

Edexcel English Literature A-level

Othello: Character Profiles

Othello

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



OTHELLO

A CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT JEALOUSY & INNER CONFLICT

INTRODUCTION

Othello starts off as an **honourable**, successful man: a general for the Venetian army, married to the woman he loves, the perfect romantic hero. Despite being an **outsider**, he has made an **impressive** place for himself in Venetian society - though he struggles with his identity. It is his strength of character, not his faults, that makes for him an **enemy** in Iago.

As is typical of Shakespeare's **titular** characters, Othello is at the centre of real-world conflicts as much as he is at the centre of the play's conflicts. He is a black man living in a white man's world, an **ex-slave** who has married a Senator's (white) wife. His fate is, **unbeknownst** to him, majorly in the hands of someone he views to be his closest friend. The psychological battleground Iago creates is **analogous** to the trauma inflicted by racism. The battle of wills between the two men, with Iago ultimately the victor, can be seen as the **conflict** between European **colonisation** and freedom of identity.

At the start, Othello believes in the **power of love**. All he wants to do is be with his wife. Ultimately, however, his insecurities and his desire for power and **self-assurance** win. He is as much a victim to his own selfishness and avarice as he is to Iago's manipulations. Shakespeare suggests the true **tragedy** is that hierarchical, colonial, Capitalist society urges you to sacrifice love and liberty in order to conform and **succeed**.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

At the Beginning of the Play (Acts 1-3)

- **The Mediator:** Shakespeare portrays Othello as a **prudent**, level-headed individual who seeks to **resolve** conflict rather than cause it. We see this particularly in the first scene in which he appears, when he tells Brabantio's men, "**Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them,**" (Act 1 Scene 2), indicating that he doesn't view **violence** as a solution. Brabantio fails to **provoke** him or spark his temper. When he goes to convince the Senate that he should be allowed to marry Desdemona, he uses the **strength** of his voice to **assert** himself and prove himself worthy. This all suggests he is immune to the type of toxic masculinity (impulsive, **belligerent**, vain) that defines many heroes in literature and **within** his own military culture.
- **The Leader:** Othello is an **ambassador** to the Moors and a well-respected general in the Venetian army. Shakespeare shows that he takes his job and duties very seriously, often putting his **obligations** to others before his own needs. One example is when he is called away from his marital bed to end the **brawl** Iago started; another is when he demotes Cassio, even though he is his friend, telling him, "**Cassio, I love thee, / But never more be officer of mine**" (Act 2 Scene 3). This scene might imply Othello is willing to **sacrifice** his own loyalties in order to act the perfect leader; he acts on the will of others, not his own, and this may foreshadow Iago's later **puppetry**. Nevertheless, we



witness Othello's skill at commanding his men and rallying morale. His affinity for **peacemaking** and ability to inspire others aligns him with a Messiah-type persona; as Othello is black, this would have been a **controversial** statement in the Jacobean era, due to the excessive **whitewashing** of the Church.

- The Doting Husband:** Shakespeare portrays Othello's devotion to Desdemona, conveying the **mutual respect** the couple share. We get the impression that Othello cares for her beyond her body or her **childbearing** 'duty'. When Othello tells the Venetian senate to **"send for the lady [...] / And let her speak of me to her father"** (Act 1 Scene 3), Shakespeare presents the faith Othello has in her, as well as his **appreciation** for her voice and opinions. Othello breaks convention by inviting Desdemona to fight her own case: typically, women carried no **authority**, especially in the **public sphere**, and had to defer to their husbands. Othello continues, **"She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them,"** (Act 1 Scene 3). Shakespeare illustrates the **strength** he draws from her support, showing how marriage should be a union and a meeting of perspectives rather than one's **power** over the other.
- The Lover:** In addition to Othello's respect and **loyalty** to his wife, Shakespeare conveys how love **brightens** Othello's spirit. His speech is full of joyful, fearless imagery, such as **"My soul's joy, / If after every tempest come such calms, / May the winds blow till they have wakened death,"** (Act 2 Scene 1) and **"The greatest discords be / That e'er our hearts shall make,"** (Act 2 Scene 1). Shakespeare portrays him as an optimist, **bolstered** by the strength love brings him. He feels like together, they can face anything, even **"death"** itself - the **ultimate goal** for lovers. The references to nature and music draw strong **parallels** with traditional love poetry, and convey how **powerful love** makes Othello feel.

EXAM TIP: Typicality

Considering the typicality of a text is a good way to ensure you are considering both context and the author's intentions. If a text is typical of its era, what are the cultural and contextual influences that make these attributes so emblematic of the period? For example, presenting a female character as weak might be typical of literature because of the legal rights of women at the time, and the resulting cultural perspective. If an author has written something atypical, why have they done this? What message are they trying to convey by challenging these trends? In an exam, making sure you consider typicality with every point you make is a quick way to include a lot of the AOs.
- The Gullible Disciple:** At first, Othello is shown to be **unwavering** in his faith in Desdemona's loyalty. He tells Iago, **"Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw / The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,"** (Act 3 Scene 3) and says to himself, **"If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself,"** (Act 3 Scene 3). Shakespeare implies Othello's trust is greater than his own **self-doubt** or insecurity. The declaration **"O then heaven mocks itself"** resembles someone swearing to God, thus demonstrating how Desdemona's **honesty** forms the foundation of Othello's **worldview**. However, Shakespeare suggests Othello is too quick to trust: numerous times he comments on Iago's **trustworthiness**, calling him **"good Iago"** (Act 2 Scene 1), **"most honest"** (Act 2 Scene 3) and **"full of love and honesty"** (Act 3 Scene 3). We see that Othello is naive in his **blind trust**.



- The Rational Thinker:** As Iago's plot starts to **unfold**, Shakespeare implies Othello will be **resistant** to his ploys. He appears aware of his own weaknesses and of the temptations of jealousy, telling Iago, **"Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy, / To follow still the changes of the moon / With fresh suspicions?" (Act 3 Scene 3)**. He **dismisses** jealousy as a fool's errand, swearing allegiance to **logic** instead. He explains, **"To be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved [...] I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. Shakespeare implies Othello's willingness to **communicate** with Desdemona, not allowing any ill feelings to **fester**, will save their marriage. In an example of 'famous last words', he declares, **"On the proof, there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy!" (Act 3 Scene 3)**. Shakespeare hints at Othello's hubris: he is **overconfident**, believing himself immune to the feelings that would **compromise** rational thought.

At the End of the Play (Acts 3-5)

- The Tortured Soul:** Within Act 3 Scene 3, we watch Othello's resolve **crumble**. He gives into paranoia and doubt, proclaiming, **"Thou hast set me on the rack," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. This **metaphor**, connoting medieval methods of torture, conveys Iago's growing power over Othello, as well as the incessant **doubts** plaguing Othello's mind. Whereas before he was a picture of rationality and calm, now he is wild and restless; he laments, **"Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!" (Act 3 Scene 3)**. Shakespeare implies Othello's greatest **nemesis** is his own mind. Paranoia is his undoing. No longer able to **trust** his own feelings towards Desdemona, he **relies** too heavily on physical proof. He demands Iago **"give [him] the ocular proof," (Act 3 Scene 3)** and tells Desdemona, **"Our new heraldry is hands, not hearts," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. This **obsession** with evidence - things he can touch and see - is a **precursor** to the ordeal with the handkerchief. His insecurities take over, and he reduces Desdemona to a series of **arbitrary objects** and gestures.
- The Warrior:** While before Shakespeare presents Othello's **military** attributes as his ability to lead and make **strategic** decisions, now we witness the bloodthirsty side of his army background. Shakespeare illustrates Othello's regression to a warmongering soldier, reacting to conflict with violence and fury. You could argue he **loses** his military **authority**, becoming instead a foot soldier to Iago. This change is marked by his declaration, **"Farewell [...] the big wars / That makes ambition virtue [...] / Farewell [...] pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!" (Act 3 Scene 3)**, within which Shakespeare details the **glorification** of violence. Othello's manhood is tied to his **"occupation" (Act 3 Scene 3)** and now he feels **disconnected** from his role. What follows could be interpreted as his attempt to regain his military prowess. He says, **"Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell! / Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate!" (Act 3 Scene 3)**, which closely resembles a war cry or call to arms. He next swears, **"My bloody thoughts with violent pace / Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love," (Act 3 Scene 3)**; this is a soldier's **vow**, portraying Othello's wrath and **bloodthirst**. Love is a weakness and an obstacle he must **overcome** to attain victory.
- The Judge, Jury, and Executioner:** Othello is paranoid and cut **adrift** from everything he knows, and as a result, Shakespeare shows how he becomes insidiously self-reliant.



His worldview **narrows** and he is immune to voice or reason. In **military terms**, he goes AWOL: He is a lone wolf, fighting his own personal **war**. He executes a death warrant for Cassio and Desdemona, saying, **“To confess and be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged and then to confess,” (Act 4 Scene 1)**; this paradoxical statement reflects his broken state of mind. He has lost an awareness of **justice** and fair trial, wishing Cassio to be **“hanged”** first and then to **“confess”** - Shakespeare suggests Othello **craves** the death of his ‘enemies’ rather than truth. When Iago suggests Othello kill Desdemona in **“her bed”**, Othello replies, **“The justice of it pleases,” (Act 4 Scene 1)**, showing how his sense of **lawfulness** and justice is now centred around his own desires. He has gained an inflated ego, viewing himself **capable** of making life and death **decisions** - the sort only God should make.

- **The Cuckold:** Othello feels his identity is **reduced** to being a cuckold upon Desdemona’s betrayal, stripping him of his manhood, qualities, and triumphs. Because of this, Shakespeare argues he seeks **revenge** and recompense for what he’s been denied. This vengeance comes in the form of murder and suffering. His **speech** is full of **“death and damnation” (Act 3 Scene 3)**, an insight into his mental state and a far cry from the **peacemaker** of Act 1; he proclaims, **“I’ll tear her all to pieces!” (Act 3 Scene 3)** and **“I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!” (Act 4 Scene 1)**. This last remark reveals his fixation on being **cuckolded**; he is infuriated that she would ‘dare’ humiliate him. Shakespeare uses this unrelenting viciousness to suggest the truth is no longer important to Othello; he craves **validation** and for his masculinity to be **reinstated**. To achieve this, Desdemona - a symbol of his insecurity - must die, regardless of her guilt. As he prepares to murder her, he says, **“Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men,” (Act 5 Scene 1)**: in his mind, Othello is fighting for all men. Her death is symbolic of men’s victory over cuckoldry and **deceitful** female sexuality.

RELATIONSHIPS

Desdemona | When the play begins, Othello and Desdemona have eloped, **unknownst** to her father. They fell in love during Othello’s visits to her house to speak with her father, as Othello **entertained** Desdemona with tales of his life in foreign lands. While others disapprove of their union because of Othello’s race and **outsider** status, it is one of the reasons Desdemona loves him. Initially, Othello is a devout husband, **worshipping** Desdemona as well as **respecting** her as an individual. He allows her more freewill and voice than was typical of the time. In addition, he has **absolute faith** in her, and cannot imagine a time when he won’t love her.

However, the unknown **territory** of Cyprus and everything it brings with it adds strain to their relationship. One main conflict in the opening acts is their attempts to **consummate** their marriage. Repeatedly, they are denied time alone together, showing the general objection to their relationship still **impacts** them. The chaos that erupts and Cassio’s subsequent demotion adds more tension to their relationship, as their **contrasting** perspectives on duty and warfare are brought to light.

Ultimately, Shakespeare portrays the **malignance** of self-doubt and insecurity, particularly a man’s **insecurity** in his own masculinity. Othello’s love for Desdemona is usurped by his



paranoia; all traces of his previous trust in her are gone. His wife becomes a source of fury and humiliation for him, and he reduces their marriage to the traditional **dynamic** of a man fighting for **authority** over his wife. In the end, he believes it is his duty to murder her in order to save others from the fate of a **cuckold**. He views her death as a **sacrifice** for the benefit of all men, choosing male solidarity over romantic love.

Iago | Othello views Iago as a close friend and **advisor**. He respects his opinion, believes him to be incredibly honest and kind hearted, and seeks his counsel. However, this is immediately **undermined** by Iago's secret conversation with Roderigo, in which he **confesses** to resenting Othello for passing him over for the promotion to lieutenant. Their relationship is therefore imbalanced: Othello's regard for Iago is **genuine**, whereas Iago's loyalty to Othello is just a facade. Othello appears unaware of how his decision to promote Cassio could have **offended** Iago, suggesting his **commitment** to his job is an obstacle to forming true bonds with people. Iago insinuates Othello's decision was made based on rank and reputation, not skill; this **accusation** suggests the uneven distribution of power within society is another barrier to true male friendship. Othello and Iago's friendship is **ill-fated** because men must compete with each other for authority. 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**. 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.

Brabantio | Through references to a time before the play takes place, the audience learns that Brabantio and Othello used to be very **close**. Othello says, "**Her father loved me, oft invited me, / Still questioned me the story of my life,**" (Act 1 Scene 3). However, upon discovering Othello's marriage to his daughter, Brabantio is enraged. He views their union as **unnatural**, and is convinced Othello **stole** his daughter from him. Firstly, this shows how the fight for **ownership** of women - akin to the fight for authority - was a prominent **barrier** to male friendship. Secondly, Shakespeare suggests Brabantio is comfortable with Othello's race - **exploits** it, even, as he takes such pleasure in his '**exotic**' tales - until he becomes involved with his own daughter. This hypocrisy reveals society's fears of the Other. Othello still respects Brabantio and remains **civil** with him when Brabantio is trying to incite conflict. However, Brabantio becomes a reminder of Desdemona's previous **duplicity**; Othello inherits his **anxieties** of having Desdemona **stolen** from him.



Cassio | Cassio is chosen to be Othello's new lieutenant, making him another of Othello's closest advisers and friends. The rank of lieutenant introduces a **formal aspect** to their relationship; in the end, this jeopardises their friendship, because Othello chooses duty over friendship and **demotes** Cassio. Cassio's demotion is a catalyst for the conflict between Othello and Desdemona. Even without Iago's **insinuations** that Cassio and Desdemona are sleeping together, the couple differ significantly on whether demoting Cassio was the right thing to do. Desdemona **lobbies** for Cassio's reinstatement, challenging Othello's authority and visibly annoying him. With the added context of Iago's implications of **infidelity**, the issue of Cassio becomes a **linchpin** for the marriage's collapse.

Once he is convinced of Desdemona's **adultery**, Othello views Cassio as a rival. By sleeping with his wife, Cassio has undermined Othello's manhood and **humiliated** him. In return, Othello wants Cassio dead.

Emilia | Emilia is the only other woman we see Othello properly interact with. The vast majority of these **interactions** take place after Othello's transformation; as a result, Emilia becomes a target for Othello's women-hating. He refers to her as a **brothel-keeper** and a whore, illustrating his belief that all women are sexual, deceitful beings. He believes Emilia and Desdemona are **colluding** together against the men in their lives. This is an extension of his belief that all women conspire to cause men **ill**.

In the end, Emilia is the one who **exposes** Iago's plots and convinces Othello of Desdemona's innocence. Othello's tale of female **solidarity** is confirmed, but not in the way he once thought: Emilia defends Desdemona when no one else will, **exonerating** her and forcing Othello to examine his own actions.

KEY THEMES

Shakespeare uses the construct of Othello to explore the **conflict** between the individual and the many, as well as the conflict between the **status quo** and the **Other**. The play is an intersection of the social (economics, hierarchy, the **institution** of misogyny and racism) and the **private** (marriage, jealousy, irrational feelings). We as an audience watch Othello trying to negotiate both of these pressures at once, with fatal consequences. Therefore, Othello is **symbolic** of (and victim to) the failings of (then) modern society.

Jealousy & Cuckoldry

Othello is known for being a play about jealousy. Shakespeare constructs the **slow collapse** of rational thought within Othello's mind as irrational, violent emotion takes over, and man becomes **beast**.

AO5: The Other

The Other is a **prominent term in literary theory**, used in the study of the timeless theme of **binary oppositions** - man/woman, coloniser/colonised, good/evil. The Other is any individual who doesn't 'belong' with the group because of some fundamental difference (in the group's opinion). A stranger becomes the Other. The Other is **the opposite of the Self**, and so represents everything unfamiliar to us. The concept of the Other is a big **part of many literary schools of thought**, including psychoanalysis and postcolonialism.

In imperial cultures, **Othering establishes power imbalances** between the colonised and the coloniser. This allows false binary divisions, such as social class, race, or gender, to endure. The Other is a **symbol of the oppressed and the repressed**.



One way Shakespeare conveys this **deterioration** is through structure and form. At the beginning of the play, Othello conducts himself well; he speaks in a measured meter and **respectful** tone, such as when he addresses the Venetian council: **“Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors, [...] I will a round unvarnish’d tale deliver / Of my whole course of love” (1.3)**. However, once he is **engulfed** by his jealousy, he loses these qualities. As Iago’s lies take hold, he **“falls in a trance”** and Iago tells Cassio not to **disturb** him, else **“he foams at mouth and by and by / Breaks out to savage madness” (4.1)**. As well as a cruel, racist remark, it is **foreshadowing** what is to come for Othello. He **“strikes”** Desdemona in public **(4.1)**, and his speech becomes littered with oaths (**“damn thyself”, “thou art false as hell”**) and **gruesome** imagery (**“a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in”**). Othello’s fall from grace is mirrored in his speech, as Shakespeare **alludes** to the contemporary belief that rational thought was the only thing separating man from beast. The transformation in Othello’s character shows how **potent** and powerful jealousy and **hatred** can be.

Though Othello claims to **“love”** Desdemona at the start, when he becomes **convinced** of her adultery, Shakespeare implies it is not lost love that **angers** him. He laments, **“O curse of marriage, / that we can call these delicate creatures ours / and not their appetites,”** and asks, **“What sense had I of her stol’n hours of lust?” (3.3)**. These complaints place emphasis on Desdemona’s **betrayal**. The semantic field of property and **ownership** suggests Othello is angered because his wife has broken a material contract, like one between an employer and his employee, rather than his heart. The adjective **“stol’n”** implies her affections and her body **belong** to him, and she has **robbed** him by committing adultery.

Shakespeare demonstrates that it is **wounded pride** that drives Othello to violence. He tells Iago **“a horned man’s a monster and a beast”** before declaring, **“I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!” (4.1)** This shows how important a man’s marriage was to his **public image**. Othello feels ashamed by Desdemona’s **treachery**, and so Shakespeare shows a man fighting for his own honour, rather than his love. To be cuckolded was the ultimate humiliation, as it suggested **impotence** and weakness. A man who couldn’t control his own wife wasn’t worthy of power or respect - hence a **“beast”**. The bestial metaphor suggests a **cuckolded** man has no place in high society, and so is relegated to being an animal. **“Monster”** holds a **double meaning**: Othello is concerned with **embarrassment**, viewing a **“monster”** as someone who has failed socially, while Shakespeare foreshadows Othello’s fate as a murderer, someone who has **failed morally**.

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 allowed members of colonised 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 colonial rule. 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 modern and contemporary** (i.e. Elizabethan) audiences.



The motivations behind Othello's jealousy, therefore, are **selfishness** and ego, as well as misogyny. The view of women as **property** is alluded to often in his jealous outbursts, and so is fundamental to his anger. Shakespeare implies that Othello's **overwhelming** feelings are only possible because of the premium society placed on a woman's complete **subservience** to her master and owner - her husband.

Race & Colonialism

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.

Shakespeare uses the character of Othello to explore the idea of colonialism as well as the idea of race. Though these may **manifest** in similar ways, there is a crucial **difference** between the two: colonialism refers to one culture eradicating another through hostile occupation and

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

exploitation. Iago's psychological **manipulation** of Othello can be viewed as an allegory for colonialism: Iago represents the white man who takes over the country (mind) of the Other, **stripping** the black man of personal identity and free will. Iago plans to **"abuse Othello's ear"** (1.3) and **"pour this pestilence into [it]"** (2.3); the imagery depicts Iago's **intent** and desire **invading** Othello's mind, a metaphor for Europe's occupation of **foreign** land.

Shakespeare **emphasises** to his audience how conscious Othello is of his own race and **outsider** status. A lot

of the racist remarks towards him in the play come from Othello himself. Within the **tales** that he told Brabantio and Desdemona, he mentioned **"the cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / do grow beneath their shoulders,"** (1.3). This **perpetuates** the common perception of foreign lands as primitive, grotesque places. Othello casts judgement on these places by portraying them in this way, suggesting he feels inclined to **distance** himself from his past. In particular, the reference to **"cannibals that each other eat"** depicts these other cultures as violent, **lawless** places, with **"cannibalism"** as a form of civil war or betrayal. Shakespeare alludes to the belief that other cultures are **distinct** from Europe because of their barbarity; however, as the play ends with its characters committing their own



violent crimes, we are shown that there is little to **separate** 'high' and 'low' society - though Othello has been **conditioned** to believe otherwise.

When trying to process Desdemona's apparent **infidelity**, Othello concludes his own race is the cause: he 'Others' himself and is burdened by it. He wonders, "**haply for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation,**" (3.3) presenting race and culture as a **barrier** to successful relationships. Shakespeare suggests Othello's faith in love and in Desdemona is **surpassed** by his own self-loathing. When **mourning** Desdemona's 'lost' innocence, he says, "**Her name, that was as fresh / as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / as mine own face,**" (3.3). This simile shows that his race and her betrayal are **intrinsically** linked. In the eyes of Othello, Desdemona has taken a **fall** from grace, and now he views her as he views himself. He **aligns** his "**black**" appearance with sin and shame, while coupling her "**name**" with the "**fresh [...] face**" of a goddess, which implies a good **reputation** comes from being the 'right' race.

Othello's **paranoia** and jealousy concerning Desdemona's faithfulness are so potent because of his deprecating view of himself. Even before Iago has "**poured**" his **poison** into his ear, Othello's mind has been filled with the racist, reductive ideologies of Europe. Because of this, he views Desdemona's **betrayal** as inevitable.

Othello is the only character of colour in the play. This isolates him further as the **Other**, and singles him out as the only **scapegoat** for Venetian bigotry and xenophobia. Consider, also, where Shakespeare chooses to set the play. We open in Venice, a place known for its **splendour** and highly developed society. When Othello is summoned to **fight** someone else's war in Cyprus, the whole cast is displaced. No one is on familiar, 'home' ground, yet Othello's **Otherness** endures. This could show how **ubiquitous** the colonial ideology is: your Otherness is determined by the people you are surrounded by, and so is an **arbitrary** construct.

Primitive vs Civilised: The Power of Speech

The idea of what it means to be '**civilised**' or 'proper' is the focus of a lot of characters in the play, as people are concerned about **reputation** and **scandal**. In addition, Shakespeare exposes the **duplicity** and facades that inhabit every society, arguing that no society is more **evolved** or civil than another. In the context of *Othello*, these ideas intersect with race and culture: after all, your society/community and your culture come **hand in hand**. The belief held by the vast majority of the characters is that cultures and races other than their own are incapable of ever becoming **civilised**.

AO5: 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 Othello, she writes, "The **vehicle of love's civilising power is shown to be language**. [...] Love's civilising power is **displayed [...] in Othello's persuasive speech**, but it **also finds its diabolic double in Iago** who operates the same persuasive speech to an utterly destructive end. The **symmetry** between the two **lends a tragic irony to Othello's fate**. As it is his propensity to love that makes him jealous, it is his propensity to persuade others that, tragically, makes him all too persuadable himself."



Speech - being articulate and **well-spoken** - is the vessel of civilisation and high society in *Othello*. Wordsmithery, rhetoric, and communication are vital to **succeeding** in Venetian society; being able to get your way and present yourself well to others sets the 'civilised' apart from the 'primitive'. Othello's **self-doubt** manifests frequently as insecurities about his speech. When addressing the Senate, he states, "**Rude am I in speech / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,**" (1.3) as he worries he won't be able to **articulate** himself well. Shakespeare suggests **incompetence** at public speaking would make someone a lesser citizen. The juxtaposition of "**rude**" - connoting immorality and **immaturity** - and "**peace**" - connoting law and order, or an **utopia** - draws the cultural divide between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised'. Othello, the Moor, is "**rude**" and clumsy, thus destined to upset the "**peace**" of Venice. This semantic field of calmness and **delicacy** is repeated throughout the play, even as malice and violence take over. Through this contrast, Shakespeare demonstrates how the **manipulation** of language is used to cover a **multitude** of sins. It is the tool of the duplicitous, the con artist.

Othello, forever **conscious** of not belonging in high society, seeks out civility and **respectability**. He wants "**those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have**", and resents Desdemona for making him "**the fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow and moving finger at**". This link between **courtship** and **speech** could suggest Shakespeare uses language as a symbol for a man's virility.

Even when he is about to **murder** her, Othello objects to her accusations, saying "**thou dost stone my heart, / and mak'st me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice [...] an honourable murderer [...] / For naught I did in hate, but all in honour**" (5.2). Here, Shakespeare highlights the **duplicity** of language, as what is "**murder**" to some may be viewed as "**sacrifice**" by others. As Othello manipulates language to his own **gain**, to **preserve** his reputation and "**honour**", Shakespeare implies he cares more about appearing civilised to others than acting **civilised**. His actions have no consequence as long as history - the words that are recorded and remembered - preserves his **reputation**.

Surprisingly, it is Iago who brings Othello's attention to the **artifice** and hypocrisy of society. When Othello calls a **cuckolded** man "**a monster and a beast**", Iago points out, "**There's many a beast then in a populous city / and many a civil monster,**" (4.1). Firstly, Shakespeare is demonstrating how ill fortune befalls everyone, but society is designed to **cover** these **misfortunes** up and to act like all is well. Most importantly, though, this image of a "**city**" populated by "**civil monster[s]**" is symbolic of society's **double standards**. No one is truly respectable or civil; the most dangerous "**monster[s]**" are the ones hiding within the city walls. The paradox of "**civil monster**" conveys how **unrealistic** the idea of 'high society' is. Shakespeare exposes the **colonial ideology** that other cultures are primitive and **bestial**.

Othello **craves** civility and respectability because he believes this will help him fit in with his peers. Shakespeare reveals that society, behind the **facade**, is nothing short of bestial, and so Othello's mission is **doomed** from the outset. He has great faith in Venetian society as a figurehead for "**honour**" and morality. Desdemona's apparent **betrayal** is symbolic of society as a whole deceiving him. He becomes **disillusioned**. As he discovers there is no true decency to take comfort in, it makes sense that he regresses into a more **violent** state. His moral compass **skews** to mirror that of his society.



AO5: Jealousy, Racism, & Sexism

"[Othello and Desdemona's] defiance of the Venetian taboo [...] locks them from the outset into a defensive posture, which predisposes Othello to the insecurity and doubt that grip him so swiftly at Iago's prompting. But Othello's vulnerability as a black outsider, who unconsciously shares the white perception of his blackness, is inseparable from his thralldom to a patriarchal concept of masculinity and a misogynistic concept of marriage that are just as endemic as racism in Venetian culture, and that play an equally crucial role in sealing both Desdemona's fate and his own. Thus 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' that stalks any society in which the sexual desire of one human being is regarded as the property of another." - Kiernan Ryan

SYMBOLISM

Shakespeare uses the construct of Othello 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 **tortured** human psyche, and for the conflicts ingrained in society. As such, his character can be seen to occupy the boundary between the public and private spheres. Shakespeare uses the **drama genre** to his advantage here: though we are given glimpses into Othello's thoughts, everything we see is ultimately displayed in the **public sphere**. Therefore, you could argue that the stage format itself is symbolic of these conflicts. How much of what we see can be trusted as **genuine**? Is it possible for us to truly **understand** Othello's character, when everything is seen through the 'tinted glasses' of an audience?

Othello is a conduit for the **dogma** and faith systems of Venetian society. His views on war, women, and race align with his peers. You could argue that Othello takes these **principles** to the extreme in a bid to belong in society; however, the passion with which he voices his beliefs suggests he truly takes them as **gospel**. On the other hand, Shakespeare writes his character with small diversions from the prevailing culture. For example, his initial love and respect for his wife would be **unusual** at the time, and even prompts him to **assert** himself before his superiors. These 'cracks' in the facade present Othello as a possible rebel or insurgent; there is **promise** for him to break the mold. Whether he does, or whether he **surrenders** to the status quo, is largely what the play's **conflict** hinges on.

Additionally, Shakespeare employs **vivid**, consistent symbolism and **imagery** in his language to give Othello'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.



Binaries

The idea of **binaries** and duality extends across the play. Othello, for instance, is neither good nor bad: he has good qualities, but his bad ones show through more and more. This conflict of **true nature** is reflected in the imagery used to depict his **character**.

One such binary is that between light and dark, or white and black. Shakespeare explores the connotations this **imagery** holds: of race, of morality, of purity, of **knowledge**. When Othello first appears on stage, it is morning and he is carrying a **“torch” (1.2)**. This associates him with new beginnings, hope, and **revelation**; he is presented as a Jesus-like character who can lead others to goodness. This is developed by his measured, wise **demeanor**, telling Brabantio and his men to **“Keep up [their] bright swords, for the dew will rust them,” (1.2)**. This portrays him as an advocate for **nonviolence** and peace - another allusion to Jesus, the ‘light of the world’.

Compare this **honourable** entrance with the end of the play. As Othello goes to murder his wife, he emerges **“with a light”**; this direct parallel exposes how **deceiving** appearances are. He is a symbol of **light** once more, but this time intends to be violent. He goes on to outline his intentions to **“Put out the light, and then put out the light” (5.2)**. This signals his **departure** from the man he once was. Shakespeare suggests Othello’s **desire** for darkness reflects a desire for **ignorance** and secrecy, suggesting **evil** thrives off these things.

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 Othello to judge **morality**. They act as points of reference, helping him 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**.

At first, Othello views his wife as the epitome of **virtue**. He declares, **“If [Desdemona] be false, O then heaven mocks itself” (3.3)**, showing he thinks it is impossible for her to do wrong. As well as **aligning** Desdemona with pure moral good, this shows Othello’s view of Heaven is rooted in how he views her. At the same time, the **possibility** of **“heaven” to “mock itself”** challenges its **infallibility**, foreshadowing the chaos to come when Othello does believe his wife to be **“false”**. Shakespeare hints that the concept of Heaven cannot provide the **certainty** and **stability** attributed to it.

Later, Othello tells Iago, **“I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,”** highlighting the **irreconcilable** conflict he is experiencing. His belief system is falling apart. He reacts with confusion, then anger and violence, at the betrayal and the **ambiguity** it causes. He calls



Desdemona “**false as hell**” and argues to Emilia, “**She was false as water**” (5.2) to justify his own actions. This means that Desdemona, who was once a **paragon** of virtue, is now the exact **opposite**. Shakespeare suggests morality is **fluid** and changing because it is in the eye of the beholder.

Consummation

It is tradition, particularly within the **Christian faith**, that a marriage is ‘made complete’ through sexual intercourse. If a marriage hasn’t been **consummated**, then it can be annulled; if it has, then it can only be undone by the lengthy **procedure** of divorce - if divorce is even allowed.

Consummation was even more significant in Othello’s era, when a woman’s **virginity** was supposed to be taken by her husband. This would **stain** the sheets with her blood, which is why Desdemona’s “**wedding sheets**” are such an important symbol of her **loyalty**.

The consummation of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage is hotly **contested**, both by characters in the play and by critics reading it. When Desdemona asks Emilia to “**lay on [her] bed [her] wedding sheets**” (4.2), either she wishes to remind Othello that her **sexuality** already **belongs** to him, or to prove to him that she hasn’t slept with Cassio by finally consummating their marriage and **staining** the sheets. The latter theory is further supported by Desdemona asking for her sheets to be her funeral “**shroud**” (4.3), as it suggests they are still white and **unblemished**. Either way, what we as an audience do know is there are at least two occasions when Othello and Desdemona intend to consummate their marriage, only to be interrupted as Othello is needed to **resolve** a conflict.

This ‘**legal loophole**’ of consummation makes their marriage vulnerable to the **hatred** and discontent of their community. Brabantio could easily have their marriage **annulled**; Iago notes that she is “**sport for Jove**” (2.3), meaning she is as yet ‘unclaimed’ by Othello. Shakespeare shows how male **superiority** relies on the ownership of women’s bodies, sexually and legally. The issue of consummation contributes to Othello’s anxiety and **paranoia** for this reason. The way Shakespeare structures the play so that their attempts to consummate are repeatedly **thwarted** reflects how society is against their union; it is like fate itself is against them. That the interruptions come because Othello’s conflict **resolution** is required conveys how he is **exploited** by his peers; he has to pursue the interests of others, fight others’ wars, rather than cater to his own **interests**.

AO5: Critics & the Consummation

As mentioned, the issue of whether or not Othello and Desdemona manage to consummate their marriage has been debated by critics for decades. Pierre Janton speaks of “**Othello’s libidinous aggressivity, unable to express itself through the channel of his ‘weak function’ [...] for Desdemona lay still a virgin in death**”; T.G.A. Nelson and Charles Haines agree, claiming they fail to consummate their marriage “**because of the pressures placed on [Othello] during the couple’s first turbulent night in Cyprus**” and arguing this failure “**reduce[s] him to a state in which his judgement is fatally impaired**”. In contrast, Norman Nelson - for instance - calls these conclusions “**highly improbable**”.



Property, & The ‘Merchant’ of Venice

In the Jacobean era, Venice was a symbol for culture and **civilisation**, known for its thriving early **Capitalism**. It was a republic, where the wealthier merchant classes controlled the state, and dominated trade links with the East and North Africa; in comparison, England had only just begun trading overseas. As such, Shakespeare examines the influence of **trade and economy**

AO5: Ownership of Women

Kenneth Burke describes Othello's stake in Desdemona is "ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property of human affections, as fetishistically localised in the object of possession, while the possessor is himself possessed by his very engrossment".

In the essay "Proper" Men and "Fallen" Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in 'Othello', Ruth Vanita writes, "[Othello] 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".

on social relations, as a new type of social class emerges. In the context of **women's bodies** being the legal property of their fathers and husbands, the play can be read as a **dispute** between rival merchants for the **ownership** of Desdemona. At first, the dispute is between Othello and Brabantio: her father asks Othello "Where hast thou stowed my daughter?" (1.2) and claims "[she] is stol'n from me" (1.3). Shakespeare

portrays Desdemona as a **valuable possession** and Othello a thief. Later, the dispute is between Othello and all other men in the play - everyone becomes a **rival** in his eyes.

As Iago's accusations and **conspiracies** take hold, Othello's investment in Desdemona becomes solely physical. He is overly concerned with her body - how **pure** it is and who has **access** to it. He is dismayed by the "curse of marriage, that we can call these delicate creatures ours / and not their appetites!" (3.3). Shakespeare shows Othello **desiring** total control over Desdemona, the way one might have total **control** over property or a trade. Men require **constant assurance** that they are in charge. They need a guarantee, made physical by a woman's body. Therefore, women's free will is at **odds** with men's lust for power, putting the two in constant **conflict**.

The symbolism of women as **economic property** often intersects with the theme of cuckoldry. As women were viewed as their husbands' property, cuckoldry, in Jacobean society and within the culture of the play, would be a crime akin to theft. Women were **prizes** and trophies; sleeping with another man's wife was the ultimate **insult** because you were removing the visible symbol of his **virility**. Othello refers to Desdemona as the place "where [he has] garnered up [his] heart, where either [he] must live or bear no life, / The fountain from the which [his] current runs or else dries up," (4.2). The **physicality** of this imagery emphasises how he has invested himself in her body, the way a tradesman invests in a share of land. While the allusions to death - "or bear no life", "or else dries up" - may suggest his love for her sustains his life, it likely also refers to the **issue** of having an heir. Shakespeare implies Desdemona's value to Othello is dependent on her ability to carry his child and thus carry on his **legacy**. If she has slept with Cassio, Othello cannot be **certain** the child is his, thus threatening his manhood and his **societal power**.



Tokens of Love

A key part of the plot is Desdemona's **handkerchief**. Shakespeare uses it as a physical symbol for her love and loyalty to Othello. The symbol is most significant to Othello **himself**, who uses the handkerchief as an **indicator** of her honesty - more so than her actions and words.

When the handkerchief is **passed** around between characters - including Iago, Bianca, Emilia, and Cassio - Shakespeare shows how a woman's reputation could be sullied and manipulated by others; furthermore, it shows how a woman's **identity** wasn't her own to control. The handkerchief's travels symbolise her loss of autonomy. Othello, seeing the handkerchief in Cassio's hand, views it as proof of her infidelity: Shakespeare again demonstrates how a woman's worth is **reduced** to her physical form. If the handkerchief is a symbol of **adultery**, then it being in the possession of the whole cast at one point or another is as if Desdemona slept with them all. This could be interpreted to **reflect** the two extreme archetypes of female sexuality: the "**maiden**" and the "**whore**".

Another similar token is their "**wedding sheets**", which Desdemona hopes will convince Othello of her **innocence**. They represent her sacrifice for love and her **tainted** innocence, as she is ultimately killed in the same sheets. The failure of her "**sheets**" - the symbol of the handkerchief **transmuted** into a new, more tragic form - to defend her innocence hints at the fickleness of men. Othello is free to interpret these **tokens** as he sees fit in order to support his own narratives.

Shakespeare's use of these tokens, making them **pivotal** parts of the plot as well as symbols for the fate of Desdemona, serves to expose men's overdependence on **physicality**. He suggests they place too much **trust** in what they can see, which makes them liable to manipulation and exploitation. For example, Iago states, "**Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs holy writ,**" (3.3), a fact that he uses in his plots to great **success**. When Othello tells Desdemona, "**Our new heraldry is hands, not hearts,**" (3.4), this marks the end of his faith in his wife. This is an example of **dramatic irony**: as an audience, we know this new perspective makes Othello vulnerable to Iago's duplicity. On a wider scale, Shakespeare may be **criticising** society's materialism and the importance it places in physical wealth. He suggests a society that craves physical **proof** cannot enjoy the benefits of love, which is something **immaterial** and spiritual.

Animals, Beasts, & Monsters

Animalistic imagery is used by Shakespeare to evoke the **disgust** shared by some characters towards others, for example Iago and Brabantio's revulsion towards Othello. Conventionally, animalistic imagery is used to **ridicule** and cast judgement on someone's most base qualities, such as **laziness** or selfishness. When Othello is the subject of these insults and **taunts**, this



would suggest he is worthy of such judgement; however, these remarks are often unfounded or **racially** charged. Therefore, Shakespeare features this semantic field within characters' vocabulary to illustrate how certain members of society are **demeaned** or degraded by others.

Othello's humanity is **dismissed** because of his race: he is viewed as less important, and this is reflected by reducing him to mere beast. Furthermore, Shakespeare may be arguing that this **oppressive** treatment forces people towards their more **animalistic** qualities. There is a suggestion of a self-fulfilling prophecy: Othello is viewed as an animal by others and ultimately becomes more 'animal' himself. Shakespeare forces us to consider whether his **fate** is a result of this treatment, and whether his **crimes** only occur because he is conforming to what society expects of him.

Iago informs Brabantio of Othello and Desdemona's **elopement** by saying, "**An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe [...] You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse [...] Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs,**" (Act 1 Scene 1), opening the play with this demeaning, racially-charged language that sets the **tone** for the rest of the story. Iago's use of **evocative imagery**, implying that Brabantio's treasured daughter is being debased by Othello, is but one example of his manipulative powers; this highlights how potent the racism in Shakespeare's society was, and how **protective** men were of the women in their **charge**. He demonstrates how Othello's outsider identity carries a lot of weight, making Brabantio and others vulnerable to Iago's cunning. As an audience, we learn of Othello's "**Barbary**" identity before we learn anything about his character or **personality**.

The **dichotomy** invoked with "**an old black ram**" versus his "**white ewe**" portrays Desdemona as a helpless damsel, her innocence **corrupted** by Othello's existence. Furthermore, Shakespeare uses this **carnal** imagery to insinuate sexual activity, tying Othello's race, apparent **immorality**, and sexuality into one inseparable trait. The connotations that the "**ram**" and "**the beast**" hold with **Satan** enhance our view of Othello as a villain. Animals are symbols of vice, associated with Witches' familiars and **bad omens**; with the simple addition of the adjective "**black**", Shakespeare implies that Othello's race and his morality come hand in hand. When we actually meet him in the next scene, the revelation that he **possesses** countless good qualities comes as a shock because of Shakespeare's adoption of **situational irony** in this scene.

AO5: Society & Savagery

"As the Venetians gradually discover to their cost, **the Wild Man lurks not in his traditional haunts** of the desert, the forest, or the wilderness **but, more disconcertingly, at home**, right at the heart of civilisation itself. **The Venetian state is, in fact, less imperilled by the Other** - the Turkish barbarian against whom Othello is engaged to fight, or indeed by the Moor himself - **than it is by its own kind**, a super-subtle Venetian whose evil is the more invidious for being homegrown. [...] The savage exists in a state of nature that, in itself, is neither good nor bad." - Catherine Bates, Shakespeare's tragedies of love

"In times of **sociocultural stress**, when the need for positive self-definition asserts itself but no compelling criterion of self-identification appears, **it is always possible to say** something like: "**I may not know the precise content of my own felt humanity, but I am most certainly not like that**." - Hayden White

"Men call that barbarism which is not common to them [...] I am not sorry we note the barbarous horror of such an action, but grieved, that **prying so narrowly into their faults we are so blinded in ours**." - Montaigne, On Cannibals (1603)



Shakespeare strengthens the **bond** between Othello's character and the concept of **beastliness** when he tells Iago to “**exchange [him] for a baboon**” if he ever gives into jealousy (**Act 3 Scene 3**), followed by the declaration, “**A horned man's a monster and a beast**” (**Act 4 Scene 1**). The conceit of beasts and animals used by Othello and others to represent societal **outsiders** reinforces the hierarchy integrated into **communities**. Man is above beast in the Chain of Being: European Man is above all others. Comparing others to animals suggests they need to be tamed or **domesticated**. It isn't possible to civilise them; they can only be tolerated, bred to work for people, but never to *be* people themselves. Shakespeare suggests this belief is **destructive** for all who hold it, regardless of race. For Othello, he is conditioned to believe he can never overcome the apparent **curse** of his heritage. For society as a whole, this invented **divide** allows people to feel complacent and **self-righteous**. Their own self-importance blinds them to society's failings - to the “**civil monsters**”.

Witchcraft & the Supernatural

One way Shakespeare conveys Othello's apparent **Otherness** within Venetian society is through **conceits** of witchcraft and the occult. Witchcraft symbolises an end to the natural order of things, and so conveys the **threat** the characters feel Othello poses to their way of **living**.

A key example of this perspective is delivered by the character of Brabantio, who is outraged that an **outsider** could “**win**” his daughter. He declares, “**She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks,**” (**1.3**). Shakespeare implies Brabantio cannot believe Othello could **charm** Desdemona naturally, and so their love could only be the result of **foul play**. This imagery appeals to a **racist stereotype** that people of other races were involved with the occult. This belief partly stemmed from a fear of the unknown: these far flung countries and their inhabitants were **unknown**, and so they were equated with another unknown - witchcraft. It was also a way of vilifying them, as Brabantio is attempting to **vilify** Othello. Witchcraft was a horrendous sin to commit and was viewed as a transgression against God's will; Shakespeare parallels these **superstitions** with the way Othello and Desdemona's **marriage** goes against the Venetian status quo.

In the same way, Shakespeare uses images of the **occult** and the **exotic** to represent Othello's character. For instance, we are told of the handkerchief's origins: “**the worms were hallowed [...] dyed in mummy [...] conserved of maidens' hearts**” (**3.4**). The handkerchief itself is believed to be **enchanted**. These symbols surround Othello's character with a sense of **wonder** and power not possessed by his peers. His Otherness is **romanticised** and undeniable.



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 the **portrayal** of Othello's character. Firstly, other characters often refer to him as a "**Moor**" when insulting or accusing him - calling upon the term's history as a **derogatory** term. Secondly, Othello's Otherness and **anxieties** about belonging may allude to the historic uprooting of his culture. The Moors were displaced and their **cultural heritage** taken away, and Shakespeare conveys this through Othello's **uncertainty**, as well as by physically **relocating** him from his Venetian home to Cyprus.

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.

Another consequence of being a centre of **international trade** was that Venice was a **cosmopolitan** capital. Trade brought an influx of immigrants from across the country and the globe, leading to a constant **exchange** of material goods and culture. Venice was already renowned for its cosmopolitan spirit, and its **multi-cultural** atmosphere only grew through the 16th century. This extended to Venetian outposts and dominions, including Cyprus, where accounts told of Venetians, Cypriots, Greeks, Jews and Turks living together.

In Venice, foreigners were **tolerated** because of their economic and **military contributions** to the city. It was very common for the Venetian state to hire mercenaries to protect their assets, and these mercenaries often came **abroad**. Othello and Cassio are such mercenaries, bringing the two men together as outsiders hired to kill for a state that doesn't claim them as its own. However, as **tolerant** as Venice was, Venetian society was very **insular** when it came to marriage and lineage. Outsiders could come to the city but weren't allowed to 'contaminate' the pure Venetian line. This explains Brabantio's **dismay** at the news of Desdemona's marriage to Othello: **"the devil will make a grandsire of you" (Act 1 Scene 1)**.

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**.

Even in a community as **ethnically diverse** as Venice, Othello is still made to feel like an outsider. Moreover, he is a mercenary for the Venetian state: therefore, he is a symbol for this new type of **governance** and capitalism. He is hired to kill and to defend the state's wishes, even when they go **against** his own identity.

There is a strong relationship between **sex and race** in 'Othello', as Shakespeare portrays common **racial stereotypes** of the time. For example, Othello is called a **"lascivious Moor"** and **"an old black ram [who] / Is tuppung [Brabantio's] white ewe," (Act 1 Scene 1)**. It is the **consensus** that Othello must be lustful because he is black. **Ironically**, the plot centres around



Desdemona - his white wife - and her **sexuality**. The links between sex and race draw **inspiration** from Venetian culture and its status as a capital for **diversity** and for pleasure.

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.**"

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 Othello's own character. You could argue the conflict **parallels** the battle between Iago and Desdemona for Othello's trust and respect. Cyprus' 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'. Within the play, Othello's part in this battle cements his allegiance to his new **cultural identity**, that of Christianity and Europe. The Turks and the Moors were not the same group, but they



shared the same religion of Islam, both had **successful** empires to rival that of Christianity, and both suffered discrimination for this reason. Therefore, when Othello **defends** Cyprus from Turk rule, he is fighting against his **old religion** and, possibly, his own people, for (as discussed above) his identity as a 'Moor' doesn't guarantee his ethnicity. In this way, you can argue that the **internal conflict** we see in Othello regarding his race - "**Haply for I am black,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**) for instance - is made manifest in his role within the **Venetian military**.

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.

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 **violence** and hatred.

Furthermore, the warfare culture of Cyprus is distinct from the **warfare** culture of Venice. The island's **infamy** for chaos and turmoil possibly contributes to this. In Cyprus, traits that would traditionally be military virtues only **exacerbate** the fates of Othello and his wife. For example, quick decision making and an augmented sense of honour would have been **celebrated** in Venice, whereas Shakespeare shows how these qualities quicken Othello's demise and **undermine** the virtues he previously **possessed**.

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.

Othello is described as a "**Moor**", someone who is typically a **Muslim**. However, he has sworn allegiance to the Christian god by fighting for Venice in this Holy War. This act could symbolise all of his **self-hatred** and inner conflict, as Shakespeare implies Othello has been **conditioned** to despise his heritage, to renounce it like someone would renounce the Devil. While Othello's duty to the Venetian government and to his culture are **mutually exclusive**, the conflict isn't one we see Othello acknowledge often, if at all. Shakespeare may use this unspoken tension to signify the character's **repression**; alternatively, he presents the fact of Othello's self-sacrifice as a fact of life, something even Othello himself is **blind** to because it has been **normalised** so strongly by his peers.

The conflict that silently **embodies** Othello's character is finally put into words at the end of the play. Othello has murdered Desdemona, discovered Iago's **fraud**, and now pleads his case. His final words are "**Say besides that in Aleppo once / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by th' throat the circumcised dog / And smote him thus,**" before "**he stabs himself**" (Act 5 Scene 2). He is

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. [...] Although **Othello** has been chosen by the Venetian government to lead its army, 'the Moor' [...] remains an alien in Venice. **Like the liminal island of Cyprus**, he is **caught in the middle**, **neither European nor Turk** yet embodying both, and in his suicide he highlights his service as a Christian hero by killing the 'turbaned Turk' within." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*



asking that this act of **loyalty** to Venice, his new 'home', is how he wants to be remembered. The story is important to him. Thus, Shakespeare suggests that the **killing** of the "Turk" is a metaphor for religious penance: Othello is a **sinner** simply for being a "Moor", and he must prove his allegiance by killing a "Turk" in the name of Venice. Moors and Turks were both Muslim peoples and would face similar **discrimination** for this reason.

Shakespeare presents Othello's stabbing of the Turk as him **symbolically** killing a part of himself; this is reminiscent of an **exorcism** or similar religious ritual. The use of religious signifiers, such as "turbaned" and "circumcised", emphasise how religious conflict motivates him. These **identifiers** could as easily apply to him, showing how he has been taught to hate his own appearance. Shakespeare's choice to have these be Othello's **final words** is very significant because, even in death, Othello is desperate to be remembered as a friend of "the state". Yet, when he "stabs himself" the same way he "smote" the Turk, Shakespeare implies Othello has taken the place of the "malignant" Turk in this story. This could be interpreted with Desdemona taking the place of the "state", showing Othello finally **remembers** her **importance** to him. Alternatively, he may view his act as a **betrayal** of his duty to Venice, because he has caused such chaos and now intends to commit the most unsoldierly act of all: **suicide**.

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, he discovers what type of person he truly is, and it's not what he **expects**.

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.

This philosophy manifests in characters' reactions to Othello and Desdemona's **relationship**. Brabantio declares, **"For nature so preposterously to err, / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not,"** (1.3). This suggests their union goes so strongly against the divine order of things that only **spellwork** could make it possible. **"Witchcraft"** is also symbolic of heresy and heathenism, presenting their love as **ungodly** and so deserving of **punishment**. This is echoed as he continues, **"It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect / That will confess perfection so could err / Against all rules of nature"** (1.3). Here, Brabantio is claiming that saying their love is natural is **accusing** God Himself of making a mistake. He can't accept the suggestion that their love is as God intended: Shakespeare shows how religion is interpreted to **accommodate** one's own prejudices.

Chaos was the **undoing** of God's creation, marking a return to darkness and **nothingness** as the Chain of Being breaks down. Therefore, the tragedy that befalls Othello and Desdemona might be interpreted as **deserved** punishment for going against the 'natural' way of things, wherein Shakespeare himself believes their relationship is **doomed** from the start.

Alternatively, Othello tells Desdemona, **"When I love thee not, chaos is come again,"** (Act 3 Scene 3), presenting their love as the **remedy** to evil and disorder. This implies that the **violence** at the end of the play is the **"chaos"** Othello speaks of, because he has been manipulated into no longer loving her. In this **interpretation** of events, Shakespeare presents **"chaos"** as the product of **hatred** and discrimination. The **"chaos"** that befalls them is Iago's doing, not their own. Furthermore, he may be implying that their love for each other is what **protects** them from this **"chaos"**: when they are separated and lose faith in each other, this makes them **vulnerable** to Iago's plots.

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.

Jacobean society's view of jealousy is initially shared by Othello himself. He says, "**Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), suggesting he would be as good as a "**goat**" if he turned to jealous thoughts. This is an example of **situational irony** because Othello ultimately surrenders to his jealousy - in a matter of minutes, no less. This conceit of regression and a return to nature **utilised** by Shakespeare presents jealousy as a **psychological** and moral **reversal**. If we return to the theme of civilisation vs. primitive society, then his animalistic imagery aligns jealousy with the type of **barbaric**, chaotic thinking that defines a lack of civility. That such beastly behaviour is displayed by ostensibly respectable people suggests the primitive and barbaric are hidden within society. There isn't a strong divide between the **progressive** and the **primal**, despite what people want to believe.

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 Othello'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**.

It is these **masculine anxieties** that fuel the wrath of Othello's jealousy. He is angry because another man has humiliated him, forcing him to **"keep a corner in the thing [he] love[s] / For others' uses," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. His concern lies in **"the fountain from the which [his] current runs / Or else dries up," (Act 4 Scene 2)**, suggesting Desdemona is only important because she will give **life** to his children. The **"fountain"** symbolises his line of **descendants**. Shakespeare suggests cuckoldry is based in man's **narcissism**: he wants to live forever but, **failing** that, wants children so that his **image** might live forever. The importance placed on legitimate heirs, alongside the myth of passive female sexuality, is what makes Othello's jealousy so **dangerous**.

Within literature, art, and colloquial talk, a symbol of cuckolds was a **horned beast**. This image persists in Othello's dialogue, emphasising his preoccupation with his humiliation and fury at his wife. One notable example is when he tells Iago, **"A horned man's a monster and a beast," (Act 4 Scene 1)**. The **animalistic** semantic field Shakespeare uses with cuckoldry allows us to link it to societal beliefs concerning jealousy and **rational** thought. The symbolism of a **"horned man"** is closely **tied** to the idea of jealousy reducing man to beast, entwining jealousy and cuckoldry. After all, it is being cuckolded that makes Othello jealous. We see how cuckoldry leads, **inevitably** perhaps, to jealousy and all that comes with it.

Shakespeare conveys how Othello believes his cuckold **identity** strips him of his manhood, **relegating** him to a **"beast"**. In contrast, Shakespeare reveals that it is Othello's jealousy that makes him a **"beast"**, because his violence and fury define him as monstrous. Being a cuckold doesn't have to define him unless he lets it. The **double meaning** of **"monster"** brings in situational irony: Othello worries about losing his manhood, while Shakespeare shows he should really be worried about losing his humanity. Within the context of the **Chain of Being**, **association** with animals symbolises **amorality** and evil. When Othello calls a cuckold a **"monster"**, Shakespeare demonstrates that goodness - morality - has become conflated with **respectability** and reputation.

