

AQA English Literature A-level

Othello

Themes: Truth and Deception

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The theme of **truth and deception** drives the main action of *Othello*. It is represented and shown through the **manipulative acts of Iago**, who slithers his way into Othello's **consciousness** and **poisons** it. This is coupled with Othello's **obsession** with his **masculine honour**, which Iago exploits with his **revenge**. As a result, Othello **succumbs** to this and becomes the **murderer** that Iago shaped him into.

The play establishes the **binary between truth and deception** from the start. For example, Desdemona hid her marriage to Othello from her father. Although this may suggest Desdemona's assertiveness regarding her love, it also makes the audience notice that she has the **capability to lie**. Her father reiterates this, as he states: '**Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has betrayed her father, and may thee**' (Act I Scene III). Othello dismisses this, but it **echoes** both with him and the audience later on in the play through Iago. This sense of **suspicion** that surrounds the female characters and the strong **sense of justice** within the male characters automatically sets Desdemona up as a **perpetrator**, due to **societal expectations** that disregards her words.

Context: morality plays and social norms

During the Elizabethan era, **religious changes** were common. This means that the **social norms** that individuals followed **varied** depending on the **religious transformations** that the country was going through. **Morality plays** were **popular** during the **medieval period**, and were gradually being **replaced by sensational plays** by the time Shakespeare became popular. However, Shakespeare loosely follows the **structure and conventions** that morality plays employed.

Morality plays were **microcosms of real social problems, order, and structure**. They utilised one **main character** that is **symbolic of mankind** and who goes through **difficulties**, experiencing the **different vices of life**. Other characters in the play represented either **goodness or evil in humanity**; villains and protagonists in most Shakespeare's plays usually adhere to this structure. **Personification** is an important technique that these plays relied on, as they made it easier for audiences to see the **consequences** of following good or evil. As a result, the play always supports a **certain moral message**, encouraging the audience to be **virtuous**. As such, they provided some guidance to audience members who may have felt **uncertain about the afterlife** or their own sins.

Such plays included **vice characters**, which are characters that **represent evil and chaos**. For example, Iago symbolises **inherent evil** because of the almost **lack of motive** that drives his revenge plan. His purpose is to lead Othello to his downfall, tempting him to **commit grave sins** against his wife and his own beliefs. This can be noted in the way he speaks of Desdemona and tricks Othello into believing that he has the **knowledge** to speak the truth. Often such vice characters are seen as '**devils**'. This reflects religious views at the time, as citizens believed that the **devil could walk among ordinary individuals**, tempting them towards sin. This is known as **dramatic irony**, which is a technique that revealed information only to the audience. For example, the other characters are unaware of the fact



that Iago is deceiving them but the audience is aware of his plans through his **asides**. This depicts his **cunning and sly nature** which he uses to place everyone against each other. On the other hand, the protagonists are seen as the **contrasting image** to these villainous characters. Often shown to be **noble and of good stature**, the protagonist of the story is faced with **great difficulties**. This comes in the form of **psychological turmoil**. For example, Othello is seen to **struggle between believing Iago or his wife**, being stuck in a **liminal space of uncertainty**. This can be interpreted as Othello **succumbing** to the temptations presented by Iago. Similarly to Macbeth and Hamlet, Othello experiences **emotional distress** as a result of being unable to come to a decision about the innocence of Desdemona. However, as he is presented with the **ocular proof** that he desired, he gives in fully into Iago's **deceitful act**.

However, one way in which Shakespeare's morality play structure differs is the **ending of his plays**. Usually, morality plays send the audience off with a **good moral message** in which the protagonist made the right choices by listening to his **conscience** and being supported by the side characters. On the contrary, *Othello* may be defined as a **nihilistic play**, which means that the ending is much more **tragic**. Othello arguably does not experience any **redemption** at the end, because he commits **two sins** – murder as well as his own suicide. These portray that he still did not make the **correct decision**, leaving audiences feeling **uneasy** about his fate in the afterlife. However, others may perceive his apparent suicide as **redemptive** because he pays the price for his **inability to protect his wife and contain his jealousy**.

AO5 Tip – Othello's tragic flaw

[Marvin Rosenberg](#) states: '**Othello's tragic flaw is that he is human**'. This may be interpreted in different ways. Othello, being a **racial outsider**, is under **constant surveillance** to uphold his **image and reputation**. In addition, he is expected to be **level headed and remain calm** when faced with **challenges**, especially considering his high position in the military. This means that he is always **under scrutiny**, suggesting that any misstep is **amplified and punished**. There is no room for mistakes, suggesting his **absolutist mind-set** where he does not consider other options but **acts on his feelings**. Alternatively, having a **jealous disposition** is **natural** for everyone. Othello was subjected to excessive jealousy. Whether it was because of Iago or Othello's **inability to make correct decisions** remains **debatable**.

Do you think Othello is responsible for his own downfall? What do you think he could have done differently with Desdemona?

Iago's Revenge Plot

Revenge is the main reason why Iago chooses to **deceive and break Othello's marriage**. The audience is presented with small **petty justifications** for his actions, none of which warrant the **extreme nature of his plans**. One of the reasons as to why he wants to bring Othello down is because he believes that Othello has had an affair with his wife. The term '**cuckolded**' or '**cuckold**' comes up often, which is a word inspired by the cuckoo bird who



invades other birds' nest in order to lay eggs in them. Between a husband and a wife, this term represented adultery where the wife is **unfaithful** to the husband. One of Iago's motives for convincing Othello that he has become cuckolded is to get revenge for Othello allegedly sleeping with his wife, although this was not true at all. For example, Othello exclaims: **'I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me?'** (Act 4, Scene 1).

Furthermore, another motive for his revenge is because of his **own jealousy**. His anger at Cassio being promoted to lieutenant instead of him is the central driving factor of his revenge. He says: **'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago: / In following him, I follow but myself; / not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end'** (Act I Scene I). This depicts the **duplicity of his nature** that he himself is aware of, making him a **consciously evil villain** who wants to cause **havoc** because of his own **personal problems**. The **double meanings** that he employs in the quote suggest further that he is certain of his manipulation being successful – he understands that he can cause distress for his **own advantage** without the Moor **questioning his sincerity**. For example, he knows that he needs to maintain a **humble, trusting façade** in order for Othello to fully trust him. The **duplicity of his nature** is also shown through Iago's movements on stage. Throughout the play, he is always **positioning himself strategically** in certain spaces in order to fulfil his plans. For example, at the start of the play he is seen to **move in and out of the shadows** – when he speaks badly about Othello to Brabantio, he is not visible to him. His duplicitous double nature is central for his revenge plans, making him **a less sympathetic character**.

Iago's plot to destroy Othello leads to his **betrayal** of numerous characters and **abuse** of his **power** as a **trusted advisor**. He explains to the audience: **'O will I turn her virtue into pitch / And out of her goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all'** (Act II Scene III). This is part of another **soliloquy** by Iago, in which he **extends his plan** to specifically encompass Desdemona and how he wants to use her **good nature** against herself. This means that he continuously has **bad intentions**, wanting to commit **treachery** by catching all of the characters in this **'net'**.

This includes Cassio as well, who he uses to make Othello believe that Desdemona is unfaithful. This is a **double revenge**, as Othello chooses Cassio as lieutenant instead of Iago. For example, in Act V Scene I, Iago uses **body language** to make Othello believe that Cassio is speaking about his affair with Desdemona. Although they are speaking about Bianca, Othello claims: **'(aside) Look, how he laughs already!'** (Act V Scene I). The **'aside'** is an important staging technique because it hides the character from other characters but makes them visible to the audience, creating more **tension** as the audience anticipates their next move. As a result, Iago utilises all characters in his plan.

He also uses Emilia, who finds and gives Iago the **handkerchief** which she knows means a lot to Desdemona, as it is seen as a **sign of love** from Othello. However, Iago's **evil nature** emerges at the end of the play when even his wife turns against him. This is because of the idea of **subjectivity** - while one person may consider something deceptive, another person may not. Emilia exclaims: **'You told a lie, an odious damned lie: Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie!'** (Act V Scene II). She is **horrified** that he lied about Desdemona to her, making her **complicit in his evil deeds**. On the other hand, Iago replies: **'I told him what I thought, and told no more Than what he found himself was apt and true'** (Act V Scene



II), suggesting Iago's **delusion** in defending his actions as **legitimate and harmless**. This makes him the **true villain** of the play - he does **not redeem himself**, nor does he die at the end.

A05 – Othello's jealousy

Different critics theorise the effect of Iago's tactics in various ways. For example, **Samuel Coleridge** says: '**Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago**'. This suggests the almost supernatural force with which Iago manages to manipulate Othello. The idea of conviction is important – her infidelity is not reality, it was manufactured through language and imagination. Alternatively, others give Othello more autonomy. For example, **Henry L. Warnken** claims: '**Iago manipulated Othello, but Othello is no mere puppet... by the middle of the play, his thoughts and feelings echo Iago**'. This portrays the sinister nature of Iago's deceptiveness, which resulted in Othello taking over and enacting those views too. In particular, as he sinks deeper into despair (which the audience notices comes at great costs) he starts to echo Iago's hatred.

Iago's manipulation

Iago's manipulation is the **main driving factor** of the play. This is clearly evident in Act III Scene III, when he continuously repeats '**Honest?**' after Othello. This suggests Iago's use of **honesty as a weapon** in order to emphasise his own **villainy** hidden through a façade. This is provocative and causes a reaction in Othello. The **language** employed by Iago is



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significant in this Act, as it is the initiating factor of the doubt in Othello's mind. At first Othello defends Desdemona's innocence, **reiterating his love** for her. Honesty is the **foundation of their marriage** of their relationship, and this is made clear to us at the start of the play. The issue with the **excessive reliance on trust and loyalty**, however, is that it creates certain **sensitivities** as well as **cracks** in their relationship. As a result, Othello is more prone to be affected by certain words and actions, reinforced when he says to Iago: '**By heaven, he echoes me, as if there were some monster in his thought**' (Act III Scene III).

Othello's insistence on honesty and truth allows him to fall under Iago's influence, as he is convinced that **Iago's honesty** is not allowing him to speak of the 'monster' that is within his mind. For Othello, this is a sign of friendship and loyalty from his friend, when ironically the 'monster' in Iago's thoughts were his plans to bring Othello



down instead. Shakespeare's **deployment of such ironic phrases** greatly engages the whole audience. This is because only the audience is aware of his **deceptive plans**, watching as it unfolds with certain indirect hints from Iago himself. As a result, the audience becomes **more immersed and invested** in the plot, helplessly watching as Iago succeeds.

Othello, after being subject to Iago's **mind tricks** that in turn made him overthink, says to Iago: **'If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought' (Act III Scene III)**. Shakespeare **employs another ironic quote** here, as the audience is aware that Iago does not have any love for him. Othello's **anxious tone** in this scene suggests that his plan has been partly executed already, **legitimising** as well as **solidifying the manipulation** that he deployed on the protagonist. Similarly, there is a shift in the **power dynamic** in this scene. Iago has the **knowledge** that Othello craves, and the latter is almost begging to know what he is thinking and what he knows. Although Iago's **rank is lower, he has control within the dialogue**. However, the use of the informal **pronoun 'thou'** demonstrates that Othello still realises his **superior position** compared to Iago ('you' would be more formal and respectful). On the other hand, the plea can be seen as **assertive** – as such, it may also be interpreted as an **order** from Othello. Either way, Shakespeare plays around with who holds power in the conversation; Iago holds power in terms of **deceiving Othello** whereas Othello still has the **higher social position**.

Iago's deception and its success is evident when he claims **'Men should be what they seem' (Act III Scene III)**. This suggests that he knows that Othello is **falling for his tricks**, while also reinforcing his 'honest' demeanour to fool Othello. This can be contrasted with what Iago says at the start of the play: **'I am not what I am' (Act 1, Scene 1)**. The **contrasting imagery** that Iago **constructs of his own character** adds to the **deceptive layers**, making him more **complex** to the audience. Similarly, Iago exclaims: **'I should be wise; for honesty's a fool and loses that it works for' (Act III Scene III)**. This is a **smart counter** to Othello's absolute belief in honesty – Iago claims that his **wise nature** is far more useful than being honest, trying to convince Othello that he understands his pain of finding out about the **true nature of his wife's fidelity**.

The effect of this emerges when Othello claims: **'By the world, I think my wife be honest, and think she is not; I think that thou art just, and think thou art not' (Act III Scene III)**. Here Othello is still trying to hold onto some hope of Desdemona being faithful but he is starting to question her actions, showing the **doubts that are starting to surface**. The use of **antithesis** and constant change of mind-set suggests that Othello feels overwhelmed by the information that Iago is giving him. This is another one of Iago's **tactics** to manipulate Othello into believing that Desdemona is being unfaithful. It shows Iago's acute sense of **understanding of humans**: he is aware that it may be in Othello's **nature to be jealous**. Iago's **exploitation** of this forces the protagonist to recede into a **primitive character**, which Iago sees as **natural** due to his race.

Furthermore, this **contrast amplifies** the **ironic** nature of his **speech pattern**, making it a staple of his language in the play. Consequently, Iago convinces Othello that he is a more **believable source of information** than his wife's words. For example, he says: **'if she be else, o, heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe't' (Act III Scene III)**. Expressions that contain 'o' portray a sense of passion; for Othello, this may be a feeling of pure jealousy or a feeling of total loss. He is still in **denial**, not wanting to believe that she would be capable of being **cunning** and **unfaithful**.



On the other hand, he quickly changes the way he speaks to and about Desdemona. When she tries to comfort his forehead pains, he says: **'Let it alone. Come, I'll go in with you.'** (Act III Scene III). The **coldness of his tone** and his **rigid body language** (facing away from her, trying not to be close to her) shows the **change** that occurred as a result of Iago. Her **honest composure** was **compromised forcefully**, being **distorted** into a **deceitful countenance** through the **doubts planted by Iago**. This is emphasised by the **short sentences** he uses with her, completely different from the **longer, passionate, and loving poetic speeches** he previously addressed her with.

This concept of being prone to **external influences** is emphasised by the fact that Othello places a lot of **importance on his honour**. Having experienced **redemption** after being freed from slavery, Othello established his **reputation as a soldier** and adventurer throughout Venice. The decree to which the **Venetian royals and courts** hold him to reflect this suggests that he is placed higher up in the **social hierarchy**. This position enables him access to spheres that his **race** would have prevented him from accessing, meaning that his awareness of his place within the **hierarchy** would have been very clear to him. This means that he will **actively avoid transgressing social codes and values**. Venetian men, as the Elizabethan audience would be aware of too, **prioritised their masculinity** and their reputation. As such, characteristics and traits related to **aggression, strength, and valour as well as authority** were central to being a 'man'. By insisting that Desdemona disobeyed him with another man, Othello is put into a **humiliating** position.

Tip – Contemporary culture

Since Shakespeare's era, the concept of **masculinity** has greatly changed. Many people recognise that placing **certain values** on male or female behaviour is **limiting and damaging**. In particular, the notion of being a masculine boy creates a sense of **toxicity** that associates certain features with men. This is limiting because it does not allow individuals to **define themselves** differently – not adhering to them leads them to being **discriminated against**. This is especially true when considering the **dangerous nature of the narrow definition** of masculinity; males who **transgress or digress** from such masculine ideals face a lot of hate from their **male peers**. For example, the treatment of homosexuals is still an ongoing problem, as a lot of **homophobic insults** include the lack of masculinity in those men.

What are the consequences of such categories? What other plays illuminate the problems of such categories?

Roderigo's deception

Roderigo is another character that falls **victim to Iago's deceptiveness**. At the start of the play he is seen to be in love with Desdemona and it is insinuated that he has tried to woo her before. However, upon finding out that she is married to Othello, he also wants to **ruin their marriage** in order to be with her instead. This is why Iago is able to **manipulate** him more easily – Roderigo is **easily swayed** by Iago, who convinces him that 'their' plan will work in the end. This allows Iago to milk him for money on the **pretence** that he will help Roderigo



woo Desdemona, but it is clear to the audience that Roderigo is only **taken for a fool** throughout the play.

However, at certain points Roderigo is seen to question Iago's **sincerity and the success of their plan**. For example, Roderigo claims: **'Faith, I have heard too much, for your words and performances are no kin together'** (Act IV Scene II). This suggests that he is aware of Iago's evil nature, and exposes it to him. In response, Iago says: **'You charge me most unjustly'** (Act IV Scene II). This shows Iago trying to defend himself, but only very weakly – Iago is aware that he is able to convince Roderigo easily, and this may be seen as a way of allowing Roderigo to be dominant for once. Roderigo rebuffs: **'With nought but truth'** (Act 4 Scene 2). Nevertheless, although he points this out he is still **deceived throughout the play**, e.g. by convincing him that Cassio is guilty of sleeping with Desdemona and being ready to kill him in order to win Desdemona's favour. This depicts the **extent** to which Iago is able to **manipulate characters in the play**.

Desdemona's victimhood and honesty

The **women** in *Othello* are seen to represent **honesty and innocence** compared to the men. However, because of their **lower social status**, their honesty is **constantly questioned** and is **twisted** into something **deceptive**. This is a technique that Shakespeare continuously uses, creating a **heightened sense of tension** and **complicating love relationships** through false deception.

Desdemona is wooed by Othello due to his **storytelling**, being **happily married** to him to the point where she **disobeyed** her own father. Although she disobeyed him, she still **spoke her truth** in terms of her love for Othello. This allowed the audience to understand that **their love is true**, and that she is a more **sympathetic character**. However, it is clear from the later action in the play that she is **not able to control his anger and jealousy**, being unaware as well as **naïve** about the well-being of their marriage. It may be argued that it is due to their **own ideal outlook on marriage** that she falls **victim** to his **jealousy**. This is because Emilia warns her of the **jealousy** and **dangers** that husbands may pose: **'Tis not a year or two shows us a man'** (Act III Scene IV) as well as arguing that **'they are not ever jealous for the cause / But jealous for they're jealous'** (Act III Scene IV). These quotes suggest that Desdemona needs to be **more aware** of who her husband really is, being encouraged to see Othello for the **jealous man** that Emilia can tell he truly is. This may be because Emilia has become **disillusioned** about her husband's **true nature**, and wants Desdemona to be in a **happier relationship** than her. This includes being honest to herself about her **less idealistic marriage**. Furthermore, Emilia provides a **deeper insight about male jealousy** – she argues that his **doubts and suspicions** that have now arisen will continue to question her honesty. Even though Desdemona might be innocent, she will face the **consequences** of her husband's anger that Emilia **foreshadows** in their conversation.

Desdemona, although having been warned about Othello, is **genuine and hopeful** that her husband may change. Some may argue that she is **too reliant on her feelings and openness**. This means that the audience knows that she continues to be faithful in her marriage towards Othello, always speaking the truth and never deceiving anyone. However, this is the strength that Iago decides to **exploit**: she **speaks openly to her husband and is**



However, Othello's fate is unclear. He believed that in killing his wife, he is able to protect her 'soul', making it a 'sacrifice' which is 'merciful' (Act V Scene II). Once he realises his **mistake**, he tries to make **amends**: '**This look of thine [Desdemona's] will hurl my soul from heaven, / And fiends will snatch at it**' (Act V Scene II). This suggests that he understands the **consequences of murdering his wife**, as this is a **mortal sin** - but by committing **suicide**, he also commits another mortal sin, **compounding his damnation**. Therefore, the consequences of **deception** are seen to be **disastrous**, with **religious overtones** that haunt the characters.

Truth & Deception: Good vs. Evil

Philosophy has concerned itself with the question of **good and evil** for a long time. In terms of the theme of **truth / deception**, truth is usually always associated with good while deception is regarded as an **inherent evil**. Iago's **utilisation of honesty as a weapon** depicts how goodness can be used as a **façade** to carry out **greater evil** – this makes him a **perfect villain**. For example, he is able to convince Roderigo as well as Othello that he is an honest person who is looking out for them. By **appealing to this idea of honesty**, Iago is able to easily deceive everyone in the play.

An example of his '**honest**' reputation comes from Othello, who repeatedly mentions this. For example, when Iago tries to manipulate Othello about **Desdemona's infidelity** and acts as though he is unable to say it, Othello notes: '**I know thou'rt full of love and honesty, / And weigh'st thy words before thou givest them breath, / Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more**' (Act III Scene III). It is through Iago's **cunning ways of hiding the truth** that he is perceived as a **trusted advisor**, enabling him to swiftly move between characters and push them towards **committing heinous acts**. As a result, Iago represents the **destabilising agent** that causes **imbalances** within the **binary of good/evil** – he **threatens to blur the lines** between them, making it harder to distinguish someone as good or bad.

Shakespeare puts Iago and Othello against each other, depicting how **evil can seep into goodness and destroy it** – again, Iago is able to blur the boundaries, pushing Othello to the edge of madness. He uses **tactics** that show a **sense of self-awareness** but are in reality strategies to further **manipulate** the subject. For example, he claims: '**As I confess, it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses, and (oft) my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not**' (Act III Scene III). In this quote, Iago admits that he sometimes makes false observations and that the **doubts** that form out of these can end up playing tricks in Othello's mind. This is a **psychological trick** employed by Iago to make Othello trust him even more; by admitting his **weaknesses**, Othello is able to see him as an **honest person** and therefore sees Desdemona's **unfaithfulness as something believable**. Due to this openness, Othello trusts in Iago to tell him the truth and show his **vulnerable side**. Consequently, this emotional vulnerability causes Othello to be **destroyed**. We can see that Iago's use of **honesty as a weapon** leads to the demise of many characters in the play.



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Overview

Overall, the theme of **Truth and Deception** plays an integral part in the play. As we have seen, most characters in the play experience deception or **deceive themselves** of a certain situation. For example, Iago is the driving force of the main plot of deception, where his **revenge** ruins most of the characters. **Roderigo** can be seen as the first victim of this, whereby he is deceived by promises of gaining **Desdemona's love**. Othello, Cassio, Emilia and Desdemona get pulled into this **pool of lies** which is orchestrated by Iago. His character is essential, as Shakespeare utilises some conventions of the **morality play**. Doing so, Shakespeare constructed a villain that is **inherently evil**, manifesting 'deception' in Iago's characterisation. Additionally, Othello deceives himself by believing Iago's words, being caught up in his own **doubts**. This means that he convinced himself of his wife's **infidelity**. As a result, deception takes different forms within various characters.

Morality is inextricably tied up with the idea of truth and deception. In the **religious** sense, truth is a **necessity** to ensure **virtuous** living. This means that individuals are expected to live and **speak truthfully** in order to ensure happiness. Iago goes against such **ideals**, exploiting **Desdemona's loyalty**, **Othello's trust** and **Emilia's sense of duty**. The contrasting **religious imagery** highlights the extent of his **revenge and jealousy**, almost leaving the audience with no hope of **redemption**. However, it is only when the truth comes out after Desdemona's death that **deceptive ideas** are overpowered. The crushing nature of her truthful words generates an immense sense of **guilt and regret** within Othello that enables him to redeem himself in committing **suicide**. At the end, Shakespeare shows that truth will always **overpower** deception.

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