

Shakespeare's *Othello* in school: literary classics and the desire to humanize social relations

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Abstract

Literary classics feature deeply striking characters and situations. They offer creative models of language, examples of behaviors to be imitated or avoided, and reflections on what humanity is and what it may become, revealing appearances that conceal deeper essences. In the school context/ In the context of basic education it becomes necessary to establish criteria by which teachers select works, given the constraints of limited school time and the competing purposes ascribed to literary education. Considering this concrete challenge for teaching practice and for the research field on literature teaching, this article presents theoretical considerations to support the selection of Shakespeare's *Othello* for use in elementary and high school. The play was analyzed using György Lukács' Marxist aesthetics, which reveals the presence of typical characters and themes expressing dialectic of humanization and dehumanization. We conclude that the work is aesthetically effective, as it enables the possibility to the individual to "become someone else" through its study, in accordance with the principles of Historical-Critical Pedagogy.

Keywords: Literature teaching. Shakespeare. Historical-Critical Pedagogy. Building of personality.

Otelo de Shakespeare na escola: os clássicos da literatura e o anseio pela humanização das relações sociais

Resumo

Com personagens e situações marcantes, os clássicos da literatura oferecem modelos criativos de linguagem, exemplos de conduta a se imitar ou evitar e

reflexões sobre o que a humanidade é e o que pode vir a ser. Em contexto escolar, torna-se necessário buscar critérios para que professores selecionem as obras, dadas a limitação do tempo escolar e as disputas por suas finalidades. Em vista desse problema concreto para a prática docente e para o campo de pesquisa sobre ensino de literatura, apresentamos, neste artigo, considerações teóricas que subsidiariam a escolha da obra *A tragédia de Otelo*, de Shakespeare, para trabalho no Ensino Fundamental e Médio. A peça foi analisada à luz da estética marxista de György Lukács, pela qual se percebeu a presença de personagens e temas típicos da dialética entre humanização e desumanização, concluindo que a obra é esteticamente eficaz, proporcionando que o indivíduo “torne-se outro” após o estudo, consoante à Pedagogia Histórico-Crítica.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de literatura. Shakespeare. Pedagogia Histórico-Crítica. Formação da personalidade.

Otelo de Shakespeare en la escuela: los clásicos de la literatura y el anhelo de humanización de las relaciones sociales

2

Resumen

Con personajes y situaciones memorables, los clásicos literarios ofrecen modelos creativos de lenguaje, ejemplos de comportamiento para se imitar o se evitar, y reflexiones sobre qué es la humanidad y qué ella puede venir a ser. En un contexto escolar, se hace necesario buscar criterios para que los docentes elijan obras, dada la limitación del tiempo escolar y las disputas por sus propósitos. En vista de esta problemática concreta para la práctica docente y para el campo de investigación sobre la enseñanza de la literatura, presentamos, en este artículo, consideraciones teóricas que respaldarían la elección de *La tragedia de Otelo*, de Shakespeare, para su uso en la escuela secundaria. La obra fue analizada recurriéndose a la estética marxista de György Lukács, a través de la cual percibimos la presencia de personajes y temas típicos de la dialéctica entre humanización y deshumanización. Él concluye que la obra es estéticamente efectiva, permitiendo la posibilidad de que el individuo se convierta en otra persona después de estudiarla, consonante con la Pedagogía Histórico-Crítica.

Palabras-clave: Enseñanza de Literatura. Shakespeare. Pedagogía Histórico-Crítica. Formación de la personalidad.

Behind all artistic activity lies the question: to what extent is this world really a human world, a world that man can accept as his own, suited to his humanity?

(Lukács, 2023, p. 363).

Introduction

This work is part of the collective effort to develop Historical-Critical Pedagogy (Saviani, 2011) and translate it into concrete school practice. Studies of pedagogical theories are divided, not always harmoniously, into areas such as foundations, didactics, teaching methodologies, curricula, etc. However, over-specialization leads to a loss of the broader perspective of pedagogical theory itself. Even in the case of Historical-Critical Pedagogy, whose Marxist foundation demands the category of *totality*, difficulties can be seen in the coherent and consistent articulation of the various fronts of the work towards its permanent collective construction.

These difficulties are often characterized in a simplistic way, as if it were just a question of finding ways to apply theory in practice, assuming that it had already been sufficiently developed and understood. We consider this line of reasoning to be mistaken and, on the contrary, we believe that there is a need to delve deeper into the dynamic and contradictory interactions between theory and practice, as well as to expand the debates on criteria for selecting subject content and on the complex process of transforming systematized knowledge into school knowledge (Saviani, 2011). Within this discussion, the specific purpose of this article is to present the path involved in the possible selection of “The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice”, by William Shakespeare (2017), in the context of the subject of Literature in the final years of Primary School and/or in Secondary School.

It is argued that The Tragedy of Othello offers significant contributions to the educational process of young Brazilians today, and can generate changes in terms of positioning in the face of social reality. The BNCC (National

Common Curriculum Base)(Brazil, 2017) conceives the teaching of Portuguese language and literature along the lines of multi-learning (Rojo; Almeida, 2012; Lankeshar; Knobel, 2007), making use of aesthetic appreciation in itself, while, on the other hand, subordinating reading skills to a utilitarian approach, aimed at adapting to new textual genres. In contrast to these perspectives, this article adopts the premise that teaching literary works at school is, at the same time, a way of learning how to position oneself in relation to society and human relations. It is therefore a process with ethical and political implications. It would be beyond the scope and limits of this paper to analyze trends in the area of Literature Teaching, but we would like to point out the importance of this field and the originality of this research, as it differs not only from an influential theory, but also from state regulations imposed on public and private education.

4 Ultimately, we aim to present the play's potential to deal with themes typical of the contradictory development of humanity (Lukács, 2018), which can be found in several other works, *but not just any work*. To this end, in addition to the sources already mentioned, we have both appropriated and countered the rich study by the most recent translator of Othello, Lawrence Flores Pereira (2017), in his preface to the edition published by Penguin/Companhia das Letras. The article is organized as follows: a brief summary of the play's plot (1); analysis of the dialectic between humanization and dehumanization contained in the amorous relationship between the central characters (2); presentation of typical characters and themes in the context of different interpretations of the play (3); and finally, some final considerations on the relationship between literary classics, aesthetic reception and didactic work aimed at humanizing and enriching students' personalities.

The tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice

The plot begins with Iago and Roderigo plotting to manipulate Brabantio, a member of the Venetian aristocracy and father of the young and beautiful Desdemona, by telling him that she is secretly marrying Othello the Moor, general of the Venetian troops. The two coup plotters felt aggrieved

about their position in relation to Othello: Rodrigo, a young nobleman, wanted Desdemona; Iago, an ensign sponsored by noblemen, couldn't accept being passed over for Michael Cassio, a young Florentine (a foreigner from a center of Renaissance influence), who had been chosen by Othello because of his academic background, to be his second-in-command. This is a typical theme: the contradictory shift from value by birth to merit, consistent with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the decline of the nobility. Cassio and Othello achieve their places through the merit of work and study; Iago and Rodrigo claim the privilege of caste.

Using racist inferences, Iago and Rodrigo inflame the anger of Brabantio, who summons Othello before the Duke of Venice, accusing him of kidnapping, seducing and corrupting his daughter by magic arts. The Duke, for his part, had just requested Othello's presence for emergencies relating to Venice's military-colonial campaign in Cyprus against the Turks. The accusation takes center stage in the conversation; defending himself, Othello says that he fell in love with Desdemona when he saw that the various accounts of his military life, given in Brabantio's own residence at his invitation, aroused enormous compassion in her. Othello says: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 225). Called upon to speak, Desdemona confirms the veracity of the facts and feelings described by Othello. Othello, having been cleared of the accusation, Brabantio is forced to begrudgingly accept the marriage. Othello and his company then set off for Cyprus, and Desdemona, brave and determined, made a point of accompanying her husband on this military journey. The young woman, who had defied the marriage arranged by her father out of interest, is not content with a decorative role and wants to be part of her husband's work. By transferring his daughter's "property" to his son-in-law, the father leaves the ominous verses: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 233), which will echo the prejudiced belief in a natural female susceptibility to infidelity and deception.

Once in Cyprus, Iago moves to destroy Othello and Michael Cassius. The news that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed by a storm is received with

great joy by Othello and his soldiers. The general then gives his commanders leave for a night of celebrations. This is where Iago's opportunity arises. Knowing that Michael Cassius is weak from the effects of wine, he induces him to drink more than he intended. Under Iago's instruction, Rodrigo makes the inebriated Michael Cassius get into a fight. Caught red-handed by Othello, the lieutenant is removed from office - the military campaign's success demanded a firm hand from the leader, a fact complicated by his status as a black man and a Muslim who had converted to Christianity, which made him feel constantly tested. Othello's reprimand, written in solemn and grandiloquent verse, appeals to the supposed moral superiority of the Christian, reiterating his adherence to it:

Why, how now! Ho! From whence ariseth this?
Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which Heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!
He that stirs next to carve for his own rage
Holds his soul light: he dies upon his motion (Shakespeare, 2006,
p. 268).

6

Iago, in a duplicitous game and always in the shadows, suggests to Cassio that he appeal to Desdemona as an intercessor, while he reinforces Othello's discontent with the lieutenant, suggesting that the latter engages not only in drinking but also in erotic relations, hinting at some illicit friendship with Desdemona. The bone of contention of the play is set. Cassio seeks out his intercessor, and she receives him, because she knows Cassio's strategic importance and friendship for Othello. Neither Desdemona nor Cassio even imagine that anyone could suppose that there is some kind of amorous liaison between them. Desdemona decides to intercede with Othello on Cassio's behalf, without warning that her attitude could be interpreted by her husband as the result of desires for another man. Desdemona's belief in the authenticity and sincerity of the reciprocal love between Othello and her was so great that it didn't cross her mind that her husband might suspect her motives for interceding on behalf of Michael Cassio.

Iago creates an insidious discourse through which he manipulates the general's emotions, planting seeds of distrust, insecurity, prejudice and jealousy. For example, Iago hypothesizes that Desdemona's attraction to Othello could be the result of a momentary youthful adventure, but that her tendency would be to choose a younger party who is better placed in the standards of Venetian society.

Ay, there's the point! As—to be bold with you—
Not to affect many proposèd matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural—
But pardon me: I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her—though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent. (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 296-297).

7

Othello feels the weight of prejudice based on race, caste, nationality and age affecting his judgment:

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—
She's gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 298).

Cassio and Desdemona fall into the trap. Tormented, Othello asks Iago for any material proof of the betrayal, which is provided with the naive help of Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's chambermaid. Emilia finds her nurse's handkerchief, an item given to her by Othello as a mystical symbol of an incorruptible union, inherited from her mother along with the prophecy that if kept, the love of its possessor would survive. Iago, aware of this, has always tried to

convince his wife to steal it; he succeeds and places it in Cassio's chambers, where it will be found by Othello, precisely at Iago's suggestion. Othello had already been cruelly interrogating Desdemona, without taking heed of her justifications. Blinded by jealousy and overcome by uncontrolled rage, he kills his wife with his bare hands in their wedding bed. Emilia despairs, cries out, and draws others into the room; shaken, she reveals her husband's plan and how she had been his plaything. Iago kills his own wife and can no longer deny the accusations. Othello commits suicide, Iago ends up in prison and Michael Cassio, who had survived an ambush, takes over the government of Cyprus.

Love in the face of the dialectic between humanization and dehumanization

8

In chapter 11 of his *Aesthetics*, Lukács (1967) deals with the theme of knowing people, criticizing theories that adopt the perspective of the unknowability of human beings. He argues that this knowledge requires the use of psychic processes that are intermediate between the spontaneous perception of a person as a whole and the analysis of singular aspects of their personality. Within this theme, Lukács addresses the individual erotic-love choice and exemplifies it precisely through the passage in which Othello explains how Desdemona's love for him and his love for her came about, stating, as already mentioned here, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them." (Shakespeare, 2017, p. 152). Lukács argues that the a posteriori verbal summary of a situation like this certainly simplifies and schematizes something that goes beyond words and verbal thought:

[...] all the intellectual and moral categories set in motion are insufficient - taken one by one and in themselves - to explain the whole. The highest admiration can be cold, the deepest compassion can be totally devoid of eroticism. It takes a whole personal set of these feelings and thoughts with the physical personality (figure, voice, gaze, etc.) for this specific eroticism to be born in both people (Lukács, 1967, p. 62).

Pereira (2017) compares the love between Othello and Desdemona to Achilles' tendon, a metaphor that refers to a weak point in a strong whole. A different interpretation would be that this love was the *source, at the same time, of the strength and fragility of both lovers*. Othello's love for Desdemona strengthened him, gave him a new reason to live, but at the same time weakened him, because his own identity became entirely dependent on his beloved. When Othello says that he loved Desdemona for what she felt for him, it means that he saw himself through her eyes, and was able to see past the prejudices of class, race and age. In turn, her identity also became dependent on this relationship. In Act I, Scene III, Desdemona says:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and scorn of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. *My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord:*
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 230,
our italics).

9

It could be said that Desdemona's humanized sensitivity was the origin of their love for each other, since it allowed her to see in Othello what society didn't: a man who could arouse the love of a woman from another class, ethnicity as well as being younger than him, beautiful and talented. But the fact that Desdemona's love rose above Othello's prejudices doesn't mean that Othello himself had overcome the marks on his subjectivity caused over the years by the stigmas. Desdemona stood up to her father and everyone else to love him, but that still wasn't enough to convince Othello himself that he was worthy of that love. Even his respectability as a general wasn't enough to feel equal to Desdemona's qualities. Another weakness was the fact that this happiness generated in Othello's mind the understandable fear that it wouldn't last, as in that verse from the song Felicidade, by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luiz Bonfá: "sadness has no end, happiness does":

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 252-253).

Iago also undermined Othello's confidence in his own ability to judge people by creating the situation in which Cassio got drunk and was drawn into a fight, which forced Othello to get up in the middle of the night to put an end to the quarrel before it disturbed the inhabitants of Cyprus, who had received Othello and his soldiers with many honors. Asked by Othello about the origin of the quarrel, Iago replied:

I do not know. Friends all but now, even now,
In quarter, and in terms like bride and groom
Devesting them for bed; and then, but now—
As if some planet had unwitting men—
Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast,
In opposition bloody. I cannot speak
Any beginning to this peevish odds;
And would in action glorious I had lost
Those legs that brought me to a part of it (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 268-269).

With these words, Iago prepares Othello's mind in three ways. One, by associating the quarrel with the situation between husband and wife; another, by making Othello completely lose confidence in Cassio and; third, by showing himself to Othello as a person who would choose extreme physical suffering over having to witness reprehensible behavior. When, the next day, Iago insinuates that Cassio is seducing Desdemona, Othello's emotions are highly intensified and mixed up, impairing his critical thinking. When the poison of jealousy is effectively inoculated into him, the effect is devastating, because if he could no longer trust Desdemona, he couldn't trust the image she claimed to have of him and, consequently, the recognition of his personality beyond social stereotypes and the meaning of his life would be shattered. The suspicion that

she might have been a fake made him express that he would have preferred to have remained unaware of the supposed falsehood:

I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O, now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars,
That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone! (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 303-304).

Othello's mistake was twofold: he didn't question the terrible conclusions he was being led to by Iago and his own unbridled emotions, and he didn't listen to Desdemona when she claimed to be innocent. In those circumstances, Othello was unable to recognize that Desdemona had a more developed sensibility than he did and was unable to adopt a consistent and coherent attitude of rejecting the prejudices that delegitimized foreigners, blacks and women. Entangled in Iago's plot, he was powerless to distance himself from his own emotions and doubts, his insecurities and prejudices, his rudeness as a soldier. He allowed himself to be dominated by the marks that past suffering had left on his subjectivity. He lacked the strength to stand back and give Desdemona the chance to reaffirm her love and innocence. Othello let his trust in the great woman who had lovingly connected with the human core of his personality fade overnight and, on the other hand, he trusted Iago, an intelligent person, but with an entirely dehumanized personality.

The kind of love that formed between the couple is linked to the possibility of *fully humanizing* social relations. Marx (2010) argues that, in capitalism,

12

the other human being *is just a means* for the individual to achieve their selfish goals, whereas, in a society that overcomes the division into social classes, the relationship between one human being and another can become *an end in itself*, a relationship whose content satisfies the need for human relationship. The erotic love relationship between people can also take place in this way. Iago, on the other hand, is a clear example of an individual whose relationship with another human being turns the other into a simple means to achieve his goals. Along these lines, love is one of the feelings that express the historical desire for the humanization of social relations, so that Marx (2010) pointed out that the quality of the relationship between men and women (not just in the erotic-love sphere) was an indication of the degree of development of a given society. However, in a society based on essentially dehumanizing relations of production, as is the case with relations between capitalists and workers, the quest to build fully humanized relationships is always contradictory, fraught with conflicts of all kinds and at odds with the predominant way people relate to each other. In this sense, if there is such a thing as naivety, it doesn't lie in love itself, but in the lack of perception of the conflicts between experiencing humanized feelings and everyday life in a society dominated by alienation, that is, dehumanization. This doesn't detract from the human value of the love between Othello and Desdemona, nor does it turn it into the foolish sentiment of naive people. On the contrary, it is a humanly superior feeling that seems to be understood by no one in the story apart from the two of them.

Othello and Desdemona's love can also be interpreted along the lines of the contradictions between content and form. Sometimes the form becomes imprisoning. In this case, the form was the type of marriage in which the man becomes the lord of the woman. Although the love between Othello and Desdemona was a more humanized relationship, Desdemona placed herself in a position of submission to her husband and he, in turn, while recognizing his wife's virtues, allowed himself to be dominated by jealousy, a feeling that dehumanizes both the one who is dominated by it and the person who becomes its target. In Othello's speech, we can see the contradictory awareness that sees *the other as property*, but at the same time knows that this transformation of the

human being into property is in conflict with the fact that *the other is not a thing, but a person*:

O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. Yet, 'tis the plague to great ones;
Prerogatives are they less than the base;
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.
Even then this forkèd plague is fated to us
When we do quicken (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 298-299).

Interactions between people are always historically constituted and concrete. In addition to the prejudices of class, gender, race and age, and the limits and contradictions imposed on love by the marriage model, there is also the context of war, since Othello is a general and his life is linked to this environment, while his personal identity is linked to his status as a warrior. In loving Othello as a whole person, Desdemona contradictorily also loved the warrior, but war means death and destruction. It would not be possible to completely separate the lover from the warrior, the human from the inhuman. The personality is not merely the sum of roles that coexist separately, but a dialectically contradictory whole.

What Iago may have considered romantic naivety was, in reality, authentic love, albeit marked by the contradictions of that historical context. For Iago, love is an illusion and naïve, as is any relationship between people that is not driven by selfish interests. This is the pseudo-realism typical of the pragmatism of people adapted to the status quo of an alienated society.

Typical themes and human personality

Lukacs's aesthetics provides categories that can guide the selection of school content; two of them are the *typical*, namely "[...] the concrete configuration of the fundamental contradictions of society in human destinies" (Cotrim, 2011, p. 581); and the *narrative method*, which privileges the narration of human action over naturalizing description. The content of the work acts in confrontation with the reader's life experience, which is enriched because the work, as a totality created in a new form of presentation, is richer than immediately sensible reality. A great work of literature reveals the determinations that make up the essence of behaviors, actions and conflicts that exist concretely at a certain stage in the development of humanity, and are singularized in human destinies. It allows one to experience, within certain limits, the humanizing possibilities of confronting life experience with literary creation, momentarily transcending personal, local, social and national barriers.

14 A series of themes in *Othello* are *typical* of moments in the contradictory process of human development. They manifest themselves singularly in the play, while being connected through many mediations to the historical problems of humanity. The typical character has the merit of articulating the universal in the singular, not being pure unrepeatable singularity, nor an abstract universal, a mere receptacle for theoretical abstractions, or a simple "[...] spokesperson for a people or a social class" (Frederico, 2015, p. 114). The typical stands out from the average characters in a similar condition, and is remarkable for their way of speaking or dressing, a certain quirk, originality or daring behavior, while still showing the essential determinations of that situation. The characters and situations in *The Tragedy of Othello* are exemplary at *embodying subjective density and social objectivity*: there has never been another envious person like Iago, another unhappy person like Othello, another innocent person like Desdemona; despite this, they embody contradictions that objectively exist in the age of alienation, a historical period marked by class struggle and the social division of labor.

The content and form of the characters are important for a complete experience. Othello's composition as a protagonist is first determined by his character as a foreigner and a black man in a contradictory position: that of a military chief of whites, and of a nation that is not his by birthright. Pereira (2017) warns that analyses involving race and ethnicity in Othello have often been out of step with historical knowledge about the context of the play. In fact, there was already stereotyping around Moorish-Islamic and white-Christian characters in other English plays from Shakespeare's time, with the former conveying cruelty and the latter wisdom and dignity (Jones, 1965). Hunter (1978), in his analysis of Othello, also pointed to the roots of this stigma in medieval Christian symbolism, which associates the color black with sin, death, animality and sexual depravity. Both consider that the play questioned these stereotypes, given that Othello does not display them. Jones observed that the stereotypical discourse was restricted to characters of low moral value, also criticizing the stereotype of the dignified and noble white man. Similarly, Orkin (1987) pointed out scenes in the play that are frankly racist, but whose action is restricted to those suspect characters. For D'Amico (1991), a virtue of the play is that it shows how someone destroys themselves by incorporating a stereotype of themselves, and by assuming a conception of the world that dehumanizes them.

These critics, in their enthusiasm for the potential of the play to challenge stereotypes, ended up being accused of redeeming possible contradictions in the work, given that, in some episodes in the history of its staging, the play appealed to racist audiences, who were satisfied to see that Iago's bad character was justified in the successful task of bringing out Othello's supposed hidden essence. This is another typical situation present in Shakespeare's work as a whole, according to Lukács (1965): *the split between ethics and politics*. Iago's action, using the worst means, does not reveal any hidden essence of Othello, but intentionally produces attitudes that are linked to the other contradictions of this tragic hero, destabilizing him. Thus, we don't agree with the idea that the play presents Othello as an "evil" to be atoned for, because his antipodes are not a positive moral antithesis, representative of dignity; on the contrary, they represent what the play leads us to disapprove of, such as the manipulation of

one human being by another, malice, slander, envy, cynicism, intelligence at the service of destroying the lives of others, and violence. Two things need to be distinguished. One is whether or not Shakespeare, as an individual, reproduced racist ideas and behavior. This discussion is up to the English playwright's biographers. The other is the discussion about Shakespeare's theatrical work, and whether the tragedy *Othello* fuels racism. Here, our position is that, on the contrary, the text of the play is opposed to prejudices based on social class, race, gender and age.

Analyzing the character Iago, the great mobilizer of the reader's indignant passions, Pereira (2017) recalls the tradition of identifying him with the figure of vice, that is, a character whose function is summarized as an allegory of evil in its pure state, of wickedness for no reason. However, the Iago of the play's opening scene already exposes his resentment at having been disadvantaged by *Othello* to the detriment of Cassio. As a product of a specific country with particular institutions, he is more than just an allegory¹. The Brazilian critic suggests, based on Stephan Greenblatt, that Iago was "[...] an expression of a new spirit that moved away from the religious, political and social ideals hegemonic in the Middle Ages until the Renaissance [...]" (Pereira, 2017, p. 30), of a moment of greater individual autonomy and open to "self-modeling", but which here degrades into "evil perversion", given the persistence of a society still based on privileges and prerogatives. Here's the twist: Iago and Cassio express that shift in value from birth to merit, as bourgeois institutions gradually supplant medieval ones.

From unmotivated malice comes the deformation of personality through the historical phenomenon of alienation: Iago's hatred is driven by class and hierarchy issues, and his procedures are forms of contact with his social environment. According to Márkus (2015): the formation of personality comes about through concrete interaction with the objectified world (abilities, needs, forms of contact and behavior), and socio-historical conditions are conditions of individuality that are appropriated and internalized by the individual with some degree of freedom - socio-historical conditions are not fatalities.

The female characters are also evidence of psychological density and the articulation of typical conflicts. In addition to Desdemona's conflict with the dominant form of her relationship with her father and husband, we remember Emilia, who oscillates between critical realism and pragmatism. Her actions range from submission to Iago to being a critical conscience of Desdemona, whom she defends with her life without expecting anything in return. One of her speeches stands out, in which we see her yearning for content that expresses contradictions with the prevailing forms of her time:

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us. Or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite.
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is it frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 361-362).

17

In view of this wealth of themes and literary creation devices, our analysis of this Shakespearean tragedy aims to support the argument that this text can be worked on in secondary schools, so as to broaden, deepen and enrich the students' view of human life. The school reader of Othello will have a wider range of determinations and relationships on various themes, denaturalizing them and perceiving them as human constructs. It goes without saying that in

Othello, tragic catharsis, generating identification with the human core of the characters struck down by the catastrophe, is closely related to catharsis in the historical-critical sense, the opportunity to make a qualitative leap in the individual's relationship with reality.

This cathartic efficacy depends on a correct reading, which is not always achieved. For subjectivism, everyone sees what they want in the work, and there are no objective criteria for considering one interpretation more valid than another, denying the dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity in the production and enjoyment of art. On the other hand, we understand that the work imposes parameters for its reception; there is a truth in the plot intentionally devised by the author - in this case, that Desdemona didn't betray her husband, that Othello didn't have a hidden evil essence, and that Iago's inhumanity has materiality and reflects the relationships produced by humanity itself. This doesn't mean that a text should answer all the questions or resolve all the conflicts that run through it, but we shouldn't disregard the information objectively provided in the plot. Nor does it mean that content cannot be reinterpreted in the light of the problems of each era². Rather, it is a call to complete the meaning of the work with life experience, but not to assign a new purpose to the characters or the plot. There is a margin (which varies from work to work and from author to author) for individual interpretation. If this didn't exist, the dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity in art would be nullified, just as this dialectic is nullified by subjectivism. Recognizing the variability of interpretations for spoken and written discourses does not imply ignorance of the fact that there are objective limits to these variations, and that traversing these limits marks the difference between acceptable and unacceptable interpretations.

In addition to the correct interpretation of the text, there is also the question of the work's effects on each person, which depends not only on the text, but also on the "before" of the individual's life, including life experiences and the degree of development of each individual's aesthetic receptivity. It's about the aesthetic effectiveness of the work, that is to say:

[...] a struggle between past experiences and new impressions provoked by art. The terrain of this struggle is precisely the

correspondence of totalities [...]. The effectiveness of great art consists precisely in the fact that *the new, the original, the significant is victorious over the old experiences of the receptive subject* (Lukács, 2018, p. 266, our italics).

This efficacy may or may not occur: either because of the ideal or artistic defects of a given work, or because of the ideological or artistic immaturity of the receptive subject him or herself. In discussing the peculiarity of the aesthetic and its categories, Lukács presupposes an already developed aesthetic receptivity. Unfortunately, Lukács didn't have time to carry out his plans to investigate the area of aesthetics that deals with receptivity. Nevertheless, we venture to say that this is a task for art and literature teachers who, by mastering the principles of aesthetics and carrying out an immanently correct reading of the literary work, can pass it on. The evidence we have for this comes from a passage by Marx (2011) which is also quoted by Lukács:

The art object - like any other product - creates an audience capable of appreciating art and taking pleasure in beauty. Production therefore produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object (Lukács, 2018, p. 267).

How cathartic the reading of Othello can be for a person will depend not only on the school's approach to this work, but also on the before and after of this process, which can last a lifetime, since it is hoped that the individual's relationship with the artistic work will not be limited to the period of school education. Bearing in mind the non-concession to relativism, it is valid for the literature teacher to try to set the students' subjectivity in motion based on the objectivity of the literary work. In this sense, we use the concept of the "cunning of reason" to suggest that this movement, initiated by educational work, transforms the richness of the work's objectivity into a movement of the students' subjectivity, in a kind of posited causality (i.e. having a prefigured effect, expected as a consequence of this intentionally posited cause and effect relationship), but using the idea of causality in a very relative way, since we are dealing with the human psyche and not purely causal processes (Duarte; Silva; Anjos, 2021). In other words, through pedagogical work with artistic works, the aim is to set

students' subjectivity in motion in certain directions, seeking particular effects, but never losing sight of the fact that students are subjects who often react in unexpected ways to attempts at educational influence.

We see art as a resource capable of transforming the subjectivity of individuals, making it possible to experience humanity condensed beyond the superficiality, pragmatism and immediacy of everyday life. The cunning of reason does not lie in adapting to reality as it is, nor in trying to overcome it in an idealistic way, but in paying attention to the possibilities of transformation and establishing strategies for its realization. In this way, we believe that the play analyzed presents itself as an instrument through which reason cunningly transforms itself (Duarte, 2016).

Final thoughts on the classics and coursework

The formation of a critical conception of the world is, at the same time, the presupposition and purpose of education according to Historical-Critical Pedagogy, a project made possible by the enrichment of the individual's personality through the appropriation of objectified human wealth. The tragedy of Othello, like other literary classics, presents the student with "[...] out-of-the-ordinary personalities who marked the world with a new sign [...]" (Snyders, 1974, p. 21); they support the formation of an original personality, not a copy of those models. The genius of Machado de Assis, a reader and translator of various classics (Ferreira, 2012) is a more than appropriate example, given the relationship between Othello and the novel Dom Casmurro³, Machado was no less original for standing on the letters of the giants. Othello destroyed himself by incorporating a worldview that deprived him of his humanity, but that doesn't mean that incorporating other people's ideas is always destructive. The conclusion of this article is that, just as Machado de Assis incorporated objectified artistic wealth and this, rather than restricting his creativity and genius, served as an impetus, the widespread notion that reading the classics tends to reproduce dominant ideas, Eurocentrism, colonialism, etc. has been challenged. In reaching these final considerations, we believe that, using the interpretations we

offer from Lukács' Marxist aesthetics (2018, 2023), teachers can set students' subjectivity in motion in favor of qualitative transformations in their conception of the world, since, as we have argued, the work can be aesthetically effective in guiding the yearning for the humanization of social relations.

If we agree with Lukács that art is a form of reflection of reality, the aim of Literature Teaching is to instruct students how to relate to human reality through literature and, as such, broaden and deepen their self-awareness as members of the humankind. Seen in this way, the object of Literature Teaching is the literary reflection of reality, not aesthetic appreciation as an end in itself, nor teaching limited to literary historiography. It is up to the teacher of this subject to get to know reality and make it their content, mediated by works capable of reflecting it intensively, that is, in the tendencies of its development, and in its processes of permanence and rupture. In this article, we believe we have pointed out that a classic is not merely a production by a renowned author, appreciated by experts in the field, but a work capable of reflecting reality in its entirety, of making its audience experience reality and ensuring that the new experienced in the aesthetic process is victorious over the old, albeit in a highly mediated way. To this end, it is necessary to overcome the fallacies that say that all readings have the same value, that any reading is always valid, or that any interpretation can be accepted.

In addition to analyzing Shakespeare's work through Lukács's aesthetics, the research sought to identify the school content present in *Othello*, by recognizing *characters and situations typical of the historical dialectic between humanization and dehumanization*. In possession of the method presented, each teacher will be able to do this, rescuing a relatively artisanal dimension of the work, avoiding its fragmentation, mechanization and alienation, as is the case with curricula geared towards skills training and printed or digital teaching materials that aim to control teaching step by step, rendering teachers and students mere executors of a process without subjects. Overcoming the alienation of the work involves the need to provide the means and conditions for its free and universal production, and these means include the appropriation of theoretical thought and mastery of disciplinary content.

Finally, we hope to have contributed with references, parameters and reflections that stimulate the direct and intentional production, through educational work, of personalities oriented towards the desire that the relationship between one human being and another should increasingly be an end in itself, satisfying the historical longing for the humanization of social relations, as Desdemona and Othello's love desired. An education committed to the production of a sensibility like that to which the heroine of the play was committed until her last moments; a sensibility that is certainly incompatible with and unsubsmissive to capitalist brutality, which today is deeply hostile not only to humanity, but to life as a whole.

Notes

1. Lukács considered (1965, p. 139) that Shakespeare: "[...] manages to preserve the popular exterior forms of the Middle Ages, while at the same time transforming them into the artistic vehicle of the great new tragedies that emerged in the Renaissance: those of the conflict between individuality and social sentiment".
2. Lukács (2013) mentions, as an example, the different meanings of Prometheus in Hesiod and Euripides. The former considers him to be a duly punished transgressor; the latter, the bearer of light and benefactor of humanity.
3. There are direct references to the play in this novel: Chapter 62 is entitled "A hint of Iago"; in it, the opportunist and social climber José Dias also inoculates Bentinho with jealousy. Chapter 135 is entitled "Othello": Bento Santiago watches the play, making connections with his own drama. The chapter shows someone who doesn't see in himself the ridiculousness he sees in others.

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Received 8 April 2025

Accepted 9 June 2025



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