Desdemona
Victim
Elizabethan Ideal

- Pure
- Beautiful
- Virtuous
- Loyal and loving wife
Brief Overview

- Iago is a 'hellish villain'
- Desdemona is a 'heavenly force'
- Innocent victim of Othello's misdirected passion
- In a cruel, selfish, destructive world, she represents selfless love
Pure and Beautiful

- Inexperienced in the ways of the world
- 'A maiden never bold' (Brabantio)
- Was initially frightened of Othello
- 'a maid / That paragons description and wild fame' (Cassio)
- 'an exquisite lady' (Cassio)
'the divine Desdemona' (Cassio)

'a most fresh and delicate creature' (Cassio)

'Now I do love her too' (Iago)
Courageous and Loyal

- Defends her love for Othello in front of the senators
- 'my heart's subdued / Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord'
Has an Idealised View of Othello

- She is young and romantic
- 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate'
- Cannot see that there is more to Othello than this
- Utter devotion and loyalty blinds her to the reality
Naive and Inexperienced

- Iago exploits her innocence: ‘And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all.
- Asks Emilia if women could really be unfaithful and cannot believe that there could be women who 'abuse their husbands / In such gross kind'
- Her goodness contributes to her downfall
- Sincerely wishes to help Cassio
- Shows immaturity in continuing to plead Cassio's case when Othello is obviously becoming vexed
- Intrudes on Othello's sphere
- 'But shall't be shortly? / ...Shall't be tonight at supper?... Tomorrow dinner, then?'
- Her description of Cassio as a 'suitor' strikes an ominous note as it has a double meaning
Errors of Judgement

- Immaturity
- Relies too heavily on Othello’s love
- Stubborn
- Tactless
- We know how Iago will twist her words
- We know Othello is less perfect than she believes
‘I will refuse you nothing.’ (Othello)

Othello says that if a time comes when he does not love Desdemona, ‘Chaos is come again’. Note of prophecy and danger in his words.

Emotional blackmail - reinstating Cassio is proof of Othello’s love for her. Tactless and imperceptive.
Important Changes - Temptation Scene

- Desdemona moves from being active to passive
- She lies about the handkerchief but still refuses to see Othello’s jealousy and excuses his behaviour
- Othello stops listening to Desdemona and begins to listen instead to Iago
Strong-willed to Passive

- Believes initially she can ‘tame’ Othello

- ‘His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift’

- Teases Othello and is able to hold her own in verbal battles with Iago
Change

- Cannot cope with the change in Othello
- Lies about the handkerchief rather than admitting the truth - very different from earlier girl who stood up to her father and expressed her views in front of the sentators
- Says of Othello’s jealousy: ‘I never saw this before’
- Bewildered by his anger: ‘My lord? / Are you wise? / What, is he angry?’
- Meekly takes the blame when he hits her: ‘I will not stay to offend you,’ but retains her composure and dignity: ‘I have not deserved this’.
Crumbling Marriage

- Desdemona refuses to believe the relationship is failing
- Othello now believes it was based on lies from the start
Public Display of Anger

- Othello’s striking Desdemona marks a turning point
- He humiliates her and speaks cruelly of her in front of Ludovico and the other senators
- ‘Sir, she can turn and turn and yet go on.’
- ‘And she’s obedient, as you say, / Very obedient’
Tragic Figure

- Turns to Iago for advice
- ‘What shall I do to win my lord again? / Good friend… I know not how I lost him’ (Act IV scene ii)
Senses death is close

Asks Emilia to put their wedding sheets on the bed, as if this will rekindle the love of the early days of her marriage

Tells Emilia ‘If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of these sheets’
Death

- Realises too late that innocence will not save her
- ‘why I should fear I know not / Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel fear.’
- Her cry of despair on hearing of Cassio’s death is misinterpreted by Othello: ‘weepst thou for him to my face?’
- Meekly accepts that she will be murdered: ‘Then heaven / Have mercy on me’.
Final Impression

- Refuses to blame Othello: ‘Nobody, I myself’
- Life has no meaning without his love
- Loved her husband dearly, but in the end was undone by her innocence and goodness