

# AQA English Literature A-level

## Othello: Themes Proximity and Distance

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## Introduction

The theme of **proximity and distance** is expressed through the locations and setting of the play. *Othello*, like other **Jacobean** plays such as *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, is set in **Italy** - specifically in **Venice**. During the **Renaissance**, along with **intellectual and artistic revolutions**, Italy was commonly associated with **corruption, decadence, high culture, romance and power**. These are personified and manifested within **Iago's character**, who performs stereotypical **Italian vices**. Similarly, the **social-cultural hierarchies** in Italy were similar to that of England, allowing audiences to **relate** to certain conflicts within that setting. For example, the problematic marriage of Othello and Desdemona challenged a **status quo** that wasn't unique to Venice.

The idea of **proximity** can suggest various things – proximity in terms of **love, death, corruption and deception**. This means that characters are always close to such **temptations** and are tested to see whether they will succumb to them. On the contrary, proximity has **beneficial connotations** too, as Desdemona and Othello's **love** is informed by intimacy and closeness. As such, there are physical and psychological barriers that **permit** as well as **prohibit proximity as a tool**; Iago is the physical manifestation of this barrier, **personifying evil** that pulls them apart.

Distance and proximity are therefore **not mutually exclusive**. Instead, they interact to produce the play's outcomes. For example, emotional distance is the result of the **absence of loved ones**. This varies from character to character, as Emilia's relationship with her husband is already strained from the start and only **disintegrates** further as the play progresses. Cassio and Bianca's relationship is also **destabilised** due to Cassio's absence, leading to mistrust. The interplay of proximity and distance, as such, symbolises the **necessity of intimacy** in marriage or companionships in order to **maintain its stability**. Othello and Desdemona are the prime and tragic example of this, as the strain within their marriage causes it to break down.

However, the problem that arises when trying to analyse Desdemona and Othello's marriage is that the break down was **deliberate**. It is difficult to identify a **solid perpetrator**; at first glance, it may seem obvious that Iago is the main culprit, however Othello and Emilia play a certain part in **instigating their own isolation, and that of Desdemona**. This suggests that distance can be initiated deliberately, especially by others. This further implies the **centrality of language and gestures** in a relationship's stability, as they can cause **misunderstandings**.

## The War of Cyprus & Psychological Isolation

The **conflict** between the **Ottoman Turks and Venice** forms the backdrop of *Othello*. This was an ongoing **religious conflict**, as both empires had been fighting each other since the mid-fifteenth century. The main action of the play is situated in the midst of the **War of Cyprus**, which lasted from 1570 to 1573. This conflict began when Sultan Selim II, from the



Ottoman Empire, invaded Cyprus in 1570; **Cyprus was controlled by Venice since 1489**, but it soon became the **central focus** for the Ottoman expansion project. They were able to capture the island's capital, Nicosia, successfully. *Othello* takes place one year after this conquest by the Turks of Cyprus, known as the **Battle of Lepanto**. This is where Venetians succeeded in winning back control of Cyprus and reinstating **Christian values**.

#### Possible Essay Points

- The theme of proximity and distance drives the play's action, causing Othello's downfall.
- Desdemona and Othello's love is not stable, and being in an isolated place leads them to break apart.
- Distance, encouraged by Iago, is the main cause of conflict and drives characters towards sin.

Battles, war and the military are causes of **division and isolation**. Not only between nation states, but also within **social networks**. The involvement of many Venetian authorities in the war suggests the **entanglement** that can occur in a soldier's life. This is important because it is Othello's duties as a soldier that take him away to a foreign land. His role in the military gives him a **heightened sense of importance**, as with his **rank** comes greater responsibility and a necessity to **maintain his reputation**. This is especially reinforced by other characters in the play, as Montano (governor of Cyprus) claims: **'For I have served him, and the man commands / Like a full soldier'** (Act 2, Scene 1). This suggests that Othello is **well respected** by other soldiers and his comrades, making him **self-aware** of his status. As a result, the battlefield may not be foreign for Othello – rather, it is **doubts and marriage** that become foreign to him.

The **interplay of his occupation, distance and his marriage** is summed up in a monologue he delivers: **'I had been happy, if the general camp, / Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known'** (Act 3, Scene 3), which means that he would still love her if she slept with all the men in his camp with the only condition being that he did not know. He continues: **'Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content! / Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars, / That makes ambition virtue!'** (Act 3, Scene 3). This portrays Othello's **descent into madness**, as he himself recognises the effects of the doubts that will destroy his peace of mind. The military and soldier imagery he evokes suggests his **gradual distancing from his career**, as he says: **'Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!'** (Act 3, Scene 3). For Othello, if Desdemona is able to be unfaithful and not love him, he feels as though **he is inadequate**. To him, an inadequate soldier is no soldier at all; an inadequate man is no man at all. This monologue depicts a **frustrated** as well as a **contemptuous tone**, portraying how he has **mentally detached** himself from his occupation. Possibly, he **resents** Desdemona for denying him the pride and respect that comes from being in the military. Along with this, audiences note that his love for



Desdemona is **excessive**, shown through its ties to his military status, but his **inability to make his own decisions** without Iago's input leads him to kill her.

The **psychological distancing** instated by Othello can be seen in the way he treats Desdemona afterwards. This theme emerges in the form of **physical violence**, caused by mental **anxieties** about her sexuality and infidelity. The way he conducts himself in public has completely transformed, slowly losing the respect that his military life has gained him. This links back to him saying **'farewell'** to his occupation, as he is too jealous to focus on **fulfilling his soldierly duties**. For example, after hitting her in public, Lodovico exclaims: **'Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?' (Act 4, Scene 1)**.

Overall, **psychological isolation** plays a large part in Othello's downfall. This is complicated by his role as a soldier, which distances him further from his wife. This is crucial because his adventure stories as a soldier are what made Desdemona love him. As such, **the very thing that brought them closer** was also one of the reasons for their marriage becoming more **distant**.

### Proximity, Distance and Love

From the start of the play, Othello and Desdemona occupy the same space and share the same love for each other. This suggests the **importance of proximity** for establishing and maintaining a stable relationship and facilitating mutual trust. However, the **isolation and danger of war** creates distance between them, as Desdemona states: **'If I be left behind / A moth of peace, and he go to the war, / The rites for which I love him are bereft me' (Act 1, Scene 3)**. This conveys the **attachment** she has formed with him - both **emotional and sexual** - leading her to follow him to Cyprus.

The use of **Cyprus as a setting** is also important, because the dangers associated with the island symbolise the parallel problems that Desdemona and Othello will face. One reason is that the play inherently focuses on Othello and Desdemona's **marriage**, which is underlined by the problem of Othello trying to **balance his love and military duties**. For example, he notes that **'the tyrant custom . . . / Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down' (Act 1, Scene 3)**. In the play, although Venetian society is fearful of his **assimilation** through the courtship with Desdemona, they respect him due to his **military prowess**. Mercenary Moors were common during the Elizabethan era. It is these experiences of **exotic adventures** that wooed Desdemona in the first place, being awed by his military success. This is important because it justifies her **curiosity** when she follows Othello to Cyprus, tolerating her **'accommodation' (Act 1, Scene 3)** to travel with her husband. She was not threatened by the tempest or the Turks when crossing the sea, **legitimising** her as Othello's **'fair warrior' (Act 2, Scene 1)**: he is happier when she is close to him.

However, away from the comfort of their own home in a **dangerous territory**, Iago is able to develop his **evil plan** of destroying Othello. All the characters in the play are subject to **surveillance** once isolated on Cyprus - they **prey on each other** to cause conflicts. Just as



Cyprus is being **corrupted** by the Turks in an isolated place, Othello's **stable mentality** and **marriage is endangered**. While succeeding in his military task to ensure **peace** within that nation, he destroys his own wife and himself. It is **ironic** that he dies in a war zone for love, even though he was such a renowned soldier.

Desdemona's experience in Cyprus also **reinforces** her isolated status, as she is only known as Othello's wife, whereas Othello is familiar and at ease in this setting. For example, he is well known around Cyprus and knows people too: '**How does my old acquaintance of this isle? / Honey, you shall be well desired in Cyprus: / I have found great love amongst them**' (Act 2, Scene 1). This suggests he is **comfortable** in living in this strange country, while Desdemona is at a **disadvantage**. This means that she is more likely to feel **isolated** and **stay closer** to her husband, which becomes fatal at the end. Because of this, the **setting plays an important part in developing and reinforcing her sense of loneliness**. As the play progresses and Othello thinks of divorcing her, he feels sympathetic towards her as she will be completely alone: '**I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind / To prey at fortune**' (Act 3, Scene 3). This imagery shows that she would be at the hands of '**fortune**' if he let her go, conveying his overwhelming love for her (he is reluctant to abandon her this way) as well as a **desire** to let her **die alone**. This **conflicting** thought process portrays Othello's frustrations in being unable to let her go – it is almost like his own **fears of being abandoned** are battling his **heightened need to defend his honour**.

On the contrary, Desdemona uses language that references **economic dependence** when voicing her anxieties: '**If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love / Or that I do not yet, and ever did, / And ever will-though he do shake me off / To beggarly divorcement**' (Act 4, Scene 2). The term '**beggarly divorcement**' suggests that she may experience difficulty both financially and socially; to be a divorced woman of her status in a **tightly regulated social setting** would automatically make her an **outcast**. She considers other ways to live in society: '**...his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love. I cannot say "whore": It does abhor me now I speak the word; / To do the act that might the addition earn / Not the world's mass of vanity could make me**' (Act 4, Scene 2). She never blames Othello for treating her in such a bad way, **accepting her isolated stance** away from her husband as she is **hopeful** in their love. However, she is aware that she has to consider other options – being outcast economically or becoming a whore. She condemns this, knowing that she could never work in that position. These realisations along with her isolation make her adamant to win back her husband and deal with his jealous disposition.

The **prevalence of isolation and distance** allows **dialogues and monologues** in the play to become more pronounced. For example, Iago is able to speak his **soliloquies** frequently, Othello has **private conversations** which only the audience is able to observe, and Othello is also left alone after killing his wife. Furthermore, his isolation is also highlighted by his **overarching outsider status** due to his **physical markers** such as the colour of his skin. Iago is able to manipulate his victims by making them feel alone with their **obsessive thoughts** but this makes him **susceptible** to his own **obsessive revenge plans**, which leads to his subsequent death. Therefore, Shakespeare suggests that **self-isolation**, regardless of whether it was instigated by someone else or not, leads to **self-destruction**.



## Isolation & Distrust

Different characters in the play **contribute** to the isolation that other characters experience. This theme of isolation is prevalent through the way the characters speak of each other as well as through each other. This means that language and speech is highly important in the way the characters are **perceived** by others. In particular, **rumours** and **word of mouth** are seen to be the main factors of **causing distrust**, which ultimately results in isolation. Distrust becomes central in driving the play's action forward, causing the tragic aspects of the play to emerge and engulf the protagonist. The heightened level of distrust and isolation can be seen as the result of being in a foreign land. However, instead of strangers causing misfortunes, *Othello* explores how **characters closest to each other develop the greatest level of hatred** due to rumours.

Shakespeare's use of this isolation is also used in his other plays, such as *Macbeth*. Macbeth is persuaded to commit murders by his wife, who is one of his closest confidantes. However, as the play progresses, this persuasion develops into an obsessive ambition in which Macbeth becomes inherently isolated - both from **other individuals and reality**. Similarly, in *Othello*, Iago's relentless persuasion creates a **rift** between Othello and Desdemona – Othello's **intrusive doubts isolate him** from his marriage. Other characters also aid this process, causing isolation in different forms.

### A05 Tip – Lacan

Jacques Lacan proposed that every individual experiences self-alienation due to their perception of themselves. This causes a split in their psyche, which means that they feel isolated from reality. This is called the mirror stage, where the Self sees its double nature. This means that the Self becomes aware of its evil nature and thus marginalises itself in order to protect others. This self-isolation can be observed in Othello's character, where his awareness of his jealous disposition makes him steer away from all the other characters.

One of these characters is Emilia, who experiences a tragic end and also helps to bring about tragedy through her involvement with Iago's plan. Her isolation is brought about by the **abusive** nature of her own marriage, in which she experiences both psychological and physical distance from her husband. Her character is often only seen with Desdemona throughout the play; whenever she is with Iago, audiences only see a **coldness** expressed towards her. This makes her isolated both within as well as outside of her marriage. As a result of this, her **complicity** and **unquestioning obedience** to her husband is justified because she only wants to bridge this gap between them. Similarly, she is adhering to **social conventions of female submissiveness**, which ultimately isolates her even further.

Consequently, Iago's own jealousy towards Othello results in her isolation, as she is dragged into his plan. For example, Iago states: **'I do suspect the lusty Moor hath leaped into my seat' (Act 2, Scene 1)**. This attests to Iago's mistrust of his wife from the start of the play,



with him keeping her away from other men and psychologically **manipulating** her to stay isolated. This is important as it shapes the way she behaves at the start. Shakespeare depicts the effects of being isolated within a relationship, as Emilia's identity is seen to be solely dependent on Iago's words. Alternatively, her service towards Desdemona fills the void left by her husband, as their friendship serves as a **space of comfort and love** for both women. However, her inability to recognise her husband's evil nature and his plan leads to her being further isolated from the friendship as she says: **'I nothing but to please his fancy' (Act 3, Scene 3)**.

This is especially noticeable when Emilia **breaks the trust** with Desdemona by giving her husband the handkerchief. This action can be seen as distrustful and ignorant, as she fails to realise the detrimental effects of this on Desdemona and Othello. By acting on her feelings of isolation and the desire to be heard by her husband, Emilia unknowingly damns Desdemona. Emilia did have an opportunity to **redeem** herself through Desdemona, as she



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begins to form her own identity by passing her wisdom on to Desdemona's naïve character. This suggests that **her isolation from her husband may have had a healing effect on her development** because her true character emerges; she is more **assertive** and witty, which would not have been possible if she was close to Iago. Nevertheless, although she is able to form her identity, this comes at the cost of losing her friendship with Desdemona. It is too late for Emilia to undo Desdemona's isolation, which was the result of Iago's evil plans.

This is evident when Othello exclaims: **'Fetch me the handkerchief!' (Act 3, Scene 4)**. Emilia is in the room when Othello accuses Desdemona, yet she forgets that she had just given this handkerchief to Iago in the last scene. Her inability to speak up or remember may depict the effects of her isolation, because she feels as though she must stay out of such conversation. If she had spoken up, Desdemona may still have been alive at the end of the play. Shakespeare does this to both show how isolation functions as a form of **repression** within Emilia's character while also depicting **selective loyalty** of the characters. This moment makes the audience **question her intentions and sincerity** towards Desdemona, who experiences the consequences of Emilia's ignorance. Similarly, this highlights the gradual isolation that Desdemona experiences due to Othello's distrust of her chastity. She compares her sins to **'loves' (Act 5, Scene 2)** that she has for him but is still isolated from Othello, who is being driven by Iago's words. This suggests Desdemona appeals to their love for each other as a way of trying to pull Othello closer to her again. She is aware that he is deliberately isolating her and himself, trying to persuade him that her faithfulness comes



from her love for him. From previous scenes, the audience is aware that Othello has an excessive amount of love for his wife – this makes him want to murder her even more so that she cannot commit infidelity again. His psychological doubt isolates him from his love for her, making him **forget** the actions Desdemona took **in order to be with him**.

Both in Desdemona and Emilia's cases, their husbands' **fatal flaws** isolate them. Both women die because of distrust; Emilia is another victim of Iago's manipulation and jealousy, while Othello's **victimhood** is compromised due to his own jealousy and doubt. This portrays **the dangers of patriarchal social structures that drive the way men perceive women**. The distrust that arises from word of mouth or assumptions have physical effects on women, because their actions are **inextricably connected to male reputation and honour**. If a woman is **perceived** to be **'too close'** to someone she shouldn't be close to, an **executive decision** is made to **distance** her from the community.

### AO3 Tip – Violence and jealousy

Marital violence was common in Elizabethan England. It was not condemned by institutions or society – in fact, what we consider abuse today was considered 'correction' then. Violence was regarded as punishment and was both socially sanctioned and legally allowed. Othello's violence towards Desdemona is not questioned – it is his jealous disposition rather than the violence that shocks everyone, as it goes against his honour. His violence is legitimised by the idea that was circulating at the time (and enshrined in law): that women were men's possessions. Victims of marital violence were often seen to blame themselves, suggesting how deeply internalised such views were.

*Do you think such violence is still justified today? How does Desdemona demonstrate this passivity in Act 5?*

Overall, Shakespeare illustrates that the **gradual build-up of distrust leads to tragedy** for most characters. All three characters – Emilia, Desdemona and Othello – are victims of a system that **perpetually isolates them**. For Desdemona and Emilia, **patriarchal power structures manifested by their husbands** ultimately lead to their inevitable deaths. In particular, Iago's **obsession with control and inherent misogyny** results in the subsequent isolation of all characters, as well as himself. Although the other characters perceive the isolation negatively, Iago is seen to **embrace** it. His plan, which ultimately excludes Roderigo unless he is needed, is **selfish**. This means that the plan **necessitates Iago to become an outsider** in order to manipulate the action from both within and outside of social relationships. This is especially noticeable by the amount of times Iago speaks in the play – compared to our protagonist, Iago has 1,097 lines whereas Othello only has 274 lines. The overwhelming number of times that Iago speaks depicts his **dominance** within the play, making him both a great villain and a disliked character for the audience, even while we are also encouraged to empathise or even root for him.

In addition, Othello's isolation comes from being placed within a **racist sphere**, where discrimination against him comes naturally. This oppression is **epitomised** in the character of Iago. Othello is already isolated due to his race and this is apparent in his **own perception** of his darker skin. His self-awareness is what allows Iago to **exploit such**





**insecurities**, isolating him from his wife and position as a soldier. As such, Othello's unwarranted distrust leads to most of the tragedy in the play, and it remains **open to interpretation** whether Iago alone is to blame for Othello's murderous actions. Nevertheless, Shakespeare presents how distrust leads to isolation through most of the characters.

## Isolation & Excessive Love

Othello's character is completely different from other **Shakespearean heroes**. Other jealous husbands such as Claudio or Master Ford do not offer the depth with which Othello's character is developed. He is seen as a **sympathetic** character to the audience – however, his love for Desdemona is much deeper and intense than that displayed by Shakespeare's other **protagonists**. In particular, Othello's race (a typically controversial aspect for Elizabethan audiences) actually makes him more likeable. Audiences as well as the characters in the play **admire his demeanour**, becoming one of Shakespeare's most beloved characters.

Despite this, his excessive love for Desdemona and his race inevitably isolate his wife, destroying their marriage. Othello's race is another factor that isolates Desdemona from the other wives and places her at the **mercy** of her husband completely. This suggests that his blackness **does not reduce his power as a husband**. The discrimination that he experiences socially outcasts his wife, enabling them to develop a relationship that goes **beyond the husband/wife dynamic**. This justifies the strength of his love for her, as they **built their own small world** for themselves. This is reinforced when he kills her in order to 'save' her.

Furthermore, the husbands in Shakespeare's plays **do not see the wrong in their actions** until proven otherwise. Othello's excessive love is interlinked with this idea of **ocular proof**, where only solid evidence will convince him to turn against his wife. In *Othello*, the ending is not inevitable; the interference of others only occurs destructively, making the process of becoming isolated easier and thus more dangerous. Desdemona is **looked down upon** for marrying Othello, just as Emilia's **mental unfaithfulness** to her husband **secures** her **ostracisation**.

## Isolation & Monstrosity

Isolation can be seen as an **instigator** as well as a **consequence**. It can be a **product of monstrosity**; this means that characters that are **marginalised** experience inherent isolation. This suggests isolation is caused by other **societal factors**. On the contrary, it can also be an instigator, meaning that **initial isolation leads** to characters becoming the **Other** or **monstrous**. In *Othello*, the protagonist explores both of these options. Othello is already isolated due to his race, experiencing racial marginalisation. This means that he will always remain the Other, **regardless** of his military success or the respect he gains from Venetian society. This implies isolation makes the emergence of his monstrosity **inevitable**. Similarly,



he becomes the Other by being targeted by Iago and thus becoming isolated. This means that his initial monstrosity leads to him becoming isolated, evident in the way he distances himself from Desdemona after descending into a jealous rage.

Othello's Otherness and the inevitability of his isolation is developed by Maria Perez Cuervo who says that **'societies create their own concepts of self and other'**. Cuervo implies that it is **external influences that create Otherness**. For example, Iago may be seen as a **microcosm** for the influences of wider society that toxically affect individuals that are viewed to be different. His insistence that Desdemona is being unfaithful portrays the way he is able to exploit Othello's Otherness, **drawing out his insecurities about his race to further isolate him**. This heightened sense of isolation that Othello is subject to strengthens the aggressive actions he performs towards his wife. This is out of his control, regardless of how he tries to change how his Otherness is perceived – it will always be exotic and different to those around him, **pre-determining him** in an isolated position. For example, Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin suggest that Othello's **'otherness preconditions him, locating him within powerful narratives of difference. Constructions of the human in peripheral space were enmeshed in discourses based on fear of difference, and impulses to dominate'**. As such, he is **unable to divert the attention** of Venetians away from his race, which determines the way he is regarded and treated by Iago. Language such as **'defective' (Act 2, Scene 1)** **reinforces** this. Therefore, Shakespeare presents the way initial isolation can bring about monstrosity even more.

Furthermore, by **succumbing** to this monstrosity, Othello **compromises his morality**. This means that by giving into Iago's temptations, he ultimately gives up his humanity and his goodness. Such **moral corruption** leads to further isolation. Othello's honourable demeanour is corrupted, making all of his characteristics appear monstrous. Shakespeare shows the way **morality, monstrosity and isolation become intertwined to cause the downfall of the hero**. Othello becomes trapped within a **reciprocal dynamic** where he is always the Other and isolated. Isolation, as such, plays a significant role in the development and downfall of his character.

## Overview

Overall, proximity and distance emerge throughout the play in direct and abstract ways. This theme links to other themes such as **love, marriage and betrayal**. Isolation and distance is first depicted when the characters are gathered in Cyprus. This is a **foreign, exotic place** that leaves the characters **vulnerable towards psychological or physical torment**. Furthermore, this isolation enables Iago's revenge plan to unfold because characters rely on each other for truthful communication. This means that Iago **weaponises this isolation** in order to **poison the communication networks**, by lying and **fabricating** Desdemona's unfaithfulness to cause Othello's descent into jealousy. This leads to the emergence of Othello's monstrosity or moral decline, which transforms his behaviour towards his wife drastically. As a result, isolation and distance **harbour distrust**. Throughout the play, this is very significant because it breaks down most of the characters' relationships.



Contrastingly, the theme of proximity shows the **possibility of healing** relationships that have become distant. As Othello and Desdemona's relationship is informed by their closeness, it is all the more shocking when they drift apart. However, the distancing of some characters leads to the proximity of others. For example, Emilia and Desdemona develop a closer friendship after being **alienated** by their husbands. As a result, Shakespeare depicts an **interplay between proximity and distance**.

Additionally, psychological isolation plays a large part in Othello's **characterisation**. This is because, through Iago's words, he distances himself from his loved ones. By **retreating into his own doubts**, Othello ultimately brings Desdemona's alleged infidelity to life. This means that his isolated stance from her allows him to question her motives more, confirming his doubts as legitimate. Shakespeare highlights the significance of this theme through the way characters change in the play, illustrating how suffocating it can be to be both isolated and too close to each other.

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