

# Edexcel English Literature A-level

## Othello: Character Profiles

### Iago

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## IAGO

### THE TOXIC SIDE OF LOVE, SOCIETY'S HIDDEN MONSTER

#### INTRODUCTION

At one time, Iago might have been honest - but this time is passed. Othello and Iago were once close friends, but now Iago only wishes his comrade **pain** and suffering. If the play is constructed around dualities - Venice vs. Cyprus, man vs. woman, Heaven vs. Hell - then Iago's story stems from the **division** between his past and present. As an audience, we can only imagine what kind of person Iago was. Now, he is a **disgruntled** employee, motivated by hatred and jealousy, fuelled by **convoluted**, contradictory delusions and an inflated ego. Denied all his previous triumphs, he mourns the worldview he used to possess, and takes his **cynicism** and **disillusionment** out on his peers.

Unlike Othello, Iago is an **indigenous** member of Venetian society: white, male, married, with a respectable role in the military. All the odds are stacked in his favour. Yet, he is convinced the world is **conspiring** against him. He was passed over for a **promotion** he believes he deserves, leaving him stranded at the bottom of the pecking order. He cannot have the woman he claims to love, Desdemona; though, the **excuses** behind his rivalry with Othello vary frequently, and the only thing that remains clear is his desire for **destruction**.

Iago is **atypical** as far as Shakespearean villains go. He is allowed the soliloquies and rapport with the audience usually reserved for the tragic heroes; while Othello, the **titular** character and arguably the protagonist, is held at arm's length through most of the play. Instead, it is Iago whose **deepest** thoughts we are privy to, and it is Iago we root for, in a grudging, **disconcerting**, twisted way. Shakespeare makes us an accessory to his plots and **complicit** in his bigotry, so that when the **denouement** plays out in full tragic fashion, we sit by and let it happen - as we are obligated to do, as an audience, and yet this **passivity** implicates us further in Iago's guilt.

Traditionally, a Shakespearean soliloquy depicts a character's **inner torment**, the push-and-pull of a morally conflicted character trying to wrestle with fate. This is not the case for Iago: he is settled in his own **immorality** and takes pride in it. The main contradiction behind his soliloquies is the reason *why* he hates Othello so much in the first place: explanations include the lost promotion, Othello sleeping with Emilia, and Iago wanting to **sleep** with Desdemona. All of this **inconsistency** makes one wonder if these are all just excuses to mask an innately evil nature: Iago is comfortable with being evil, but not comfortable with being **evil** for evil's sake.

From the start, Iago is **disillusioned** with the concept of love: he views it as weak, lust-fuelled irrationality. However, he is happy to manipulate love's **intoxicating** power for his own means. Because of this, Iago represents the demonic counterpart to Othello's love: where Othello uses **persuasive speech** to defend his love, Iago uses it to sow the seeds of his **destruction**. Shakespeare uses the character of Iago to show that love is not simply the force for good within a sinful world. Love contains the **capacity** for evil within itself.



## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- The Disgruntled Employee:** Shakespeare characterises Iago as a resentful, **egocentric** individual who feels overlooked and undervalued by his peers. He has an overblown view of his own talents and worth; so, when Othello chooses Cassio over him, it enrages him greatly. He tells Roderigo, **“I know my price, I am worth no worse a place,” (Act 1 Scene 1)**, suggesting he is **entitled** to the promotion. Another thing that **wounds** Iago’s ego is the pecking order of his society, within which he is at the bottom and must serve many above him. When he says, **“[Cassio] must his lieutenant be, / And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship’s ancient,” (Act 1 Scene 1)**, his sarcasm makes his resentment and **bitterness** very apparent. The mocking term **“his Moorship”** conveys his disregard for his superiors. We see that Iago is envious of others’ power and **authority**, wishing it for himself.
- The Jilted Husband:** Iago is ruled by sexual jealousy, **exaggerated** pride, and belligerent competitiveness - all traits that define **toxic masculinity**. Shakespeare writes his character such that these aggressive qualities manifest with his misogyny and paranoia. Iago doesn’t trust anyone; he operates as a lone wolf trying to get his own way, and other people are only a **means** to an end. He accuses both Othello (**Act 1 Scene 3**) and Cassio (**Act 2 Scene 1**) of sleeping with his wife, and Shakespeare implies Iago is more **angry** at these men than at his wife for cheating on him. Rather, he is cruelly dismissive of Emilia and calls her a **“villainous whore” (Act 5 Scene 2)**; he views her as a ‘lost cause’ and a fallen woman, unworthy of his care or attention. Shakespeare demonstrates the hypocrisy within male **insecurities** through Iago’s **contradictory** actions. He is enraged at the prospect of other men sleeping with his wife, yet doesn’t care for Emilia at all. For instance, he implies she nags him, telling Cassio, **“Would she give you as much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me / You would have enough,” (Act 2 Scene 1)**, and he calls her a **“foolish wife”** and a **“good wench” (Act 3 Scene 3)**. He **alienates** himself from other men because they are competition and distances himself from women because of the powers of **seduction** they wield. This illustrates that men view women as **trophies** for their ego and virility, not caring for their wives as fellow human beings at all. It isn’t their wives’ love or **companionship** they desire, but their **subservience**.
- The Serpent:** Iago always knows the right thing to say to someone to persuade them to his way of thinking. He has an **uncanny** ability to identify someone’s biggest wants or insecurities, and exploit them for his own gain. Possibly, this **manipulative** ability is used by Shakespeare to show how Venetian society’s biases and prejudices make it vulnerable to such **mechanisations**. After all, it isn’t too much of a leap for Iago to deduce that Brabantio will be scandalised by his daughter’s **elopement**. Furthermore,

### AO5: Iago & Justice

“Efficiency and intelligence devoted to good have availed Iago nothing, for he remains the Moor’s ancient. His tragic intrigue has its genesis, consequently, in his determination to secure justice for himself. [...] At the beginning of the play Iago is a man seeking justice who, **having right on his side but no recourse to law** in what is a personal rather than an actionable matter, **takes affairs into his own hands** and devotes his intelligence and efficiency to obtaining for himself what he interprets as justice.” - John C. McCloskey, *The Motivation of Iago*



Shakespeare depicts him as a master of disguise: he can change his personality when the situation calls for it. With Roderigo, he promises, “**Thou shalt enjoy [Desdemona],**” (Act 1 Scene 3), while belittling and **intimidating** him, for example calling him a “**silly gentleman**” (Act 1 Scene 3). With Othello, he focuses instead on Desdemona’s flaws while acting the loyal friend, reminding him often, “**You know I love you,**” (Act 3 Scene 3). Just like the **Serpent** in the Garden of Eden, Iago doesn’t commit any crimes himself until the end of the play. Instead, he orchestrates the actions of everyone else, so that they do his dirty work for him. This is one way in which he **avoids** blame: he preys on the malice and evil of others.

- **The Entrepreneur:** In relation to his **resentment** at the Venetian pecking order, Shakespeare portrays Iago as a renegade or visionary. He wants to take apart the **system** from the inside. Also, he isn’t shy about being in it for himself. It’s not just that Iago doesn’t trust anyone to work with him: he doesn’t want them to share in his victories. Above all, Iago is driven by **selfishness**, pride, misanthropy, and greed. He openly admits, “**I follow [Othello] to serve my turn upon him,**” (Act 1 Scene 1), continuing, “**Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end,**” (Act 1 Scene 1). Iago doesn’t fear divine judgement or **moral consequence**, because he cares only for getting what he wants. Shakespeare shows us a man who is absorbed with the present and **scorns** the life to come in “**Heaven**”. This conveys his materialism and narcissism. Iago’s ‘every man for himself’ outlook is in accordance with **capitalist** ideals. Moreover, by rejecting “**love and duty**”, Iago **rejects** the two concepts upon which the play - and Venetian society - is built.
- **The Undecided:** Iago may talk a big game, making an effort to appear **confident** and self-assured, but Shakespeare hints at a conflicted, unstable mental state. The reasons he gives for his **crusade** against Othello are plentiful and ever **changing**; he cites Othello choosing “**a great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio,**” (Act 1 Scene 1) to be his lieutenant, the **rumour** that Othello has “**done [his] office,**” (Act 1 Scene 3), his “**love**” for Desdemona (Act 2 Scene 1), and his “**fear [that] Cassio [is] with [his] night-cap,**” (Act 2 Scene 1). These narratives are of his own making, but **propel** him towards **violence**. The truth might be that there is no real motivation behind his actions: he might merely crave drama and chaos. That he attempts to **justify** them suggests he isn’t as **content** with his own vices as he wants us to believe.
- **The Bigot:** Shakespeare constructs Iago to be a **spokesperson** for Venetian bigotry and **prejudice** - ideals that are in line with Jacobean England’s own. In this way, he allows his audience to watch and examine these views from an outsider’s perspective. His opinions of others, particularly people of colour and women, are very **reductive** and degrading; for instance, he calls Othello a “**lusty Moor**” (Act 2 Scene 1) and paints all women as “**villainous whores,**” (Act 5 Scene 2). Therefore, he embodies the hegemony of white **masculinity** and its pathological fear of outsiders. You may argue that Iago uses such extreme, conservative stereotypes to **disguise** his own personal feelings of **vitriol** and fear. At the same time, Iago tailors his discriminatory language to his audience - the other characters in the play. After all, his racism and **misogyny** aren’t outliers. His language is carefully devised to evoke the biggest reactions from his peers: he **taunts** Brabantio, for example, by telling him, “**You have lost half your soul: / Even**



now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe,” (Act 1 Scene 1).

- The Preacher:** In the same way that Iago appeals to traditional Venetian **ideals** of race and gender, he lectures on his own beliefs and the ‘right way’ to live. Shakespeare portrays Iago as someone with his own **agenda** to get across, through words and actions. He champions same-race unions and female subservience while admonishing hypocrisy. One of his most significant **preoccupations** is with lust, both other people’s and his own: he teaches Roderigo, **“Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners [...] We have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts,”** (Act 1 Scene 3). He depicts **sexual desire** as a stain or blemish in the sanctimony of the human body in this monologue that closely resembles a sermon. When he alleges to love Desdemona, he caveats, **“Not out of absolute lust - though peradventure / I stand accountant for as great a sin,”** (Act 2 Scene 1), suggesting he is conflicted or even **repulsed** by his own moral failings.
- The Cynic:** Shakespeare conveys Iago’s **disillusionment** with his society and culture, welcoming the interpretation that Iago’s conspiracies against Othello act as an **allegory** for civil **unrest** and rebellion, as in the Gunpowder Plot against James I in 1605. He condemns the corruption and favouritism of ostensibly infallible institutions: **“Preferment goes by letter and affection, / Not by the old gradation,”** (Act 1 Scene 1). In addition, he rejects the concept of love, believing it to be a **weakness**, **“merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will,”** (Act 1 Scene 3). He has no faith in loyalty or altruism, viewing humans as purely selfish beings. He tells Roderigo, **“In following him, I follow but myself,”** and, **“For necessity of present life, / I must show out a flag and sign of love,”** (Act 1 Scene 3). This presents love as a facade or pretence. Whenever he professes to love Othello in the play, he does so to further his own **causes**; thus, he calls into question the **integrity** of love itself.

**A05: Similarities Between Iago & Othello: Irony**

“Nothing that is in Iago is absent from Othello, though there is much in Othello of which Iago never dreamed. [...] Both Othello and Iago are **ironists**. Within certain important limitations, they tend to think and feel in the same ways. The elements that **Iago finds within Othello**, by looking within or projecting himself, are these: first, a **sense of authority** from the ironist’s superior power or knowledge in a conflict situation; second, an **almost overpowering frustration** when one is denied this superior knowledge [...]; third, a **general tendency**, which under the stimulus of frustration may mount to compulsion, to **confront or manipulate situations so that one achieves ironic mastery** - by reserving knowledge, by finding knowledge hidden from others, by posing as ignorant where one has knowledge or as weak where one is strong; and fourth, a **tendency to project one’s own nature, to assume that others also confront life ironically.**

“For Iago irony is compensatory. It **bridges the gap between his self-esteem and the place accorded to him by the world**. Irony becomes for him both a means and an end, a means of getting what he wants [...] but an end as the very act of irony indulges his self-importance.” - Arthur M. Eastman

- The Con Man:** Iago is a master **manipulator**, able to distort reality or his own appearance to fit his needs. Beyond this, Shakespeare implies Iago is afraid of truthfulness and **vulnerability**: he admits to Roderigo, **“For when my outward action**



doth demonstrate / The native act and figure of my heart / [...] I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at”, (Act 1 Scene 1). What follows is a statement that perfectly sums up his character: “I am not what I am,” (Act 1 Scene 1). This conveys the **paradox** that is human identity, and the truth that we are limited by our own **perceptions** of others.

## RELATIONSHIPS

**Othello** | When the play opens, Iago is **complaining** about Othello’s decision to promote Cassio to lieutenant instead of him to Roderigo, believing it to be a betrayal. He explains that any acts of love, duty, or loyalty he shows to Othello are just a means to an end, as he plans to lead Othello with **lies** and fiction towards his demise. His first act is to **inform** Brabantio of Othello’s elopement with his daughter, Desdemona, thus endangering Othello’s marriage and breaking his trust. He then warns Othello of Brabantio’s rage, feigning shock and innocence; this act epitomises the **deceit** and artifice that defines Iago and Othello’s relationship. There is a **power imbalance** because Othello trusts Iago deeply, unaware of the other man’s hatred for him, while Iago is exploiting and **misleading** him.

Iago is Othello’s ensign, or standard-bearer, meaning he is Othello’s **subordinate**. While Othello views Iago as a trusted friend and advisor, Iago cannot see past the hierarchy that **separates** them. He resents Othello for the power and authority he holds over him. When he suspects Othello - and, later, Cassio, another of his superiors - of sleeping with his wife, this is an expression of his **insecurity** about power. Sleeping with another man’s wife would emasculate him and therefore give you **authority** over him; in this way, Iago takes his **bitterness** about Othello’s power and applies it to all areas of life. He constructs a narrative where Othello is his superior and his competitor in everything he does, justifying his **desire** to ‘eliminate’ him. Furthermore, Iago believes he deserves a reward for his loyalty and friendship; Othello, the authority in this relationship, is blind to the **ulterior** motives behind social bonds. The men’s relationship thus symbolises the political power-plays behind friendships and the social currency attributed to **male-male bonds**.

Iago successfully **bends** Othello to his will, filling his mind with lies, hatred, and fury. He undermines Othello’s relationships with others, **isolating** him and making him fully reliant on Iago. His ability to convince Othello of Desdemona’s infidelity and his own **honesty** conveys the power of male **homosocialism** and male solidarity in society: Iago’s word is worth more than Desdemona’s despite her being Othello’s wife, because Iago is a man. He manipulates Othello’s doubts and **weaknesses** for his own benefit, emulating Capitalism’s competitiveness. The men’s relationship can be interpreted as an allegory for **colonialism**: Iago, the white man, destroys Othello’s identity and **replaces** it with his own.

Arguably, Iago takes Desdemona’s place as Othello’s lover. The two pledge their **allegiance** to each other in a ritual that is strikingly similar to a wedding ceremony. Othello’s dependence on Iago grows; Iago becomes Othello’s (lack of) **moral conscience**, spurring him on, fuelling his anger, and gaslighting him. Theirs is the epitome of an abusive relationship, where Iago is the **manipulator** and Othello is the unwitting victim. Therefore, Shakespeare uses their bond to explore the other side of love - the **antithesis** to Othello and Desdemona’s, and yet the victor.



**Emilia** | We don't learn much about what Iago and Emilia's marriage was like prior to the events of the play, though Iago's **shameless misogyny** and Emilia's subservience to him implies it was a loveless one. In contrast, when Iago cites Othello's alleged affair with Emilia as cause for his fury, we are led to believe Iago cares enough about his wife to be **hurt** by her infidelity. Shakespeare sets it up to seem like Iago intends to fight for his wife, but as he continues to plot and **conspire**, it's clear he cares more about his **pride** and masculinity than her.

Emilia and Iago's first interaction is in Act 2, symbolising the way she is an **afterthought** to Iago. When the two talk, Iago takes the opportunity to harangue and mock her, going on to denounce women as a whole. Emilia is a **scapegoat** to him, someone to blame for his problems, and an easy target: he takes out his anger and misogyny on her, and as his **dutiful** wife, she is to take it quietly. Contrary to Iago's expectations, Emilia does assert herself and **criticise** his cruel remarks, hinting at the discontent she has been feeling for a while. Despite this, her actions are still those of a **subservient** wife: she chooses to steal the handkerchief for him, though she doesn't know what he intends to do with it and suspects **malice**. She explains, "**I nothing but to please his fantasy,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), meaning she is desperate to impress him and wants to make him happy. This implies she has long been **neglected** by her husband, and must place his **needs** and happiness above her own.

There are a few ways to interpret Iago and Emilia's marriage at this point. While it is quite obvious Iago is taking advantage of her, using her as a pawn in his game, Emilia's feelings aren't as clearcut. Possibly, she truly loves him, and chooses to **prioritise** his desires. She may be desperate for his attention, and so willing to do whatever it takes to get it. Alternatively, she may feel **obliged** to do as he asks, pressured by convention and the **ideal** of the obliging, subservient wife put forward by Venetian society. Either way, Shakespeare uses their relationship to show how **women's identities** were erased in marriage.

It is Emilia's decision to **defy** her husband and expose his lies that changes the course of the plot, ensuring Iago is arrested for his crimes. Her **courage** to speak out against him, going against her instinct to "**obey**" him (**Act 5 Scene 2**), shows how **freedom of speech** can liberate women. Moreover, when Emilia does defy Iago, it is to defend Desdemona and attest to her innocence: a show of female **solidarity** against male **oppression**, showing how one woman's bravery and defiance can liberate others.

#### AO5: Iago's Murder of Emilia

"Emilia is **not killed by Iago alone** [...]. The **other men present**, by their inaction, literally **create the space** [...] wherein a wife can be killed by her husband. [...] Even though it is evident by this time that Emilia is exposing Iago's guilt and is therefore in need of protection (like any state witness), none of the men present makes a move to disarm Iago. What we see on stage at this point is a lone unarmed woman surrounded by armed men who deliberately fail to protect her - a **visual presentation of the defenselessness of a wife**. [When Othello tries to stab Iago] Montano immediately disarms Othello with the result that Iago is able to kill Emilia and run away. What we see in this piece of stage business is two people being simultaneously assaulted - one a murderer, the other the woman who has exposed him. He is armed, she unarmed. And, in this moment, **the man who intervenes does so to save the murderer**, not his victim." - Ruth Vanita, 'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

**Roderigo** | Roderigo is yet another **pawn** in Iago's game. He takes advantage of Roderigo's infatuation with Desdemona, identifying that it aligns with his own **desires**. While Iago pretends to honour the agreement between them, promising, "**Thou shalt enjoy her,**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**), he never intends to **uphold** his end of the bargain. Instead, he takes his money and strings him along, manipulating him into doing his dirty work, such as **inciting** violence with Cassio. Iago claims to resent the class system of Venice and clearly resents being subordinate to others, Shakespeare illustrates how Iago uses Roderigo as his inferior. He intimidates and **mocks** him,



revealing the hypocrisy in Iago's **rejection** of hierarchy; he craves power over others, and has no **empathy** for Roderigo in his role of underling. Roderigo is an anonymous worker, a soldier sent off to die in a war of Iago's making.

**Desdemona** | Iago's **false bond** with Desdemona is perhaps the most tragic of the play. He pretends to be her friend, even comforting her when Othello **loses** his temper with her. He **impersonates** a close ally even while he plots her death, luring her into the path of Othello's fury. When Desdemona feels helpless and alone, she takes comfort in Iago's loyalty; as an audience, we know Iago is faking it all, making us **pity** her even more for how alone she truly is. Desdemona has faith in Iago to **protect** her against her husband's violence, and he **betrays** this trust.

In addition to his **perpetuation** of domestic violence, Iago perpetuates the objectification of women. He purports to love Desdemona, yet causes her immense **suffering**. He himself is not convinced his affection for her is the result of lust. His actions reveal his true motives, and it seems he views Desdemona as a **trophy**, a symbol for his **virility** and authority over Othello. Othello has slept with his wife, and so it is only fair that he sleeps with Othello's: "**wife for wife,**" (**Act 2 Scene 1**) he explains, in a maxim that closely resembles the Bible's "**an eye for an eye**". In this way, Desdemona is dehumanised, fought over like **merchandise**.

**Brabantio** | Iago doesn't have a direct relationship with Brabantio: Brabantio believes he is speaking to Roderigo the whole time. This **confusion** further develops the sense of chaos and **disorientation** Iago creates. What is most significant is how Iago exploits Brabantio's own insecurities and prejudices with fatal consequences. He knows exactly how to get a rise out of Brabantio. Shakespeare uses the exchange between the two men to show how Venetian society's **bigotry** enabled Iago's catastrophic **vendetta**. All of the characters are complicit in Desdemona's death, just as Brabantio's racist ideals are what Iago targets with his **inflammatory** language.

**Cassio** | Iago's **hatred** for Cassio is practically identical to his hatred for Othello. Cassio is another of his superiors, and Iago feels intimidated by his authority. He reacts to this **intimidation** with paranoia, suspecting Cassio of sleeping with his wife because such an act befits a man more powerful than him. Also, he **resents** Cassio's Florentine culture; he both dismisses and is **daunted** by his high culture.

## KEY THEMES

Shakespeare uses the **construct** of Iago to explore the conflict between what one wants to be true and what is really true. This applies to the **personal** - such as love - and to the **social** - such as Venetian society's belief that it represents perfection. Iago, the master of facade, is able to defy the lines between appearance and reality, and this skill is what makes him so dangerous within a **community** that relies so heavily on the superficial; yet, he is not immune to the conflict between expectations and reality, and falls **victim** to his own **fantasies**. Iago is symbolic of all the failings Shakespeare perceives in his contemporary society, from its bigoted social mores to its refusal to accept its own savagery. The greatest **threat** to Venice is not the outsider but one of its own. This choice speaks volumes.





## Jealousy & Cuckoldry

*Othello* is known for being a play about **jealousy**. Shakespeare illustrates Iago's jealous origins and how they are **inexorably** tied to his racist, misogynist ideologies. Simultaneously, he portrays jealousy as Iago's chosen **tool** for **destruction**, using it with ease to manipulate others and ultimately decide their fates. Iago is the master of others' jealousy, but only because he falls **victim** to his own in the first place. Hate breeds hate; jealousy **begets** jealousy.

### **AO5: Othello as a Domestic Tragedy: Jealousy & the Military**

"In making himself the minister of justice [...] Iago becomes **so deeply involved in intrigue that he cannot extricate himself**. [...] He is no better fitted to take civil justice into his own hands than is Othello. For both of them the application of military habits of mind to civil and personal affairs is fraught with danger, in so far as **each acts with the self-reliant egotism** characteristic of a commander in the field. [...] With Iago, **hard intellectuality and practical efficiency** divorced from goodness or from concern with public affairs **degenerate into rascality**. In pursuit of justice and revenge Iago becomes an **Elizabethan Machiavel**, who is not bothered by moral values in the ordinary sense [...] The qualities in him which would be virtue on the battlefield become rascality in personal and private affairs." - John C. McCloskey, 'The Motivation of Iago'

The majority of scenes in the first acts conclude with a **soliloquy** from Iago, in which he details the jealousy he feels and how he seeks to **rectify** it. This consistency in structure emphasises how he is driven by **envy** and resentment, with the repetition mirroring how jealousy is found in all areas of society. In these monologues, Iago outlines the various **motivations** behind his jealousy, including both Othello and Cassio's alleged affairs with his wife, and his own **desire** for Desdemona. Therefore, while the structure of Iago's arguments are consistent, the arguments behind them aren't; this may implicate Iago in an **inner-conflict** of his own, or Shakespeare may **wish** to show that, once unleashed,

jealousy cannot be sated and will find **infinite** excuses to persist.

We are given the first of these reasons for his jealousy when Iago says, "**It is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He's done my office,**" (Act 1 Scene 3). Referring to his wife as his "**office**" connotes work and **duty**, linking a man's marriage to his authority and **respectability**. Shakespeare illustrates how jealousy derives from male ego, as the **repetition** of the first person possessive "**my**" conveys Iago's sense of **ownership** over Emilia and their union. The **possessiveness** also shows how Othello has humiliated Iago by taking his rightful place "**twixt his sheets**" and preventing him from carrying out his duty - his "**office**". Iago admits, "**I know not if't be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), portraying jealousy as a **relentless** force that can't be reasoned with. The "**mere suspicion**" that another man has embarrassed him is enough to **provoke** him to acts of extreme **destruction**. Later, the conspiracy against him grows, as Iago says, "**I fear Cassio with my night-cap too**" (Act 2 Scene 1); his paranoia is overwhelming and quickly spiralling out of control. With the return of the possessive "**my**" and the euphemism "**night-cap**" to refer to his wife, Shakespeare shows how men **crave** complete control over women's **bodies** and minds. The reality that this is impossible makes a rival out of every fellow man in the fight to keep their wives '**tamed**'. Iago believes both Othello and Cassio have slept with his wife, demonstrating his chronic **distrust** of his peers.

When Iago claims once more that "**the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into [his] seat,**" (Act 2 Scene 1), we see his **prejudice** manifested in his jealousy. The epithet "**the lusty Moor**" appeals to a common racial stereotype of the era, portraying black people as **carnal**, lecherous



creatures. Moreover, the repeated euphemisms used in place of Emilia's name amplifies his **misogyny**; within his jealous narratives, women are solely **sexual** objects, trophies to be won and lost at the hands of other men. Shakespeare argues that jealousy is a **symptom** of male anxiety, borne from ego and **posturing** rather than love. The omission of Emilia's individuality shows that his "**seat**" could be any woman: what matters most is that another man has "**leaped into**" it.

This **relationship** between jealousy and male ego is **developed** when Iago continues, "**The thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw at my inwards; / And nothing can or shall content my soul / Till I am evened with him, wife for wife,**" (Act 2 Scene 1). The metaphor of jealousy as a "**poisonous mineral**" conveys the emotion's power over Iago. He is helpless to its **destruction**, and so gives into its demands. "**Till I am evened with him**" displays jealousy as a competition between men, rather than an issue of the heart. The phrase "**wife for wife**" is economic in nature, portraying women as **bartering** chips or prizes whose cost is a man's dignity, though they **possess** no inherent worth in the eyes of their husbands.

Perhaps it is Iago's own experience with jealousy that allows him to **manipulate** its presence in others. Plotting aloud, he remarks, "**Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ,**" (Act 3 Scene 3). Thus, Shakespeare portrays jealousy as a form of delusion or **delirium**, altering one's perception of reality. It lacks **reason** or logic, drawing fatal conclusions from insignificant "**trifles**". The simile "**strong / As proofs of holy writ**" imply the jealous are **devoted** to their paranoid beliefs the way one is devoted to God. He continues, "**Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons / Which at the first are scarce found to distaste, / But with a little act upon the blood / Burn like the mines of sulfur,**" (Act 3 Scene 3), emphasising the **insidious**, subtle nature of jealousy. It enters **unnoticed** into a system, festers, and wreaks havoc. The simile "**Burn like the mines of sulfur**" connotes Hell and so **foreshadows** the suffering to come; furthermore, it shows Iago knows that he only needs to set the ball rolling, and Othello's brain will fill in the rest.

When Iago says, "**And many worthy and chaste dames even thus, / All guiltless, meet reproach,**" (Act 4 Scene 1), Shakespeare depicts women as the **victims** of male jealousy. The juxtaposition between "**guiltless**" and "**reproach**" conveys jealousy's ability to **twist** reality, rendering defined binaries like good vs. evil **meaningless**. Shakespeare argues the concept of female purity and chastity is subjective: if a man decides a woman is **unfaithful**, then she is

#### **AO5: Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory focuses on **the impact imperialism and colonisation has had on the world** and how we experience it. Specifically, it looks at the identity of decolonised societies and how it has been shaped by the Western cultures who colonised it. Postcolonialism seeks to **rectify the imbalance of the 'colonist' and the 'colonised' by allowing members of these societies to speak for themselves.**

A key motivation of colonialism was to indoctrinate non-European countries into European culture, so that this new colony could act as an extension of the European 'mother country'. Postcolonialists examine the impact of this on the identities of those subjected to this treatment. Even if postcolonial theory didn't exist in Shakespeare's time, this doesn't stop us from **reading 'Othello' through a postcolonial lens.** The knowledge we have accumulated about colonial practices and their impact give the play meaning that it perhaps didn't possess at the time of writing, but this doesn't make these readings any less valid. Considering this is a good way to **contrast the perspectives of a contemporary (i.e. Elizabethan) audience and a modern audience.**



unfaithful, regardless of her true guilt. There has to be a **scapegoat** for male insecurities, and women take the **fall**.

## Prejudice & Race

The concept of the **Other** has occurred in literature throughout history, as writers explore how the strange and unfamiliar are received, and how they **threaten** our perceptions of 'what's normal'. *Othello* is no different. Othello is a Moor in Venice, set apart from his peers because of his race and culture. Yet, he occupies a **respectable**, secure position in society. Traditionally, the idea of the Other in a position of power would be met with outcry and fear, as it would be viewed as an **upheaval** of the 'proper order' of things. However, it is Iago - not Othello - who uproots the workings of Shakespeare's **microcosm** of Venetian society, leaving chaos and tragedy behind.

Iago **espouses** the bigoted, conservative values of Venetian society; thus it is not his views that are atypical amongst his peers, but the ferocity and violence with which he seeks to uphold them. What's more, his **scheming** is so successful because it relies on Iago reflecting his victims' ideologies back at them. He recognises how people's biases make them **vulnerable** to **manipulation** and he exploits this truth. In this way, Iago's own beliefs are ambiguous and, ultimately, unimportant: it is the **prejudices** of his subjects that propels the tragedy of the play. Shakespeare argues the success of Iago's plot is **contingent** on his fellow Venetians sharing these views. Whether Iago truly believes the abuse he spouts is **inconsequential**, for the end result is the same.

We see Iago's adept **exploitation** of Venetian racism in the opening scene of the play, where he provokes Brabantio into a fit of rage and shock. "**Even now, now, very now,**" he emphasises, **an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe,**" (**Act 1 Scene 1**). This lewd, **graphic imagery** would be particularly evocative to Brabantio, who is motivated both by his bigotry and his desire to protect the **purity** of his daughter. The juxtaposition of the "**old black ram,**" a perverted and Satanic beast, with the "**white ewe,**" an image of **innocence**, depicts Desdemona as the **unsuspecting**, vulnerable damsel; thus, Iago adds urgency to the revelation that a father can't ignore. He continues, "**Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,**" (**Act 1 Scene 1**), stressing the **urgency** of the situation even more and appealing to the traditional **societal** anxieties concerning illegitimate children, legacy, endogamy (marrying within one's own tribe or culture) and **miscegenation** (the 'mixing' of races through marriage or sex). The image also evokes a common cultural assertion that the **Devil** took the form of a black man.

At the same time, Iago's own **prejudices** emerge - arguably giving the audience insight into the true motivation behind his maliciousness. He refers to Othello as the "**lascivious Moor**" (**Act 1 Scene 1**), the "**lustful Moor**" (**Act 2 Scene 1**), and likens him to an "**ass**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**). His fixation on Othello's **sexuality** reveals his relationship with Desdemona as the source of Iago's disgust, while cheapening their love as mere "**lust**". As with Emilia, his **aversion** to using Othello's name **dehumanises** him, hinting at Iago's very poor opinion of him. He describes Othello and Desdemona's marriage as one between "**an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian,**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**), suggesting he finds their love inherently **unnatural** and, therefore, **offensive**.



This is echoed when he tells Othello, **“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— / Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank, / Foul disproportion thoughts unnatural,”** (Act 3 Scene 3), exposing his own **revulsion** at Desdemona for not loving one **“of her own”** kind. His repeated references to nature insinuates their marriage is doomed from the start. This quote epitomises the root of Iago’s wrath: by **courting** and marrying a **beautiful** Venetian woman, Othello has acted as if he were her equal in class and race, which Iago believes he is very much not. Their **union** defies the principle hierarchies of race and **social standing** upon which Iago’s Venice is built. Therefore, he seeks to set the course of **“nature”** right once more: to implicate Desdemona in the **“fruits of whoring”** (Act 5 Scene 1), and to drive Othello to the **“savage madness”** (Act 4 Scene 1) of the archetypal **“barbarian”**.

Iago is the first to point out that his plots only took hold because the **stereotypes**, anxieties, and biases he **evoked** weren’t of his own invention, but rather were shared by all he spoke to and manipulated. Describing the process by which he convinced Othello to **murder** Desdemona, he says, **“I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true,”** (Act 5 Scene 2), thus relinquishing himself of responsibility for Othello’s actions.

Othello agreed with Iago’s **insinuations** and made the choice himself to murder his wife. Moreover, the adjective **“apt”** implies the perceived **truth** of Desdemona’s disloyalty was dependent on how convenient it was for him; in other words, Othello chose to convince himself of Iago’s

**narrative** because it allowed him retribution and suited his **needs**. Thus, Shakespeare suggests we adapt our **worldviews** in order to meet our own, pre established expectations: truth is **subjective**, tainted by and a servant to prejudice. Othello’s distrust of women and his own demeaning view of himself because of his race made him agreeable to Iago’s **power of suggestion**.

Furthermore, when Othello asks Cassio to **“demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body,”** (Act 5 Scene 2), Iago retorts, **“Demand me nothing; what you know, you know,”** (Act 5 Scene 2). Thus, he **implicates** everyone present in Othello’s crime. One of Venice’s own may be the agent of chaos and destruction, but it was Venetian society itself that paved the way for his **machinations**, sowing the seeds of racial tension, bigotry, and hierarchy that Iago exploited. Shakespeare’s villain is not an **aberration** within society, but its mirror image, and therein lies the true villainy. Another interpretation of Iago’s **final line** is that he is addressing us, his audience. Throughout the play, we have borne witness to Iago’s soliloquies, plots, and **inner motivations**, so that we are complicit in his actions and implicated in Othello’s suffering and eventual crime. Therefore, he doesn’t need to explain **“why”** he has done these things: we already know.

#### AO5: Iago & the Venetian Norm

“The really disturbing thing about Iago is not that he’s an unfathomable psychopath, but that he’s **pathologically normal** and theatrically irresistible. Although he initiates and engineers its catastrophe, Iago is **not the fundamental or sole cause** [...]. To grasp that fact is to **pluck out the heart of Iago’s mystery**, which is dispelled by the realisation that **his malignity is not a monstrous deviation from the Venetian norm but its mirror image**. The patriarchal, racist universe of Othello confronts in ‘damned Iago’, the ‘inhuman dog’ (5.1.62), not its demonic antithesis but its grotesque epitome.” - Kiernan Ryan



## Identity & Colonialism

The play 'Othello' is a study of **colonialism** and imperialism as much as it is a study of race. Though these may manifest in similar ways, there are crucial **differences**: colonialism refers to one culture eradicating another through hostile occupation and exploitation, while imperialism is the **ideology** of extending a country's rule or **power** over others, often acquiring these territories by force. In this way, Shakespeare uses the experiences of his characters and the hierarchy they live in to examine the wider **structural**, social impact of these **ideologies**.

The characters in the play base their identities largely in their culture - and, by extension, their race, as **race** and culture seem to be used **interchangeably**. For example, Desdemona is a **"super-subtle Venetian"** (Act 1 Scene 3), and so her personality - in Iago's opinion - derives from everything Venice represents. Othello is the outsider. He is **self-conscious** of his heritage and aspires to **assimilate** himself into Venetian culture. Iago, critical of Venetian society though he is, believes this cultural identity to be the superior one. He exacts his **revenge** with the hope that Othello will regret ever **'defying'** the Venetian status quo. This violent assertion of the hegemony of Western culture parallels the ideologies of **imperialism** and white supremacy.

Iago's **psychological manipulation** of Othello can be viewed as an allegory for colonialism: Iago is the white man who takes over the country (mind) of the Other, stripping the black man of **personal identity**, free will, and autonomy. Iago plans to **"abuse Othello's ear"** (Act 1 Scene 3) and **"pour this pestilence into [it]"** (Act 2 Scene 3); the **imagery** depicts Iago's intent and desire invading Othello's mind, a metaphor for European occupation of foreign land.

The semantic field of **"poison"** (Act 3 Scene 3) and **"medicine"** (Act 4 Scene 1) portrays Iago as a **corrosive**, destruction force that will permanently alter Othello's nature. Furthermore, the conceit implicates Iago in the **"witchcraft"** (Act 1 Scene 3) of which Brabantio **accuses** Othello. Similarly, he plans to lead Othello **"by the nose / As asses are"** (Act 1 Scene 3), suggesting Othello will lose the ability to pursue his own wants. The simile dehumanises Othello and conveys how he will be **exploited**, in the service of Iago against his own interests, as Shakespeare suggests other cultures were abused by the West for **profit**. While imperialism was often enforced through **military power** and other examples of 'hard power', the indoctrination of other cultures into the superiority of Western culture was also achieved by forms of 'soft power'. Soft power is defined by being **non-coercive** (not forced), rather using persuasion and attraction to shape the preferences of others. This is what Iago uses to enact his **vision**, crafting his words to lead Othello **"by the nose"** like a skilled politician.

### AO5: is 'Othello' about race?

"To Shakespeare, who **always reads deeper than others**, it is **on the surface a matter of colour**, but at **bottom a matter of racial divergence** that amounts to an **incompatibility of character**." - Alexander W. Crawford (1916)

"Any Black man who has gone out with a white woman knows that there are a lot of Iagos around [...] **If it did not begin as a play about race, then its history has made it one.**" - Ben Okri

"Othello self-destructively **internalises the prevailing racism**, while Desdemona [...] remains an idealised, virtuous woman - keeping alive the image of a besieged, white femininity so crucial to the production of the black man as a 'savage'." - Jyotsna Singh (2004)

"To **talk about race** in Othello is inevitably **to fall into some degree of anachronism**, while **to ignore it is to efface something fundamental** to the tragedy." - Michael Neill

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Shakespeare presents Iago as a **playwright** in his own right, sculpting the narrative and **rewriting** his fellow characters until they fit his bigoted stereotypes. He “**ensnared [Othello’s soul and body]**” (Act 5 Scene 2) and from the winnings created a **wrathful** wife-killer, befitting of the “**changeable**”, “**barbarian**” (Act 1 Scene 3) Moors he sees in his mind’s eye. In the same way, he plots to “**turn [Desdemona’s] virtue into pitch,**” (Act 2 Scene 3), implying he is **capable** of bending reality to match his prejudices. Identity isn’t set in stone, finding its definition instead within the greater **social structures** that perceive it. Therefore, when Othello’s character undergoes that appalling transformation and he murders Desdemona, Shakespeare **exposes** the story for what it is: a narrative of a **white man’s** making. Othello doesn’t fulfil the stereotypes of a ‘Moor’ because the myths are true or accurate, but because Iago forced them to be so, making **manifest** Venice’s worst fears. What’s more, Iago is **driven** by the same jealousy and ego that Othello eventually succumbs to; the parallels between them are never stronger than when Iago kills his **unarmed** wife just as Othello does. Therefore, Shakespeare shows that **jealousy** and violence aren’t vices unique to ‘Moors’ or outsiders. He drives home the point he has been making all along: that no one culture is more **civilised** than another; there are no **inherent** differences between the true natures of a white man and a black man; and **evil** is hidden within us all.

## Duplicity of Women

Female sexuality was one of the biggest **threats** to the order of society. Think of the archetypal **femme fatale**: a woman who lures men towards villainy or their own deaths using her own ‘feminine wiles’. The earliest femme fatale, arguably, was Eve, who convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and so **doomed** all of humanity to sin. Fornicating women were **blamed** for leading men astray, destroying male honour - for a husband was held accountable if a woman ‘fell’ in society’s standings - and **shaming** their families. Furthermore, women were descended from Eve and so could be seduced as easily as they seduced others, **betraying** mankind in the process.

No one champions these beliefs more than Iago himself. His hatred and **mistrust** towards women is rivalled only by his hatred for Othello. In his eyes, everyone woman is a femme fatale, a ‘fallen woman’ hiding in the wings, searching for a man to corrupt. Once more, Iago is not an anomaly within Venetian society, but its spokesperson. Shakespeare uses his character to put all of society’s most **wicked**, vindictive, **damaging** views on display. Everything that happens at the hands of Iago happens, by extension, at the hands of misogyny. His lies revolve around

### AO5: Jealousy, Racism, & Sexism

“Much has been made of Iago’s ostensibly ‘motiveless malignity’ ever since Coleridge coined his famous phrase 200 years ago. But there’s surely no great mystery about what makes this villain tick. As Iago sees it, a black African has had the gall to court and marry a white Venetian beauty as if he were the equal of a man of her class and colour. [...] Othello and Desdemona have **made a mockery of the principles of social, sexual and racial hierarchy** on which Iago’s very identity and sense of self-worth depend. So he hatches a plot and tells a tale designed to put them in their place: to turn ‘The divine Desdemona’ (2.1.73) into the ‘subtle whore’ (4.2.21) he thinks every woman really is, and to turn the noble, eloquent Othello into a deranged wife-killer, who proves the racist’s worst fears fully justified.” - Kiernan Ryan

the concept of this duplicitous woman and the **myth** that women can’t be trusted.

Shakespeare presents this fear of the femme fatale when Iago says, “**You are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds,**” (Act 2 Scene



1). The seemingly unending list of women's **deceptions** suggests there is no shred of truth or integrity in what women do. The semantic field of appearance, with "**pictures**" and "**players**", portrays women as superficial while **emphasising** society's premium on how things seem rather than how things are. The Biblical allusions "**saints**" and "**devils**", furthermore, appeal to the myth of Eve as the original fallen woman and suggest women are capable of **manipulating** the line between true good and true evil. "**Devils**" are known for tempting mankind to commit sin, and so Shakespeare suggests women **exploit** their apparent innocence to manipulate and **trick** men. The final clause, "**housewives in your beds**", implies the only place women fulfill their roles as the **dutiful** wife is while having sex; this presents them as lustful. Alternatively, it shows Iago's underlying belief that women exist to **satisfy** men's needs, especially their sexual needs. Sex is the only thing that unites the genders, but even then women cannot be trusted for they have **ulterior motives**.

Furthermore, Shakespeare uses Iago to present the **narrative** that women are corrupted by their own sexuality. "**This is the fruits of whoring,**" (Act 5 Scene 1), he says, when Cassio is wounded and Roderigo nearly killed. All evil and chaos, he is suggesting, is a result of the unnatural **sexual desires** of women. Shakespeare portrays Iago as a preacher, lecturing his audience on the consequences of sin. A similar **religious weight** is conveyed when Iago warns Othello, "**In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands. Their best conscience / Is not to leave 't undone, but keep't unknown,**" (Act 3 Scene 3). This presents women as inherently **two-faced** and hypocritical. The true threat of female duplicity, Iago argues, is that they do not care for their **immorality**, only their reputation. They hide their "**pranks**" from their husbands but are content with God knowing, suggesting they are more concerned with **fooling** their husbands than preserving their 'mortal soul'. Thus, Shakespeare presents men as the intended victim of female **duplicity**. The juxtaposition between "**leave 't undone**" and "**keep't unknown**" reveals reputation and **respectability** as the **priority** over morality. Iago appears disillusioned with society as a whole, as Shakespeare suggests the shallowness of people has **corrupted** the concepts of virtue and vice: the **goodness** of a person is defined by what people think of them, rather than what they have done.

## SYMBOLISM

Shakespeare uses the **construct** of Iago to show how men react when their personal **ideologies** and beliefs are challenged, allowing irrational **emotion** to get the better of them. He is a symbol for the violent, inhumane ways in which institutions - such as imperialism, white **supremacy**, and misogyny - are upheld and forced on those who seek to **defy** them. Because of this, Iago can be viewed as a **political figure**, though his manifestos and conferences occur behind closed doors, within the private sphere. Equally, his character can be interpreted as a **caricature** or imitation of a preacher, a religious teacher who appeals to one's inner morals to

### A05: Love & Civilisation

In the essay 'Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love', critic Catherine Bates calls love "a **fundamentally creative force** and as such it is **opposed to the forces of destruction**. [...] It is therefore the great civilising force, the energy that counters anarchy and chaos with order and degree. [...] Love sponsors the forces of life, creating human families and social groups in the teeth of man's instinct for destruction - both self-destruction and the destruction of the other."

Applying these ideas to Iago, she writes, "A number of literary symmetries make it clear that Othello's miraculously effective words find their demonic counterpart in Iago, whose storytelling, though equally effective, works to conversely deadly effect. An **expert raconteur** himself, Iago catches Othello's ear with a **skilful weaving of narrative cliché** and readerly expectation. He presents the story of Desdemona's adultery with Cassio in the terms of a hackneyed city play whose plot is just waiting to happen. [...] Here love is not merely a good in an evil world. It is **shown to contain the seeds of evil** within itself."



justify twisted means. Shakespeare's use of the drama genre ties in here: with his soliloquies and **asides**, Iago interacts directly with the audience in the way a politician or preacher might lecture a crowd. However, if he is aware he is being **observed**, then we cannot know how much of what he displays is genuine. The character of Iago is a **performance**, of course, but this is a character who knows they are performing. Even when he is alone, Iago may be performing for us, or for **himself**. Is it possible for us to truly understand his motivations? Is Iago himself even aware of what he really thinks?

Iago is a **conduit** for the dogma and faith systems of Venetian society. His views on war, women, and race align with his peers. The difference is he isn't afraid to **voice** them; in doing so, he **harnesses** the vitriol and bitter hatred of these **unspoken** prejudices, and draws violence out of his peers. What was, perhaps, a 'dormant' tension is now graphic and outright. Arguably, Iago is a character that **forces** Shakespeare's audience to confront their own prejudices, just as he forces Venetian society to confront its own **demons**.

Additionally, Shakespeare employs **vivid**, consistent symbolism and imagery in his language to give Iago's character depth. Associating him with images such as light vs. dark, heaven vs. hell, and the **supernatural** allow the audience to gauge what type of person he is. **Symbolism** allows the playwright to take the play out of the realm of reality and into another playing field, as it appeals to our emotions and **memories** more than plain dialogue can. Shakespeare's exploration of the human condition is **strengthened** by it.

### Appearance vs. Reality

We fear what we don't know, and we base what we know on what we can see, and feel, and prove. Therefore, anyone or anything that **defies** these 'laws' upsets our concept of reality, and we are confronted with what we can never know. These ideas were particularly **prominent** in the Jacobean era, when it was believed that **external appearance** was in accordance with what lay **within**; for example, witches are ugly because they are evil, and young maidens are beautiful because they are **virtuous**. If appearances are deceptive, as Shakespeare implies, then this means all knowledge and truth are elusive, inherently unstable, and **fallible**.

Iago is the perfect example of this, as from the start he intends to **disguise** his true motives under **false pretences**. His duplicity symbolises the subjectivity of reality, as well as the fundamental weakness of society. He is able to cause so much **destruction** because no one can read **malignity** on his face and so they all believe him to be innocent. Through Iago's character, Shakespeare argues that the biggest threats to society and **order** are the things that seem to fit in the most. You could even argue that Shakespeare demonstrates it is only possible to 'fit in' by **faking** it.

At the very beginning, Shakespeare establishes Iago as **artifice** and deceit **epitomised**. He tells Roderigo, "**I follow him to serve my turn upon him. / We cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly followed,**" (Act 1 Scene 1). This foreshadows his betrayal of





Othello, thus **undermining** their friendship. The phrase “**I follow him to serve my turn upon him,**” suggests that altruistic love is impossible: all favours or loyalties are founded on **ulterior**, selfish motives. Shakespeare may be **alluding** to the system of capitalism, suggesting all genuine human connection is corrupted by the need to compete for **survival**. The verb “**serve**” is a pun, **subverting** the listeners’ expectations because “**serve**” typically indicates loyalty and commitment; Shakespeare’s wordplay parallels Iago’s own ability to defy **expectations**.

Iago continues, “**When my outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure of my heart [...]** / **I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at. I am not what I am,**” (Act 1 Scene 1). The macabre imagery in the **metaphor** “**wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at,**” implies Iago has a pathological fear of **honesty** and vulnerability. “**Daws**” connote death and bad omens, suggesting Iago would rather endure **physical pain** than be seen for who he truly is. Because of this, Shakespeare suggests that integrity is a weakness in society, and that it is ‘safer’ to **disguise** your real nature. The famous concluding line “**I am not what I am**” embodies Iago’s character and illustrates how nothing can be trusted. Shakespeare argues that your **social identity** - how others perceive you - can never capture the truth of you. This doesn’t necessarily mean the deception is intentional: it may allude to some truth of the **human condition**, where it is impossible to articulate your feelings and impossible to truly know another human being. Alternatively, this statement may convey Iago’s **ambition**: he aspires to be more than he is, and he hasn’t achieved his ‘full’ self yet. He waits for his reputation to match how he views **himself**.

Within this concept of appearance and reality, the character of Iago functions on several **levels**. He is a symbol for the **subjectivity** of identity, where you’re judged on how you seem rather than what you are. On a personal level, he is a symbol for the human condition - for the **curse** of being unknowable, and for the barrier this poses to human **connection**.

Though Iago appears **cynical** of society’s facades, quoting the “**pranks**” (Act 3 Scene 3) of Venice’s women and the “**civil monsters**” (Act 4 Scene 1) within the city walls, he engages in the same acts of deceit. Shakespeare may be portraying the **hypocrisy** of groups in society, such as **religious groups**, who criticise the sins of others while partaking in their own, more wicked, deeds. Alternatively, Shakespeare may be showing how people, when **confronted** with injustice and **dishonesty**, choose to emulate it rather than reject it. *If others are benefitting from this, why can’t I?* Iago chooses to mimic society’s **duplicity** for his own gain, displaying the *every man for himself* attitude that defines capitalism. Thus, Shakespeare shows how these lies and **facades** are perpetuated by selfish greed. The cycle continues, until all of the **customs** and ‘truths’ of a culture are built on **lies**.

## Heaven vs. Hell

This **Biblical imagery** is used to convey one of the most prominent binaries in the play: the contest between good and bad. Reflecting the fervent religion of the times, Heaven and Hell are used by Shakespeare’s characters to judge **morality**. They act as points of reference, helping



them to decide if a person or action is virtuous or not. However, Heaven and Hell are the **epitomes** of good and bad; as such, when characters reference them, Shakespeare **reveals** the strict, binary perspective of society. People want to be able to sort things into neat boxes. Which box someone belongs in, however, is shown to be **subjective**.

To Iago, the **doctrines** of Heaven and Hell exist to be mocked and challenged, rather than to be principles to aspire to. Using his powers of deception and **manipulation**, Iago plays with the idea of what it means to be good or bad; he successfully convinces his peers to view him as a virtuous, **honest** man. Along the way, he challenges his audience to reexamine their concept of goodness, asking, **“What’s he then that says I play the villain, / When this advice is free I give, and honest, / Probal to thinking, and indeed the course / To win the Moor again?” (Act 2 Scene 3)**. In this question, he asks if intent is more important morally than consequence. As such, Shakespeare uses his character to combine morality with the symbolism of **appearance vs. reality**, illustrating the ways in which goodness has lost **meaning** in social ‘currency’.

This combination of morality with deliberate **pretence** is exemplified when Iago states, **“Divinity of hell! / When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows,” (Act 2 Scene 3)**. This statement **challenges** Jacobean notions of morality, where it was believed you could tell someone’s

**inner self** from their outward appearance. Shakespeare also undermines the idea of true altruism, insinuating the kindest, most **“heavenly”** acts are **motivated** by wicked wants: everything is the **opposite** of how it seems. Goodness serves only as a shield for sin. The noun **“shows”** connotes artistry and shows how **goodness** can exist only on the surface; equally, the verb **“put on”** implies people are in control when they act **sinfully**, and so wickedness is a choice. The dichotomy of heaven and hell Iago invokes here ultimately **invalidates** both sides of the moral compass, because vice and **virtue** can masquerade as the other. This is symbolised in the paradox, **“Divinity of hell!”** which combines both, suggesting the two aren’t **mutually exclusive**. The paradox can also be interpreted as a metaphor for Iago’s character and his relation to Othello’s character: his hate is the equivalent to Othello’s love, and his villainy is the **mirror** image of Othello’s heroism.

Not only is Iago capable of **manipulating** his own morality: he can tailor the qualities of others to suit his own desires. For example, he declares, **“I will turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all,” (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Here, Shakespeare argues that no one is **capable** of recognising vice or virtue for what they are. The concepts don’t exist in absolutes or as intrinsic qualities (as if you could measure them in a lab,

**AO5: Iago & Religious Rhetoric**

“Where the play intersects with religious discourses [...] we find words at their most potent, **piercing and bruising hearts**.  
 “Iago’s polemics is modelled on and distorts methods prescribed by sixteenth-century sermon theory. His **warping of contemporary preaching** makes him **even more diabolical than hitherto recognised**.  
 “Iago refashions his listeners and inscribes them anew in a different narrative, modelled on the narratives of salvation and damnation, or faith and doubt that preoccupy early modern English culture. [...] He **exploits the culturally privileged discourse of preaching**, figured through the metonym of the ear, and implicates that discourse with the sexual economies of the play.  
 “The **early modern affiliation between Reformed pastor and sinner** clearly foretells the modern relationship of analyst and patient, an association carefully reproduced in Iago’s treatment of Othello. But the therapy Iago practises will bring his listener neither comfort nor the assurance of salvation, but instead the assurance of torment, indeed torment itself.” - Richard Mallette



regardless of context). Instead, our moral judgement relies on the opinions of our peers. Iago is able to “**turn [Desdemona’s] virtue into pitch**” because public opinion is easily **swayed**. The imagery here evokes a sense of the occult, as if he is performing witchcraft, but in reality he is only being persuasive. The metaphor “**out of her own goodness make the net**” presents good and evil as **physical resources**, available to be exploited. Furthermore, as Iago plans to taint everyone’s view of Desdemona, Shakespeare reflects on how a woman’s reputation was decided by **rumour** and gossip. As Iago plots to “**enmesh them all,**” Shakespeare **condemns** the superficiality of society and its **hollow** definitions of morality.

### Othello’s New Lover

Othello is convinced his love for Desdemona is **unwavering** and that if he ever stops loving her, “**Chaos is come again,**” (Act 3 Scene 3). Yet, within the space of a few minutes, he swears never to “**look back**” or “**ebb to humble love**” (Act 3 Scene 3); his love for and **trust** in Desdemona is **forgotten**, gone as quickly as the threat of Turkish invasion. In contrast, his love for and faith in Iago are unscathed, and **remain** this way until the very end. The competition for Othello’s devotion is embodied in his conflict, “**I think my wife be honest, and think she is not; / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not,**” (Act 3 Scene 3). Either Iago is telling the truth or Desdemona is: Othello is torn between the two. This statement pits Iago and Desdemona directly **against** each other; you could interpret this as a symbol for the duality in Othello’s nature, as he is pulled between his desire for love (Desdemona) and for hate (Iago). By the end of this pivotal scene, he is settled: he declares, “**All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven,**” (Act 3 Scene 3), casting **doubt** about how powerful his love was to start with, and appoints Iago as his new “**lieutenant**” (Act 3 Scene 3). Iago, the symbol for **hatred** and **revenge** and misogyny, has won the war for Othello’s heart.

Both Shakespeare’s use of **language** and his use of structure present Iago symbolically becoming Othello’s new lover, taking Desdemona’s place in his life. Othello tells Iago, “**I am bound to thee forever,**” (Act 3 Scene 3); by suggesting he **owes** Iago for ‘rescuing’ him from his **adulterous** wife, Shakespeare portrays male **solidarity** as the all-encompassing social force behind all relationships, an ongoing war against the deceit of women. This oath is **reciprocated** with one of Iago’s own: “**I am your own forever,**” (Act 3 Scene 3). The parallel structures of these sentences solidify the toxic bond between them. With these promises, Shakespeare blurs the line between military camaraderie and **homosexuality**. Equally, Shakespeare gives Othello and Iago shared lines and symbolic parallels in the same way he does to Othello and Desdemona. For example, the exchange “**Will you think so?**” “**Think so, Iago?**” “**What, / To kiss in private?**” (Act 4 Scene 1) illustrates Iago’s control over Othello, as his mind yields to Iago’s. Furthermore, successive scenes depict “**[Iago with a light]**” (Act 5 Scene 1) and “**[Othello with a light]**” (Act 5 Scene 2), erasing their individuality. This represents the **perilous** side of love, as Shakespeare portrays someone **surrendering** their own autonomy and letting themselves be **consumed** by another person.



The ending of the 'temptation scene', Act 3 Scene 3, features a symbolic **ritual** between Othello and Iago that resembles a **wedding**. This begins with Othello saying, **"Now by yond marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words," (Act 3 Scene 3)**, to which Iago returns, **"Witness you ever-burning lights above, [...] / Witness that here Iago doth give up / The execution of his wit, hands, heart, / To wronged Othello's service," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. The strong **allusions** to marriage establish Iago as Othello's new partner. In particular, their references to **"heaven"** watching suggests they have made vows in the presence of God and so they are eternally **bound** to them. The phrase **"give up / The execution of his wit, hands, heart, / To wronged Othello's service,"** conveys total devotion to Othello, presenting **self-dissolution** (the loss of self-identity) and thus the **all-encompassing** destruction of jealousy. The semantic field of **matrimony** employed by these characters is used to show love is **conquered**: in contrast to Othello and Desdemona's relationship, love is now manipulated and exploited. The same romantic language is used for Desdemona and Iago's relationships with Othello, criticising the idea that language **civilises** and improves you.

Iago's symbolic replacement of Desdemona reflects how **male solidarity** takes precedence over respect for women. Othello is happy to trust Iago and commit himself to the cause, and is just as happy to **dismiss** his love for Desdemona. The mention of **"wronged Othello's service"** again implies the existence of an ongoing war against female sexuality that provides the foundation for all male bonds. It's possible that the **homoerotic undertones** of Iago and Othello's relationship is used by Shakespeare to further villainise their bond to his contemporary, **homophobic** audience. Alternatively, the homoeroticism may not play into this portrayal of toxic love: Shakespeare may intend it as an equally **valid** form of love as Othello and Desdemona's, hence the use of traditional **romantic** language (e.g. **"sacred vow," (Act 3 Scene 3)**). Nevertheless, the parallels between the two couples welcomes the audience to draw comparisons between them. Iago's love may appear to be the **demonic** counterpart to Desdemona's, but ultimately there is little to **separate** them, suggesting love is intrinsically **neutral**: it's how it's used that matters.

### An Emerging Economy

The precipitating event to Iago's vengeful tirade, as presented by Shakespeare, is Cassio being **promoted** to lieutenant over him: **"A great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, / A fellow almost damned in a fair wife, / That never set a squadron in the field," (Act 1 Scene 1)**. This highlights the **hierarchy** upon which Venetian society depends, acting as a microcosm for Jacobean England. The depiction of Cassio as a **cultural man**, **"a great arithmetician"** with a **"fair wife"**, suggests Iago feels insecure in how civilised

#### **AO5: A Marxist Reading**

"The **pecking order** in Othello is clear. The Duke and aristocratic members of the Venetian Senate give orders to Othello, who in turn commands his lieutenant Cassio. Ensign Iago is subordinate to both. All three ostensibly serve out of loyalty to the state and for the status their military position brings, but they can be dismissed at the pleasure of their superiors. [...]. The **different gradations of status** embedded in the text are often **represented in military terms**, with Iago presented as a rough-speaking non-commissioned officer, resentful of Cassio's rank and courtly manners. But the play's exploration of rank and class go beyond the military. Iago's repeated advice, 'Put money in thy purse', suggests that a **new economic model has replaced the feudal obligations of service**, which had been based on a bond of loyalty and duty between servant and master." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*



he is in comparison with the “**Florentine**”. He resents Cassio for having “**never set a squadron in the field,**” insinuating he was chosen for his **civility** rather than military **prohess**. He continues this accusation when he says, “**‘Tis the curse of service; / Preferment goes by letter and affection, / Not by the old gradation,**” (Act 1 Scene 1). Shakespeare exposes the **favouritism**, nepotism, and elitism society runs on. By calling it “**the curse of service**”, he suggests class and status are inevitable consequences of power and greed; people will always seek to put others down to lift themselves up. Consequently, Shakespeare portrays Iago as a symbol for **disillusionment** and discontent within the lower classes. Iago, an Ensign, is subordinate to the majority of characters in the play. He seeks **change**, and to disrupt the hierarchy system: “**I know my price, I am worth no worse a place,**” (Act 1 Scene 1).

Fitting with his role as the disillusioned **insurgent**, Iago symbolises the new form of capitalism and the new types of power it promises. Most relationships in the play are governed by military ties, particularly amongst the men. Iago is Othello’s Ensign, and lower in the **pecking order** than Cassio. Cassio is Othello’s lieutenant. Othello is contracted to the Venice Senate. Iago resolves to upend this clearcut **system** of power and reverse the roles, by manipulating Othello into being dependent on him and by turning Othello against his own lieutenant. In contrast to the corruption of “**preferment**” (Act 1 Scene 1) that determines social **influence**, Iago’s dialogue is full of **references** to money and capital. For example, the repeated imperative “**Put money in thy purse**” (Act 1 Scene 3) encourages Roderigo to invest in his own interests and future. It is also empowering, as Shakespeare shows how **money** and the free market can change social landscapes. The character Iago tells of a new economy to replace the **dynamic** between servant and master. The current hierarchy relies on loyalty and duty, things that can easily be **faked** as shown by Iago, whereas “**money**” is tangible and self-serving, answering to no higher calling than greed and **materialism**.

### Sex in the City

Iago believes all romance is merely lust **masquerading** as love; ergo, Shakespeare uses his character as love’s cynic, someone who can only see love’s dark underbelly. Part of the narrative he weaves with the lives of his peers includes proving his own **pessimistic** judgements right, reducing marriage to a lust-based frenzy; in the process, Shakespeare hints at the **reification** of sex in society. Sex and female sexuality are commodities Venice trades in: they govern a lot of the relationships within the play, determining who has the power and when. We might not like Iago’s **dismissal** of love, but Shakespeare presents a society that, ultimately, shares the same sentiments. Characters - including Othello - **ostensibly** care about marriage, but as the plot **unravels**, the focus turns to sex.

Iago tells Roderigo, “**Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners,**” (Act 1 Scene 3), thus implying we are in **control** of our own fates and responsible for our own wellbeing. These ideas **stem** from the philosophy of Humanism, a prominent school of thought in the Renaissance that believed in the potential of a person to do good, both for themselves and for their society as a whole. With this monologue of Iago’s, Shakespeare suggests certain



emotions **threaten** this potential: Iago says, “**If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion,**” (Act 1 Scene 3). This concluding statement portrays love as something violent, **primitive**, and volatile. It is clear Iago views love as a **weakness**, and he goes on to exploit the lapses in **judgement** it causes. Shakespeare may be praising humanity’s ability to think logically, in keeping with the belief that “**reason**” separates man from **beast**; alternatively, he might argue that society takes advantage of **compassionate**, empathetic human nature, thus **manufacturing** a weakness where there wasn’t one before.

The symbolism in the metaphor “**our bodies are our gardens**” is reminiscent of the **Garden of Eden**, a gift from God that humans lost because of their own deceitful actions, the place where sin was created. The reference connotes **temptation** and corruption, showing how good things can easily be lost. Shakespeare conveys the importance of looking after ourselves and minding our own behaviour, suggesting it is our **responsibility** and ours alone. The symbolism also agrees with the Biblical teaching of the sanctity of life, where our bodies are **temples** made in the image of God and must be respected as such. Shakespeare brings our attention to the many ways in which our “**gardens**” can be **marred** and our judgement corrupted, including “**rage**” and “**lust**”. This ties in with the theme of civility vs. barbarity, as “**carnal stings**” are typically associated with **primitive culture**; yet, Shakespeare challenges these preconceptions by insinuating the same vices exist in ‘high society’. Furthermore, the Garden of Eden and ‘the Fall of Man’ is traditionally associated with **female seduction**, as Eve falls for the Serpent’s bait and encourages Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Therefore, this monologue may be interpreted as another example of Iago’s **bigotry**, as he portrays women as the cause behind men’s “**most preposterous conclusions**”.

This speech of Iago’s can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, Iago’s **cynicism** towards love foreshadows his later actions: Shakespeare sets Iago up as love’s nemesis or opposite, **distancing** him from love’s creative, civilising force for good and making him a symbol for chaos. Moreover, Shakespeare’s use of the Garden of Eden **allusion**, for instance, develops the idea of Iago as a twisted interpretation of a preacher. He lectures Roderigo about the risks of **lust and sin**. He believes he is superior to others for his **rejection** of love, yet succumbs to the same jealousy and lust he warns against; he is a symbol for the hypocrisy of religious teaching and authority. On the other hand, Shakespeare might be **warning** his audience about the things that **prevent** us from being good people. He shows us someone who is driven to evil by “**raging motions**” and “**carnal stings**”, both in the character of Iago and in that of Othello. Thus, he appeals to the **humanist** teaching of individual potential, praising **logic** and kindness over selfish emotion. Iago’s portrayal of love as lust in **disguise**, in addition, may serve to expose the corruption and **perversion** of a patriarchal society. As long as the body of one person is the ‘legal possession’ of another, we are **destined** to be ruled by the “**lust of the blood**” (Act 1 Scene 3). The sins we see characters accuse Othello of, for example calling him “**changeable**” (Act 1 Scene 3) and “**lascivious**” (Act 1 Scene 1), are **conventionally** symbols of barbarity



and depravity, but Shakespeare argues they are present in all of human nature. The revered, **high-cultured** streets of Venice are not free from the “**baseness of our natures**”.

#### **AO5: Ownership of Women**

In the essay “Proper” Men and “Fallen” Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in ‘Othello’, Ruth Vanita writes, “[The play] describes murderous jealousy as innate in the husband-wife relationship which posits the wife as the exclusive possession of the husband and is thus at odds with the human condition wherein one can never know another person’s inmost thoughts and desires”. Similarly, Kiernan Ryan writes, “Sexual jealousy is shown to be the rule in Venice rather than an exceptional emotional disorder to which Othello is especially prone to succumb. [...] All these characters fall prey like him to ‘the green-eyed monster’ (3.3.166) that stalks any society in which the sexual desire of one human being is regarded as the property of another.”

## **CHARACTER IN CONTEXT**

The central conflict in the play of ‘Othello’ combines two defining issues of the Jacobean era: the **treatment of women** and the treatment of outsiders. In this case, ‘outsiders’ refers to people of **colour**, though the same themes can be applied to another big controversy of the time - the conflict between **Catholics** and **Protestants**. Simultaneously, Shakespeare brings the spotlight to a new system of **hierarchy** and **class**, embodied by the city of Venice. This foreshadows the direction England’s economy was starting to take at the time of writing.

As such, ‘Othello’ is more of a **social commentary** than a morality play. This genre places Shakespeare with his contemporaries, as the Jacobean era saw a prominent use of **satire** and **politics** in its literature. That said, the play is not lacking in morals and messages for Shakespeare’s audience; though ‘Othello’ is set some decades before, its themes and depictions convey Shakespeare’s perspective on the time he was writing in, the early 1600s. Shakespeare uses the setting of **wartime Cyprus** as a lens through which to view his own ‘modern’ time (meaning we can do the same thing!).

### **Moors**

The term ‘**Moor**’ has historically been used by **Christian Europeans** to refer to people from Somalia, Ethiopia, the Middle East, the Berber coast, North Africa in general, and even India - in short, its use to specify a person’s **ethnicity** is **ambiguous**. It was often used as a derogatory term so **accuracy** wasn’t important to its user.



Originally, the Moors were a group of **Muslims** from what is now North Africa who captured the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) in 711 A.D. The peninsula became a **cultural** and **economic capital**, but Moorish rule was opposed by European Christians. Eventually, in 1492, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II and Isabella I triumphed in a war against the Moors of the Iberian Peninsula. This led to the Moors being **expelled** from Spain, though small communities still resided throughout Western Europe - including in Italy, where the play is set.

We see evidence of this complex history in how Shakespeare writes Iago's treatment of Othello. Firstly, he refers to him as a "**Moor**" when insulting or **accusing** him - calling upon the term's history as a derogatory term. Even in his own soliloquies, performed in private, Iago invokes the term more often than he refers to Othello by name. This choice by Shakespeare illustrates how **deep-rooted** Iago's hatred and racism is, while showing how people of colour were denied humanity and identity by their **oppressors**. Secondly, the majority of Iago's **malicious** plot unfolds on the island of Cyprus. He chooses to threaten Othello when he is most vulnerable, **displaced** and disoriented by this new environment - alluding to the expulsion of the Moors from Spain and the **erasure** of their heritage.

## Venice

The Venice of the Jacobean era was close to a **cultural utopia** in many ways. It was a symbol of beauty, culture, and civilisation. With its numerous trade links with the Eastern World and North Africa and its **thriving economy**, it was the poster child of early Modern Capitalism. At this time, England was only just beginning to trade abroad. Furthermore, Venice was a **Republic**: the wealthier **merchant** classes controlled the state and bought powerful military forces to protect **colonial exploits**.

A consequence of this was the emergence of a **new ruling class** that hadn't been seen before. The city had laws that dictated people dress according to their social standing, but these were rarely enforced and the emerging mercantile class dressed according to financial, not social, status. In addition, Venice was viewed as a '**pleasure capital**', known for a higher **sexual tolerance** than other places.

Its status as a symbol for **progress** makes Venice the perfect opening for this play. Shakespeare explores what it means to be **civilised** rather than primitive, ultimately exposing societies such as Venice for being hypocritical and insidious. Othello worries that he doesn't possess "**those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), a reference to Venetian high society that shows how he feels **inadequate** amongst his peers. However, Iago claims, "**There's many a beast then in a populous city / and many a civil monster,**" (**Act 4 Scene 1**), a **harsh** truth that Shakespeare exposes by the play's fruition. As a character, Iago exposes many of the contradictions and **hypocrisies** of his peers and of his society, even while being **guilty** of most of them himself. Venice's progress isn't enough for him; he embodies the burgeoning change and unrest of the city, wanting to be in charge of the **chaos** rather than part of it. He **resents** the concept of serving others.





Iago defends Venetian culture and **tradition** when he decides to **punish** Othello and Desdemona for **defying** convention. Though he perpetuates Venetian culture, he is also its harshest critic. Venice was the **pleasure** capital, but Iago condemns “**unbitted lusts**” (**Act 1 Scene 1**) and the “**fruits of whoring**” (**Act 5 Scene 1**). He believes “**In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands. Their best conscience / Is not to leave 't undone, but keep't unknown,**” (**Act 3 Scene 3**), criticising Venice for its sexual and **moral freedoms**, and the facades it perpetuates. Therefore, Iago is in many ways a conservative traditionalist. He preaches about the dangers of sexual desire and **falsehoods**. Yet, at the same time, he pushes for change and his own personal liberties. Hence, in these contradictions Shakespeare shows the **paradoxes** and failures of reason in human nature. Iago's political beliefs are shaped by selfishness. He doesn't want to erase all of Venice's flaws and deceptions. He wants to **benefit** from them.

## Cyprus

Crusades against Islam brought Europeans to Cyprus, and the island became a Christian military base for operations in the **Levant** (the countries of West Asia that border the Mediterranean, such as modern-day Israel and Lebanon). The **conflict** between the Christian

Republic of Venice and the Islamic **Ottoman Empire** had been an on-off affair since the mid-fifteenth century; by the time the play premiered, four wars between the two nations had already taken place. The most recent of these was known as the **War of Cyprus**, which took place between 1570 and 1573. This round of violence was precipitated by a **Turkish invasion** of the isle between 1570 and 1571 that consolidated Ottoman control.

Choosing to set his play during a **crisis of living** memory amplifies the tensions within the play, as well as the play's significance as a piece of **political commentary**. This choice is also a noteworthy **divergence** from Shakespeare's source material, Giraldi Cinthio's 'Hecatommithi', which lacked any clear **historical anchor**.

Its position within the Ottoman empire made Cyprus singularly **vulnerable** to Turkish threat, and the island was dangerously **isolated** from the rest of the Christian world. The country's identity was torn between the two warring religions; this **duality** is reflected in Iago's own character, as his exterior is so deeply **embroiled** in conflict with his interior. You could argue the conflict parallels the battle between Iago and Desdemona for Othello's trust and **respect**. Cyprus'

### AO5: Venice vs. Cyprus

In his edition of Shakespeare's plays, Samuel Johnson wrote, “**Had the scene opened in Cyprus, and the preceding incidents been occasionally related, there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity**”. His argument is that Shakespeare's choice to set the opening act in Venice adds significant meaning to the play.

In 'Shakespeare's tragedies of love', Catherine Bates argues, “**Cyprus distorts to the point of grotesqueness the norms of civil breeding such that it is Desdemona's very accomplishments and cultivated habits which finally indict her.**” Of the contrast between the two settings, she concludes, “**[It] drives home the dialectical nature of cultural self-definition. Notions of wildness, madness, otherness and heresy are not moral absolutes but concepts that serve to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses: civilisation, rationality, identity, and orthodoxy.**”



isolation reflects the **psychological** conditions Othello and Desdemona are thrown into under Iago's manipulations - a fitting setting to intensify the feelings of claustrophobia and **helplessness** they experience.

The play is likely set during the **Battle of Lepanto**, a year after the Turks conquered Cyprus. The battle marked a **decisive** triumph for the Christian Venice and its allies 'the Holy League'. Iago's feud with Othello is a microcosm for this wider conflict. In his eyes, Othello has taken over his "**office**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**) by sleeping with his wife and **humiliated** him further by **denying** him the promotion, establishing him as a threat to Iago's identity and sense of self. Hence, Othello the Moor jeopardises the **hegemony** of white Iago, mirroring the Christian perception of Islam. Furthermore, Shakespeare's choice to have Iago's **plottings** take hold while in Cyprus means the relationship between the two men echoes the history of the island even more strongly. Iago "**abuse[s] Othello's ear**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**) and "**ensnare[s his] soul and body**" (**Act 5 Scene 2**) in a place that symbolises the **suppression** of the Ottoman empire and the **Islamic faith**, making his plans for Othello appear more insidious and **tragic**. The battle for control of Cyprus is played out once more as Iago battles against Othello's very existence.

This choice of **setting** and time period evokes another example of typically Shakespearean dramatic irony. It was believed that **victory** over the Turks came 'too late' to help Cyprus; the Venetians left Cyprus in 1573, and the island fell to the Turks once more. Shakespeare's audience would have known this, making the apparent peace **celebrated** in **Act 2** feel uncertain and **falsely comforting**. The characters are lulled into a false sense of security as Iago prepares to strike. The Venetian government has only temporarily **avoided** the threat, and Othello has only temporarily avoided the wrath of his close friend.

The significance of Cyprus as a setting doesn't end here. Its reputation for **savagery** and barbarity, alongside its identity as a **military bastion**, makes it the antithesis of Venetian calm and order. Having Venetians in Cyprus brings the conflict between the civil and the primitive to the fore, just as we **witness** Othello's character wrestle with those same **ideals**. Iago, on the other hand, walks the line between the two easily, seemingly enjoying playing with perceptions. While his fellow Venetians **struggle** with the culture shock, Iago is at home in Cyprus. This island of chaos and war is a perfect setting for him to carry out his **plans**; you could even say the island is a symbol for Iago's **personality**. When the characters step foot on Cyprus, they have unknowingly surrendered to him: they're in his **territory** now.

#### **AO5: Iago as Villain & Soldier**

"To maintain, as some writers do, that [Iago] delights in evil for its own sake or that he is a symbol of evil rather than a human being is to ignore his plainly stated motivation and to overlook the stages by which intrigue reaches its tragic culmination. His ends are, indeed, relatively no more diabolical on a private scale than are many of the actions of armies on a public scale [...]. He is a villain, of course, but not merely because he is guilty of evil deeds; more fundamentally he is a villain because he transfers from one sphere of action the deeds proper therein to another sphere in which they are decidedly improper. It is the ethical blindness of Iago which prevents him from seeing that the methods of war, legitimate as they may be on the field of battle, are not equally applicable to the affairs of peace." - John C. McCloskey, 'The Motivation of Iago'



Cyprus was **denied** its own **autonomy** and sovereign identity because it was continually occupied by one empire or other. This makes it a symbol for **submission**, mirroring Iago's occupation of Othello's state of mind. According to myth, Cyprus is the birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of **love**; in contrast, we are presented with an island engulfed by war and violence. The island has become a figurehead for male **power** and conflict: the symbol of love is **dominated** by **warfare**. This dichotomy is mirrored in the plot, as Othello and Desdemona's romance is overtaken by Iago's violence and **hatred**.

The **relocation** to Cyprus marks the point where everything turns on its head. Iago's plans start to take hold, and nothing is as it seems. The island's chaotic identity and **renowned** 'primitive' behaviour take hold. What's more, the characters never return to Venice. The transition to Cyprus and everything it represents is **irreversible** and final.

## Religion

**Religion** was a huge part of Jacobean life, and as such plays an important role in all of Shakespeare's plays. The Church was influential in the subject of **morality** as well as the subject of politics: the Church had the ear of the monarch, who was the symbolic head of the Church and the government, meaning there was none of the **separation** between Church and State that we have today. Because of this, Christian ideology was the foundation of many aspects of life, and people used it as a **touchstone** or guide in more ways than one. It's important to remember the ubiquity of the Church in everyday life, because Shakespeare explores its **significance** as a political force in addition to its **moral consequence**.

## Islam vs. Christianity

The subject of **religious conflict** takes a main role in 'Othello'. As mentioned above, the rise of the Ottoman empire exacerbated tensions between the Muslim and Christian worlds. This motivated a lot of **foreign policy** at the time, as a lot of resources and **manpower** were devoted to this religious war. Venice and Cyprus were at the **epicentre** of this battle. It was the position of the Church that Islam threatened Christianity and its values, and this was the **motivation** behind the Crusades. At the same time, the Ottoman Turks had launched campaigns against the **Christian world**, capturing many non-European countries including Constantinople, causing the fall of Greece and the Balkans. In the period when the play is set, these tensions were a fact of life, but this didn't lessen any of the stakes or bad feelings between the two sides.

Iago adopts the title of "**the Moor**" for Othello, most notably in his **soliloquies** and when he is persuading others to come round to his way of thinking - for instance, when he goads Roderigo in Act 1, Scenes 1 and 3. Therefore, Shakespeare illustrates Iago **weaponising** Othello's ethnic

### **A05: A Postcolonial Reading**

"Shakespeare draws upon the Christian-Turkish binary but also undercuts it by making the play's most villainous character a Venetian and its hero an outsider." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*



identity, amplifying the hostility felt towards him by identifying him as the 'enemy'. The context of the conflict between Islam and Christianity adds to the power of his rhetoric, for a "Moor" was someone who, typically, was a **Muslim**.

### Religion: Protestantism vs. Catholicism

Under the rule of **King James I**, England was a Protestant state, but this hadn't always been the case. Since Henry VIII's separation from the Catholic Church the century before (part of the movement known as the Reformation), England had oscillated between the **two denominations** depending on who was on the throne. Both **Catholics** and **Protestants** had suffered violence and **oppression** at the hands of the other. Because of this, the conflict and **controversy** religion brought with it was very close to home for Shakespeare's contemporary audience. This likely made the **religious conflict** in the play - between the Islamic Turks and the Christian Venetians - easier to empathise with, and so amplified the messages behind it.

**Protestantism** of the time encouraged a preoccupation with the **self**. Introspection was important when practising and maintaining your faith, as there was a movement towards **self-improvement**. This ideal is reflected in the literature of the time: **tragic heroes**, such as Othello, are tormented by their own consciences - "**Thou hast set me on the rack!**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**) - and follow a **spiritual** journey to Heaven or Hell. Othello is troubled most by his own thoughts. When Iago 'exposes' Desdemona's **betrayal**, Othello discovers what type of person he truly is, and it's not what he expects. Iago acts as a type of **moral catalyst**, driving people towards their true **vices** much like the Serpent in the Garden of Eden.

In contrast to Othello's **mental torment**, Iago isn't bothered by his own malignance. He refers to himself as a "**devil**" preparing to don the "**blackest sins**" (**Act 2 Scene 3**), embracing his role as the villain. Furthermore, in his soliloquy he asks, "**How am I then a villain / To counsel Cassio to this parallel course / Directly to his good? Divinity of Hell!**" (**Act 2 Scene 3**). The **oxymoron** he finishes with is emblematic of his character's **purpose**, conveying the subjectivity of vice and virtue. This has wider implications, as Shakespeare insinuates that authorities and institutions in Jacobean England, particularly the Church, are corrupt. As Iago asks this question while **alone** on stage, he is addressing the audience; Shakespeare is **challenging** his audience to reconsider their definitions of morality. Furthermore, this is an example of 'breaking the fourth wall' and metaliterature, as Iago's reference to being a "**villain**" suggests awareness of being a character in a play. By **questioning** his status as the "**villain**", Shakespeare questions the tropes, archetypes, and stereotypes used to depict your typical **antagonist**.

### Religion: Nature, Law & Order

The teachings of the **Bible** and the Church held great significance in how people aimed to live their lives. Moreover, the ideologies and **dogma** influenced Jacobean culture, as your actions were **evaluated** by whether your soul could enter Heaven or not.



One key idea that was prominent in Shakespeare's time was the hierarchical Chain of Being. Inherited from **medieval theology**, the philosophy stated that everything on Earth held innate worth as decreed by God: God was at the top of the chain, with angels below, while humans were above animals and plants. Closely tied to this was the existence of a **divine order**. This was a **predeterministic** outlook that stated everything that had happened or would happen was known and decided by God. In Jacobean culture, any attempts to **change** or challenge the divine order or the Chain of Being would end in **tragedy**, as punishment for defying God.

Iago believes Othello and Desdemona's relationship is grotesquely **unnatural**. He says of Desdemona, "**To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,**" (Act 2 Scene 3). This depicts her as a **seductress**, leading Othello away from God's "**redemption**" and forgiveness. He goes on to say, "**Her appetite shall play the god / With his weak function,**" (Act 2 Scene 3); he believes she has corrupted Othello and flagrantly **rejected** the divine order. To "**play the god**" is one of the worst sins as it suggests you believe you are superior to God; Shakespeare shows the belief that Desdemona deserves punishment for her actions. Later, Iago tells Othello, "**Not to affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree, / Whereto we see in all things nature tends— / Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank, / Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural,**" (Act 3 Scene 3). He believes a white woman loving a black man goes against nature itself. The adjective "**rank**" depicts their relationship as something rotten and **putrid**, evoking physical **disgust**.

Yet, at the same time, Iago revels in his own ability to wreak **havoc**. In the conclusion of the first act, he says, "**Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light,**" (Act 1 Scene 3). This identifies him with **archetypal** forces of evil. The line sounds like a spell or curse, connoting witchcraft and making the line more fitting in the play Macbeth. The **conceit** of **devilry** and the occult Shakespeare uses to portray Iago's character, such as "**monstrous**" in the quote above, creates the sense that he is slightly **supernatural**. He has an uncanny ability to know exactly what to say to make someone do what he wants, and a contemporary audience would naturally wonder if his skills come from **Satan** or the occult. However, Iago reminds Roderigo, "**Thou know'st we work by wit and not by witchcraft,**" (Act 2 Scene 3); Shakespeare may imply that there is something inherently human about **hatred** and malice. He implies narratives about "**witchcraft**" and "**Hell**" serve to distance us from our own **flaws**, allowing us to **avoid** our responsibilities and the truth that human beings are capable of evil all on our own.

### Religion: Jealousy

Jealousy and **rational thought** are integral to the play's main message, so it's helpful to know how Jacobean culture viewed them. You can see evidence of how these **cultural** beliefs shaped Shakespeare's portrayal of human nature; at the same time, you may find instances where Shakespeare **challenges** these perspectives.



In accordance with the **Chain of Being**, it was believed that the ability to think rationally was what separated humans from animals. A failure of **reason** was the cause of the fall of man: allowing **passion** to overtake reason meant you had lost what made you human, reducing you to the animalistic state of being. This state was defined by appetite and **instinct**. It makes sense, then, that to act irrationally and impulsively made you a monster in the eyes of others, because you had **fallen** below the level of man and become **bestial**.

We see this idea manifested explicitly in Shakespeare's **personification** of jealousy. Iago warns Othello, "[Jealousy] is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on," (Act 3, Scene 3) while Emilia informs Desdemona, "[Jealous is] a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself," (Act 3, Scene 4). This depiction of jealousy as a "monster" conveys how **destructive** a force it is, while alluding to the **societal beliefs** surrounding it. The parallel of Othello and Desdemona being told the same thing by another husband and wife suggests it is their **torment** and struggles, not their love, that **unites** them. Shakespeare also introduces dramatic irony here, as we know Iago and Emilia's marriage is strained because of Iago's own jealousy. Shakespeare suggests you can be told the same **warnings** many times over, but it doesn't mean you will learn. He implies jealousy is a tragic but necessary part of human existence. Its very nature is **irrational**, and so cannot be **warned** away with rational thought.

Iago has an astute **understanding** of how jealousy warps perspective and causes lapses in judgement. When he acknowledges, "I know not if't be true / yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety," (Act 1 Scene 3) and, "It is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not," (Act 3 Scene 3), Shakespeare implies Iago is **self-aware**. Even so, being conscious of his flaws doesn't save him from them. This is why he describes jealousy as a "plague", as the **metaphor** shows how **paranoia** consumes you and can't be **cured**. Iago shares Jacobean views of jealousy and rational thought, but this doesn't change the **outcome** of the play.

## Cuckoldry

Saying that 'Othello' is a play about jealousy is certainly a **simplistic** perspective. You could argue that the play is less about jealousy itself and more about **male ownership** of women's bodies, and the role this plays in the emotion of jealousy. Through Iago's jealousy, Shakespeare explores the societal taboo of cuckoldry and the strains it puts on **loving** relationships. He ultimately argues that these **arbitrary**, man made constructions of virginity and **faithfulness** are irreconcilable with true love.

**AO5: Cuckoldry: The Ultimate Marital Crime**  
"From a feminist perspective, early modern England's preoccupation with cuckoldry demonstrates a basic male insecurity about women's sexuality." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*

In the Jacobean era, when a woman married, any **property** she owned became the property of her husband. Equally, the security of societal order and a husband's **peace** of mind were **dependent** on a woman's virginity prior to marriage and her faithfulness within it. This was



because it was a woman's duty to bear her husband's rightful **heir** - the inheritor of his property, reputation, and identity. **Inheritance** passed down the family line, so men needed to be sure a son was theirs. Illegitimate children couldn't be assimilated in family **structures**, so were viewed as **threats** to the fabric of society. Therefore, a guarantee of a woman's fidelity was paramount if the hierarchy of society was to be kept **intact**.

Cuckoldry signalled the **breakdown** of these ideologies. A cuckold is a married man whose wife was unfaithful, and holds connotations of mockery and **derision** (as noted by the characters of the play). As such, being cuckolded challenges beliefs that were highly protected in Jacobean society, concerning a woman's sexuality and the issue of **succession**. Becoming a cuckold was a **prevalent** male fear because it meant becoming an object of ridicule: you were a man who couldn't control his own wife, and had married a woman with **unnatural** sexuality.

As noted before, cuckoldry appears to be one of the **catalysts** for Iago's vendetta. He reveals, **"It is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He's done my office," (Act 1 Scene 3)**. That we only find out this important **detail** at the end of the first act shows how **humiliated** and embarrassed Iago is, as Shakespeare shows how much of a taboo cuckoldry was to men. The thing a man **dreaded** being, even more than a cuckold, was someone who **admitted** to being one. Moreover, the opening **"It is thought abroad"** implies Iago's main motivation comes from **rumour**. As well as showing that **"mere suspicion" (Act 1 Scene 3)** is enough to provoke male insecurity, Shakespeare implies that having people know is **worse**. Iago resents the idea of people believing this **emasculating** thing about him. Later, he accuses Cassio of being **"with [his] night-cap too," (Act 2 Scene 1)**. Shakespeare shows how all men were in **competition** for ownership of women. Masculinity is so **fragile** that it can't coexist with other men.

### Archetypes of Femininity

Plentiful tropes and myths surrounded what it meant to be a **woman** in Jacobean times. Generally, there were four **archetypes of femininity**, within which all women were categorised: the maiden, the wife, the widow, and the whore. These classifications, as you may have already identified, revolve around the 'stage' of a **woman's sexuality**; the maiden is a virgin, whereas the widow has lost her sexual identity and is **unanchored** in society. Men wanted to marry virgins - the maiden - but used whores for their own pleasure. The fifth category of **'witch'** was reserved for those women deemed too **masculine**, ugly, or barren to be **'real' women**. Additionally, there was the archetype of the fallen woman, someone who had lost her innocence in the eyes of others; fallen women couldn't regain their reputations, were the prey of gossips, and were **ostracised** from society.

Masculinity drew from these categories of **womanhood**. They served as goals or benchmarks. For example, virgins, newly-weds, and demure widows were 'sexual targets': men wanted to sleep with them because the **conquest** of the apparently unattainable was an irresistible challenge to their masculinity. Brides and betrothed women were seen as being in a state of **transition** between the categories, making them vulnerable to assault or slander. Young,



beautiful wives were both **desired** and **feared**, because they could **captivate** their husbands and other men with their 'feminine wiles'.

**AO5: Iago's 'Fallen Women'**

"The **ultimate irony** in the play's representation of male-female relations **is the fact that two women accused by their husbands of "falling" morally, actually fall not morally but physically, before our eyes, felled by those morally 'fallen' husbands' hands** and, symbolically, by the male-dominated society which endorses the murder of supposedly fallen women." - Ruth Vanita, 'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

Throughout the play, we see that Iago's view of women is grounded in these **classifications**. He pigeonholes women based on their sexuality, a perspective that is reductive and **harmful**. He describes women as "**players in [their] housewifery, and housewives in [their] beds,**" and declares, "**You rise to play and go to bed to work,**" (Act 2 Scene 1). All of this suggests a woman's sole **purpose** is to serve men

sexually and insinuates that women **enjoy** it. Iago implies women demean and sexualise themselves on purpose, and so deserve to be treated as sexual objects. The **repetition** of the verb "**play**" depicts women as superficial in all other aspects of life. Here, Shakespeare is tying the theme of femininity to the theme of **public vs. private**, as Iago possesses the typical belief that women belong behind doors. The verb "**play**" also hints at male **insecurity**, because Shakespeare suggests Iago thinks all women are skilled con artists and feels threatened by their ability to **deceive**. Just as a beautiful wife was desired and resented because of her sexual power, Iago fears the **sway** women hold over him.

