

Guide to Othello

Key Facts

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full title · The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice

author · William Shakespeare

type of work · Play

genre · Tragedy

language · English

time and place written · Between 1601 and 1604, England

date of first publication · 1622

publisher · Thomas Walkley

tone · Shakespeare clearly views the events of the play as tragic. He seems to view the marriage between Desdemona and Othello as noble and heroic, for the most part.

setting (time) · Late sixteenth century, during the wars between Venice and Turkey

setting (place) · Venice in Act I; the island of Cyprus thereafter

protagonist · Othello

major conflict · Othello and Desdemona marry and attempt to build a life together, despite their differences in age, race, and experience. Their marriage is sabotaged by the envious Iago, who convinces Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful.

rising action · Iago tells the audience of his scheme, arranges for Cassio to lose his position as lieutenant, and gradually insinuates to Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful.

climax · The climax occurs at the end of Act III, scene iii, when Othello kneels with Iago and vows not to change course until he has achieved bloody revenge.

falling action · Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room and later arranges a conversation with Cassio, which Othello watches and sees as "proof" that Cassio and Desdemona have slept together. Iago unsuccessfully attempts to kill Cassio, and Othello smothers Desdemona with a pillow. Emilia exposes Iago's deceptions, Othello kills himself, and Iago is taken away to be tortured.

themes · The incompatibility of military heroism and love; the danger of isolation

motifs · Sight and blindness; plants; animals; hell, demons, and monsters

symbols · The handkerchief; the song "Willow"

foreshadowing · Othello and Desdemona's speeches about love foreshadow the disaster to come; Othello's description of his past and of his wooing of Desdemona foreshadow his suicide speech; Desdemona's "Willow" song and remarks to Emilia in Act IV, scene iii, foreshadow her death

Analysis of Major Characters

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Othello

Beginning with the opening lines of the play, Othello remains at a distance from much of the action that concerns and affects him. Roderigo and Iago refer ambiguously to a "he" or "him" for much of the first scene. When they begin to specify whom they are talking about, especially once they stand beneath Brabantio's window, they do so with racial epithets, not names. These include "the Moor" (I.i.57), "the thick-lips" (I.i.66), "an old black ram" (I.i.88), and "a Barbary horse" (I.i.113). Although Othello appears at

the beginning of the second scene, we do not hear his name until well into Act I, scene iii (I.iii.48). Later, Othello's will be the last of the three ships to arrive at Cyprus in Act II, scene i; Othello will stand apart while Cassio and Iago supposedly discuss Desdemona in Act IV, scene i; and Othello will assume that Cassio is dead without being present when the fight takes place in Act V, scene i. Othello's status as an outsider may be the reason he is such easy prey for Iago.

Although Othello is a cultural and racial outsider in Venice, his skill as a soldier and leader is nevertheless valuable and necessary to the state, and he is an integral part of Venetian civic society. He is in great demand by the duke and senate, as evidenced by Cassio's comment that the senate "sent about three several quests" to look for Othello (I.ii.46). The Venetian government trusts Othello enough to put him in full martial and political command of Cyprus; indeed, in his dying speech, Othello reminds the Venetians of the "service" he has done their state (V.ii.348).

Those who consider Othello their social and civic peer, such as Desdemona and Brabantio, nevertheless seem drawn to him because of his exotic qualities. Othello admits as much when he tells the duke about his friendship with Brabantio. He says, "[Desdemona's] father loved me, oft invited me, / Still questioned me the story of my life / From year to year" (I.iii.127–129). Othello is also able to captivate his peers with his speech. The duke's reply to Othello's speech about how he wooed Desdemona with his tales of adventure is: "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.iii.170).

Othello sometimes makes a point of presenting himself as an outsider, whether because he recognizes his exotic appeal or because he is self-conscious of and defensive about his difference from other Venetians. For example, in spite of his obvious eloquence in Act I, scene iii, he protests, "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (I.iii.81–82). While Othello is never rude in his speech, he does allow his eloquence to suffer as he is put under increasing strain by Iago's plots. In the final moments of the play, Othello regains his composure and, once again, seduces both his onstage and offstage audiences with his words. The speech that precedes his suicide is a tale that could woo almost anyone. It is the tension between Othello's victimization at the hands of a foreign culture and his own willingness to torment himself that makes him a tragic figure rather than simply Iago's ridiculous puppet.

Iago

Possibly the most heinous villain in Shakespeare, Iago is fascinating for his most terrible characteristic: his utter lack of convincing motivation for his actions. In the first scene, he claims to be angry at Othello for having passed him over for the position of lieutenant (I.i. 7–32). At the end of Act I, scene iii, Iago says he thinks Othello may have slept with his wife, Emilia: "It is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office" (I.iii.369–370). Iago mentions this suspicion again at the end of Act II, scene i, explaining that he lusts after Desdemona because he wants to get even with Othello "wife for wife" (II.i.286). None of these claims seems to adequately explain Iago's deep hatred of Othello, and Iago's lack of motivation—or his inability or unwillingness to express his true motivation—makes his actions all the more terrifying. He is willing to take revenge on anyone—Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, even Emilia—at the slightest provocation and enjoys the pain and damage he causes.

Iago is often funny, especially in his scenes with the foolish Roderigo, which serve as a showcase of Iago's manipulative abilities. He seems almost to wink at the audience as he revels in his own skill. As entertained spectators, we find ourselves on Iago's side when he is with Roderigo, but the interactions between the two also reveal a streak of cowardice in Iago—a cowardice that becomes manifest in the final scene, when Iago kills his own wife (V.ii.231–242).

Iago's murder of Emilia could also stem from the general hatred of women that he displays. Some readers have suggested that Iago's true, underlying motive for persecuting Othello is his homosexual love for the general. He certainly seems to take great pleasure in preventing Othello from enjoying marital happiness, and he expresses his love for Othello frequently and effusively.

It is Iago's talent for understanding and manipulating the desires of those around him that makes him

both a powerful and a compelling figure. Iago is able to take the handkerchief from Emilia and know that he can deflect her questions; he is able to tell Othello of the handkerchief and know that Othello will not doubt him; he is able to tell the audience, "And what's he then that says I play the villain," and know that it will laugh as though he were a clown (II.iii.310). Though the most inveterate liar, Iago inspires all of the play's characters the trait that is most lethal to Othello: trust.

Desdemona

Desdemona is a more plausible, well-rounded figure than much criticism has given her credit for. Arguments that see Desdemona as stereotypically weak and submissive ignore the conviction and authority of her first speech ("My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty" [I.iii.179–180]) and her terse fury after Othello strikes her ("I have not deserved this" [IV.i.236]). Similarly, critics who argue that Desdemona's slightly bizarre bawdy jesting with Iago in Act II, scene i, is either an interpolation not written by Shakespeare or a mere vulgarity ignore the fact that Desdemona is young, sexual, and recently married. She later displays the same chiding, almost mischievous wit in Act III, scene iii, lines 61–84, when she attempts to persuade Othello to forgive Cassio.

Desdemona is at times a submissive character, most notably in her willingness to take credit for her own murder. In response to Emilia's question, "O, who hath done this deed?" Desdemona's final words are, "Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell" (V.ii.133–134). The play, then, depicts Desdemona contradictorily as a self-effacing, faithful wife and as a bold, independent personality. This contradiction may be intentional, meant to portray the way Desdemona herself feels after defending her choice of marriage to her father in Act I, scene iii, and then almost immediately being put in the position of defending her fidelity to her husband. She begins the play as a supremely independent person, but midway through she must struggle against all odds to convince Othello that she is not too independent. The manner in which Desdemona is murdered—smothered by a pillow in a bed covered in her wedding sheets—is symbolic: she is literally suffocated beneath the demands put on her fidelity. Since her first lines, Desdemona has seemed capable of meeting or even rising above those demands. In the end, Othello stifles the speech that made Desdemona so powerful.

Tragically, Desdemona is apparently aware of her imminent death. She, not Othello, asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed, and she asks Emilia to bury her in these sheets should she die first. The last time we see Desdemona before she awakens to find Othello standing over her with murder in his eyes, she sings a song she learned from her mother's maid: "She was in love; and he proved mad / And did forsake her. She had a song of willow. / . . . / And she died singing it. That song tonight / Will not go from my mind" (IV.iii.27–30). Like the audience, Desdemona seems able only to watch as her husband is driven insane with jealousy. Though she maintains to the end that she is "guiltless," Desdemona also forgives her husband (V.ii.133). Her forgiveness of Othello may help the audience to forgive him as well.

Othello Character Introduction

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A preliminary assumption may be that, because Othello kills his beloved wife after the devious machinations of Iago, then perhaps Othello is as much a victim of Iago's evil as Desdemona is of Othello's wrath. Some may argue that the sin of Iago - to plot the downfall of the Moor - is worse because it blossoms in a diabolical, calculating mind, as opposed to the sin of Othello which is committed because he has become a mere pawn in Iago's hands, blinded by hurt, ruined by his own naivete. However, it can be shown that Othello allows himself to be manipulated. Iago's suggestion of the infidelity of Desdemona provides just the excuse Othello needs to justify the destruction of the wife he believes cannot truly love him. The argument can be made that Desdemona's murder is a result of Othello's pride and rush to judgment and, as a result, he must be held accountable.

Othello, unlike Iago, is capable of forming strong, loving relationships; his genuine friendship with Iago confirms this fact. Othello allows himself to be influenced by Iago, and allows Iago to bring out his most evil characteristics. Although Iago may be the more innately evil of the two, Othello does little to prevent his base instincts from becoming dominant. To see why Othello commits his crime and why he has to be held accountable for it, we must examine his motive. It can be claimed that what actually causes Othello to commit murder is not his being mentally weakened and manipulated by Iago, but rather his own pride and lack of confidence which he allows to gain control. Othello is a strong leader, self-assured in his ability to handle military matters, but he is insecure with his personal qualities. He is in a new city with different customs. He has a new bride - a young and beautiful girl - whom he loves but does not know well. He is unsure why Desdemona would choose him for her husband, and can only fathom one explanation, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd." (1.3.167)

The Moor surely is aware of the widespread prejudice in Venice and certainly must question why Desdemona would defy her culture and fellow white Venetians by marrying a black man. Othello has his doubts about Desdemona before Iago begins his scheming. Even though his wife shows nothing but love for him, Othello cannot believe in her love wholeheartedly. His answer to his doubts is, initially, to put Desdemona on a pedestal, making her an "emblem of purity and trustworthiness" (Kenneth Muir, *Aspects of Othello*, 17). 'Tis not to make me jealous

To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well.

Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw

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The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,

For she had eyes, and chose me.(3.3.208-14)

Othello is going reach the precarious conclusion that Desdemona's compassion and virtue alone enable her to love the unlovable. When Iago does shatter the Moor's idealistic image of Desdemona, he is simply reinforcing what Othello believes deep down to be totally possible: that Desdemona could love another man. Iago cleverly argues that Desdemona is quite capable of betrayal because she has already betrayed her own race and breeding to marry a Moor: Ay, there's the point! as (to be bold with you)

Not to affect many proposed matches

Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,

Whereto we see in all things nature tends ...

Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,

May fall to match you with her country forms,

And happily repent. (3.3.228-34)

With Iago's validation of his suspicions, the Moor's barbaric nature can surface. His warrior instincts can take over, which is exactly what Othello wanted all along. He is comfortable only in the role of the aggressor. Why does Othello not make a better effort to combat Iago's accusations? It is true that he asks for some material proof of his wife's treachery, but he does not at all question the evidence when it is laid before him. As far as Othello is concerned a trusted friend and soldier has confirmed what he himself suspected all along and that is proof enough -- reason enough to condemn her to death.

The most damaging evidence that Othello is fully reasonable, and rendering this twisted justice out of pride and bitterness, comes In Act 4. Othello has had an epileptic seizure and is clearly shaken, yet it is obvious that he is still in full possession of his mental faculties. His low self-esteem led him to believe in Desdemona's betrayal, but his fierce warrior conceit will force him to make sure she pays dearly for her transgression. Like Iago, plotting his course of destructive action, Othello too plots the death of Desdemona with calculating reason: Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be calm to-night; for she shall not live. No, my heart is turn'd to stone. (4.1.178-9)

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Othello is now concerned only with rendering justice:Iago: Do it not with poison. Strangle her in bed, even the

bed she hath contaminated. (4.1.202)

Othello: Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good! (4.1.204)

Othello claims that he is not seeking revenge. However, by refusing Desdemona the chance to defend herself, it is not clear how his form of justice differs from pure vengeance. The Moor is going to make sure the adulteress pays for her crime and her deception. After all, she made him look like a fool: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). Othello is going to save others from falling into her diabolical trap; he is acting as judge and executioner without permitting Desdemona an attempt to prove her innocence.

One must ask if these are the actions of a mentally weak man, a mere puppet in the hands of Iago? Othello cannot trust his wife on earth because he is incapable of understanding why she loves him and, therefore, cannot believe her love is genuine. After she is dead, he will be free to love his idealistic image of Desdemona without worry:Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, And love thee after ... (5.2.18-9)

Othello kills Desdemona under the guise of righteous indignation and will not admit his true motive. When Othello finds out Desdemona truly is the pure and innocent emblem he created in his mind, he is obligated to commit suicide. The Moor must again render justice, this time upon himself. Othello's remorse and subsequent suicide is the only reason why we should not place him on the same villainous level as Iago. But, at the same time, his feelings of guilt after-the-fact cannot be allowed to exonerate him. Othello has an obligation to allow Desdemona to contend the charge of adultery. He chooses to disregard that obligation in favour of satisfying his own fixations. It would be easier for us to defend Othello and cast all the blame on Iago. Iago is an aberration, but Othello is 'Everyman', fighting an internal battle between good and evil. It would feel better to see Othello as a mental weakling, driven insane by his pain and confusion. We could then say with certainty that he did not choose evil over good. But we cannot exonerate him. Othello's sin against Desdemona is as heinous as Iago's sin against Othello. Othello proves it with his own words:Desdemona: Kill me to-morrow; let me live to-night!
Othello: Nay, an you strive-
Desdemona: But half an hour!

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Othello: Being done, there is no pause.

Desdemona: But while I say one prayer!

Othello: It is too late. (5.2.80-5)

Othello plot summary

Othello: Plot Summary

Act I, Scene I

The play opens on a warm Venetian night, where a conversation is underway between Roderigo, a gentleman, and Iago, a soldier under Othello's command. Roderigo, who has been courting Desdemona, is upset with the news that she has eloped with Othello, a great Moorish warrior who is now a general in the service of the ruler of Venice. Iago confesses to Roderigo that he hates the Moor because another soldier, Michael Cassio, has been promoted to lieutenant instead of Iago. He reveals that he only remains in Othello's service to facilitate his plans of revenge: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (I.i.42). It is not surprising that Iago sees Roderigo as a useful puppet in his evil schemes. He tells Roderigo that they should first inform Desdemona's father of the Moor's marriage to his daughter. Her

father, prejudiced and ignorant, will surely be livid when he hears that a black man has wed Desdemona. Roderigo hopes that her father, Brabantio, will use his political status to see that their marriage is quickly annulled. But Iago knows that the Duke would not jeopardize Othello's desire or ability to fight for Venice in the Turkish wars by punishing him for marrying a Venetian nobleman's daughter. Othello's punishment for wedding Desdemona is not part of Iago's plan. His plan at the moment is only to make Othello believe that he is a trustworthy confidant. When Othello is confronted by Brabantio, Iago will be there to lend his counsel and support. Iago and Roderigo stand below Brabantio's bedroom window and Roderigo calls his name. To ensure a response, Iago adds, Awake! What ho, Brabantio! Thieves! thieves! thieves!

Look to your home, your daughter, and your bags!

Thieves! thieves! (I.i.79-81)

Brabantio comes to the window and Iago tells him to dress at once and come down, for "an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe" (I.i.88). Unable to understand Iago's reference to the union of Othello and Desdemona, Brabantio demands to know why they are bothering him at such a late hour. Roderigo explains that his daughter is in the 'clasp of a lascivious Moor' and Brabantio rushes into Desdemona's room to find it empty. He runs downstairs and out into the street without even changing into his day clothes. Furious, he demands to know if they have married and when Roderigo answers yes, Brabantio cries 'treason'. Roderigo tells him where he can find Othello and Brabantio hurries off in a rage.

Act I, Scene II

The scene opens on a Venetian street where Iago has joined Othello and his attendants. Iago is quick to report his conversation with Roderigo to Othello. Of course, Iago's retells the story to accommodate his cunning plan. He says that Roderigo "prated" and spoke such scurvy and provoking terms

Against your honor

That with the little godliness I have

I did full hard forbear him. (I.ii.6-9).

Cassio arrives with news that the Duke requires Othello at an urgent war meeting. Brabantio and Roderigo enter and Brabantio lashes out at Othello: "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?" (I.ii.62-4). Othello responds to the verbal attack with grace and dignity. Brabantio demands that Othello go to prison. Othello calmly tells him that he cannot for the Duke needs him at once. Brabantio decides to take the matter to the Duke, since he is already awaiting Othello. He is sure that the Duke will brand Othello a criminal as he has done, sure that his is "not an idle cause" (I.ii.95).

Act I, Scene III

The Duke and his senators gather in the council chamber. They are concerned with the news that a Turkish fleet is planning an attack on Cyprus, which is governed by Venice. They are discussing a counter attack which will be led by Othello, when Brabantio comes storming in, accusing Othello of corrupting his daughter, Desdemona, with "spells and medicines bought of mountebanks". Othello asks that they summon Desdemona, for her testimony is the only defense he needs. While they wait for her, Othello describes to the Duke the real way in which he won Desdemona's heart. She arrives, with Iago following her. She tells the Duke and her shocked father that she did fall in love with Othello for the "visage in his mind" (252). She begs to be allowed to go with Othello to Cyprus. The Duke grants her permission to accompany Othello, but Othello must leave immediately. Desdemona must meet him there at a later time, and Othello entrusts Iago with her safe passage: "Honest Iago/My Desdemona must I leave to thee" (I.iii.295). The senate adjourns and leave the council chamber, followed by Brabantio, Othello, Desdemona, and all the rest, except for Iago and Roderigo. Iago assures Roderigo that Desdemona's love for Othello is fleeting and that, if Roderigo will come to Cyprus, he will continue scheming to break up the newlyweds. Roderigo agrees and leaves to make preparations to sail for Cyprus. Once alone, Iago reveals phase two of his evil plan -- the destruction of Michael Cassio, the soldier who received the promotion from Othello. He will make Othello believe that Cassio is Desdemona's secret lover, thereby

ruining both of his enemies with the same lie.

Act II, Scene I

Act II opens in Cyprus where Montano, the Venetian governor and his friends discuss a tempest that might have destroyed the Turkish fleet. A messenger comes in with the news that the enemy ships have indeed been pulled under by the waves. But they soon begin to fear that the very same storm has taken the lives of Othello and his crew. Cassio arrives, confirming that Othello cannot be located. One ship does land, carrying Iago, Desdemona, Roderigo, and Iago's wife, Emilia, who has come to look after Desdemona. Desdemona is shaken with fear for her husband, but, much like her warrior husband, she is brave and steady, and keeps her worry to herself. She converses with Iago and Emilia, and is sure to include Cassio in the discussion. Cassio is an old and beloved friend of Othello's and he too is afraid that the ship has been lost at sea. Out of this great concern for Othello's safety, Cassio takes Desdemona by the hand. Iago delights in this overt display of affection that he will use against them. A trumpet sounds and to everyone's relief Othello enters. He greets Desdemona with a kiss and addresses the crowd, proposing a great feast in celebration of the Venetian victory. All but Iago and Roderigo move from the seaport to the royal castle. Iago tells Roderigo that Cassio is also in love with Desdemona and that, to help their plans, Roderigo should pick a fight with Cassio while he is on duty. This will hurt Cassio's reputation and ruin his friendship with Othello and help keep him apart from Desdemona. Desperate, Roderigo agrees: "I will do this if you can bring it to any opportunity." (II.i.276). They bid each other goodbye and Iago walks off alone. He soliloquizes that he intends to "make the Moor thank and love" him, while at the same time planting thoughts of jealousy in Othello's mind -- thoughts so strong "That judgement cannot cure." (II.i.296)

Act II, Scene II

On a street in Cyprus a herald announces the great victory feast and party that Othello has planned. All the soldiers have full liberty to make merry until eleven o'clock that evening, at which time they must return to their posts.

Act II, Scene III

In the great hall of the castle Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio speak briefly about Iago. Othello tells Cassio that Iago is "most honest". Othello and Desdemona leave and Iago comes in to join Cassio. Iago asks him to partake in a glass of wine. Cassio agrees, but insists that he have only a little, for he has "no brains for drinking". But reason gives way to temptation and soon Cassio is drunk. Although he should know better, Cassio takes his post as usual. Iago sends Roderigo to engage Cassio in the fight and within moments the two come bursting back into the hall, swords clashing. They duel until Othello rushes in and demands that they stop. Disappointed and angered by Cassio's behavior, Othello dismisses him from duty. Othello leaves and Iago convinces Cassio that, in order to regain Othello's favour and his position as lieutenant, he must persuade Desdemona to speak to Othello on his behalf. Cassio leaves, confident that Iago's plan will work to restore his friendship with Othello. Iago is also sure that his plan will be a success, but with much different results. His intent is to make it appear that Desdemona is pleading for her long-time lover. Desdemona will become Iago's most valued pawn: So I will turn her virtue into pitch,

And out of her own goodness make the net

That shall enmesh them all." (II.iii.336-8)

Act III, Scene I

Outside the castle, Cassio has gathered some musicians in the hopes of putting Othello in a good mood. Cassio asks Emilia if she will grant him access to visit Desdemona. Iago overhears and offers to fetch Desdemona at once. Desdemona agrees to an interview with Cassio and Emilia shows him to Desdemona's chamber.

Act III, Scene II

In this short scene Othello makes plans to inspect some parts of the fortifications built by his troops. The

purpose of this scene is to explain why Othello is not initially present when Desdemona meets with Cassio. Iago had planned to concoct a story to ensure Othello was absent for Cassio's visit, but luck has made Iago's job easier indeed.

Act III, Scene III

The scene shifts to the garden of the castle. Cassio asks Desdemona to speak to Othello and convince him that he is still a trustworthy soldier and friend. Desdemona does not hesitate to help because she knows how deeply Cassio and Othello feel for one another. She longs for them to reconcile: "You do love my lord/You have known him long" (III.iii.10-1). In a moment of brilliant dramatic irony, Desdemona innocently professes her undying support for Cassio: Assure thee

If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it

To the last article. My lord shall never rest;

I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;

His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;

I'll intermingle everything he does

with Cassio's suit. (III.iii 20-6)

Othello returns to the castle and first greets Iago. They go together to see Desdemona and they catch a glimpse of Cassio leaving out the back entrance. Under his breath, Iago is quick to add "Ha! I like not that" (III.iii.34). Othello asks what Iago means by such a statement. Confused, he further asks if that was really Cassio that just parted from his wife. Iago, in the midst of administering his first dose of poison, replies "Cassio, my lord?/No sure, I cannot think it/That he would steal away so guilty-like/Seeing you coming" (III.iii.37-40). Desdemona rushes over to Othello and immediately begins to plead for Cassio. So adamant is she that Othello agrees to a future meeting with Cassio to begin a reconciliation: "Prithee no more. Let him come when he will/I will deny thee nothing (III.iii.75). Happy with Othello's answer, Desdemona leaves the garden and Iago, alone once again with Othello, continues his evil machinations. He asks if Cassio knew about Othello's love for Desdemona from the beginning of their courtship. Othello says yes and adds that Cassio even served as a matchmaker for the two and "went between [them] very oft". Iago shows deep concern and subtly hints that Cassio's ulterior motive had been all along to engage in an affair with Desdemona. Iago plays upon Othello's insecurities, reminding him that Cassio is younger and more handsome and is a white Venetian citizen. It does not take long before Othello is convinced of Desdemona's betrayal. He chooses the words of Iago over his trust in his wife, and declares "my relief must be to loathe her." (III.iii.268). Desdemona enters with Emilia to call Othello for supper. He tries to hide his inner turmoil but Desdemona can tell that he is troubled. He complains that he has a headache. She pulls out a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries and lovingly puts it to his head, but he pushes it away and it falls to the ground. Othello insists she not bother picking it up, and he tells her that he is ready for supper. For some time Iago has asked Emilia to steal Desdemona's handkerchief and now, alone in the garden, she has the opportunity. Hiding it in her pocket, Emilia wonders what Iago's intentions are for the handkerchief. Iago enters and Emilia proudly shows him the handkerchief. He calls her a "good wench" and she asks him for what purpose will he use it. He refuses to tell her and she leaves on his command. Once alone, Iago reveals what Emilia desired to know: I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin/And let him find it" (III.iii.321-2). Othello returns from his short supper and he is distraught to say the least: "Farewell, tranquil mind" (III.iii.350). Desdemona's treachery consumes his thoughts and he lashes out at Iago, demanding immediate proof of her betrayal. Iago makes up a story that placed him outside Desdemona's chamber a short time before, and he tells Othello that he heard Desdemona professing her love to Cassio. Othello rages "I'll tear her to pieces" and Iago adds that he has seen Cassio with Desdemona's handkerchief -- the first gift Othello ever gave her. Othello cries for "blood! blood! blood!" (III.iii.451) and kneels before his confidant Iago, taking a vow of revenge: Now, by yond marble heaven,

In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here enrage my words. (III.iii.459-62)

Iago also kneels and pledges his loyalty to Othello. In this joint swearing of oaths, Iago and Othello have become partners in evil. Through this act we see Othello's transformation from hero into villain.

Act III, Scene IV

In front of the castle Desdemona and Emilia meet the Clown, a servant to Othello. Desdemona asks him where Cassio might be, and he says that he will search for him. Desdemona is distraught over her missing handkerchief and tells Emilia that she would have rather lost anything else she owns, ironically adding: and but my noble Moor

Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness

As jealous creatures are, it were enough

To put him to ill thinking. (III.iv.22-4)

Othello arrives and cunningly asks Desdemona to lend him the handkerchief, and she replies that she cannot. He tells her the history of the handkerchief, and packs his tale with implied accusations. He next tells her that, if the handkerchief were misplaced, it would be an irrevocable loss. Now afraid of the consequences, she lies to Othello and assures him that it is not lost. But Othello grows more angry and storms out of the room in a rage. Iago and Cassio enter and Cassio asks Desdemona if she continues to plead his case before Othello, and she admits that she cannot because she too has fallen out of favour with her husband. But she promises to discuss Cassio with Othello when she is again on good terms with him. Desdemona and Emilia leave and Cassio stays behind to talk to Bianca, his lover, who has just come out of the castle. Bianca chides him for not giving her the attention she deserves. He pulls out the handkerchief that Iago planted in his chamber and asks Bianca if she will make a copy of the embroidered pattern, for he finds it very beautiful. She agrees and Cassio asks to be alone as he waits for a possible word with Othello.

Act IV, Scene I

On the grounds of the castle, Iago and Othello have found a secluded place in which to continue their discussion of Desdemona's adultery. Although to the audience it appears that they have resumed where they left off at the end of Act III, Shakespeare hints that much time has elapsed and that Iago used those missing hours and days to pollute further Othello's mind. Iago tells Othello that Cassio has admitted to having sex with Desdemona. Othello, overcome with rage, spirals into incoherent hysteria: Lie with her? lie on her? -- We say lie on her when they

believe her. -- Lie with her! Zounds, that's fulsome.

Handkerchief -- confessions -- handkerchief! -- To

To confess, and be hang'd for his labour -- first to be hang'd,
and then to confess. (IV.i.35-40)

He collapses in a trance-like state, oblivious to the outside world. Iago delights in his victory: "Work on/My medicine, work" (IV.i.44-5). Cassio enters and Iago pretends that he has information about Othello but they must discuss it later. Cassio leaves and when Othello regains his composure, Iago tells him that he will work a confession out of Cassio if Othello will secretly listen to their conversation. When Cassio comes back, Iago asks him about Bianca, and he replies that he knows that she loves him but that "She is persuaded I will marry her out of her own love and flattery/not out of promise" (IV.i.127-9). As expected, Othello thinks that Cassio is referring to Desdemona. Bianca comes in holding Desdemona's handkerchief. Livid, she tells Cassio that she was a "fine fool" to take the "minx's token". She demands he give the handkerchief back to the woman it belongs to, whom she assumes is Cassio's lover. Bianca runs away and confused Cassio follows her. Othello steps out of the shadows. His rage has metamorphosed into cool hatred as he calmly asks: "How shall I murder him, Iago?" (IV.i.166). He resolves also to murder Desdemona for her betrayal and discusses with Iago the best way to be rid of her. He asks for poison, but Iago says no, "Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed

she hath contaminated" (IV.i.202-3). Othello responds like a heartless monster: "Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!" (IV.i.204). Iago wants the privilege of killing Cassio himself and he will report back to Othello before midnight. Desdemona appears with Lodovico, her kinsman, who brings word from the Duke that Othello must return to Venice and that Cassio will be placed in charge of the soldiers in Cyprus. When Desdemona openly expresses her happiness for Cassio's promotion, Othello strikes her, screaming "Devil!". Timidly, Desdemona says that she will leave Othello's presence for fear she will anger him more. Lodovico, surprised at Othello's behavior, asks him to call her back. Othello does, only to brand her a devious manipulator in front of her kinsman. He orders her away and storms off to prepare for his trip back to Venice. Lodovico wonders if this is the noble Moor whom the senate believes to be a master of all situations. Iago tells Lodovico that he has changed much and that his treatment of Desdemona is at times even worse than what they have just witnessed. Lodovico says that he is sorry to have been so deceived by the Moor and the scene comes to a close.

Act IV, Scene II

In a room of the castle Othello has found Emilia to question her about her knowledge of Desdemona's affair. She tells him that she has been with them every time they have spoken, and that she has heard nothing that would be considered suspicious in the least. She begs Othello to put such thought out of his mind at once, for Desdemona is as true and loyal a wife as any woman could be. She adds, "If any wretch have put this in your head/Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse!" (IV.ii.15-6). Othello commands her to leave. He does not want to hear the truth and ignores her testimony. He calls her a madam, lying to protect her whore Desdemona. When Desdemona enters Othello coolly asks her to come to him. Desdemona is very afraid and when he orders Emilia to leave Desdemona begs to hear the reason for his fury. He asks her what she is and she replies that she is his loyal wife. He calls her "as false as hell" and labels her a strumpet and a whore. Desdemona is stunned when she realizes what she is being accused of, and she can only deny the charges against her, which fall upon deaf ears. When Emilia re-enters to check on Desdemona, Othello walks out, telling Desdemona to keep their conversation a secret. Emilia asks Desdemona if she is all right and she replies that she cannot tell if she is awake or dreaming. Shaken to her very core, she cannot regain her composure, but asks Emilia to fetch her husband. Emilia is surprised at Desdemona's request for Iago, but she agrees and leaves to search for him. When Iago comes into the room, Desdemona begs for his counsel. Iago tells her that a matter of state is weighing heavy on Othello's mind and he assures her that all will soon be well. She leaves the room and Iago immediately sends Roderigo to kill Cassio. Roderigo agrees to the murder because Iago convinces him that Cassio's death will force Othello to remain in Cyprus and thus Desdemona will also stay and continue to be close to him.

Act IV, Scene III

In another room, Othello is gathered with Desdemona, Emilia, and Lodovico. Othello tells Desdemona to dismiss Emilia and get to bed, and he will be up shortly. While she gets ready for bed she speaks with Emilia, who helps her unpin her gown. Desdemona sings a sorrowful song about a woman who is abandoned by her lover and she waits for Othello's knock at the door. She asks Emilia how any woman could do what she herself is falsely accused of doing. Emilia replies that she can certainly understand why women sometimes cheat on their husbands and, considering the way men treat their wives, it is oftentimes wholly justifiable. Desdemona bids Emilia good night and the scene ends with Desdemona's lines so characteristic of her virtuous nature. She prays that the poor way in which she has been treated by Othello will teach her, not to hate or seek revenge, but to forgive and improve upon her own faults: "Good night, good night/Heaven me such uses send/Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (IV.iii.102-3)

Act V, Scene I

Out on the streets Iago positions Roderigo to ambush Cassio. Roderigo stands in the shadows with his sword ready, and Iago watches close by, mentioning to the audience that he hopes each one will kill the

other so that he will not have to return Roderigo's money and jewels. Cassio appears and Roderigo attacks him, but Cassio's thick coat shields him from the point of the rapier. Cassio strikes Roderigo, wounding him, and Iago is forced to crouch down and stab Cassio in the leg. Cassio's injury causes him to fall to the ground and when Othello arrives, he is delighted to see what he believes is the corpse of Cassio. He quickly leaves for the castle, ready to administer Desdemona's punishment. Lodovico and Gratiano appear and Roderigo asks for their help. Iago comes out of the dark and pretends to be shocked by the chaos. Cassio is very much alive and he identifies Roderigo as one of his attackers. Iago, aware he must silence Roderigo for good, expresses his outrage at the attack and stabs Roderigo in a fit of supposed righteous indignation. Roderigo cries "O damn'd Iago! O inhuman dog!" (V.i.63), and dies. Iago orders Emilia to tell Othello what has happened and, when Bianca arrives upon the scene, Iago accuses her of being Roderigo's accomplice and places her under arrest.

Act V, Scene II

The scene shifts to Desdemona's bedchamber in the castle. Desdemona is sleeping peacefully when Othello enters with a lantern. He stands for a long while at the foot of her bed, staring at her, overcome with feelings of love. He declares that he will not scar her beautiful face, but rather he will kill her "bloodlessly". He kisses her one last time and she awakens and sweetly asks her husband to come to bed. He orders her to say one final prayer and to prepare for death. She begs him to tell her what she has done and he reveals it is because she gave his handkerchief to her lover, Cassio. She pleads with him to fetch Cassio who will support her innocence, but he says the Cassio is dead. She begs Othello to let her live, "Kill me tomorrow; let me live to-night!" (V.ii.80). But Othello will not listen to her cries, and coolly tells his horrified wife that "It's too late" (V.ii.88). He smothers Desdemona where she lay. Emilia bangs on the door, reporting to Othello that Cassio has been injured but that he is still alive. Othello draws the curtains on Desdemona's bed to hide his heinous deed and lets Emilia in to tell him more. But Desdemona, not quite dead, lets out a faint cry professing her innocence one last time. Emilia demands to know who has hurt her, and even now Desdemona loves Othello enough to protect him: "Nobody -- I myself. Farewell" (V.ii.124). Desdemona dies, and Othello cowardly denies that he has murdered her. But Emilia does not believe him and he at last blurts out that he is guilty, but only of sending a "liar gone to burn in hell!". He threatens Emilia to keep silent but she screams "murder" and alerts the whole castle. Montano and Iago run into Desdemona's chamber, and Othello again speaks of the handkerchief. Emilia tells Othello that Iago made her steal the handkerchief, and, beginning to comprehend the terrible truth, he lunges at Iago, but is promptly disarmed by Montano. Iago grabs Emilia and stabs her, much to the dismay and shock of Montano. As she lay dying, Emilia remembers Desdemona's song and confirms that she was chaste and in love only with the "cruel Moor". Iago runs away and the men chase after him, leaving Othello by himself. He has a sword hidden in the chamber and he waits for the men to return with Iago as prisoner. Othello stabs Iago, only to wound him, and is again disarmed. He asks forgiveness of Cassio who is now in the room, and Cassio obliges. More information about Iago's plot is revealed in a letter left by Roderigo and picked up by Cassio as he lay on the street. Othello gives a final speech and pulls out a dagger he has hidden well. He stabs himself and falls dying next to Desdemona. His last words are to his innocent wife and victim: "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this/Killing myself, to die upon a kiss." (V.ii.358-9)

Othello short summary

Othello Summary

In a street in Venice, the villain Iago complains to Roderigo that Othello the Moor chose Cassio to be his lieutenant, rather than Iago. Iago vows to stay loyal to Othello only as long as it works to his advantage. They then inform Barbantio that his daughter Desdemona is sleeping with Othello. Barbantio hesitates to believe them, since Roderigo has been an unwelcome suitor to his daughter, but he soon finds she is

missing. At Othello's house, Cassio and other officers arrive summoning Othello to the Duke of Venice on urgent matters. Barbantio then arrives and orders Othello arrested, until he learns of the Duke's summons. At the Duke's chambers, Barbantio accuses Othello of using spells and potions to win Desdemona. He, however, proves this is not so, and Barbantio reluctantly blesses their marriage. We then learn that the Turkish fleet (the Ottomites) is sailing toward Cyprus. The Duke asks Othello to go defend it, and Desdemona asks to come with. Othello asks Iago to take care of Desdemona and follow him to Cyprus. Roderigo laments to Iago that he has lost Desdemona since Othello has married her. Iago convinces Roderigo to make money by selling his lands and fighting in wars. Over time, Iago feels Othello will tire of Desdemona and she will again become available. Iago, for his own part, reveals to the audience that he is only using Roderigo for his money. He also begins to plot his revenge against Othello for choosing Cassio.

At Cyprus, the governor Montano reports that a tempest has drowned the Turkish fleet, effectively eliminating their threat. Next, Cassio arrives, then Iago, his wife Emilia, and Desdemona, and lastly, Othello. In private, Iago tells Roderigo he believes Desdemona is in love with Cassio, based on their flirting before Othello arrived. He convinces Roderigo to pick a fight with Cassio to get Cassio in trouble with the local authorities. Alone, Iago reveals his plans to make Othello jealous of Cassio and/or Roderigo for courting Desdemona. That evening, after supper, Othello and Desdemona head to bed, while Iago arrives with wine, hoping to get Cassio drunk. He does, then Roderigo eggs him on, and a fight ensues, pulling Montano into the melee. Othello breaks it up, and after Iago explains (pretending not to know Roderigo), Othello tells Cassio he is no longer his lieutenant. Privately, Iago convinces Cassio to entreat Desdemona to ask Othello to reinstate him. Alone, Iago reveals that he'll use their private meetings to convince Othello that Desdemona is disloyal.

At the Citadel (Othello's lodging), Cassio entreats Desdemona to help him. When Iago and Othello appear in the distance, Cassio leaves. Desdemona relays Cassio's penance, then leaves herself. Iago begins dropping hints of his "suspicions" about Cassio and Desdemona to Othello, to which Othello probes Iago for his thoughts, and Iago pretends to reluctantly reveal them. Thus, Iago plants the seed that Desdemona is being disloyal to Othello. All throughout, Othello keeps stating how he genuinely believes Iago is of "exceeding honesty". Iago leaves and Desdemona appears calling Othello to dinner. He, already becoming (wrongly) suspicious, is rude to her when she tries to cure his "headache" with her handkerchief, given to her by Othello as his first gift to her. They leave, and Emilia appears and picks up the handkerchief, remembering that her husband Iago has asked her to steal it repeatedly before. Iago appears and takes it from her; then privately states that he'll plant it at Cassio's room to fuel Othello's suspicions. Othello reappears, and reveals to Iago how greatly depressed he has become. Othello yells at Iago and demands proof of the suspicions which Iago has planted in his head. Iago then claims he has heard Cassio talk of his love for Desdemona in his sleep. Iago also claims he's seen Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief. This being the final straw, Othello names Iago his lieutenant and orders Iago to kill Cassio within the next three days. As for Desdemona, Othello wishes her dead too. In her room, Desdemona and Emilia look for the lost handkerchief. Othello appears and claims to have a cold and asks to see it. Desdemona says she doesn't have it, but promises it is not lost. Othello, enraged, leaves. Cassio again appears and entreats Desdemona to talk to Othello. She tells him she has tried, but Othello has become irritable. Cassio's mistress Bianca appears and he asks her to copy the handkerchief he found in his room (Desdemona's), since he likes it, but fears someone will ask for it soon.

At his chamber, Iago eggs Othello on more as Othello slowly goes crazy, since Iago tells him Cassio admitted sleeping with Desdemona. Iago rejoices as Othello goes into a seizure/trance. Iago convinces Othello to hide while he questions Cassio about Desdemona. In reality, Iago plans to speak to Cassio about Bianca, eliciting laughter and smiles. Othello sees this and thinks they are talking about escapes with Desdemona. Bianca then appears, enraged, and throws the handkerchief at Cassio, accusing him of getting it from another lady. This, too, Othello sees. After Cassio and Bianca leave, Iago comes to Othello

and convinces him to strangle Desdemona in bed that night, while Iago promises to take care of Cassio. The noble Lodovico from Venice arrives at Cyprus and gives Othello a letter. Already angered, the letter enrages Othello as it orders him home to Venice and Cassio to remain in Cyprus, taking over Othello's command. Desdemona tries to calm him and he strikes her, shocking Lodovico. Iago tells him Othello has changed, but will not reveal more. At the citadel, Othello questions Emilia about Desdemona's honesty; she swears Desdemona is honest, though Othello summons Desdemona and accuses her of being disloyal and a whore, all while himself weeping. When Othello leaves, Desdemona summons Iago and Emilia to comfort her. Emilia tells Iago she believes an evil villain hath put the thoughts into Othello's head. Ironically, Iago replies "it is impossible". Separately, Roderigo comes to Iago complaining that he has given Iago all his jewels to give to Desdemona, and has seen no positive results from her. Iago calms him down and explains that Othello and Desdemona are leaving, by order of Venice, and Cassio will take over in Cyprus. However, Iago says, if Cassio were to die, Othello would have to stay in Venice, and Roderigo would be able to have Desdemona. Iago tells Roderigo to wait outside Bianca's house after midnight, then kill Cassio when he leaves. Iago promises to help, if necessary. At supper, Lodovico and Othello go on a walk, and Othello orders Desdemona to wait, alone, in her bedroom for him. At night, in a street, Iago sets Roderigo up to kill Cassio. Iago thinks to himself that both must die, or his plotting will be revealed. Cassio appears and Roderigo attacks him, cutting off one of Cassio's legs, during which Cassio wounds Roderigo. Othello overhears Roderigo's cries for help and thinks Cassio is dead; he thus returns to Desdemona. Meanwhile, Iago, who had left, reappears to "investigate" the noise. Lodovico and Gratiano also come. Iago finds Cassio, who's still alive. Alone, he finds Roderigo and stabs him, assuring his death. Iago then "discovers" Roderigo and calls the others. Bianca appears and Iago accuses her of being in cohorts with Roderigo. He calls her a strumpet and takes her into custody. Othello then arrives back at Desdemona's chamber, ready to kill her, even though he still finds her beautiful. Despite her pleadings, he smothers her with a pillow, though she doesn't completely die. Emilia appears and tells Othello that Roderigo is dead, but Cassio is alive. She then hears Desdemona cry for help and tries to help her, but she dies. Emilia asks Othello why he killed her and he says Iago told him she had slept with Cassio. Montano, Gratiano, and Iago appear and Emilia accuses Iago of being a liar. He admits he told Othello Desdemona was sleeping with Cassio. Gratiano tells us Desdemona's father has died over the grief of losing her. Othello explains that Cassio had Desdemona's handkerchief, given to him by her, but Emilia laments that she found it and gave it to Iago. At this, Iago tries to kill Emilia, but Gratiano and Montano hold him back. Othello, in a rage, comes at Iago, but he escapes and kills his wife (Emilia), then flees. Montano and Gratiano take Othello's sword, then chase Iago. Othello finds another weapon, then Lodovico, Cassio, Montano, and Iago (captured) reappear. This time Othello wounds Iago, but is disarmed. All is revealed as letters explaining Iago's deeds were found on Roderigo, and he, when near death, confessed that Iago had put him up to attacking Cassio. In a closing speech, Othello pulls a hidden dagger and kills himself. Fittingly, Lodovico leaves Iago for Cassio to sentence and torture.

Othello Summary

1

Othello Summary

Act I.

Shakespeare's famous play of love turned bad by unfounded jealousy, begins in Venice with Iago, a soldier under Othello's command arguing with Roderigo, a wealthy Venetian. Roderigo has paid Iago a considerable sum of money to spy on Othello for him, since he wishes to take Othello's girlfriend, Desdemona as his own.

Roderigo fears that Iago has not been telling him enough about Desdemona and that this proves Iago's

real loyalty is to Othello not him.

Iago explains his hatred of Othello for choosing Cassio as his officer or lieutenant and not him as he expected.

To regain Roderigo's trust, Iago and Roderigo inform Brabantio, Desdemona's father of her relationship with Othello, the "Moor" which enrages Brabantio into sending parties out at night to apprehend Othello for what must obviously be in Brabantio's eyes, an abuse of his daughter by Othello...

Iago lies that Roderigo and not himself, was responsible for angering Brabantio against Othello, Iago telling Othello that he should watch out for Brabantio's men who are looking for him.

Othello decides not to hide, since he believes his good name will stand him in good stead.

We learn that Othello has married Desdemona. Brabantio and Roderigo arrive, Brabantio accusing Othello of using magic on his daughter.

Othello stops a fight before it can happen but Othello is called away to discuss a crisis in Cyprus, much to the anger of Brabantio who wants justice for what he believes Othello has done to his fair Desdemona.

2

The Duke is in council with several senators discussing their enemy, the Turks (Turkish people).

Brabantio complains to the Duke that Othello bewitched his daughter and had intimate relations with her.

Desdemona is brought in to settle the matter, Othello meanwhile explains how he and Desdemona fell in love. Desdemona confirms this and the Duke advises Brabantio that he would be better off accepting the marriage than complaining and changing nothing.

The Duke orders Othello to Cyprus to fight the Turks, with Desdemona to follow, accompanied by the trusted Iago.

Roderigo despairs that his quest for Desdemona is over now that she is married, but Iago tells him not to give up and earn money instead; soon Desdemona will bore of Othello.

Alone, Iago reveals his intention to continue using Roderigo for money and his hatred of Othello (Othello picked Cassio and not Iago for his lieutenant).

Iago explains that his plan to avenge Othello is to suggest to Othello that Cassio is sleeping with Desdemona (Othello's wife).

Act II.

Several weeks later in Cyprus, Montano and several others are awaiting Othello's arrival by bark or ship. We learn that a terrible storm has largely battered and destroyed the Turkish fleet, which no longer poses a threat to Cyprus. Unfortunately there are fears that this same storm drowned Othello as well.

Montano reveals his high praise of Othello, which is shared by many. Cassio, who has arrived, sings Desdemona's praises. A ship is spotted but it is Desdemona and Iago's not Othello's. Iago suspects that Cassio loves Desdemona and slyly uses it to his advantage.

3

Iago tells Roderigo that he still has a chance with Desdemona but Cassio whom Desdemona could love is in the way. Killing Cassio (who became Othello's lieutenant instead of Iago) will leave Desdemona to Roderigo, Iago slyly explains.

Othello finally arrives to everyone's great relief. Iago decides to tell Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona's so Iago will be rewarded whilst Cassio will be punished.

A Herald announces celebration that "our noble general Othello!" has defeated the Turkish fleet, calling on all to celebrate this great triumph and also to celebrate Othello's "nuptial" or wedding to the fair Desdemona.

Iago learns more of Cassio's high regard for Desdemona and Iago manipulates Cassio into drinking too much since he is certain Cassio will do something he will regret.

With Cassio gone, Iago tells Montano of Cassio's drinking problem turning Montano's high regard for Cassio into dust. Iago also tells Roderigo to attack Cassio. This happens, and Cassio wounds Roderigo and then Montano who was trying to break up the fight.

Othello is now awake and Cassio's name ruined.

Othello though he loves Cassio, has no choice but to demote him from his position as his lieutenant. Next Iago comforts Cassio by suggesting he speak with Desdemona who could put in a good word for him with Othello.

Iago comforts a wounded Roderigo, telling him he has won by ruining Cassio's name. Iago has his wife Emilia ensure Desdemona and Cassio will talk so Othello can see his wife talking with Cassio, allowing Iago to convince Othello that Desdemona is being unfaithful...

Act III.

4

Cassio tells Iago that he has arranged to meet Desdemona, Iago helping Cassio to do this.

Iago's wife, Emilia, tells Cassio that Othello would like to reinstate him as his lieutenant but the fact that Cassio's fight is public news, prevents Othello from doing this immediately.

Emilia tells Cassio that she can arrange a meeting with Desdemona.

Some time later, Cassio speaks with a very sympathetic Desdemona who assures him that Othello still very much loves Cassio. Furthermore, Desdemona resolves to keep putting in a good word for Cassio until he is again Othello's lieutenant.

At a distance, Iago manipulates Othello by first suggesting shock and then hiding his outbursts from Othello. This guarantees Othello's attention, as Iago plants seeds of doubt in Othello's mind about Desdemona's fidelity especially where Cassio is concerned.

Iago leaves Othello almost convinced that his wife is having an affair with Cassio.

Othello now complains of a headache to Desdemona, which results in her dropping a strawberry patterned handkerchief, Othello's first gift to her. Emilia picks this up gives it to Iago who decides the handkerchief could help his manipulation if he ensures Cassio receives it.

Iago arranges to place the handkerchief near Cassio's lodgings or home where he is certain to find it and take it as his own, unaware that it is Othello's gift to Desdemona.

A furious Othello returns to Iago, certain his wife is faithful and demanding proof from Iago of Desdemona's infidelity.

Reluctantly and hesitantly, Iago tells Othello he saw Cassio wipe his brow with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello is convinced, cursing his wife and telling Iago who is now promoted to lieutenant to kill Cassio. Othello will deal with Desdemona...

5

Desdemona worries about her missing handkerchief and comments that if she lost it, it could lead Othello doubting her fidelity. Emilia when asked about Desdemona's lost handkerchief, lies, denying having seen the handkerchief she picked up and gave to Iago.

Othello enters; asking Desdemona for the very same handkerchief and Desdemona assures him that the handkerchief is not lost and will be found.

Desdemona now tries to change the subject to Cassio, but Othello continually stresses the value the handkerchief has to him, this leading to Othello angrily ordering his wife away.

Cassio arrives, Desdemona telling him that her attempts to help him are not going well. Iago claims total ignorance to the cause of Othello's fury.

Cassio gives Othello's handkerchief, which he found, to his suspicious mistress Bianca who reluctantly starts to copy its patterning (presumably its strawberry motif / design) for him.

Act IV.

Iago fans the flames of Othello's distrust and fury with Desdemona's supposed "infidelity" by first suggesting Desdemona shared her bed with Cassio and then that her giving away the handkerchief is no

big deal when Iago knows exactly how hurtful to Othello, giving away this sentimental gift is. Next Iago suggests to Othello that Cassio will "blab" or gloat to others about his conquest of Desdemona before telling Othello that Cassio boasted to him that he did indeed sleep with Desdemona. Meeting later with Cassio, Iago cunningly talks to Cassio about Cassio's mistress Bianca, each smile and each gesture made by Cassio infuriating a hidden Othello who thinks Cassio is talking about sleeping with Desdemona (Othello's wife).

6

Next Bianca (Cassio's mistress) arrives, angrily giving back the handkerchief Cassio gave to her. This infuriates Othello since as Iago puts it, Cassio not only received Othello's handkerchief from his wife but then gave it away to his whore (Bianca) as if it were worthless. Othello decides to kill Desdemona by strangulation in her bed, Iago's idea. Iago pledges to kill Cassio. Lodovico arrives, announcing that Othello is to return home and Cassio is to be the next Governor of Cyprus. Desdemona's joy for Cassio enrages Othello, leaving Lodovico and Iago to wonder how much Othello seems to have changed and leaving poor Desdemona to wonder how she offended the man she truly loves...

Othello questions Emilia as to whether Desdemona was unfaithful to him. Annoyed that Emilia's answers suggest nothing has happened between Desdemona and Cassio, Othello dismisses her comments as those of a simple woman.

Othello meets Desdemona, Desdemona becoming increasingly upset with her husband's anger towards her, an anger she cannot understand.

Othello eventually reveals to Desdemona that her infidelity is the source of his anger, Desdemona pleading her innocence on deaf ears.

Emilia and Desdemona discuss Othello's strange behavior. Emilia is certain some evil fellow has twisted Othello to believe Desdemona has been unfaithful, not realizing that this evil man is her own husband Iago.

We learn that Iago has been pocketing Roderigo's gifts to Desdemona, which never reached her. Fearing Roderigo will learn this, Iago tells Roderigo that Cassio must die since Iago benefits if ever man dies.

7

Lodovico tries to calm Othello down. Othello orders Desdemona to bed to await him later, an order Desdemona dutifully obeys out of love for Othello.

Emilia notices that Othello is much calmer now and tells Desdemona her bed has been made with her wedding sheets as requested. Desdemona asks to be buried in those same sheets should she die before Emilia, a hint of trouble ahead (Foreshadowing).

Emilia is barred from joining Desdemona in her bedchamber, angering her. Desdemona, depressed, recalls a song (The Willow Song) of a maid who was similarly abused by her husband and sings it.

Desdemona and Emilia talk about infidelity. Desdemona would not be unfaithful to her husband (Othello) for all the world; the more cynical and worldly Emilia would for the right price...

Act V.

Iago and Roderigo wait in a street to ambush Cassio. Iago tells Roderigo how to kill him. Iago does not care which ends up dead. Iago is worried that about Roderigo's increasing questioning of what happened to jewels that were given to him to pass on to Desdemona...

Roderigo attacks Cassio but Cassio wounds Roderigo instead. Iago from behind stabs Cassio, wounding him in the leg. Othello hearing Cassio's cries is pleased, announcing that he too will soon kill (Desdemona).

Lodovico and Gratiano and Iago reappear, Iago claiming total innocence to Cassio's injuries even though he inflicted them.

Seizing Roderigo, Iago stabs and wounds him "in revenge" for wounding his "friend" Cassio.

Gratiano and Lodovico tend to Cassio's wound. Bianca, Cassio's mistress arrives, Iago cleverly laying

suspicion for Cassio's injuries on his innocent mistress, making Iago less suspicious...

8

Othello enters Desdemona's bedchamber (bedroom) trying to convince himself that he is killing her for her own good. He kisses his still asleep wife one last time. Desdemona awakens, but Othello will still kill her, telling her to pray so her soul will not die when she does.

Desdemona again asks what wrong she has committed, Othello telling her that she gave Cassio his handkerchief, by which he means he thinks she had an affair with him.

Desdemona pleads her innocence, telling Othello to bring Cassio over to prove she did not give away her handkerchief. Othello says he confessed and is dead, Desdemona's fear and surprise prompting Othello to believe she does care for him.

Othello kills Desdemona.

Emilia banging on the door outside cannot stop this. Later Emilia is let in, revealing Iago has killed Roderigo and Desdemona who was thought dead, murmurs her last breaths but loyally does not say Othello killed her.

Othello tells Emilia he killed her and Emilia despite Iago's attempts to remove her reveals the truth about the handkerchief; she found it, and then gave it to Iago. Iago now in trouble, stabs his wife Emilia and escapes.

Emilia dies, singing the "Willow Song" before criticizing Othello for killing his loving wife.

Lodovico, Montano, Cassio and the now captured prisoner Iago soon appear, Othello stabbing Iago but not killing him before having his sword removed.

Lodovico is disappointed that Othello, a man so honorable has reverted to acting like a slave. Othello tries to argue that killing his wife was a noble action but it falls on deaf ears.

9

Lodovico learns that Othello and Iago plotted Cassio's death. Lodovico reveals letters in the dead Roderigo's pocket proving Cassio was to be killed by Roderigo.

Iago proudly confirms that Cassio did find the handkerchief in his bedchamber because Iago placed it there to be found.

Othello, realizing what he has done, kills himself with a concealed weapon and lies himself on top of his wife.

Cassio is placed in charge of Iago and Lodovico leaves to discuss this sad matter with others abroad...

The History of Othello

The History of Othello

According to the Accounts of the Master of the Revels (published in 1842), Othello was performed in 1604. The full entry reads: "By the King's Majesty's Players. Hallowmas Day, being the first of November, a play in the banqueting house at Whitehall called The Moor of Venice." Other evidence supports the fact that Shakespeare wrote the play in or before 1604. As William Rolfe explains in his book *A Life of William Shakespeare*:

Stokes (*Chronological Order of Shakespeare's Plays*) shows that it was written before 1606 by the fact that in the quarto of 1622 (i.1.4) we find the oath "S'blood" (God's blood), while this is omitted in the folio. This indicates that the quarto was printed from a copy made before the act of Parliament issued in 1606 against the abuse of the name of God in plays, etc. So "Zounds" and "by the mass" (in ii.3) are found in the quarto but not in the folio (293).

Eighteen years passed before Othello was first put into print in 1622 by Thomas Walkley. Walkley's was a quarto edition, known as Q1, and it was the last Shakespearean edition of a single play before the collected edition, known as the First Folio (printed by Heminge and Condell in 1623). Othello was one of Shakespeare's most popular plays throughout the 17th century. The preface to the first quarto tells us

that the play "had been diverse times acted at the Globe, and at the Blackfriars by his Majesties Servants", and the Allusion Book records that from 1591 to 1700, Hamlet is referred to most often in contemporary literature at 95 times, while Othello is fifth with 56 references (Brooke, 176).

The famous Renaissance actor Richard Burbage was the first Othello, and was amazing in the role according to tributes made to Burbage after his death in 1619. Through the Restoration and Queen Anne periods a number of great actors played the role of Othello, but only one was able to live up to Burbage: Thomas Betterton. Colley Cibber wrote that Betterton was "an actor as Shakespeare was an author, both without competitors, formed for the mutual assistance and illustrations of each other's genius."

We have no record of the first Iago, but Joseph Taylor, an actor with the King's Men from 1619, was acclaimed in the role of the voluble villain, and during the Restoration Michael Mohun's portrayal of Iago was extremely popular.

One performance of Othello, produced in 1660, starred an actress by the name of Margaret Hughes in the role of Desdemona. This production is of particular importance because it marked the first time a woman was accepted on the English stage. Before this, all the characters, whether male or female, were played exclusively by men.

Othello remained very popular throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and many of the most brilliant actors of the time sought the role of the Moor; the most famous being Edmund Kean, the great tragic thespian, who also gave noted performances as Richard III, Macbeth, Lear, and Hamlet. His son, Charles John Kean, was also an actor and theatre manager. During one performance of Othello at Covent Garden in 1833, Edmund Kean collapsed on stage into the arms of his son who was playing Iago, and died a few weeks later.

Junius Brutus Booth was another noted 19th century Shakespearean actor who brought a strong interpretation of the Moor to America. William C. Macready played Othello and Iago, as well as all of Shakespeare's other great creations. He was the first to pay specific attention to Othello's moorish garb. In the early 20th century the most acclaimed portrayal of Othello was by Paul Robeson, the distinguished actor and civil rights advocate. Robeson won the Donaldson Award for outstanding lead performance in 1944 for Othello, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters medal in 1944, to name but a couple. James Earl Jones and Laurence Olivier have also made memorable the character of Othello. Othello has made the transition from stage to film over twenty times this century, and from stage to television at least five times.

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The Role Of Desdemona

The Role Of Desdemona In Shakespeare's Othello

The Role of Desdemona in Shakespeare's Othello The character of Desdemona represents a woman of the 17th century who surpassed the norms of sexual morality set for Venetian women of that time. When Desdemona left the house of her father, Brabantio, to wed the Moor, Othello, it was the first step in redefining her role as a woman. Desdemona, instead of asking her father's permission, decided on her own to marry Othello. It seems as though Desdemona was breaking away from the strictness imposed by Brabantio. She denied her father any right in choosing or granting allowance to Othello to marry her. Instead she chose the man who she wanted to marry and felt it unnecessary that her father intervene in their relationship. This act of independence by Desdemona tore away the gender barriers of the

Venetian patriarchal society and posed a threat to male authority. The other aspect of Desdemona's mutiny was the miscegenation in Desdemona and Othello's marriage. 1The choice of mate made by Desdemona further deviated from the role in which Venetian society would cast her. The traditions of the Venetian society are discovered when Iago speaks to Brabantio and plants both the ideas of miscegeny and loss of power into Brabantio's mind. Iago cautions Brabantio: Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise! (Oth I. i. 88-90) These lines highlight the fact that in Elizabethan society, Brabantio, like other fathers, considered Desdemona's body to be his possession while also tapping into the fear of miscegenation that existed in Venice at that time. 2In his book "Sex in History," Rattray Taylor describes patriarchal societies in which the power was placed in the hands of men, to be based on father-identifier schemes (77). Taylor explains that children who are father-identifiers, model themselves after their fathers because of their interest in authority and in an attempt to acquire power as their fathers have (314). This can be applied to Desdemona's rebelliousness. Because Brabantio had such immense power over her, Desdemona may have wanted to gain this kind of power herself. Thus she decided to take her relationship into her own hands and ignored the tradition of receiving her father's approval. Desdemona was striving to play an equal role with the men in the Venetian society. The aspect of playing the same role as the men in the Venetian society also explains Desdemona's marriage to Othello. Instead of Brabantio taking the initiative in the marriage, Desdemona took the initiative in the courtship because she envied the power that her father had over her and the power of Othello's bravery and masculinity. 3She wished to be a man as brave and as noble as Othello (Holland 253). Desdemona's actions were not necessarily based on the desire to be a man, but more so a desire to have the equal powers of men. By marrying Othello, Desdemona was showing that she was strong enough and educated enough to break the societal confines of passivity for women (Walker 2). However, we must not assume that Desdemona did not love Othello or that she married him only to define herself as a liberated woman. Desdemona's concise statement about her love was revealed with balance and health when she said: I saw Othello's visage in his mind, And to his honours and his valiant parts Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (Oth. III. iii. 250-252) We can see that she loved Othello for his body and mind, for his reputation and actions, and she consecrated herself to him spiritually and practically and she continued to love him throughout all the events and accusations. Race was not an issue to Desdemona and this was a result of her intelligence and determination to become liberated. Othello, however, may have been frightened by Desdemona's aggressiveness as a woman. This, along with the misperceptions brought on by Iago, could have led to his changing views of Desdemona. When Othello and Desdemona are first married, Othello spoke nothing but love for Desdemona. Robert Burns' poem, "A Red, Red Rose" best represents Othello's feelings toward Desdemona. The lines: "As fair art thou, my bonnie lass, / So deep in luv am I / And I will luv thee still, my dear, / Til a' the seas gang dry" (Burns 531), represent hope, faith, and experience. Othello's love for Desdemona at the beginning of the play was based on this hope, faith and experience. Unfortunately, after Iago's manipulation, Othello's love turned to despair, pain, and anger. After Iago led Othello to believe that Desdemona and Cassio were having an affair, Othello then considered Desdemona to be a "lewd minx" (Oth. III. iii. 475). Othello did not have enough faith in his wife to disregard the accusations made by Iago. Emilia, however, had a better understanding of Desdemona's actions than did Othello. As a woman, Emilia was not threatened by Desdemona, but instead felt admiration toward her. 4With no family or friends, Desdemona and Emilia were alone in a military camp, where masculine conceptions of honor defined what women were (McKewin 128). Because both women were aware of their oppression, they both could relate to one another on a level of understanding. Naturally Emilia looked up to Desdemona because she was tired of how Iago treated her. Emilia was not able to take the steps toward liberation like Desdemona did, so she was living the experience through Desdemona. It was not until Emilia was faced with the tragic death of Desdemona that she was able to express her desire to escape from the male-dominated society. It was then that she

felt an obligation to Desdemona to break free of Iago's manipulation and speak the truth. Cassio's was also an enthusiastic admirer of Desdemona. Although Cassio wanted only the help of Desdemona in getting his position back as Othello's Lieutenant, it cannot be denied that he also worshipped her (Coleridge 174). However, Cassio was too loyal to Othello to have any relationship beyond friendship. His admiration came from his acknowledgement of Desdemona's fearlessness of public forum. Cassio also knew that Desdemona would plead on his behalf simply because she feared the repercussions of his demotion in Venice. Cassio recognized Desdemona's political concerns. He knew that she would help him get his position back out of love for Othello and his reputation, and through her recognition that Cassio was more qualified than Iago. Cassio knew that Desdemona was constantly striving for her voice to be heard and she demonstrated her intellect through word and deed. Ironically and tragically, Desdemona's desire for her voice to be heard fed into Iago's web of deception (Walker 2). Both Desdemona and Othello were under the impression that Iago was an honest man. Thus, when Othello accused Desdemona of adultery, she went to Iago for help. Naturally Iago, who put the idea of adultery in Othello's head, told Desdemona that Othello was troubled by business with the state. In this way Iago avoided the revealing of his manipulation. To Desdemona he appeared to be comforting and supporting in her time of confusion. To Othello, Iago had the appearance of a loyal servant by informing him of Desdemona's "affair." These manipulative actions by Iago can be related to William Blake's "A Poison Tree." The lines of Blake's poem indicate the wrath that one man had for his enemy and how he used his wrath to manipulate his enemy. It reads: I was angry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end. I was angry with my foe: I told it not, my wrath did grow. And I watered it in fears, Night and morning with my tears; And I sunned it with smiles, And with soft deceitful wiles. And it grew both day and night, Till it bore an apple bright. And my foe beheld it shine, And he knew that it was mine, And into my garden stole, When the night had veil'd the pole; In the morning glad I see My foe outstretched beneath the tree (531). Iago's foes were Cassio, Roderigo, Desdemona, and Othello. He used deceit to make his wrath against them all look as though he was just trying to help them. His actions were like the poison fruit on Blake's tree that looked so appealing. Iago lured everyone into his trap until they were all under his control. Desdemona, although an intelligent woman seeking liberation, fell into Iago's trap because she loved Othello and was upset that he had considered her a "whore." She was a very trusting person and did not think that Iago would hurt her. Although she was striving to play an equal role of the men in Venice, at times her sensitivities overpowered her desire to break the gender barriers. In Taylor's book, he states that children who are father-identifiers still revert to their own type (314). Thus Desdemona was still influenced by matriarchal themes such as love and emotion, rather than power. This is why she had such a strong desire to make amends with Othello. It is also the reason in which she put so much trust into Iago. Desdemona's matriarchal sensitivities are like those of the character Frances in Irwin Shaw's "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses." Like Frances, Desdemona wanted to be loved and acknowledged by her husband. When Frances said to her husband, "I'm good for you,...I've made a good wife, a good housekeeper, a good friend. I'd do any damn thing for you" (499), her desire to be acknowledged as a good wife derived from her matriarchal tendencies of sensitivity. Desdemona, like Frances, could not control her feelings of insignificance. Both were striving to be the best wives that they could be and both felt that their roles as wives were being threatened. Therefore, their matriarchal instincts were to do anything in their power to alleviate the tension between their husbands. This desire by Desdemona to please her husband can also be attributed to her intelligence and liberation. She does not merely listen to Othello's accusations, but instead tries to explain her situation. She could have very easily let Othello control her but she made her point known and told the truth about her circumstance. Desdemona, just before her death, challenges Othello as she had challenged her father and defends herself with the same straightforward precision she used before the Senate: And have you mercy too! I never did Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio But with such a general warranty of heaven As I might love; I never gave him token. (Oth. V. ii. 59-62) Even in her death, Desdemona proved her

liberation by showing that she controlled her own desires. Unfortunately Desdemona, by destroying the gender barriers, sealed her own fate. Because the men of Venice were unable to comprehend Desdemona's self-control, her death was inevitable. Othello realized that Desdemona's body and mind were her own domain. Upon this realization, Othello also saw that he had lost his power. By taking charge of her own destiny, Desdemona revealed to Othello that he was destined to lose control. Forced to deal with Desdemona's rebelliousness and the pressures of Iago, Othello murdered his wife. Sadly, the ultimate price that Desdemona had to pay for her liberation was death.

Themes

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Incompatibility of Military Heroism & Love

Before and above all else, Othello is a soldier. From the earliest moments in the play, his career affects his married life. Asking "fit disposition" for his wife after being ordered to Cyprus (I.iii.234), Othello notes that "the tyrant custom . . . / Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down" (I.iii.227–229). While Desdemona is used to better "accommodation," she nevertheless accompanies her husband to Cyprus (I.iii.236). Moreover, she is unperturbed by the tempest or Turks that threatened their crossing, and genuinely curious rather than irate when she is roused from bed by the drunken brawl in Act II, scene iii. She is, indeed, Othello's "fair warrior," and he is happiest when he has her by his side in the midst of military conflict or business (II.i.179). The military also provides Othello with a means to gain acceptance in Venetian society. While the Venetians in the play are generally fearful of the prospect of Othello's social entrance into white society through his marriage to Desdemona, all Venetians respect and honor him as a soldier. Mercenary Moors were, in fact, commonplace at the time.

Othello predicates his success in love on his success as a soldier, wooing Desdemona with tales of his military travels and battles. Once the Turks are drowned—by natural rather than military might—Othello is left without anything to do: the last act of military administration we see him perform is the viewing of fortifications in the extremely short second scene of Act III. No longer having a means of proving his manhood or honor in a public setting such as the court or the battlefield, Othello begins to feel uneasy with his footing in a private setting, the bedroom. Iago capitalizes on this uneasiness, calling Othello's epileptic fit in Act IV, scene i, "[a] passion most unsuited such a man." In other words, Iago is calling Othello unsoldierly. Iago also takes care to mention that Cassio, whom Othello believes to be his competitor, saw him in his emasculating trance (IV.i.75).

Desperate to cling to the security of his former identity as a soldier while his current identity as a lover crumbles, Othello begins to confuse the one with the other. His expression of his jealousy quickly devolves from the conventional—"Farewell the tranquil mind"—to the absurd:

Farewell the plum'd troops and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell,
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!"
(III.iii.353–359)

One might well say that Othello is saying farewell to the wrong things—he is entirely preoccupied with his identity as a soldier. But his way of thinking is somewhat justified by its seductiveness to the audience as well. Critics and audiences alike find comfort and nobility in Othello's final speech and the

anecdote of the “malignant and . . . turbaned Turk” (V.ii.362), even though in that speech, as in his speech in Act III, scene iii, Othello depends on his identity as a soldier to glorify himself in the public’s memory, and to try to make his audience forget his and Desdemona’s disastrous marital experiment.

The Danger of Isolation

The action of Othello moves from the metropolis of Venice to the island of Cyprus. Protected by military fortifications as well as by the forces of nature, Cyprus faces little threat from external forces. Once Othello, Iago, Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo have come to Cyprus, they have nothing to do but prey upon one another. Isolation enables many of the play’s most important effects: Iago frequently speaks in soliloquies; Othello stands apart while Iago talks with Cassio in Act IV, scene i, and is left alone onstage with the bodies of Emilia and Desdemona for a few moments in Act V, scene ii; Roderigo seems attached to no one in the play except Iago. And, most prominently, Othello is visibly isolated from the other characters by his physical stature and the color of his skin. Iago is an expert at manipulating the distance between characters, isolating his victims so that they fall prey to their own obsessions. At the same time, Iago, of necessity always standing apart, falls prey to his own obsession with revenge. The characters cannot be islands, the play seems to say: self-isolation as an act of self-preservation leads ultimately to self-destruction. Such self-isolation leads to the deaths of Roderigo, Iago, Othello, and even Emilia.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Sight and Blindness

When Desdemona asks to be allowed to accompany Othello to Cyprus, she says that she “saw Othello’s visage in his mind, / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (I.iii. 250–252). Othello’s blackness, his visible difference from everyone around him, is of little importance to Desdemona: she has the power to see him for what he is in a way that even Othello himself cannot. Desdemona’s line is one of many references to different kinds of sight in the play. Earlier in Act I, scene iii, a senator suggests that the Turkish retreat to Rhodes is “a pageant / To keep us in false gaze” (I.iii.19–20). The beginning of Act II consists entirely of people staring out to sea, waiting to see the arrival of ships, friendly or otherwise. Othello, though he demands “ocular proof” (III.iii.365), is frequently convinced by things he does not see: he strips Cassio of his position as lieutenant based on the story Iago tells; he relies on Iago’s story of seeing Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona’s handkerchief (III.iii.437–440); and he believes Cassio to be dead simply because he hears him scream. After Othello has killed himself in the final scene, Lodovico says to Iago, “Look on the tragic loading of this bed. / This is thy work. The object poisons sight. / Let it be hid” (V.ii.373–375). The action of the play depends heavily on characters not seeing things: Othello accuses his wife although he never sees her infidelity, and Emilia, although she watches Othello erupt into a rage about the missing handkerchief, does not figuratively “see” what her husband has done.

Plants

Iago is strangely preoccupied with plants. His speeches to Roderigo in particular make extensive and elaborate use of vegetable metaphors and conceits. Some examples are: “Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme . . . the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills” (I.iii.317–322); “Though other things grow fair against the sun, / Yet fruits that blossom first will first be ripe” (II.iii.349–350); “And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand, / Cry ‘O sweet creature!’, then kiss me hard, / As if he plucked kisses up by the roots, / That grew upon my lips” (III.iii.425–428). The first of these examples best explains Iago’s preoccupation with the plant metaphor and how it functions within the play. Characters in this play seem to be the product of certain inevitable, natural forces, which, if left unchecked, will grow wild. Iago understands these natural forces particularly well: he is, according to his

own metaphor, a good “gardener,” both of himself and of others.

Many of Iago’s botanical references concern poison: “I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear” (II.iii.330); “The Moor already changes with my poison. / Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, / . . . / . . . Not poppy nor mandragora / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep” (III.iii.329–336). Iago cultivates his “conceits” so that they become lethal poisons and then plants their seeds in the minds of others. The organic way in which Iago’s plots consume the other characters and determine their behavior makes his conniving, human evil seem like a force of nature. That organic growth also indicates that the minds of the other characters are fertile ground for Iago’s efforts.

Animals

Iago calls Othello a “Barbary horse,” an “old black ram,” and also tells Brabantio that his daughter and Othello are “making the beast with two backs” (I.i.117–118). In Act I, scene iii, Iago tells Roderigo, “Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon” (I.iii.312–313). He then remarks that drowning is for “cats and blind puppies” (I.iii.330–331). Cassio laments that, when drunk, he is “by and by a fool, and presently a beast!” (II.iii.284–285). Othello tells Iago, “Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsufflicate and blown surmises” (III.iii.184–186). He later says that “[a] horned man’s a monster and a beast” (IV.i.59). Even Emilia, in the final scene, says that she will “play the swan, / And die in music” (V.ii.254–255). Like the repeated references to plants, these references to animals convey a sense that the laws of nature, rather than those of society, are the primary forces governing the characters in this play. When animal references are used with regard to Othello, as they frequently are, they reflect the racism both of characters in the play and of Shakespeare’s contemporary audience. “Barbary horse” is a vulgarity particularly appropriate in the mouth of Iago, but even without having seen Othello, the Jacobean audience would have known from Iago’s metaphor that he meant to connote a savage Moor.

Hell, Demons, and Monsters

Iago tells Othello to beware of jealousy, the “green-eyed monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on” (III.iii.170–171). Likewise, Emilia describes jealousy as dangerously and uncannily self-generating, a “monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself” (III.iv.156–157). Imagery of hell and damnation also recurs throughout Othello, especially toward the end of the play, when Othello becomes preoccupied with the religious and moral judgment of Desdemona and himself. After he has learned the truth about Iago, Othello calls Iago a devil and a demon several times in Act V, scene ii. Othello’s earlier allusion to “some monster in [his] thought” ironically refers to Iago (III.iii.111). Likewise, his vision of Desdemona’s betrayal is “monstrous, monstrous!” (III.iii.431). Shortly before he kills himself, Othello wishes for eternal spiritual and physical torture in hell, crying out, “Whip me, ye devils, / . . . / . . . roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” (V.ii.284–287). The imagery of the monstrous and diabolical takes over where the imagery of animals can go no further, presenting the jealousy-crazed characters not simply as brutish, but as grotesque, deformed, and demonic.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Handkerchief

The handkerchief symbolizes different things to different characters. Since the handkerchief was the first gift Desdemona received from Othello, she keeps it about her constantly as a symbol of Othello’s love. Iago manipulates the handkerchief so that Othello comes to see it as a symbol of Desdemona herself—her faith and chastity. By taking possession of it, he is able to convert it into evidence of her infidelity. But the handkerchief’s importance to Iago and Desdemona derives from its importance to Othello himself. He tells Desdemona that it was woven by a 200-year-old sibyl, or female prophet, using silk from sacred worms and dye extracted from the hearts of mummified virgins. Othello claims that his mother used it to keep his father faithful to her, so, to him, the handkerchief represents marital fidelity.

The pattern of strawberries (dyed with virgins' blood) on a white background strongly suggests the bloodstains left on the sheets on a virgin's wedding night, so the handkerchief implicitly suggests a guarantee of virginity as well as fidelity.

The Song "Willow"

As she prepares for bed in Act V, Desdemona sings a song about a woman who is betrayed by her lover. She was taught the song by her mother's maid, Barbary, who suffered a misfortune similar to that of the woman in the song; she even died singing "Willow." The song's lyrics suggest that both men and women are unfaithful to one another. To Desdemona, the song seems to represent a melancholy and resigned acceptance of her alienation from Othello's affections, and singing it leads her to question Emilia about the nature and practice of infidelity.