



Othello

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

William Shakespeare

YEARS WRITTEN

1603–04

GENRE

Tragedy

ABOUT THE TITLE

The original title of the play, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, creates tension between Othello's ethnicity as a Moor and his residence in the predominantly white Venice. The

shortened version of the title, *Othello*, draws attention only to the play's tragic hero.

🕒 In Context

Venice and the Ottoman Empire

The play is set in the 16th century, at a time when Venice was in constant conflict with the Ottoman Empire over control of the Adriatic Sea. The Ottomans are the "Turks" of the play, and the Ottoman Empire became what is modern-day Turkey. Cyprus, a small island off the coast of Greece, was a profitable location for trade and had been under the influence of Venice since Caterina Cornaro, a Venetian noblewoman, married James II, the king of Cyprus, in the late 1400s. After the death of James II, she became ruler of the island but eventually abdicated, allowing Venice full control of Cyprus. The island was strategically placed for the Venetian military to launch attacks against the Ottomans. In the play, Othello's military successes on behalf of Venice are set within this conflict—even though by Shakespeare's time, Cyprus was already part of the Ottoman Empire, which had taken it in a 1570 military action.

Shakespeare's Treatment of Race

Othello's identity as a Moor may link him with Arab and Berber North Africans who lived in medieval Spain and remained there after the fall of Granada in 1492, which ended Muslim rule on the Iberian peninsula, until they were later forced to leave in

1609. Iago's reference to Othello as a "Barbary horse" may also link Othello with the Barbary people of North Africa. There is evidence that an ambassador from Barbary visited London in 1600 to advocate for an alliance against Spain, and Shakespeare may have been familiar with the event. At the time, it was noted that the ambassador and his attendants practiced religious rites that contrasted with Christianity and were likely Muslim. Alternatively, Shakespeare may use the term *Moor* to refer to a black African who was not necessarily from Spanish or North African Muslim descent. Yet, Queen Elizabeth, in 1601, referred to Spanish Moors when she tried to ban them from Britain.

Regardless of the specifics of Othello's ethnic background, he is set apart as something other in the mostly white European culture in which he resides. While his character bridges this divide with European traits such as Christianity, military success against a Muslim empire, and nobility, Othello's differences make him vulnerable to Iago's manipulations, which are based on racial tensions. Iago plays on cultural fears regarding racial mixing when he characterizes for Brabantio the marriage between Othello and Desdemona in black-and-white sexual terms: "an old black ram/is tugging your white ewe." As both Othello's and Desdemona's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are called into question, the motif of blackness recurs. Othello's jealousy is thought to be influenced by black bile, and Desdemona's reputation becomes "begrimed and black." On the surface, it seems that blackness is to blame for the loss of innocence or purity within Othello and Desdemona's relationship. Yet, in a twist on the motif, Desdemona, in reality, is innocent of any crime, and the blackness of Othello's jealousy comes not from his ethnicity but from the black manipulations of a white character, Iago.

Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*

The main source for Shakespeare's *Othello* is Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, which tells the story of a valiant and handsome Moor living in Venice who falls in love with a virtuous and beautiful lady, Desdemona. She returns his love in kind. They marry and are happy together, when the Moor is given a military appointment that will either take him far from Desdemona or require she embark with him on the dangerous voyage across the sea. Desdemona agrees to accompany him to his new post. A "wicked Ensign" also falls in love with Desdemona and plots to make the Moor believe she is

unfaithful. His plan is successful, and he and the Moor conspire together to kill Desdemona. The Ensign carries out the killing, but later claims the Moor confessed to killing his wife. The Moor is arrested and tortured. Later, the Ensign is also tortured, and he dies.

Shakespeare would have read this story in the original Italian or in French translation, as it had not been translated into English at the time *Othello* was written. A few differences are quite significant. In the original story, neither the Ensign nor the Moor have names. Shakespeare makes them more personal: Iago and Othello. In the original, it is the Ensign who kills Desdemona with the Moor's consent, yet Shakespeare chose to have Othello do this deed, with Iago as manipulator.

Author Biography

Neither the exact birth or death dates of William Shakespeare are known. However, he was probably born around April 23, 1564, as the third child of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. This date is based on a record of his baptism, which occurred on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, and the fact that baptisms were customarily done three days from birth. Very little information is known about Shakespeare's childhood or early adulthood, outside of the marriages, baptisms, and burials recorded by Holy Trinity Church. He married Anne Hathaway, eight years older than Shakespeare and pregnant with his child, when he was 18. A daughter, Susanna, was born to the couple on May 26, 1583, a few months later. Twins—Judith and Hamnet—were born a few years after; Hamnet died in childhood.

In approximately 1588, Shakespeare moved to London to pursue a career in the theater. As Shakespeare became known as an actor and playwright, references to him outside of church records can be found. The Lord Chamberlain's Men's records indicate that by 1594 Shakespeare was a managing partner in the troupe, as well as an actor and playwright. The fact that some of his plays were actually recorded and sold as popular literature, even during his lifetime, attests to the fact his work was unusually popular. He owned shares in the London's Globe Theater, which was built in 1599.

Shakespeare's main source for the story of *Othello* was Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio's 1565 work, the *Hecatommithi*. The earliest records suggest *Othello* was first performed in 1604 under the title *The Moor of Venice*; it was popular throughout

the 1600s and remained so well into the 18th century. Early versions of the play include the sworn oaths *S'blood* ("God's blood") and *Zounds* ("God's wounds"), but these were later removed in accordance with an act of Parliament in 1606 that made such uses of God's name in plays illegal. In 1660, actress Margaret Hughes, playing Desdemona, became the first woman to perform on the English stage. Before this time, all roles—male and female—were performed by men and boys.

Shakespeare retired in 1611, and he died a few years later in 1616 at age 52—likely on his birthday, although the official records of Holy Trinity Church only give his burial date, April 25.

Characters

Othello

As a tragic hero, Othello is unusual in that he is relatively passive and reactionary. His action does not drive the plot. He is known as a man of action—a military leader, and a successful one. His eloquent words and valiant actions in battle have given him a reputation. But in the play, he does not take the most active role in his own character arc. Iago, in contrast, manipulates behind the scenes from the first moments of the play. Othello wins Desdemona by his stories of the adventures he's experienced, and he seems to be more in love with the confidence she gives him by her adoration than with the woman herself. He is not present when the others arrive at Cyprus, and he arrives at the celebration just in time to discipline Cassio. He is more acted upon than actor. In one reading of the play, Iago can be characterized as a Satan figure, and this, along with the "temptation" that takes place in the castle gardens on Cyprus, puts Othello in the role of Adam.

Iago

Iago declares early on in the play, "I am not what I am." And indeed, the audience might well leave the play wondering, Who is Iago? What is his motivation for causing such utter destruction in the lives of arguably innocent people? Is he angry at being passed up for a promotion? Does he think Emilia has been sleeping with Othello? These petty motivations

seem inadequate in light of the absolute thoroughness with which Iago manipulates the people around him. He is excellent at immediately assessing a person's strengths and how these strengths can be turned into weaknesses. He exploits Roderigo's desire for Desdemona and his generous hand with money. He leverages Cassio's desire to please Othello. He turns Desdemona's kindness to Cassio against both herself and Othello. And he keys in on Othello's love for Desdemona as the one weak point in Othello's armor. If Othello is an Adam, Iago is the snake in the garden: Satan himself.

Desdemona

Desdemona is a woman of strength and purpose. She falls in love with Othello and acts on her own to elope with him, eschewing social conventions. She argues convincingly to go with him on the military mission to Cyprus. And she is unwavering in her kindness to Cassio. Through no fault of her own, her independent spirit and goodness are used against her by Iago in his plot to ruin Othello. Yet her actions on her deathbed are curious. She seems to take the blame for her own death, and seems quite passive as she is murdered. These contradictions may suggest Desdemona's independent spirit is at odds with the submissive obedience required of her by society.

Cassio

Michael Cassio has recently been appointed as Othello's second in command, much to the chagrin of Iago: "that never set a squadron in the field,/Nor the division of a battle knows." Cassio's flaws open him up to exploitation by Iago, who seeks revenge against Cassio for this appointment. Cassio is more brains than brawn, and he doesn't hold his alcohol well. He's also a flirt, and he tends to characterize the women in his life as Madonnas (Desdemona) or whores (girlfriend Bianca).

Roderigo

In love with Desdemona, Roderigo is wealthy and foolish. He provides a steady flow of income to Iago, who has promised to help Roderigo woo Desdemona. His desperation makes him susceptible to Iago's manipulations, and Iago convinces Roderigo to help kill Cassio, who has been positioned by Iago

as a rival suitor for Desdemona. In the end, Iago kills Roderigo.

Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Othello	Othello is a Moor who has become a general in the Venetian army.
Iago	Iago is Othello's ensign, or third in command, and the villain of the play.
Desdemona	Desdemona is Othello's beautiful and kind wife, through whom Iago plans to ruin Othello.
Cassio	Michael Cassio is Othello's young but devoted second in command.
Roderigo	Roderigo is a foolish young gentleman who is paying Iago to help him woo Desdemona.
Bianca	Bianca is a Venetian courtesan who has a special relationship with Cassio.
Brabantio	Brabantio is Desdemona's volatile and paternalistic father.
Clown	The Clown is a servant of Othello's and a source of humor in an otherwise dark and violent play.
Duke of Venice	The ruler of Venice, the Duke of Venice summons Othello for military service in Cyprus, and takes Othello's side in the disagreement between Othello and Brabantio.
Emilia	Emilia is Iago's wife, but she is also a woman with progressive opinions about the ways men and women interact and the double standards by which they are judged.
The gentlemen of Cyprus	The gentlemen of Cyprus discuss the major storm at sea that destroys the Turkish fleet.
Graziano	Graziano is a Venetian gentleman related to Brabantio who accompanies Lodovico.

Lodovico is a Venetian gentleman related to Brabantio who carries messages from Venice to Cyprus.

Montano is in charge of Cyprus before Othello arrives.

Plot Summary

The play is set in Venice in the mid-1500s, during a time of conflict between the Turks and Venetians. As the play begins, Turkey is preparing for war against Venice and is likely to attack either the Venetian island of Cyprus or Rhodes. Othello, a Moor from North Africa and a successful Venetian general, has eloped with a young Venetian noblewoman named Desdemona.

When the news gets out, Roderigo, a gentleman who is in love with Desdemona, complains to Iago, Othello's ensign (third in command to Othello), about the secret marriage. Iago had agreed to help Roderigo court and win Desdemona, but only if Roderigo kept him supplied with money. Iago is irritated at Othello for promoting another man to lieutenant (second in command), Cassio, instead of himself. Iago and Roderigo go together to Brabantio's home and reveal that Brabantio's daughter Desdemona has gone away secretly with Othello. Iago leaves before his identity is known and goes back to Othello. Soon Cassio joins them, bringing a message from the Duke of Venice that Othello is required to turn back the Turkish attack on Cyprus. Othello leaves to go to the Duke, and Brabantio follows along, hoping to confront Othello about Desdemona.

The Duke, however, takes Othello's side in the matter, partially because Othello is so earnest in his professions of love for Desdemona and his description of how they had fallen in love. Desdemona arrives and supports Othello's argument, and Brabantio is forced to accept the marriage. Othello makes arrangements to leave right away for Cyprus, and Desdemona plans to accompany him.

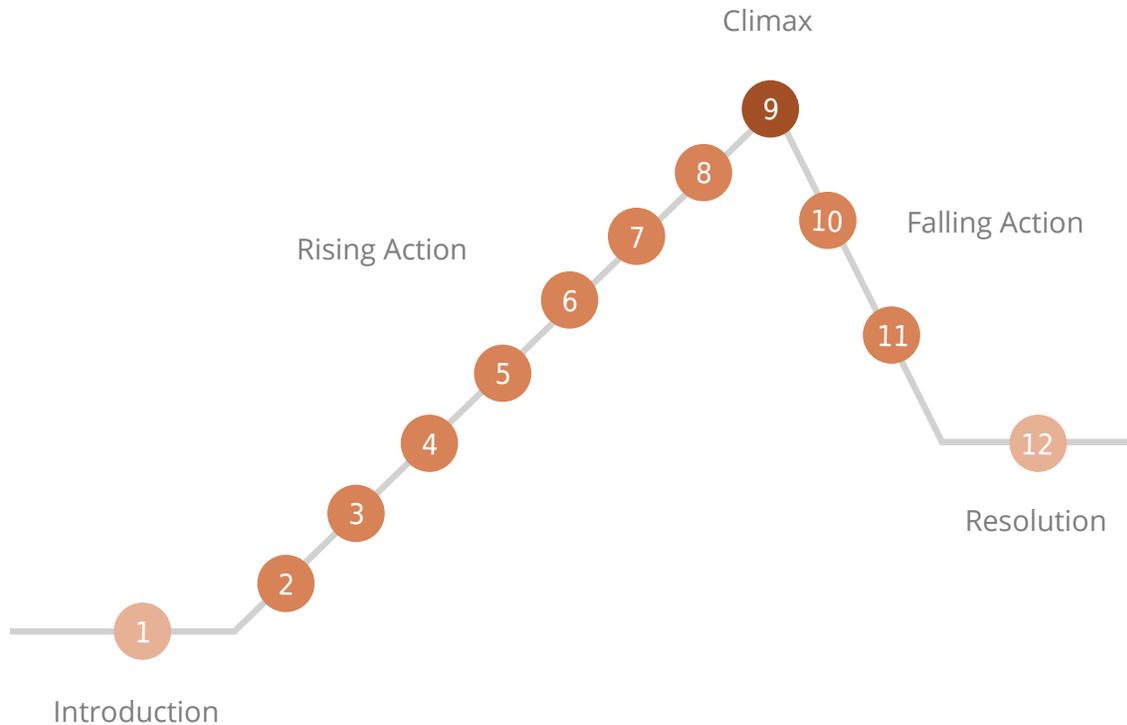
The next day, Desdemona, Iago and his wife, Emilia, Roderigo, and Cassio arrive on Cyprus before Othello. Cassio holds Desdemona's hand for a moment in greeting, and this small gesture gives Iago an idea of how to get back at both Cassio and Othello. Then Othello arrives. Miraculously, the Turkish

ships on their way to invade Cyprus have been destroyed by a storm, so they celebrate this turn of events at a banquet that evening. At the celebration, Iago encourages Cassio to get drunk and then encourages Roderigo to fight Cassio. Montano tries to break up the fight, and Cassio ends up stabbing him in the leg. When Othello finds out, he takes away Cassio's high rank. Iago tells Cassio he should appeal to Desdemona, who can go to Othello on Cassio's behalf. When Cassio leaves, Iago reveals to the audience he plans to make Othello think Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair. As Cassio approaches Desdemona, and Desdemona asks Othello to reconsider Cassio's case, Iago plants the seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind.

When Desdemona accidentally drops her handkerchief, Emilia picks it up and gives it to her husband. Iago drops the handkerchief in Cassio's room, and Cassio finds it. Later, Iago stages a scene with Cassio meant to convince Othello, observing from a hidden place just out of earshot, that Cassio is sleeping with Desdemona. As a result, Othello becomes wild with jealousy.

As Iago orchestrates another fight between Cassio and Roderigo, and ends up killing Roderigo, Othello plans Desdemona's death. That night, he smothers Desdemona in her bed. Emilia reveals that she was the one who picked up the handkerchief and gave it to Iago, and Othello realizes he has been manipulated. He tries to kill Iago, but Iago kills Emilia instead. Then Othello kills himself, and Iago is arrested.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Desdemona elopes with Othello, a Moor and Venetian general.

Rising Action

2. Desdemona goes with Othello and his soldiers to Cyprus.
3. Iago plots to convince Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful.
4. Iago gets Cassio drunk. Cassio is demoted.
5. Cassio asks Desdemona to speak to Othello; she agrees.
6. Desdemona loses a handkerchief given to her by Othello.
7. Emilia finds the handkerchief and gives it to Iago.

8. Iago uses the handkerchief to show Desdemona's infidelity.

Climax

9. Othello commits to killing Desdemona.

Falling Action

10. Othello kills Desdemona.
11. Emilia betrays Iago, who kills her; Othello kills himself.

Resolution

12. Iago is arrested.

Timeline of Events

Early morning

Othello is summoned by the Duke of Venice.

That evening

Cassio gets drunk at the banquet.

During the day

Desdemona's handkerchief is lost, found, and given to Iago.

After dark

Roderigo attacks Cassio; Iago wounds Cassio; Iago kills Roderigo.

Night

Iago and Roderigo meet and commiserate about Othello.

That day

Othello, his soldiers, and Desdemona go to Cyprus.

Next morning

Cassio asks Desdemona to appeal to Othello on his behalf.

Later that day

Othello questions Desdemona about the handkerchief.

That night

Othello kills Desdemona; Iago kills Emilia; Othello commits suicide.

🔍 Scene Summaries

Shakespeare wrote *Othello* in five acts, further divided into scenes. This study guide provides summary and analysis for each scene.

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

The play opens on a street in Venice in the latter half of the 16th century; Roderigo is arguing with Iago, an ensign (or ancient, the third in command) under Othello's command. Roderigo is a silly young gentleman who has been trying unsuccessfully to court Desdemona. Iago has been taking Roderigo's money and promising him help to win over Desdemona (and her father). But Roderigo has just heard of the elopement Desdemona and Othello, and he is outraged. Iago plays along with the outrage, saying he hates the "Moor" (Othello) for promoting Cassio to lieutenant ahead of him. Iago convinces Roderigo he can still win Desdemona, if he keeps letting Iago help.

Iago suggests to Roderigo that they should work together to get back at Othello. They first go to the home of Desdemona's father, Brabantio, and from the darkness outside, crudely describe how Othello has made away with Desdemona, enraging Brabantio. Iago leaves before his identity can be revealed, because he wants to keep up appearances that he is Othello's friend. Brabantio confirms that Desdemona has run away and insists on going with Roderigo to find her and Othello.

Analysis

The first scene establishes the situation and setting of the play, as well as the character that will drive the action of the play. An event previous to the first scene is very important to the situation, or context, of the plot: Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, has eloped with a "Moor" who has not yet been named aloud (but is Othello of the title). This inciting event sets into motion the rest of the play, as Othello's relationship with Desdemona becomes the focus of the drama.

Setting is very important in this play, especially because it begins with an expansive setting (as characters move easily from place to place) and ends in a very constricted one. The play begins outdoors, in the public sphere: on a street in Venice.

Finally, right away in the play the audience meets Iago, one of Shakespeare's most famous villains. He tells the audience what he is up to: "I am not what I am," he says, drawing upon the biblical description God gives himself in the book of Exodus (Exodus 3:14), "I am who I am" (New Revised Standard version). Adding *not* to this formula suggests Iago is a Satan figure, and so he proves to be. Iago never identifies himself to Brabantio. As his identity is concealed, his true self is concealed.

Iago's method of villainy is also revealed in this scene. He appeals to different people by pretending to have something in common with them, or by framing himself as a trusted friend, helper, and confidante. He finds what motivates them—what drives them to act—and leverages it for his own ends. He commiserates with Roderigo's sense of outrage and envy, by explaining that he, too, has been wronged by Othello. He appeals to Brabantio's paternalism and racial prejudice, comparing Othello to an animal and using the crudest language to cause Brabantio to visualize Othello and Desdemona having sex: "an old black ram/is tugging your white ewe" and "your daughter and the Moor are (now) making the beast with/two backs." Iago will continue to show a flair for quickly identifying what will cause a person to take the action he desires.

Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Iago, acting as a "friend" to Othello, warns him an angry Brabantio is on his way. However, Cassio arrives with a message from the Duke of Venice: Othello must go and fight off a Turkish invasion. Before Othello can leave, Brabantio arrives and accuses Othello of using witchcraft on his daughter. Brabantio then follows Othello and the others to see the Duke, hoping to air his grievance there.

Analysis

Iago's nature as a master manipulator is further demonstrated as he tries to manipulate Othello into getting angry at Roderigo, and as he acts like Othello's friend just after insulting him in such crude terms at Brabantio's. Othello, at this point, is full of confidence and doesn't take the bait. He's confident he performed admirably in the military, and his love for Desdemona is real, so he doesn't fear Brabantio. As if to validate Othello's confidence, Cassio arrives with his summons from the Duke of Venice. This scene sets up Othello as a truly important leader and an admirable military man.

Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

The Duke of Venice and his senators are meeting in the middle of the night and trying to figure out what the Turkish army is up to based on messages that arrive. When Othello and Brabantio arrive, Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching his daughter into marrying him. Othello denies this, describing how Desdemona fell in love with him because of stories he told her about his military career and his many adventures. When Desdemona arrives, having been summoned, she supports Othello's account. Brabantio is still angry but knows he is defeated. The Duke and senators instruct Othello to go to Cyprus to fend off the invasion. Desdemona says she will go with her new husband. Roderigo is upset at the way all this has turned out, but Iago tells Roderigo not to worry. He says Roderigo should go to Cyprus too, taking along a purse full of money, which Iago likely intends to relieve him of.

Analysis

As Othello speaks to the Duke of Venice and the senators, defending his actions, he is very compelling and earnest. It is clear that he is not only successful in military actions, but he is also a charismatic man who has earned the admiration of his men, the Duke, and Desdemona. He's a man of action, but also a man of eloquence. It is his stories of adventure that win Desdemona over. She fell in love after listening to hours and hours of stories about his travels in exotic locations, the

dangers he experienced, and his bravery. The fact that his words have such power to convince Desdemona to love him, and to convince the Duke and senators to believe him, is an important character point. Later in the play, as he begins to deteriorate, he will lose some of this eloquence; at one point, being unable to express his wishes in any more compelling way than to say "the handkerchief" over and over.

Desdemona shows she is an intelligent and strong woman in this scene, as she argues quite logically for why she sees her duty to Othello as more important than her duty to her father. Then she insists on going with Othello on his mission to Cyprus, saying, "I love the Moor to live with him." And the strength of her love and admiration for Othello are clearly part of his sense of self-confidence.

Act 2, Scene 1

Summary

Cassio has arrived on the island of Cyprus and is talking to Montano, who was governor of the island before the war. Cassio and Montano are concerned because the ships carrying the others have not arrived, and there has been word of a storm out at sea. But then the ship carrying Desdemona and Iago lands safely, and Cassio, Iago, Desdemona, and Iago's wife, Emilia, banter together. Iago notices that Cassio takes Desdemona's hand as he talks to her, and this gives him an idea to make Othello dislike Cassio: "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio," he explains. Then Othello arrives, greets Desdemona, and announces that the Turkish fleet is destroyed.

Analysis

This scene serves the plot by getting all the main characters together in Cyprus. Until now, the focus of the story has been on Othello, so this scene allows the audience to get to know the other characters without Othello's presence. It shows that Iago can seem charming even when he is being somewhat crude: women "rise to play, and go to bed to work," he says, to general amusement. The scene also introduces Emilia, Iago's wife. It is important to notice the marriage of Iago and Emilia has some tension in it, but also Emilia goes along with her

husband's joking even as he makes fun of her, suggesting she nags him and she annoys him by talking when he wants to sleep. Emilia tolerates and even seems to encourage his joking about women.

This general bantering fleshes out the characters and relationships, so the audience can better understand the material Iago has to work with as he begins his masterful manipulations. By the end of the play, Iago will have manipulated each one of the assembled characters. Desdemona is good and kind; he will exploit that. He will exploit Emilia's willingness to go along with his "games." He will exploit Cassio's fondness for and trust in Desdemona.

More importantly, when he sees Cassio hold Desdemona's hand, Iago seems to find the kernel of the plan that will eventually bring Othello down. Iago sees the friendliness between Cassio and Desdemona, and realizes *at once* that this can be leverage. It is an epiphany for Iago. First, he plans to use this friendliness to get back at Cassio, but soon this plan will be woven together with his plan to get back at Othello.

Act 2, Scene 2

Summary

A short while later, a herald brings a message from Othello. There will be a feast to celebrate the destruction of the Turkish fleet and Othello's recent marriage to Desdemona: "It is Othello's pleasure ... /that upon ... the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet,/every man put himself into triumph: some to dance, some to make bonfires, each man to what/sport and revels his addition leads him. For besides/these beneficial news, it is the celebration of his/nuptial."

Analysis

In an amazing occurrence, the storm Cassio was so worried about destroyed the Turkish fleet but allowed the ships from Venice to arrive quickly and safely. The Turkish invasion was important as a plot point, because it got everyone to the island of Cyprus. Now that they are all there, however, the Turkish threat is no longer important. So Shakespeare dispenses with it in a storm. Shakespeare doesn't worry too much about realism, and often relies on odd coincidences to move his plots

forward or resolve inconsistencies.

Act 2, Scene 3

Summary

As the party begins, Iago encourages Cassio to drink wine, hoping to get Cassio drunk so that he gets into trouble with Othello. Cassio does get drunk, and then Iago urges Roderigo to pick a fight with him. A drunken brawl breaks out, by the end of which Cassio beats up Roderigo; Montano, who tries to break it up, also gets wounded. Othello arrives and angrily demotes Cassio from his rank of lieutenant.

Afterward, Cassio, alone with Iago, bemoans his own stupidity for getting drunk. Iago, all friendliness, tells him he has a plan to help Cassio regain his rank. He suggests Cassio ask Desdemona to speak to Othello on his behalf. Iago has an ulterior motive, however: he plans to make Othello think Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair. Cassio, believing Iago is "honest," agrees with the suggested course of action. After Cassio leaves, Iago reveals that the best way to do the worst evils is to pretend to be good.

Then Roderigo enters, outraged again. He's been paying Iago to help him win Desdemona, and all he's gotten for it is a beating. Iago again reassures him, telling him to be patient. After Roderigo leaves, Iago plans to bring Othello where he can see Desdemona and Cassio together.

Analysis

The theme of honor is developed through Cassio's extreme concern about his reputation. "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!" he cries, after he drunkenly humiliates himself at the celebration and is stripped of his rank. Iago replies, "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving." He says this, not because it is true, but because he's going to suggest that Cassio can regain his "reputation" by appealing to Othello through Desdemona.

At this point, Iago has accomplished what he told Roderigo he

wanted at the beginning of the play: Cassio's demotion. It would seem this should satisfy Iago's grievance; Iago, however, is not satisfied. He wants to create more destruction, and here, it all finally comes together. Iago's soliloquy in this scene maps out his plan. He has identified Othello's main strength—Desdemona—and how he can turn it to a weakness: "His soul is so enfettered to her love/That she may make, unmake, do what she list,/Even as her appetite shall play the god/With his weak function." He also shows that he will use Desdemona's own strength—her goodness—against her: "And by how much she strives to do [Cassio] good,/She shall undo her credit with the Moor./So will I turn her virtue into pitch,/And out of her own goodness make the net/That shall enmesh them all."

The last two lines of this soliloquy uses the image of a net enmeshing all of Iago's victims in the same trap. This is an important image, because it foreshadows the way that, by the end of the play, the setting reflects this sense of a trap, or net, slowly closing on its victims. The play begins in Venice, where the characters roam freely. But the setting shifts to an island—a smaller setting with more limitations on motion. Then the setting moves to the castle, then to a garden and the private rooms of the castle, then to the bedroom, and then to the bed, where the net closes.

Act 3, Scene 1

Summary

Cassio has hired musicians to play in the street near the castle where Othello and Desdemona are staying. But a Clown, Othello's servant, tells the musicians they may play only silent music. Iago has convinced Cassio to ask Emilia, Desdemona's gentlewoman, for help in getting Desdemona to plead his case to Othello. Cassio has done this, by sending a message to Emilia. Iago then tells Cassio he will send Emilia to hear what Cassio has to say in person, and Cassio is very grateful. Iago exits, and shortly Emilia enters, with reports that Desdemona is already speaking to Othello about the situation. Cassio, apparently concerned that this may not be enough, asks Emilia to arrange a meeting between himself and Desdemona. Emilia thinks Iago is just trying to help Cassio. However, with dramatic irony common to Shakespeare, the audience knows that this is to make Othello believe Desdemona and Cassio are secret

lovers.

Analysis

Cassio is trying to make up for his blunder and get back in Othello's good graces by hiring some musicians to play for the newly wedded couple on their first real night together. It doesn't seem to work.

Iago continues to put his plan into motion. He's already convinced Cassio to contact Emilia, and now he sends Emilia to Cassio to report back on his suit in person. Iago knows that his goal of incriminating Cassio will be furthered by a meeting between Desdemona and Cassio (one that Othello could, perhaps, walk in on—which is exactly what happens). But he cannot be the one to set up such a meeting, because there isn't any way he could go directly to Desdemona without giving away his role in the whole plot. At times, he can take direct action—as when he encourages Cassio to get drunk—while maintaining his persona as a trusted friend and fellow soldier, but he can't go in secret to Othello's wife without arousing suspicion. So, he manipulates Cassio in making the first overture to Emilia, then escalates the situation by sending Emilia to Cassio for a meeting where Cassio can speak more freely of what he wants (which is "access" to Desdemona) than he could in a message. The growing gap between what the characters know about Iago's nature and what the audience knows is a stunning example of dramatic irony. The fact is, from the start, Iago has identified himself as the villain of the story and then keeps the audience apprised of all his nefarious plots and plans, which builds suspense. It also causes the audience to wonder who the main character of the play really is: Othello or Iago?

Act 3, Scene 2

Summary

At the citadel, Othello, Iago, and some gentlemen stroll together. Othello gives Iago some letters to deliver for him, and Iago takes the letters: "These letters give, Iago, to the pilot/And by him do my duties to the Senate." Othello tells the gentlemen that he is ready to see the fortification: "This fortification, gentlemen, shall we see 't?"

Analysis

This interaction shows two things about Iago. First, he is trusted by Othello. While Othello's trust has already been made known, it is important to reiterate it just before Scene 3, in which Iago uses that trust to undermine Othello's faith in his wife's fidelity. Second, Othello uses Iago as a conveyor of information. This is significant because Iago manipulates others by inventing and spreading misinformation to influence their behavior, rather than taking a more direct action. His role as a person who controls information is an essential piece of his operation.

Act 3, Scene 3

Summary

Desdemona, Cassio, and Emilia are talking about Cassio's desire that Othello give him his rank back when Iago and Othello enter. Cassio leaves in a rush, feeling uneasy about his standing with Othello. Iago remarks that Cassio looks like a guilty man, leaving so quickly.

Desdemona asks Othello to give Cassio his rank back, and Othello seems to agree. Then Iago speaks to Othello alone. He hints that Desdemona and Cassio are lovers, and Othello, who trusts Iago, begins to have suspicions. Iago, still acting like Othello's friend, tells him to watch out for jealousy, "the green-eyed monster which doth mock/the meat it feeds on." But even in warning Othello in this way, he arouses Othello's suspicions. Iago keeps dropping hints until Othello demands to know what he truly thinks. Iago suggests that Othello watch Desdemona and Cassio interact.

Desdemona accidentally drops a handkerchief Othello had given her, and Emilia picks it up, remembering Iago had asked her many times to get it for him. At first, she plans to get a copy made and give Iago the copy. Instead, Iago takes the handkerchief from her and tells her to say nothing. He plans to drop it in Cassio's room to make Othello believe all the lies.

Meanwhile, Othello becomes increasingly mad with jealousy. Iago tells him he has heard Cassio talk in his sleep about having sex with Desdemona. He also tells Othello he has seen Cassio with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello takes this as a

sign that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with Cassio. Othello swears he will kill Desdemona. Iago says he will kill Cassio.

Analysis

This scene is very long and advances the plot dramatically. It includes a "temptation" in which Iago manipulates Othello into thinking Desdemona is unfaithful. It also includes the whole affair of the losing and finding of the handkerchief: Desdemona accidentally drops her handkerchief, and Emilia retrieves it and gives it to Iago. It is this point that will, later, allow Emilia to put two and two together and figure out that her own husband is behind all the suffering. (Also, this is the only time Iago and Emilia are alone together in the play.) The scene ends as Iago and Othello are alone again, with Othello demanding "ocular proof," and Iago acting as trusted partner in avenging this (untrue) betrayal. It is at this time that Othello promotes Iago to lieutenant, rather than restoring the rank to Cassio.

The setting here is very important: the garden of the castle, which is more confining than the island of Cyprus, as Iago's net begins to close. It further parallels the biblical story of the Garden of Eden and Fall of Man. Iago plays the part of Satan, planting the seed of suspicion about Desdemona's fidelity just the way the snake piqued interest in the forbidden fruit and sowed the seeds of temptation in Adam and Eve. In addition, the snake (Satan) in the Garden of Eden uses Eve to get to Adam, just as Iago uses Desdemona to ultimately cause Othello to fall. In Genesis 2:17, God says of the forbidden tree, "in the day that you eat of it you shall die." In fact, Othello murders Desdemona later that evening. In the biblical story, the serpent tempts Eve first; here, "Adam" is the target.

Othello's language begins to contain elements of Iago's animal-infused language in this scene, showing that Iago's poison has begun to take hold. Iago uses a great deal of bestial language from the beginning of the play, and here, Othello begins to mimic this habit. For example, he says of Desdemona, "Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings,/I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind/To prey at fortune." This is a reference to the jesses, or straps, that hold a trained falcon to its leash, and to the way the falcon owner would direct the falcon's flight. And at the end of the scene, he calls Desdemona a "lewd minx."

Strangely enough, Iago has asked Emilia to do some of his

dirty work, and this shows that he trusts she will not betray him. Most of the time Iago convinces people they are doing the right thing, but here, Emilia knows stealing is wrong, even if it seems like a small theft. At the end of the play, Emilia is the only one who has all the pieces of the puzzle. Iago makes himself just a little vulnerable to her, because he needs her to do this task for him. She does ultimately betray Iago with this information, but not in time to save Desdemona.

Act 3, Scene 4

Summary

The next time Othello speaks to Desdemona, he becomes angry because she does not have the handkerchief. She doesn't understand why he is so upset, not realizing he suspects she and Cassio are having an affair, and so continues to ask him to restore Cassio's rank. This only makes Othello even more furious.

Cassio meets his lover, Bianca, and gives her the handkerchief, which he has found in his room but doesn't know is Desdemona's. He asks Bianca to copy the stitching on it.

Analysis

Othello can hardly contain his emotions as he greets Desdemona and holds her hand. His self-control is crumbling quickly, and his language reflects it. As he speaks to her, his eloquence disappears, and he resorts to demands such as "Is 't lost? Is 't gone? Speak, is 't out o' th' way?" "Fetch 't. Let me see 't," and also, the thrice-repeated "The handkerchief!" In addition to this loss of eloquence, and the animal references introduced in the previous scene, Othello refers more often to hell and the devil. For example, he tells Desdemona her hand is a "young and sweating devil ... /That commonly rebels." Iago's influence continues to grow in him.

As he loses his reason and is overtaken by his jealousy, the handkerchief becomes disproportionately important to Othello as a symbol of Desdemona's faithfulness. In his mind, it represents her fidelity to him. By losing it, her infidelity is confirmed.

Desdemona seals her own fate in this scene, as she accepts

the help of Iago to help her deal with Othello's increasing anger. This gives Iago an opportunity to appear to help her: He offers, "I will go meet him./There's matter in 't indeed if he be angry." She accepts, making her own deal with the devil: "I prithee do so."

Act 4, Scene 1

Summary

Iago continues to stoke Othello's jealousy. He tells him that Cassio has admitted to an affair with Desdemona. Othello is so upset he faints, and while he is unconscious, Iago sees Cassio and tells him to come back in a few minutes. When Othello recovers, Iago tells him to hide and observe as Iago and Cassio talk. Iago talks about Bianca with Cassio, and makes Cassio laugh, while Othello watches them but cannot hear the entire conversation. Othello believes Cassio is talking about Desdemona, and becomes enraged. Then Bianca enters with the handkerchief Cassio told her to copy. To Othello, this seems like final proof that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him.

Two noblemen, Lodovico and Graziano, arrive from Venice, bringing messages from the Duke of Venice. These contain orders for Othello to return to Venice, leaving Cassio in charge in Cyprus. Desdemona is glad to hear of Cassio's good fortune, but Othello interprets her reaction all wrong. He yells and strikes her. Lodovico is shocked at how Othello has changed, and Iago acts shocked as well. However, Iago says he is loyal to Othello and doesn't want to speak badly of him.

Analysis

As Iago sees jealousy take hold of Othello, he escalates the situation, manufacturing evidence of an affair. He builds a false case against Desdemona bit by bit, and now he plays his final card: He gives Othello the "ocular proof" Othello has demanded. The ocular, or visible, proof is the handkerchief Cassio has given to Bianca, his lover.

At best, Othello only hears part of the conversation between Cassio and Iago. At first, Iago positions Othello too far away to hear clearly what Iago and Cassio say, for they refer to Bianca by name. But then the conversation becomes more ambiguous,

using pronouns instead of names, so that the "she" they are speaking of could be any woman: "She was here even now. She haunts me in every place." At this point, Iago motions for Othello to come closer: Othello says, "Iago beckons me. Now he begins the story." So by the time Othello can hear any words spoken—and it is somewhat unclear just how much of the conversation he *does* hear—the two men could be talking about Desdemona. And this is how Othello takes it.

Eavesdropping is a common device used in Shakespeare's plays. Famously, both Benedick and Beatrice eavesdrop in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and hilarity ensues. Although they are being tricked, ultimately the information they learn is close to the truth. In *Hamlet*, both Polonius and Hamlet eavesdrop, Polonius on Hamlet and his mother, and Hamlet on Claudius's prayers. In both of these cases, the eavesdroppers are privy to secret information that is basically true. For Polonius, the eavesdropping ends badly. Othello's eavesdropping results in his belief in a lie, and the results are tragic.

Iago's actions show that his plan includes not just the death of Desdemona and the madness of Othello, but the undermining of Othello's reputation with his men. Iago digs and digs at Othello, forcing him to visualize his wife with Cassio in bed together, until Othello's language becomes disjointed, and then he finally falls unconscious. When Othello falls "into a trance," Iago tells Cassio it is his second epileptic fit (not true), and "The lethargy must have his quiet course./If not, he foams at mouth, and by and by/Breaks out to savage madness" (also not true). By inventing a history of "fits," Iago sets the stage for people to believe that Othello is not a noble military leader but a mad savage. And when Lodovico asks, "Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate/Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature/Whom passion could not shake, whose solid virtue/The shot of accident nor dart of chance/Could neither graze nor pierce?" Iago replies, "He is much changed." He will destroy Othello the man. But he will also destroy Othello the legendary military leader, whom readers met in Act 1 as a calm and strong, yet gentle, hero.

At the end of the scene, when Othello is at his most vulnerable, Iago actually suggests to Othello the exact method of murdering Desdemona: "Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated." No longer is Iago the soldier under Othello's command. Othello is now taking Iago's commands.

Act 4, Scene 2

Summary

Othello, nearly insane with jealousy, aggressively questions Emilia about Desdemona and Cassio's relationship. Emilia vehemently denies any wrongdoing, but Othello doesn't believe her. He speaks cruelly to Desdemona, and he accuses her of being a "strumpet," although he also says he loves her. She is confused and sad, so she asks Emilia to fetch Iago. Iago plays the friend, and tries to cheer her up.

After Desdemona and Emilia leave, Roderigo arrives and angrily confronts Iago. He complains once again that he has given Iago wealth, and yet Iago has failed to get Desdemona for him. Iago, as he has done before, calms him down and presents a solution to the problem. He tells him that Othello and Desdemona will leave Cyprus shortly, and Cassio will be in charge. He suggests Roderigo kill Cassio.

Analysis

Othello's questioning of both Emilia and Desdemona would seem to suggest he's open to an alternate explanation, but this does not prove to be the case. In fact, although both argue quite eloquently for Desdemona's innocence, Othello obviously is unwilling to give up his belief—based all on lies and insinuations—that Desdemona is unfaithful. This may be because he loves her passionately and cannot bear the thought of her with another man, or it may be because he feels his reputation depends on her fidelity to him. It also may be that, without her undivided admiration, his own identity and sanity are crumbling. It has been clear from the beginning that her regard, respect, and devotion are a great part of what he finds lovable about her.

Desdemona continues to trust Iago, to her own destruction. At the end of his interaction with her in this scene, he says, "Go in and weep not. All things shall be well." In reality, he knows things will not be well. It is also notable that he sends her into her bedroom, where she will be murdered just a short time later.

Emilia angrily denounces whoever is behind the lies that have led Othello to his jealous rage; she doesn't know it, but she is

railing against—in the most furious terms—her own husband: "I will be hanged if some eternal villain,/Some busy and insinuating rogue,/Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,/Have not devised this slander" and "The Moor's abused by some most villainous knave,/Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow." This is the height of dramatic irony, because the audience knows she is talking about Iago, her husband, and she has actually assisted him with his evil plan without realizing it. Her words here also foreshadow the fact that she will be the one who brings Iago's plan down in the end, as she finally realizes later he is the very "scurvy fellow" she knew had to be at the bottom of it.

Act 4, Scene 3

Summary

That night, Othello tells Desdemona to go to bed, and to send Emilia and her other servants away for the night. As Emilia helps get her ready for bed, Desdemona remembers a song her mother's servant (named "Barbary" just as Iago called Othello a "Barbary horse" in Act 1, Scene 1) used to sing: "a song of Willow" about a woman whose lover left her. Emilia tries to comfort Desdemona, saying men are often jealous and treat their wives unfairly. Desdemona finds Emilia's attitude a little shocking, and she is incredulous that wives would be unfaithful. Emilia, however, suggests that women are unfaithful because their husbands were unfaithful first.

Analysis

In this scene, Othello coldly dismisses Desdemona to the bed in which he plans to kill her. In the intimate scene between the two women that follows, Desdemona expresses her confusion about why Othello thinks she could possibly be unfaithful. Emilia, more worldly wise, protests that many women have affairs, and she blames this on the husbands, who probably are out there having all kinds of affairs rather than attending to their wives. She calls out the double standard that men are allowed to have affairs, while women are expected to be faithful. She gives a compelling argument for the humanity, equality, agency, and sexual needs of women. She also turns the traditional leadership role of men back on itself, noting that because men are supposed to be leaders, it is no surprise

women would learn to have affairs from them: "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so." Perhaps Emilia, having seen the cruel treatment of Desdemona by Othello, is encouraging Desdemona to take a lover, for her own satisfaction and happiness. Or perhaps, as Iago wondered, Emilia has already had affairs. There's no conclusive evidence for this, but it remains a possibility, and certainly Emilia's attitude here is more sexually liberated than Desdemona's.

Act 5, Scene 1

Summary

Meanwhile, in a Cyprus street Iago gives Roderigo a weapon and tells him to wait for Cassio, then kill him. Iago retreats to wait under cover of darkness as Roderigo attempts, and fails, to kill Cassio. Instead, Roderigo is wounded by Cassio. Hidden by the dark, Iago darts into the midst of this action, wounds Cassio, and exits. Othello hears Cassio's cry and believes Iago has done what he said he would do; Othello runs off to complete his part of the plan. Then Graziano and Lodovico enter, looking for the source of all the commotion. Iago also enters, and pretends he is just coming by for the first time. He acts concerned about Cassio, and then murders Roderigo, as if in retaliation for the attack on Cassio. Bianca arrives and is worried about Cassio's wound. Iago tries to blame Bianca for the attack on Cassio. Then Lodovico, Graziano, and some others help take Cassio away to have his wound treated.

Analysis

This scene takes place in the dark, which is important because Iago wounds Cassio in the dark, but then can pretend to respond to Cassio's cries for help as if he has just arrived. Then, he can kill Roderigo out of justice for Cassio's injury (which Iago actually has caused). In the confusion, Iago can direct this fight, cleaning up the loose end of Roderigo, who has suddenly become an unnecessary complication in Iago's life.

It is interesting that until this fight, Iago's plans have gone off perfectly. He's controlled every detail. However, Roderigo's incompetence at killing Cassio, even with a weapon and coaching from Iago, forces Iago to think quickly of another way

to achieve his ends and still keep his true nature concealed. After all, he has a reputation as an honest man, and he doesn't want to lose that. So, Iago quickly wounds Cassio and then kills Roderigo so he can't give away Iago's role in the trouble. While Iago comes out looking like an upstanding gentleman, this small breakdown of his plan foreshadows Emilia's revelation of his involvement and his eventual unmasking.

Act 5, Scene 2

Summary

In her bedroom at the castle, Desdemona sleeps. A candle burns. Othello enters, and speaks of his love for her but also what he plans to do. He will not shed her blood, he says, but he must kill her or else "she'll betray more men." He kisses her, and when she wakes up, he encourages her to confess her sins to God. He tells her he is going to kill her and again brings up the matter of the handkerchief, but she pleads with him, saying, "I never did/Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio/But with such general warranty of heaven/As I might love: I never gave him token." But he refuses to believe her, and smothers her.

Emilia comes in, and discovers Desdemona nearly dead. Desdemona professes her love for Othello, and tries to take the blame for her death; after proclaiming her guilt, she dies. Then Othello tells Emilia he killed Desdemona because Desdemona and Cassio were lovers, which Emilia knows is a lie. She realizes her husband is the one who has been lying to Othello, and she cries out "murder!" Iago, Montano, and Graziano come running, and when they arrive, Emilia begins to accuse her husband. As Emilia speaks, Othello finally realizes the truth, and tries to attack Iago. In the confusion, Iago stabs Emilia and deals her a fatal wound. He tries to get away but is caught. Othello again attacks him, wounding him.

Iago, when pressed, refuses to explain why he did the evil things he did. Othello admits his fault, and asks them all to think of him as "one that loved not wisely, but too well." Then he stabs himself, falls upon the bed, and dies kissing Desdemona: "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,/Killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

Lodovico chastises Iago, and he puts Graziano in charge of Othello's possessions. He tells Montano to make sure Iago is tortured, and says he will bring the sad news to Venice.

Analysis

This scene begins with Desdemona asleep, having said her prayers (as she says later in the scene) and lit a candle near her bed—perhaps in anticipation of Othello's arrival. She has, after all, prepared the bed for a "wedding night," having had the wedding sheets put on as she anticipates being able to have an uninterrupted night with Othello. In one reading of the timeline of the play, Othello and Desdemona have not yet consummated their marriage. Only about two days have gone by since their wedding, and on both nights, Othello has been summoned by duty. If they have not consummated their marriage, Desdemona's words "Kill me tomorrow: let me live tonight!" take on a greater meaning.

As Othello enters, he uses the lit candle as a metaphor in which he compares blowing out a candle to snuffing out Desdemona's life: "Put out the light, and then put out the light," he says, describing first the physical act of blowing out the candle and then the symbolic act of snuffing out the "light" of Desdemona: her life. But, with a patience and eloquence at odds with the frantic state he was in just a short time previous, he takes his time to develop this thought: he can relight a candle, but he cannot give back a life. He even goes on to use a flower metaphor to express the same idea: "When I have plucked the rose,/I cannot give it vital growth again." Yet despite what seem like reservations, in the end he decides to go through with the murder.

A few interesting inconsistencies in the play are highlighted in this scene. One is Othello's explanation of where the fateful handkerchief came from. Previously, Othello claimed that it came to his mother from a "charmer" (Act 3, Scene 4). In this scene he states, "It was a handkerchief, an antique token/My father gave my mother." Another is the contradictory timeline of the play. While the play's events seem to take place over a few days, Othello claims here that "she with Cassio hath the act of shame/A thousand times committed."

To close the play, Lodovico dispenses with the practical considerations (dealing with Othello's possessions and bringing word to the Duke), and he brings the audience's attention to the bodies on the bed. "Look on the tragic loading of this bed," he says, addressing Iago but forcing the audience to direct attention there as well. There are three dead bodies on the bed: Desdemona's, because she was smothered there; Emilia's, because she begged "lay me by my mistress' side" as she died; and Othello's, because he died kissing Desdemona.

This final image shows that Iago's net has tightened all the way, trapping his victims inside.

The main themes of the play resurface in its final scene. Desdemona's love for Othello motivates her to try to shield him from blame for her death. Iago's reputation for honesty, his honor, proves to be an issue through the end of the play. From the moment Othello reveals that Iago is the one who told him Cassio and Desdemona were having an affair, it begins to dawn on Emilia that her husband is at the bottom of the whole scheme. Othello calls him "honest, honest Iago," while Emilia replies "He lies to th' heart!" and Lodovico calls him both "hellish villain" and "viper." Iago's betrayal of his honesty, and his devilishness, resurface in the final scene of the play.

“” Quotes

"I am not what I am."

— Iago, Act 1, Scene 1

Early in the play, Iago admits his deceptive nature. He will deceive and manipulate. He is an actor of skill—one who can convince others of his absolute earnestness and trustworthiness. Yet he is neither trustworthy nor earnest. It is important to note that in Exodus 3:14, God described himself as "I am what I am." By turning this statement into its opposite, Iago sets himself up as the Devil.

"I saw Othello's visage in his mind,/And to his honors and his valiant parts/Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate."

— Desdemona, Act 1, Scene 3

Desdemona says this to explain why she wants to go with Othello to Cyprus. She is referring to the fact that through Othello's stories she has seen his adventures, picturing them in her own imagination. This is what won her love.

"He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper. With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio."

— Iago, Act 2, Scene 1

As Iago looks on, Cassio greets Desdemona, taking her hand. This moment gives Iago the idea to use Cassio to get to Othello, through Desdemona. In this aside, Iago tells the audience what he is going to do.

"So will I turn her virtue into pitch,/And out of her own goodness make the net/That shall enmesh them all."

— Iago, Act 2, Scene 3

Iago lays out his plan. Desdemona's goodness will lead her to be kind to Cassio, and it is this attention to Cassio that will cause Othello to believe Iago's story that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair.

"Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving."

— Iago, Act 2, Scene 3

Iago reassures Cassio after Cassio has lost his rank due to his drunken actions, saying a man's reputation is not really that important. Of note, other men in the play find reputation to be very important, including Othello. But Iago will say anything to get Cassio to do as he wants. Here, he wants him to feel that there is hope of regaining his status with Othello by appealing to Desdemona.

"Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,/Chaos is come again."

— Othello, Act 3, Scene 3

Othello says this about Desdemona just before Iago "tempts" him in the garden. It is an expression of Othello's love for her, but also foreshadows the "perdition" or damnation to which Othello falls when he gives in to Iago's temptation.

"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!/It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock/The meat it feeds on."

— Iago, Act 3, Scene 3

Iago says this as part of his temptation of Othello in the garden. He is warning Othello of being jealous at the same time he, Iago, is planting the seed of jealousy in Othello's mind. He's warning Othello of jealousy, but he is also pointing out how Cassio and Desdemona are so friendly.

"She did deceive her father, marrying you."

— Iago, Act 3, Scene 3

Iago manipulates Othello by pointing out that Desdemona disobeyed her own father to marry the Moor. In this way, he uses reason to convince Othello that Desdemona is the kind of woman who might be unfaithful.

"Who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?"

I should venture purgatory for 't."

— Emilia, Act 4, Scene 3

While Desdemona cannot see any motivation that would cause her to have an extramarital affair, Emilia is more practical. She suggests there are reasons—and some of them might be good ones—for being unfaithful. It also suggests that Emilia's ethical standards are less pure than Desdemona's, which could explain why she is willing to go along with Iago's plotting for such a long time.

"Look on the tragic loading of this bed./This is thy work."

— Lodovico, Act 5, Scene 2

Lodovico observes Iago's "work" has resulted in dead bodies covering the bed. Each of the deaths in the final scene adds to the tragic pile. This final image shows the net that Iago set has tightened to one very small point in space: a bed.

Symbols

Handkerchief

Desdemona's handkerchief, given to her as a gift from Othello, is a potent symbol of love and trust. Originally it had been Othello's mother's, and his gift of it to Desdemona shows his love for and trust in her. Othello even explains to Desdemona that the handkerchief allowed his mother to make her husband faithful in their marriage. The handkerchief, then, represents fidelity. Because Othello sees great symbolic importance in the handkerchief, Iago has good reason to use it for his own nefarious purposes. When Desdemona accidentally loses it, and Emilia gives it to Iago, Iago controls the symbolism of the handkerchief. He makes this symbol of love and trust into one of unfaithfulness and betrayal. And so Othello is completely undone by the loss of the handkerchief, because it represents

the loss of Desdemona; he crumbles into incoherent shouts of "the handkerchief!" as he is overwhelmed by Iago's lies.

Willow Tree

As Desdemona and Emilia prepare for bed, Desdemona shares a "song of 'willow.'" Here, the willow tree becomes a symbol of Desdemona's sadness and emotion over her lost love, foreshadowing the impending death of this love as well as Desdemona's own physical death. In Shakespeare's plays, willow trees often signify deserted women. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia falls from a willow tree after being abandoned by Hamlet. Here, increasingly abandoned by Othello's trust, Desdemona sings, "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve" and "I called my love false love, but what said he then?/... If I court more women, you'll couch with more men." In fact, Desdemona, though innocent, will try to accept the blame for her own death: "his scorn I approve." In addition, the topic of infidelity provides Desdemona a chance to express her belief that nothing, even Othello's betrayal, could make her unfaithful to Othello, and provides Emilia with a chance to state the opposite.

The Color Green

Iago tells Othello to beware of jealousy because it is "the green-eyed monster which doth mock/The meat it feeds on." Green symbolizes the jealousy that will ultimately undo Othello's marriage, sanity, and life. Iago also uses plant images to explain his own role in the action of the play. He sees the will of a person as the gardener of the body: "Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners."

Themes

Love

Love is a powerful force in the lives of Desdemona and Othello, whose secret marriage is the spark that ignites the plot. A great deal of time is spent as Othello explains to the Duke of Venice and to Brabantio how Desdemona came to love him by his stories. Desdemona is utterly devoted to Othello, even to the point of wanting to take the blame when he murders her, rather than have him suffer. Yet Othello's love for Desdemona proves to be his undoing, as it causes him to be easily manipulated by Iago, who sees it as a point of weakness in Othello's otherwise strict military demeanor.

The two couples—Othello and Desdemona, Iago and Emilia—have very different relationships. Othello and Desdemona have a romantic relationship that is, perhaps, too good to last. In contrast, Iago and Emilia's relationship is plagued by mistrust and misogyny.

Betrayal

Trust and betrayal are features of nearly every relationship in *Othello*. Iago is a trusted officer, adviser, and friend, and his position of trust allows him the opportunity to manipulate others. Othello entrusts Iago with important correspondence, and never questions his intent. Roderigo confides to Iago his love for Desdemona and accepts his help. Cassio takes Iago's advice willingly, and even Desdemona seeks out his advice when Othello seems to be acting strangely. Iago betrays all this trust in spectacular fashion.

Trust between Othello and Desdemona is also an important feature of the play. As the play begins, Othello unquestioningly accepts Desdemona's love and fidelity. He is convinced of it, and it gives him confidence and security. She, in turn, trusts him utterly. Yet due to Iago's manipulations, Othello loses trust in Desdemona. And ultimately, Othello betrays Desdemona's trust by murdering her.

Honor

Honor is a driving force in the lives of the men of *Othello*. Iago appeals to Brabantio's sense of being dishonored by his daughter's elopement and sparks outrage in Roderigo by suggesting that it is unfair for Desdemona to have married Othello. Although Iago's own motivation for his villainous actions is murky at best, he does suggest his plot against Othello is motivated in part by Cassio's promotion and rumors Emilia was unfaithful with Othello. Cassio, after getting into a drunken brawl, bemoans the loss of his reputation more so than the loss of his rank. This provides Iago with the leverage he needs to manipulate Cassio and make him a key part of the plot to destroy Othello. Othello's honor is wounded by the idea that Desdemona might be unfaithful, leading him to murder.

Motifs

Darkness and Light

Iago often hides in darkness to prevent people from knowing his identity. He stays out of sight in the wee hours of the morning as he and Roderigo goad Brabantio about Desdemona's elopement. He hides in shadows while Cassio and Roderigo confront each other, using the darkness as cover as he deals blows to both sides of the fight. Othello enters Desdemona's bedchamber by the light of a candle, and uses the light as a metaphor for her life, which he plans to snuff out as he would a candle.

Desdemona's and Othello's opposing skin colors are also illustrated through the text: Desdemona is called (rudely) a "white ewe" (Act 1, Scene 1) and "fair Desdemona" (Act 4, Scene 2), while Othello is referred to as a "black ram" (Act 1, Scene 1) and "black Othello" (Act 2, Scene 3). In addition, the contrast of Othello's dark skin and Iago's light skin brings situational irony to their portrayals in the play. Despite conventional associations of dark with evil and light with good, Iago, the light-skinned one—not the Moor Othello—plays the devil, which undercuts racial stereotyping of the day.

Animals and Demons

Iago (as the devil figure in the play) frequently uses beast and demon imagery to extend the negative associations with blackness he uses to manipulate the racial tensions in the play. In the very beginning of the play, he suggests to Brabantio that Othello and Desdemona are making "the beast with two backs," and Othello is "an old black ram." These beast references are like a pestilence that is contagious, and careful readers can track the moments in which the contagion is passed to others. Cassio, after getting drunk at Iago's encouragement, declares he is "by and by a fool, and presently a beast." And when Iago plants the seed of suspicion in Othello's mind, Othello, too, begins to use animal and hell references. When Emilia finds out Iago has used her, she declares in the final scene that she will "play the swan."

Suggested Reading

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