

AQA English Literature A-level

Othello

Overview of Text and Key Scenes

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Overview

Othello, thought to have been written in **1603**, is one of William Shakespeare's most famous plays. It is set in **Venice** and **Cyprus** in the late sixteenth century, roughly contemporary to when it was written. It consists of five acts and is an example of a **Shakespearean tragedy**, following the titular hero, a 'Moor', whose flaws and misjudgements lead to his as well as other characters' downfalls. Shakespeare delves into the **psyches** and **motivations** of Othello and those of the antagonist **Iago**, an **ensign** who falsely convinces Othello that his wife has been unfaithful. The play explores **love** and **jealousy**, **racism** and **prejudice**, **deception** and **manipulation**, **revenge**, and **justice**. Its central focus on love and revenge, which has captured readers and audiences for centuries; it is still performed all over the world today.

Genre

Othello is one of the great **Shakespearean tragedies**. It is primarily the tragedy of Othello himself and of his fall from grace, but also a **love tragedy** as the relationship between Othello and Desdemona breaks down. These two different tragic paths are **interwoven**: the interracial marriage-of-equals is in part a cause of Othello's decline, as his marriage to a noble Venetian lady is what Iago uses to manipulate him.

Shakespeare draws on the **Ancient Greek** genre of tragedy in *Othello*. His play follows some typical **tragic conventions**: it is the story of a strong and striking hero whose **misjudgements** and flaws lead to widespread suffering, and ultimately the death of himself and those around him.

There are some important keywords to learn when it comes to tragedy. The tragic hero's **hamartia** is his fatal flaw which leads to his downfall; it is the cause of mass suffering and calamity. Most noteworthy is that in a tragedy, the tragic events are the result of **man's own actions**. Although tragic heroes tend to have numerous flaws or failings of judgement, there is one main cause of their tragic trajectory. Othello's **hamartia** is generally considered to be **jealousy**, which enables him to be tricked and manipulated by Iago. It is also worth thinking about the other flaws in Othello's character, for example his **insecurity** and **gullibility**, and how they interact with his hamartia. You could also consider how the **tragedy of love** is important here: Othello kills Desdemona as a result of a **jealous rage**.

AO5 TIP

Several literary critics have written on tragedy in Shakespeare. A.C. Bradley observed that "[t]he centre of the tragedy [...] may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action" (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904).

At the end of a classical tragedy, the hero experiences a moment of **anagnorisis**, in which he becomes aware of his mistakes and misjudgements. This is often followed by **catharsis**, an emotional release in which the protagonist realises that his downfall was brought about by his own actions and errors. This is a moment of **cleansing**, and of clearing the soul of wrongdoing; in **spectating** the play, the audience experiences a similar cleansing and feels a strong emotional release as well. This moment of realisation always comes too late, and this contributes to the tragedy of the situation: the hero is ready to amend but, due to his own actions, this is no longer possible.



Although *Othello* is a tragedy, there are also some unusual aspects of the play which do not fit quite so clearly into this genre. Othello holds a high rank in the military (a general), but he is not a king or a nobleman in the way some of Shakespeare's other famous tragic heroes are (e.g. Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear); he is more **ordinary**. He is also an **outsider** in Venetian society due to his race and seeming '**otherness**'.

Structure

Othello spans **five acts**, typical of a Shakespearean tragedy. In fact, the structure of the play ties in with its genre: across the five acts, we follow the tragic hero's **rise**, followed by a **reversal of his fortune**, through to his **fall**.

Othello is at his noblest in Act I. His language is **elevated** and **controlled**:

**“Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
My very noble and approved good masters,
That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true”** (Act I Scene III).

He speaks in elevated **blank verse** and is polite and gracious towards the Senators whom he addresses. He is **modest** as well: he goes on to claim **“Rude am I in my speech”** (Act I Scene III) although his actual words prove otherwise. His fluent language gives us the impression of a character who is **commanding** and **dignified**, a conspicuous and striking tragic hero who is primed for a reversal of fortune.

By Act IV, his verse has broken down and become **fragmented** and **confused**:

**“Lie with her! lie on her! We say lie on her, when
They belie her. Lie with her! that's fulsome.
--Handkerchief--confessions--handkerchief!--[...]--Is't possible?--Confess--handkerchief!--O
devil!--”** (Act IV Scene I).

This reads more like a **train of thought** than an elevated speech. His speech is now broken down into **short sentences and exclamations** as his own mental state breaks down as well. The frequent exclamation marks and pauses also indicate his **nervousness** and **lack of composure**, a strong contrast to Act I.

This break-down of **language** is closely tied to the **play's structure**, as it allows us to track the rise and fall from grace of the tragic hero across the five acts.



Key Themes

Love is one of the main themes in *Othello*. The play primarily focuses on Othello and Desdemona's relationship which is initially a **genuine** and reciprocal **marriage of equals**; he says that **"She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them"** (Act I Scene III). The **splitting** of this sentence evenly across two lines of **iambic pentameter** indicates their **reciprocal love**, as their love is evenly shared and divided across the two lines. However, Othello's love for Desdemona is used **against him**. Iago draws on Othello's **marital insecurities** - the fact that he married a white Venetian woman, and that her father disapproved of the match - to turn him against his wife.

The theme of love is closely tied to **jealousy**, which we have already identified as Othello's **fatal flaw**. But Othello is not the only character prone to jealousy, as it is **Iago's jealousy** of Cassio's promotion that triggers the entire storyline. Shakespeare uses the famous metaphor of jealousy as **"the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on"** (Act III Scene III). This creates an image of characters who are helpless in the face of their own jealousy; it is a **destructive** and **monstrous** force throughout the play.

Race is another key theme in *Othello*. **Racist stereotypes** and **assumptions** are rife throughout, and inform many of the characters' actions. Iago constantly uses **derogatory** and **racist language** to describe Othello. He **dehumanises** him (**"An old black ram/Is tuppung your white ewe"** (Act I Scene I)) and calls him the spawn of the **devil** (he says to Brabantio **"the devil will make a grandsire of you"**, Act I Scene I). Brabantio despises the match and does not believe Desdemona could have married him willingly (**"O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter? / Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her"**, Act I Scene II). Some critics and viewers have thought that Shakespeare presents Othello as nothing more than a **stereotype** of a Moor. For example, in Act III Scene III there are fewer than **400 lines** between Othello declaring his love for Desdemona (**"Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee"**) and confessing his **hatred** and **desire to murder** her (**"I will withdraw / To furnish me with some swift means of death / For the fair devil"**). In the first Act, Iago declares that **"[t]hese Moors are changeable in their wills"** (Act I Scene III), implying that Othello is more **prone to jealousy** and easily turns on his wife because he is of **African** descent. **Hugh Quarshie**, who played Othello in the **2015 RSC** production, discussed his initial reluctance at taking on the role for fear of **reinforcing racist stereotypes**.

AO4/AO5 TIP

In 2015, the RSC held a debate titled 'Is *Othello* a racist play?' in which the actor Hugh Quarshie (who played Othello in the RSC 2015 production) explained his 'worry' that Othello quickly succumbs to Iago's manipulations 'because of the convention of the Moors being perceived to be prone to jealousy, to irrationality, to violence'. He went on to say that a stereotype of the Elizabethan stage was that 'whenever a Moor appeared, that usually signalled something menacing, or a threat to the social, moral, and sexual order of society'. For example, Aaron, a Moor in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, is a caricature of violent and remorseless evil.



Truth and **deception** are also important in *Othello*. Iago is a character brimming with deception: early on in the play he admits “**I am not what I am**” (Act I Scene I), and the audience is left wondering what motivates his **evil actions**. Othello, on the other hand, is a character striving for **truth** and **honesty**. He calls Iago “**honest Iago**” four times in the play, and he will not doubt Desdemona without the “**ocular proof**” of her **infidelity**, and Iago must “**be sure thou prove my love a whore**” (Act III Scene III). Othello’s insistence on honesty and evidence speaks to his **integrity** as the play’s protagonist, but even this is turned against him when Iago feigns the evidence of Desdemona’s **unfaithfulness** with the **handkerchief**.

Context

The settings in *Othello* are **integral** to the plot. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, **Venice** was famed for its **wealth**, **cosmopolitan culture**, and **political stability**. It was thought of as a place of **female promiscuity** and **sexual freedom**, and as a **mixing pot** filled with people of different races. It was renowned for the freedom it offered its diverse range of citizens, many of whom (like Othello) were **immigrants** who had adopted **Venetian values**. It was both **familiar** and **exotic**, situated in Europe but with close trading ties to the Middle East and North Africa. Its **geographical closeness** but simultaneous **otherworldliness** make it an excellent location for Shakespeare to explore **human relationships**, especially interracial and intercultural ones. Although Othello is still an outsider, he nonetheless has a place in the multicultural Venetian society.

Much of the play is also set at an outpost in **Cyprus**, in the **Venetian-Ottoman wars** throughout the late 16th century. Cyprus is even further removed from the Venetian setting where the play begins, both geographically and culturally. The further the action is removed from the perceived ‘civilisation’ of Europe, the more we see the **break-down** of **relationships** and **civility**.

Othello is a ‘**Moor**’ but this had numerous different connotations in Shakespeare’s England. Today, the part is nearly always performed by a **black actor**, and Iago’s **derogatory descriptions** of Othello describe him as black. But the word ‘Moor’ was also used in the 16th and 17th centuries to describe the people of North Africa as well, so Othello’s exact race is **unknown and debated**. **Performance history** should be considered as well: the role was written for a white actor. **Richard Burbage**, one of the most famous actors in Shakespeare’s company, is most likely the first actor to have performed the role, wearing **black make-up** and a wig made from **black lambswool**.

Characters

- **Othello**: the play’s **protagonist**. A ‘**Moor**’ whose precise background is unknown, but who converted to **Christianity** and became a **military general** in the **Venetian army**. At the beginning of the play he is a **composed** and **powerful** figure, but he easily falls prey to his own **insecurities** and Iago’s **manipulations**, and his love for his wife, Desdemona, is turned against him into an all-consuming **jealous rage**.



- **Desdemona:** the **daughter** of Venetian senator Brabantio, and **wife** of Othello. She is a good and loyal wife. She follows Othello to war in Cyprus. She also has some **strong-willed** moments, for example she attempts to persuade Othello to forgive Cassio in Act III Scene III. On her deathbed she is an image of **virginal innocence**, lying in her wedding sheets and still declaring “**the loves I bear to [Othello]**” (Act V Scene II).
- **Iago:** Othello’s **ensign** and the play’s **antagonist**. Iago is generally considered to be the most **evil** of Shakespeare’s villains. He turns Othello against Desdemona through careful **manipulation**, but his **motivations** are never entirely clear. He is in-part **jealous** that Othello did not promote him (see Act I Scene I), and in-part driven by **racially-motivated hatred**. He **refuses to repent** at the end of the play.
- **Emilia:** the **wife** of Iago, and Desdemona’s attendant. She is **suspicious** of her husband but only realises his duplicitous plan when it is too late and her mistress is dead. It is Emilia who **exposes Iago** to Othello: “**may his pernicious soul / Rot half a grain a day! he lies to the heart**” (Act V Scene II).
- **Brabantio:** Desdemona’s **father** and a Venetian **senator**. He **disapproves** of the match between his daughter and Othello, which has taken place in secret. In fact, he is convinced that Othello has “**enchanted**” her into marriage (Act II Scene II).
- **Cassio:** Othello’s **lieutenant** and a **friend** of Desdemona. Iago uses this friendship, and Cassio’s youth, to play on Othello’s insecurities and to convince him that Cassio is Desdemona’s lover.
- **Roderigo:** a nobleman in **love** with Desdemona. He teams up with Iago and pays him to court Desdemona on his behalf, little knowing Iago’s true motives. Iago convinces Roderigo to assist him in killing Cassio, but then subsequently kills him to keep his cover.
- **Bianca:** a **courtesan** who is in love with Cassio. When Othello overhears Cassio talking about Bianca, Iago convinces him that he is talking about Desdemona instead.
- **The Duke of Venice:** the **leader** of the governing authority in Venice. He **reconciles** the disagreement between Othello and Brabantio over the former’s marriage, and he appoints Othello to the outpost in Cyprus.
- **Gratiano:** Brabantio’s brother. He finds the wounded Cassio after he has been attacked by Roderigo.
- **Lodovico:** a distant relative of Desdemona. He acts as a messenger between Venice and Cyprus.
- **Montano:** the governor of **Cyprus** before Othello. In Act II, he fills us in on the status of the war.



Quick Summary

Act 1

- As the play opens, Iago is telling Roderigo that he **hates** Othello because Othello **promoted** Cassio instead of him. Iago's hatred for Othello is obvious.
- Iago and Roderigo travel to Brabantio's house, the father of Othello's newly-wed, to tell him of his daughter's marriage to 'the Moor'. Brabantio is **angered** and orders **Othello's arrest**.
- Brabantio and Othello appear before the governing Duke of Venice, and Othello explains that Desdemona fell in **love** with him after hearing **stories** about his life. She is called to witness and confirms her genuine love for him.
- Othello is called to **Cyprus** to command a force against the **Turks**, and Desdemona accompanies him.
- In a moment alone with Roderigo again, Iago convinces him to follow them to Cyprus and tells the audience of his plan to convince Othello that Desdemona is having an **affair** with Cassio.

Act 2

- Cassio, Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia disembark in Cyprus and are greeted by the governor. The **friendship** and **goodwill** between Cassio and Desdemona is apparent, and Iago will use this to his **advantage**.
- Othello arrives and announces a night of **celebrations** because the Turkish fleet was wrecked in a storm.
- Iago begins his plan to manipulate Othello. He convinces Roderigo to pick a **fight** with the **drunk Cassio** and in the midst of this the governor of Cyprus becomes injured.
- Othello **dismisses** Cassio from his service.
- **Feigning friendship**, Iago advises Cassio to speak to Desdemona and enlist her help in seeking Othello's forgiveness.
- Iago delivers another **soliloquy**, telling the audience that his plan is going well so far.

Act 3

- Desdemona is **sympathetic** with Cassio's situation and promises to speak to Othello on his behalf. She wholeheartedly **defends** Cassio to her husband, and asks him for a pardon.
- Immediately after, Iago begins to convince Othello explicitly that there is something between Cassio and Desdemona: **"Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio"** (Act III Scene III). Othello is now thoroughly **suspicious** but has no proof.
- Desdemona drops her **handkerchief** and Emilia takes it, saying Iago asked her to steal it **"a hundred times"** (Act III Scene III). Othello returns to Iago, angry that he let himself be swayed by Iago. He insists the Iago provide some **"ocular proof"** (Act III Scene III) before he goes any further.
- Iago claims he has heard Cassio **sleep-talking** about Desdemona, and that he has seen him using Desdemona's **handkerchief**. This is proof enough for Othello, and he decides that he will **kill** his wife and Iago will kill Cassio.



- Desdemona is **upset** that she has lost the handkerchief as it was a gift from Othello. She again tries to **convince** her husband to forgive Cassio, but this only **hardens Othello's heart** against her.

Act 4

- **Feigning supportiveness**, Iago continues to talk to Othello about Cassio and Desdemona. He stages a conversation between himself and Cassio for Othello to overhear; he asks Cassio about his lover Bianca, but tells Othello that they are discussing Desdemona.
- Othello's **mental state** worsens and he determines to kill Desdemona that evening.
- Desdemona defends Cassio once again and Othello **hits** her.
- Emilia helps Desdemona prepare for bed and is concerned about Othello's behaviour, but Desdemona stays loyal to her husband.
- Emilia delivers a speech in which she **blames men** for not understanding that women have feelings just as men do.

Act 5

- Roderigo **attacks** Cassio, who stabs Roderigo in return. Othello overhears and thinks that Iago has killed Cassio, as they agreed. Iago pretends to be enraged at Roderigo's actions and **kills him**.
- Othello enters the **bedchamber** where Desdemona is sleeping. He urges her to **confess** and **suffocates** her when she will not admit her guilt.
- Emilia enters and tells Othello that Iago was lying and that she took Desdemona's handkerchief and gave it to her husband. Iago **stabs** her, and Othello **realises** he has been tricked.
- Iago is **arrested**, and Othello **stabs himself** in grief.

Analysis - Act I

- Significantly, Iago and Roderigo are the first characters we are introduced to in the play, rather than Othello himself. This creates **anticipation**, but it also **alters our opinion** and **interpretation** of the titular character. The fact that we meet Iago first, and hear his opinion towards Othello, sets us up to be **sympathetic** towards Iago.
- Knowing nothing of Othello's true character at this point in the play, we easily believe Iago's depiction of him. He is not mentioned by name but is referred to simply as "**the Moor**" (Act I Scene I). Already in the opening scene, Shakespeare establishes the idea that Othello will be **defined by his race**, and this is something that repeats throughout the play.
- However, Iago's **true villainy** quickly becomes obvious and we are not sympathetic towards him for long.
- Act I is important in establishing the characters and their backgrounds:
 - Othello 'the Moor' is an **outsider**, and we see this in Iago's and Brabantio's treatment of him.
 - The Venetians **disapprove** of Othello's marriage to Desdemona. Act I Scene III gives us an important insight into their relationship and establishes their **marriage** as one between **equals**.



- Desdemona is **strong** and **outspoken** rather than **passive**. She **defends her love** for Othello and speaks directly to the Duke of Venice using an **imperative**: “**Most gracious duke, / To my unfolding lend your prosperous ear**” (Act I Scene III). Through her language, she **demand**s that the Duke listens to her.
- In this Act, we also gain a sense of the **importance of Iago**. He both opens and closes Act I and this establishes him as a **structurally dominant** character who is integral to how the plot unfolds.

Key Quotes & Analysis

- **Act I Scene I: “an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe”**

This is the first of many **animalistic** and **racist** descriptions. This **dehumanises** Othello, describing him with **bestial lusts**. This **vulgar** description puts Desdemona in a position of virginal innocence, but as a woman who is dominated by her animalistic husband: she is “**white**” and is the **grammatical object** of the sentence (Othello is the **subject**). The bestial language that is used to describe Othello would have had particular resonance for Shakespeare’s audience. The **Great Chain of Being** was a **hierarchical Christian structure** which ranked all beings, from God at the top, down through angels, humans, animals, and plants. Animals were even **lower** than the **lowliest of humans**, and this quote therefore demonstrates Iago’s belief that ‘Moors’ (people of African descent) are **lowlier than Europeans**, and are even **less than human**. In this opening scene, Othello is also referred to as a “**Barbary horse**” and he and Desdemona having sex are “**making the beast with two backs**”. Furthermore, to Shakespeare’s contemporary audience the word “**black**” refers not only to colour but also to **morality**; as the opposite of white, black stood for **evil** and the **devil**. By drawing attention to Othello’s colour, Iago emphasises his apparent evil nature.

- **Act I Scene I: “Were I the Moor I would not be Iago. / In following him I follow but myself; / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end... I am not what I am”**

We often need to break down Iago’s language in order to understand it fully, and this fits with his **deceptive** and **wily nature**. He **speaks cryptically**, and **acts cryptically**. He also denies his own self by saying “I am not what I am”, and we never truly know Iago or his motives throughout the play.

- **Act I Scene II: “Damn’d as thou art, thou hast enchanted her”**

Brabantio cannot fathom why Desdemona would have married a ‘Moor’ unless she were **enchanted** by him. This introduces the **motif** of **witchcraft** into the play: Othello is constantly associated with witchcraft, and this gives him an air of **otherworldliness** and **exoticism**. Magic is neither understood nor accepted by Christian Europe, so associating Othello with magic further removes him from European society and **exoticises** him as an ‘other’.

- **Act I Scene III: “Her father loved me; oft invited me; / Still question’d me the story of my life, / From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes, / That I have passed. / I ran it through, even from my boyish days...”**

This is a long but important speech as we are given an insight into **Othello’s past**. In this passage, Shakespeare draws on **travel writing**, a popular contemporary genre in which European travellers



would explore previously unvisited territory and write down their experiences in a fanciful and exoticised way. The difference here is that Othello, an African, is describing his own story but using the **style** of an **exoticised travel narrative** to please his European listeners. There is a sense that he is **performing** his own story: he “**ran it through**”, as you might run through lines for a rehearsed play. His experiences pile up through his use of **anaphora**: “**Of moving accidents... / Of hair-breadth scapes... / Of being taken...**”.

AO2 TIP

Try learning some key terms which describe the different language techniques that Shakespeare uses. This will impress examiners!

Othello goes on to describe how Desdemona would “**With a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse**”: This image can be **deconstructed** in several ways. On the one hand, it suggests that Desdemona is perhaps not so pure and innocent as she initially seemed because she is “**greedy**”, one of the **Seven Deadly Sins**. On the other hand, this image also suggests that Othello is “**devour[ed]**” by the Venetian listeners; they **consume** his background so that he may become a part of their society. This is indicative of a late 16th- / early 17th-century **fascination** with ‘**otherness**’ and the **unknown**. This was a time of exciting **exploration**; in 1577-1580, **Francis Drake** completed his **circumnavigation** of the world in a single expedition, and a few years later in 1620 the **Mayflower** would carry English pilgrims across the Atlantic to the ‘New World’. As a result of this **contemporary interest** in the unknown, Shakespeare’s audience listens to Othello’s story of far away lands and different people with an interested and “**greedy**” ear, just as Othello’s audience does.

Othello refers to his journey as “**My pilgrimage**”. This indicates his **assimilation** into Christianity. His **non-Christian origins** are only acceptable to the Venetians because he tells them a **sanitised** version which ends in **conversion** to Christianity.

There is one more important image in this speech. In response to Brabantio’s accusations that he enchanted Desdemona, Othello explains that his words are “**the only witchcraft I have used**”. Although he seemingly **denies** his use of witchcraft, he still **associates** himself with it. This is another indication that Othello is being **defined by his ethnicity** and fulfilling what the Europeans expect of him.

EXAM TIP

Think about what this speech tells us about Othello and Desdemona’s early relationship, and their love. Why does Desdemona love Othello? Do you think it’s because she feels pity for him, or because his storytelling wins her over? Are there any indications that she loves him mainly for his ‘exotic’ backstory?

- **Act II Scene I: “I hate the Moor: / And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office: I know not if't be true; / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety.”**

This quote from Iago is easy to overlook as it comes at the end of Act I and is not referred to again. This offers another motivation for Iago’s behaviour: he’s heard a **rumour** that Othello slept with his wife, Emilia, and therefore seeks **revenge**. It might also explain the specific nature of the way in which he ruins Othello (convincing him his wife has had an affair, as Iago believes his wife has).



This also cements a clear **distinction** between Othello and Iago; the former is insistent that he will not act against Desdemona without proof, whereas Iago will seek revenge on “**the mere suspicion**”. However, we might **mock** Iago for this because there is absolutely no indication of an affair between Othello and Emilia in the play. So rather than offering a motivation for Iago, in a way it **undermines** him, as we question if he is **making up reasons without evidence** to justify his actions to the audience.

Analysis - Act II

- After establishing the characters and the setting in Act I, Act II is where Shakespeare begins to **zoom in** on their relationships and motivations. The **external threat** of war with Cyprus is **dismissed** when we are told “**our wars are done**” (Act II Scene I) at the very beginning of this Act.
- Instead, Shakespeare sets up Iago’s “**web**” (Act II Scene I) of **control** and **manipulation**; this is of much more interest than external factors such as war. By cutting off the external world, the **intensity** of the play and of the characters’ relationships increases because we focus more on them.
- Shakespeare plays with **dramatic irony** throughout *Othello* and we see this firstly in Act II. For example, the audience is left with a sense of **foreboding** when Cassio takes Desdemona’s hand at the end of Scene I. We can see that this is innocent, which makes our knowledge that this moment will be **twisted** against the innocent characters even more **horrific**.
- When Desdemona enters the stage after the brawl in Scene III, Othello ushers her off to bed again: “**All’s well now, sweeting; come away to bed**”. This **foreshadows** the next moment we will see Desdemona in bed in Act V, when Othello **strangles** her. We will recall how **rapidly** their relationship **deteriorated** over a mere three acts of the play.
- Iago once again closes the Act with a **soliloquy**. He is the character with the most **on-stage time**, and he has many more soliloquies than Othello. Shakespeare seems more interested in delving into **Iago’s psyche and motivations** than those of the **eponymous hero**.

Key Quotes & Analysis

- **Act II Scene I: ‘With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio’**
Iago uses extensive **animal imagery** to describe Othello, but also refers to himself as a **spider**. This is a very fitting image for Iago’s character, and allows us to **visualise** his role in the play. He spins a **wide web of lies** intended to “**ensnare**” and to **trap** many of the characters, including Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, and Emilia. The image of Iago as a spider also attributes to him a degree of **authority** over the **plot**. He is the character in charge of spinning the web and making the decisions that affect the other characters.
- **Act II Scene III: “Why, how now, ho! from whence ariseth this? / Are we turn’d Turks, and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? / For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!”**



This quote from Othello reveals the **Venetian fear** and **dismissal** of **outsiders**. When they fight, they are compared to “**Turks**”, the very foreigners they are fighting against in the war. The Venetians clearly believe themselves to be **superior** and **more civilised**. The fact that Othello speaks this line is noteworthy, and on the one hand this suggests that he does not consider himself as an outsider as he abruptly dismisses other outsiders. But on the other hand this creates a sense of **foreboding** as we are aware that Othello himself will be manipulated and ultimately **purged** from Venetian society.

- **Act II Scene III: Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost / my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of / myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, / Iago, my reputation!”**

Cassio is **distraught** at ruining his **reputation**, and this quote reveals to us the importance of reputation throughout the play as a whole. Iago’s manipulations ruin the reputations of Cassio, Desdemona, and Othello, all whilst he builds up his own **false reputation of honesty**.

- **Act II Scene III: “she’s framed as fruitful / As the free elements [...] As [...] she for him pleads strongly to the Moor, / I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear, / That she repeals him for her body’s lust; / And by how much she strives to do him good, / She shall undo her credit with the Moor. / So will I turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all.”**

This quote, spoken by Iago, is an interesting insight into his attitude towards Desdemona. This depiction of her is **sexually charged**: she is “**fruitful**”, suggesting **fertility** and **productivity**, and has an “**appetite**”, i.e. a sexual appetite. In the early 17th century, Venice had a reputation as being a place of **female promiscuity** and **prostitution** (even more so than other cities) - its liberality applied to sexuality as well as the diversity of its citizens. When Iago frames Desdemona as unfaithful, he draws on and utilises these **stereotypes** of Venetian women. This quote also furthers our impression of Iago as a **mastermind** orchestrating the entire plot - he explicitly claims to be making “**the net / That shall enmesh**” the other characters. Furthermore, the motif of **black as evil** crops up again here. Desdemona and her innocence will be **tainted**: white will turn to “**pitch**”, a very dark black substance.

Analysis - Act III

- Act III is the centre-point of the play and, as is typical in a tragedy, it is the **turning point** for the tragic hero.
- **Dramatic timing** is important in Scene I: Iago manipulates the events but is able to convince Othello that they are natural, for example by hinting that Cassio’s exit is proof of his guilt.
- Act III Scene III is arguably the most important in the whole play, as Othello is **successfully convinced** of his wife’s infidelity and decides he will kill her. He comes utterly convinced of Desdemona’s guilt in a startlingly short space of time (fewer than 400 lines).
- Scene III draws a parallel with **medieval morality plays** in which Good and Evil are **personified** as characters who tempt the protagonist, or try to convince him to remain good. In *Othello*, Iago is the **personification of evil** whilst Othello tries to remain true to his **values and conscience**.



- We can think of the play's **structure** as a **hill**: we climb up in Acts I and II, before reaching the summit of Act III and rapidly declining in Acts IV and V.
- This analogy can also be applied to Othello's **mental state**: this is the last Act in which Othello is mentally stable, and we will see this in the **breakdown** of his language.
- Again, Shakespeare uses **dramatic irony** in this Act to increase the sense of **tragedy**. This is the moment from which there is no going back and the audience knows that after Othello determines to kill Desdemona, they are both doomed. From now on, we are simply watching the **inevitable** play out.
- We learn the full importance of the **handkerchief** as a **symbol** in this Act. As a gift from Othello to Desdemona, it **represents** his **non-Christian heritage** (it was a gift from his mother), but it also comes to represent **Desdemona's faithfulness**. When Othello believes she has given it away, she has not only given away the love that they shared but also her own body.
- Scene IV can be read as a **trial** scene, in which Othello is the **prosecutor** and Desdemona's failure to produce the handkerchief becomes the **evidence** that seals her doom.

Key Quotes & Analysis

- **Act III Scene III: "For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago; / I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; / And on the proof, there is no more but this,-- / Away at once with love or jealousy!"**

The theme of **seeing** is important in *Othello*. This is partly because of its focus on **colour**; Othello is aware that as a "**Moor**" he looks different to the Venetians around him, so when he says that his wife "**had eyes, and chose me**" the **subtext** is that she chose him **despite his ethnicity**. This is a subtle indication of Othello's **insecurities**, as he feels that Desdemona had to **overlook** his **ethnicity** in order to marry him, and he is constantly aware of his **difference**. This quote also introduces Othello's need for **proof**, and this idea will recur throughout the scene.

- **Act III Scene III: "I am glad I have found this napkin: / This was her first remembrance from the Moor: / My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Woo'd me to steal it; but she so loves the token, / For he conjured her she should ever keep it, / That she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to."**

This is another example of **dramatic irony**: Emilia does not realise the impact of her actions, but the audience knows that in stealing the handkerchief and giving it to Iago, Emilia unwittingly seals her mistress's doom.

- **Act III Scene III: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, / Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof: / Or by the worth of man's eternal soul, / Thou hadst been better have been born a dog / Than answer my waked wrath!"**

Othello comes back to the importance of **sight** and of having **visual proof** of Desdemona's infidelity. His **insistence** on evidence is a testament to his **honesty** and **nobility**, but it also leaves him **open to manipulation** because when Iago falsely produces evidence, Othello immediately determines to murder his wife. The exclamation at the end of this quote tells us that Othello shouts at Iago here, indicating his **rising temper** and **anger**. The **2015 RSC** production of *Othello* included a **torture scene** at this moment in the play: Othello interrogated Iago to ensure he was



certain of Desdemona's infidelity. The addition of this scene **solidified** the audience's notion of Othello's absolute **dedication** to determining the truth.

- **Act III Scene III: "Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell! / Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught, / For 'tis of aspics' tongues!"**

This is where we start to see the **break-down** of Othello's **mental state** through his **language**. His increasing anger is evident here through his repeated **exclamations**. He is losing control over language, just as he loses control of his temper.

Analysis - Act IV

- From Act IV, we witness Othello's **mental and physical breakdown** as he is **consumed** by **jealousy** and **anger**. As is typical of a tragedy, the general law and order of society also breaks down as the tragic hero falls from grace.
- Othello **hits** Desdemona in Scene I, and this is a strong **reversal** of the earlier love and affection that was so visible between the couple in Acts I and II.
- The arrival of Lodovico, a messenger from Venice, in Scene I **broadens the scope** of the play and reminds us of the external world. However, we know that by this stage Othello has become too wrapped up in his own **jealousy and confusion** that he will not make it back to Venice.
- Desdemona puts her **wedding sheets** on the bed that she is to sleep in. She will be murdered in this bed while she sleeps, so the wedding sheets become her **symbolic grave**. This is fitting: the wedding sheets are used when the bride loses her **virginity**, and Desdemona is an innocent and a faithful wife, so she dies in sheets that symbolise this innocence.
- The sheets can also symbolise Othello and Desdemona's **marriage**, which was full of love when the first married but is now sadly full of hate.
- Emilia delivers a famous speech on **womanhood** and **marriage**: "**Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell / And have their palates both for sweet and sour, / As husbands have**". She speaks up for some of the **unfairnesses** that women faced in marriage, and defends their human rights. This is a strong moment for Emilia's character, who thus far in the play has only accidentally assisted Iago in framing Desdemona. It is a **precursor** to her confrontation of Othello and Act V, and her revealing of Iago as a liar.

Key Quotes & Analysis

- **Act IV Scene I: "Lie with her! lie on her! We say lie on her, when / they belie her. Lie with her! that's fulsome. / --Handkerchief--confessions--handkerchief!--[...] Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. / --Is't possible?--Confess--handkerchief!--O devil!--"**

We saw Othello's language begin to break down in Act III, but now it breaks down into several **short exclamations** and **clauses**. His speech is reflective of his mental state: he is struggling to think clearly and see past his jealousy. This is a clear **contrast** to Othello's **composure** that we



witnessed at the beginning of the play, where he spoke **fluently and poetically**. His repetition of “**handkerchief**” also indicates his **obsessive fixation** - this apparent evidence of Desdemona’s affair is what his decision to murder her hangs on.

- **Act IV Scene I: “Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even / the bed she hath contaminated.”**

Iago draws attention to the **marriage bed**, which Desdemona ironically has not “**contaminated**”. She is as good and innocent as the day she married Othello, and this is symbolised when she makes up the bed with her wedding sheets again.

- **Act IV Scene II: “his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love. I cannot say 'whore:' / It does abhor me now I speak the word;”**

Desdemona’s speech in this Act strongly contrasts Othello’s. She **retains her composure**, even with the creeping knowledge of her **imminent death**, and this is indicated in her **calm** and **poetic language**. She draws attention to her own **goodness** and **purity**: she will not allow herself to be “**taint[ed]**”, and cannot bring herself to even say the word “**whore**”. This directly contrasts Othello who, earlier in this scene, called her a “**whore**” and an “**Impudent strumpet!**”. By this stage in the play, Shakespeare draws our attention to Othello and Desdemona as opposites: Othello as **dark and evil**, and Desdemona as **white and pure**.

Analysis - Act V

- Act V is where we see the minor characters’ plotlines come to a close. Roderigo is killed by Iago and we realise just how **futile** his role in the play was; he was simply a pawn for Iago, and is killed when he is no longer useful.
- Othello’s **soliloquy** at the beginning of Scene II is calm and composed, and reminds us of his characterisation in Acts I and II. He is no longer **raving and confused**, but instead **deadly certain** on his course of action. This heightens our **sense of tragedy** because he has been so far manipulated by Iago, he almost resembles his old self, yet he is certain of his wife’s guilt.
- Desdemona is an image of **perfect innocence** in this Act: she is sleeping in her white wedding sheets. As she is smothered, she begs to say “**one prayer!**” but she is denied this.
- Emilia is a **strong voice** in the final scene. She defies her husband on numerous occasions in order to speak the truth: “**No, I will speak as liberal as the north: / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak**” (Act V Scene II). She speaks out despite Iago threatening her, and she eventually pays with her life when he stabs her. Despite the fact that Desdemona has been silenced, Emilia becomes the **final strong female voice** of the play.
- Othello now calls Iago a “**devil**” and although his **realisation** comes too late, it does restore some sense of right to the play.
- Othello **kills himself** to **atone** for his wrongdoings. **Suicide** in the context of Jacobean England is even more of a **tragic end** for the protagonist since it was considered a **mortal**



sin to take one's own life, akin to **murder**, rather than allowing God to carry out his judgement. This is a truly **tragic** and **pitiful** end for the once-great Othello.

- **Lodovico**, one the minor characters, speaks the final words in the play. There is **no sense of justice** or promise of future **hope** at the end of this tragedy; instead it ends in **bleakness**. Iago still lives, Gratiano seizes Othello's possessions, and Lodovico returns to Venice to share the sad news.
- There is a final reference to **sight** in Lodovico's last words, a theme which has been so prevalent throughout the play. Seeing Othello slumped against Desdemona's corpse "**poisons sight**" (Act V Scene II); it is too **horrific** to look at, so the curtains on the stage must be drawn.

Key Quotes & Analysis

- **Act V Scene II: "Yet I'll not shed her blood; / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow [...] / Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men."**

Othello cannot bring himself to **mar** Desdemona's **beauty**. He will not shed her blood, and we can draw a parallel here to her **virginal purity**. A woman bleeding on her wedding night was thought to be proof that she was a virgin, so Othello refusing to shed Desdemona's blood when he kills her allows her to remain in a state of **premarital innocence**. This is how Othello wishes to remember her, before she seemingly cheated on him. The use of the **modal verb** - she "**must**" die - demonstrates the **strength** of Othello's conviction here, and how he feels almost **duty-bound** to kill her. He insists on his own honour right through to his death, and begs people to believe that "**nought I did in hate, but all in honour**".

- **Act V Scene II: "When I have pluck'd thy rose, / I cannot give it vital growth again. / It must needs wither"**

Again, the way Othello refers to Desdemona before killing her references her **virginity**. This quote implies that her beauty has "**wither[ed]**" after she has lost her virginity. This is what Othello truly regrets because he believes her **corruption** to be from sleeping around with other men. In Othello's mind, if Desdemona was still innocent and virginal, he would not have to kill her. For him, his wife's **lack of innocence** is the true **tragedy**.

- **Act V Scene II: "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well; / Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought / Perplex'd in the extreme"**

Shortly before Othello kills himself, he fixates on how he will be remembered. At the very close of the play, Shakespeare returns again to the idea of **reputation**: rather than worrying about his actions, Othello is more worried about how he will be remembered and talked about after death. His **anxiety** is with his **legacy**, and in his final speech he attempts to **exert control** over how he will be remembered, as one who **loved** too much.

