca respectively.

Desdemona for the first time understands the bond between her husband and Iago; she, from his revelation, understands answers to her questions she threw in life: “My husband knew Iago was lying, manipulating, sabotaging. So why did he act on obvious deceit? Brotherhood.

The quiet approval beamed from one male eye to another” (25). She also realises that the bond between the two men is their being soldiers, rapists, and war criminals. She then questions Othello in his confession if he and Iago did kill the boy that saw their rape of women; "then mercy triumphed" (26), she retorts, as Othello says, they did not. However, the latter explains that the truth is much worse:

“Before our decision to do no more harm our eyes met, Iago’s and mine, in an exchange of secrecy . . . The look between us was not to acknowledge shame, but mutual pleasure. Pleasure in the degradation we had caused; more pleasure in leaving a witness to it. We were not only refusing to kill our own memory, but insisting on its life in another” (26).

This sheds light on Eliot's epigraph at the beginning of his "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in which there is a similarity between Othello and Prufrock in their disdain of their worlds. On this occasion, both situations connect with the character of Guido da Montefeltro in Dante's *Inferno* (XXVII, 61–66) which reads:

“If I but thought that my response were made to one perhaps returning to the world, this tongue of flame would cease to flicker. But since, up from these depths, no one has yet returned alive, if what I hear is true, I answer without fear of being shamed (*Inferno* XXVII, ll. 61-66).

The above verse refers to a meeting between Dante and Guido da Montefeltro. The poet himself interrogates the suffering spirit Guido, one of Dante's medieval Italian world (c. 1220-98), a fraudulent and a victim of a character, who reveals his sins thinking that no one ever could return from Hell alive.

Guido's lines are used as an epigraph in Eliot's "Love Song" and may stand for the character of Prufrock himself. Similarly they foreshadow Othello's reflection of the world as a hell through talking about the evil in it. The lines show Prufrock as a modern Guido (Banerjee, 1972; Locke, 1963). In terms of Othello, the man confesses to Desdemona immoral and unsocial deeds unaccepted religiously and socially but he does this only when he is in the afterlife.

Morrison's presentation of the encounter of Desdemona and Othello is not romantic and for pleasure; the face to face is mature and recognisable. After condemning his rape as "obscene, monstrous" (27), Othello utters a vital question upon which his suffering spirit will depend : “Can you forgive me?”(27). No, Desdemona says, she cannot. She tells her husband her inability to forgive the violence he committed against her, yet she still loves him: "Honest love does not cringe" (27). Though she is unable to forgive him, she confesses that their love will live:

Desdemona: I can love you and remain committed to you.

Othello: In spite of what I have described?

Desdemona: In addition to what you have described. (27)

Here, love is intermingled with violence. Desdemona continues saying things revealing her tortured spirit as she was silent and ran after her sentiments:

“Did you think loving another was a profit-driven harvest: choosing the ripe and discarding the rot? . . . Honest love does not flinch at the first roll of thunder; nor does it flinch when faced with the lightning flash of human sin . . . my error was in believing that you were more than the visage of your mind” (27).

Desdemona expresses to him from the other world: " You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State, who will die for the State" (36). Othello criticises his wife for her blind admiration of his narrations that were "a useful myth, a fairy's tale cut to suit a princess' hunger for real life" (36); and this is opposite of Desdemona's praising of Othello's storytelling in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Here, Morrison's Othello tells of his boyhood, his mother's death when he was young, how he was raised by a woman resembling Barbary in appearance and manners.

Desdemona chooses to embrace Othello to help him forget the isolation of his childhood and his violent rape of an elderly woman. She loves him to the extreme that she cannot see anyone in “life” and “death”. This reflects the similarity between her and Dante's Beatrice who begged the poet Virgil's spirit to accompany Dante for protection throughout his journey at Hell.

It seems that Morrison's attempts to enlarge the audience's understanding of Othello are significant due to his confession of brutal rape and his pleasure in immortalising these deeds. This does not encourage feelings of pity towards Othello. However, Desdemona confronts him: "you believed a lie. You broke my hymen one day and thought I was unfaithful the next day? Me? Othello: I don't know. I did suspect. Actually I don't care"(39). In their confrontation, he tries to justify his murder of Desdemona as his justification of the rape of the elderly women with Iago. He offers his apology to his wife: "I am beyond sorry. It is shame that strafes me" (42) – he admits that "I murdered myself and you to stop the drama . . . my love for you was mind deep" (42). He also regrets his behavior and understands that "we should have had such honest talk, not fantasy" when they married. They apologise to each other, though Othello says that "apology is a pale word for what I am called upon to recognise"(42). In her reply, Desdemona responds:

“My mistake was believing that you hated war as much as I did. You believed I loved Othello the warrior. I did not. I was the empire you had already conquered . . . the earth is not quiet or waiting. In the screech of color and the whisper of the lightless depths of the sea, it boils, breaks or slumbers. *And in this restless rest human life is as unlimited and miraculous as love*”[Italics added] (42-43).

James (2001) argues that Desdemona's reaction to Othello's narration reflects how her emotions appear as strange as Othello's story of heroic tales; she becomes too serious. Eventually, they are directed to a world far from only their relationship. Instead, they can now possess wisdom and peace.

Barbary

Desdemona's apparition recalls Barbary, the African nurse who is mentioned in *Othello* as the one who taught Desdemona the Willow Song. The nurse is mentioned as the one who offers solace for Desdemona in difficult situations. Desdemona claims, “encouraged a slit” in the curtain the mother tried to wrap around her: "Barbary alone conspired with me to let my imagination run free . . . (of places) where nature is not a crafted, pretty thing, but wild, sacred and instructive" (6). Barbary appears face to face with Desdemona who becomes overjoyed to view her nurse on the edge of the grave that represents the afterlife. She is also shocked when the nurse withdraws. In the conversation between the two women, Desdemona discovers that her beloved nurse's name is Sa'ran and Barbary is a metaphorical name for Africa:

“[Y]ou don't even know my name. Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage . . . the sly, vicious enemy who must be put down at any price; held down for the conqueror's pleasure” (33).

Surprisingly, Desdemona questions Barbary about her name (Sa'ran), and then admits that she is her best friend. But Sa'ran does not pay attention to her, responding that she is merely her slave. The conversation reflects the similar miserable condition of the two women in their being slaves for others. This shows the amount of regret that Desdemona possesses for following her heart to be as a slave for Othello and this leads to her doom: " Sa'ran. We are women. I had no more control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still" (36). Admitting that she is ever abused by Desdemona on the other hand, the nurse talks about her Willow song.

In this world of the afterlife that Morrison reflects, the women share similarity away from social class and colour; only love connects them; they face earthly injustice each according to her problem. Eventually, Desdemona demonstrates that they "will never die again" (37).

They are reunited with one another. In the final line, Desdemona illuminates that love will be their bond and similarity. In a continuous context, Desdemona talks about her nurse, saying, "she was more alive than anyone I knew and more loving. She attended me as though she were my birth mother . . . Her heart, so wide, seemed to hold the entire world in awe and to savor its every delight" (6).

These memories reveal Desdemona's inner being. It is a moment that has a space in Desdemona's memory, especially that of the Willow Song. Finally, her "spacious heart drained and sere, Barbary died" (p. 8). Here, Morrison's purpose is not to rewrite the women's past experiences and differences, but to transcend them in the afterlife. Now, they both refuse to be victims.

The death of the nurse arouses Desdemona's spirit to express a monologue to evoke something hidden related with her interaction with men, especially Othello: "Were we women so frail in the wake of men who swore they cherished us? Was a lover's betrayal more lethal than a betrayal of one's self?" (8), adding that her nurse's demise turns her to determine "to be otherwise . . . to search most carefully for the truth of a lover before committing [her] . . . own fidelity" (8).

The character of Barbary can be compared to Piero Delle Vigne who was the loyal adviser to Emperor Frederick, and who was put in a jail, and committed suicide. They arouse the feelings of pity.

The Mothers

Desdemona's life with her family before her marriage with Othello, including her childhood, comprises a part in her monologue. After demonstrating herself, she speaks of her own mother, the absent character in *Othello*. In Morrison's play, Desdemona never interacts with her mother but the daughter shares a memory of her, describing her as "a lady of virtue" (5), who instilled in her daughter "the theme of behavior" (5). The mother is regarded by her daughter as a woman submissive to her husband. In this context, Desdemona recollects a memory from her childhood when her mother saw her barefoot in a pond, remembering that her mother prevented her from wearing shoes for ten days: "It meant my desires, my imagination must remain hidden. It was as though a dark heavy curtain enclosed me. Yet wrapping that curtain over my wilfulness served to strengthen it" (5). These things were never told in her life, but here, at the setting of the afterlife, this character is free to tell what has happened without being afraid of the reaction of others.

In her stage direction, Morrison writes: "Two women approach each other. One is dressed in simple cloth, the other wears a sumptuous gown. They both have white hair and carry a

torch" (14). These are the mothers of Othello and Desdemona respectively. The first is called Soun, whereas the other is formally called M. (Madame) Brabantio. At the beginning, they are sitting onstage together, facing each other. They both appear to be mourning the death of their offspring:

Soun: We have much to share. Clever, violent Othello.

M. Brabantio: Headstrong, passionate Desdemona.

Soun: Both died in and for love. (15)

M. Brabantio may have been a strict and unforgiving mother, as presented by Desdemona, but she is devastated by her daughter's murder, just as Soun, Othello's mother, grieves her son's suicide. When Soun asks if they are enemies due to the crime, M. Brabantio replies, "Of course. Our vengeance is more molten than our sorrow"(14-15). However, they eventually come together with Soun's suggestion that they should adopt the cultural tradition and "build an altar to the spirits who are waiting to console us" (14-15).

Their situation at the afterlife represents a Guelph leader, the father of Dante's friend Guido in *The Divine Comedy*. This figure woke up from his grave to ask about his son, Guido in Dante's epic.

Emilia

Emilia is Iago's wife and Desdemona's confidant in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Here, in Morrison's setting of the afterlife, this character takes part in the events. The scene between Desdemona and Emilia discusses marriage, infidelity, and gender. Their conversation starts in harsh recrimination: Emilia is rude and shameless but Desdemona is quiet and faithful. Desdemona blames her for doing what she did when they were friends "but didn't the man you knelt to protect run a gleaming sword through your survival strategies?" (29). The other astonished replies:

"And why did he? Because I befriended and supported you. I exposed his lies, you ingrate That is your appreciation for my devotion to you? 'My cloak, Emilia,' 'My night gown, Emilia,' 'Unpin me, Emilia,' 'Arrange my bedsheets, Emilia.' That is not how you treat a friend; that's how you treat a servant." (29).

In their talk of marriage, Emilia shows that she is, like Desdemona, thinking marriage is her only salvation but she realises that she is mistaken, saying " Not only was her marriage filled with lust rather than love, but that passion generated nothing" (30). In their conversation once more, Desdemona expresses the close relationship between them to the point that she wishes she had known her from the childhood since Emilia was an orphan and Desdemona lacked

her mother's love. In reaction, Emilia objects to this and the Desdemona offers her apology, justifying that it was better for her to understand "instead of judging" (30). Emilia's last words show the contrast between her outer and inner being, keeping her old skin when she needs to camouflage "her true dazzle" (30), and concluding that the " little lizard changed my life" (30). Desdemona also tells her what she did and sacrificed for the sake of Othello: "Think. I wed a Moor. I fled my home to be with him. I defied my father, all my family to wed him. I joined him on the battlefield" (32). Obviously, these things are expressed for the first time directly to Emilia by Desdemona herself. Here, the role of Emilia recalls the character of Piero Delle Vigne in Dante's *Comedy*, who is the faithful adviser to Emperor Frederick, but he was imprisoned and then committed suicide.

Conclusion

This study reflects that the root of the idea of revelation of the spirits from the afterlife about things in need of being clarified in Morrison's *Desdemona* is found in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Though Dante was not the first to use such content and setting, he is nevertheless the closest writer that Morrison follows in her treatment of her text. Actually, the dramatist manages to portray Desdemona as a brave female character, who is accused of infidelity by her husband and is killed for such accusation. But metaphorically, Morrison tries to give a voice to this famous heroine in literature to illustrate matters and confront characters she was connected with them in life.

Firstly, in comparing these two works of literature, the characters of Morrison's *Desdemona* are related to some of the characters in Dante's *Comedy*. On the other hand the former characters appear as different in personality and attitudes from those in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Yet, the purpose of this study is achieved by focusing on things that are revealed from characters inhabiting the afterlife, which is shown to be a time-honoured trope for a good milieu and place from which characters are able to evoke and express freely and peacefully about things that were unable to be expressed in life.

Notes

1 All quotations concerning the text of Morrison's *Desdemona* are taken from: Toni Morrison, (2012), *Desdemona*, with a foreword by Peter Sellars (London: Oberon).



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