

Plot Summary

1	Act 1	Roderigo is told by Iago that Desdemona has married Othello. Iago hates Othello because he has been overlooked for a lieutenant position. Iago urges Roderigo to pursue Desdemona, knowing her father Brabantio will dislike having Othello as son-in-law. Iago and Roderigo wake Brabantio to tell him of the marriage. He orders the arrest of Othello. At the same moment, officers summon Brabantio to a meeting of the Senate about the imminent threat of a Turkish invasion. Once there, Othello explains how his stories of military success won Desdemona's love. Desdemona is called to defend her marriage. Brabantio disowns her and she chooses to follow Othello, in the care of Lieutenant Cassio.
2	Act 2	In Cyprus, Montano greets Cassio, Desdemona, Iago and his wife Emilia. Othello arrives with news that storms have dispersed the Turkish fleet. Roderigo is wary about pursuing Desdemona, but Iago reassures him. He urges him to duel Cassio, who he says Desdemona is falling in love with. Iago gets Cassio drunk, Roderigo incites his anger and Montano is stabbed trying to contain Cassio. Othello is angry and strips Cassio of his lieutenant-ship.
3	Act 3	Iago convinces Cassio to ask Desdemona for help in regaining his post. Iago has sown seeds of jealousy in Othello's mind, suggesting Desdemona is overly fond of Cassio. Othello is angry when Desdemona cannot find the first gift he ever gave to her, a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries. It is not lost – Iago instructed Emilia to take it and hide it where Cassio would find it.
4	Act 4	Iago continues to inflame Othello's jealousy. He encourages Othello to listen in on, and misinterpret, a conversation between Cassio and his mistress Bianca. They are discussing the handkerchief. Othello's agitation at what he hears brings on an epileptic fit. He orders Iago to kill Cassio. Desdemona cannot understand Othello's changed attitude towards her. He even strikes her in front of a relative, Ludovico. She talks with Emilia, singing to relieve herself of the distress she feels.
5	Act 5	Roderigo has begun to suspect Iago. Iago manages to persuade him to fight Cassio again. In the fight, Iago goes undetected and wounds Cassio. He then enters again to accuse and kill Roderigo for wounding Cassio. Othello murders his sleeping wife. He smothers her with a pillow while she asserts her innocence. Othello defends himself, mentioning the handkerchief. Emilia realises what has happened and betrays Iago's plot – he stabs and kills her. Iago is arrested and sent to trial after Othello wounds him. Othello commits suicide. The play ends with Cassio reinstated and placed in command as Governor of Cyprus.

Characters

1	Iago	Machiavellian/malcontent villain Iago 'who hates good simply because it is good, and loves evil purely for itself' (A.C. Bradley).	6	Roderigo	Iago's assistant. Murdered by Iago in the end.
2	Othello	First great black protagonist in Western literature. 'There is no ferocity in Othello, his mind is majestic and composed' (Kermode); 'both monster and hero' (Greenblatt).	7	Bianca	Cassio's mistress who is an 'outsider' (Simpson).
3	Desdemona	Tragic victim, Othello's wife. 'Becomes a stereotype of female passivity.' She is 'too knowing, too dependent' (Jardine).	8	Emilia	'the mouthpiece of repressed femininity' (Bayley). Desdemona's chaperone and Iago's wife.
4	Brabantio	Desdemona's father and Venetian senator.	9	Ludovico	Desdemona's cousin and diplomat. Arrives to see Othello slap Desdemona. Witnesses deaths of main characters.
5	Cassio	Othello's lieutenant, accused of adultery with Desdemona. 'very lovable', 'we trust him absolutely' (Bradley).	10	Montano	Governor of Cyprus before Othello arrives.

Themes

1	Jealousy	Motivates the central conflicts of the play: Iago's resentment of Othello, Othello's suspicion of Desdemona.
2	Treatment of women	Women are presented as passive individuals and treated as objects by the male characters.
3	Race	Race leads to Othello's insecurity, which Iago can then exploit. Othello never feels at ease in Venice because of his dissimilitude.
4	Reputation	It is evident that Iago wouldn't have been able to do what he did without such a good reputation of honesty.

Context

1	The Other	An individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way. E.g. Othello is often referred to as 'the Moor' by other characters, to highlight his 'otherness.'
2	War	The threat of a Turkish fleet invading the island of Cyprus draws Othello and Desdemona away from Venice. Shakespeare's depiction of this conflict is based in history, but by no means historically accurate.
3	Patriarchal society	Men ran all of the institutions and were considered heads of the household. Rules applied to women that concerned their conduct in certain situations, e.g. they should not go anywhere unescorted.

Key Vocabulary

1	Tragic hero	The protagonist of a tragedy play. Makes an error in judgement that leads to their downfall.
2	Hamartia	The tragic hero's fatal flaw. Othello's is extreme jealousy stemming from his insecurity about his position in Venice.
4	Machiavellian	A cunning, scheming and unscrupulous character, such as Iago. The term comes from Niccolò Machiavelli's political treatise <i>The Prince</i> .
5	Dramatic Irony	Some things are revealed to the audience before the characters, increasing tension.
6	Motif	Image, sound, action or other figure that has symbolic significance. Some motifs in Othello are: sight and blindness, hell, animals.
7	Symbol	Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts, e.g. Desdemona's handkerchief.
8	Allusion	An expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly; an indirect or passing reference. There are various mythological/religious/historical allusions in Othello.