



William Shakespeare's

Othello

A brilliant Moorish general in the Venetian army is manipulated by his ensign Iago into believing his wife Desdemona is unfaithful, leading to tragic consequences.

Exploring Shakespearean Plays



Othello

Brief Summary

Othello is a tragedy by William Shakespeare about a respected Moorish general, Othello, who marries Desdemona, a noblewoman of Venice. Othello's ensign, Iago, becomes jealous and deceitfully convinces him that Desdemona is unfaithful. Consumed by doubt and manipulated by lies, Othello's trust collapses, leading him to kill Desdemona before learning the truth. Realizing his tragic mistake, he takes his own life. The play explores jealousy, manipulation, racism, and the destructive power of mistrust.



Othello



Iago



Emilia



Cassio



Desdemona

Key Themes of the Play

Jealousy

Shakespeare examines romantic, personal and professional jealousy through many character.

Appearance vs Reality

Iago is an incredibly duplicitous character and other characters are oblivious to his true intentions.

Otherness

Othello is othered due to his status as a Moor in Venetian society. Cassio is also an outsider, being from Florence. Bianca exists on the fringes of this society based on her status as a courtesan.

Imagery and Symbolism

Imagery and symbolism serve to reinforce the key themes of the play: the handkerchief and the Willow Song are important symbols while Shakespeare also explores images of animals and hell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1564-1616

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was an English playwright, poet, and actor, widely regarded as one of the greatest writers in the English language. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, he married Anne Hathaway at 18 and had three children. By the early 1590s, he was working in London as an actor and playwright, eventually becoming a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men.

Shakespeare wrote around 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and several long poems, producing comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances. His works—such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Romeo and Juliet*—are celebrated for their rich language, psychological depth, and insight into human nature. He died in 1616 in Stratford and remains a foundational figure in world literature.



Shakespearean Tragedy

Tragic Hero

Definition

The central character, often of noble birth or high status, who is destined for downfall, suffering, or defeat.

Examples

Hamlet in "Hamlet," Romeo in "Romeo and Juliet," and of course, Othello !



Tragic Flaw

Definition

A character flaw or error in judgment that leads to the hero's downfall.

Examples

Othello 's jealousy and misjudgement.

Tragic Recognition

Definition

The tragic hero realises his mistake too late.

Examples

Othello realises he has been manipulated by Iago after he has murdered his wife.



CHARACTER

profile

NAME:

ROLE:

TRAITS

List 3–5 words that describe the character.

-
-
-
-
-

KEY QUOTE

FLAW:

KEY QUOTE

CHANGE

RELATIONSHIPS

THEME



Character Social Media Profile

Logo

Create a social media profile for a character in your story. Complete each section to show who the character is, what they care about, and how they change.

Username

Bio

Relationship Status (Choose One)

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Married
- ☐ It's Complicated
- ☐ On a Mission

Top Three Hashtags

Latest Post

Write a caption to go with the post that your character would share about something important that happened in the story. Include emojis!

Character Playlist

Songs that fit your character’s journey or mood

1

2

3

Friends List

Name 2 characters they would be friends with

1

2

Use this plan to write your own response to the question.

“Iago’s cunning and manipulative intelligence, coupled with his chilling lack of discernible motive, is what makes him Shakespeare’s most compelling and terrifying villain.”

With close reference to the text, and supporting your points with relevant quotations, write a response agreeing or disagreeing with this assessment of Iago's character.

Assessment: Agree- Iago is unpredictable and diabolical

Cunning and manipulative intelligence:

- **Can exploit other characters’ weaknesses**
- **Is capable of both plotting schemes and seizing opportunities**
- **Expertly manipulates those around him and conceals his true nature**

Lack of discernible motive:

- **He rarely shares insights into his motives and when he does, they appear flimsy and without merit**
- **Iago seems to thrive in chaos and schemes until he has destroyed the lives of multiple characters**
- **Even when Iago has caused substantial damage to the lives of other characters, he does not appear entirely satisfied.**
- **He refuses to reveal his motives at the conclusion of the play, which reinforces his enduring appeal as a compelling yet frightening villain**

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Introduction:

Shakespeare’s Iago, a character created over four hundred years ago, remains as chilling a villain and engaging a character as he did when he first appeared on a dramatic stage. His ability to expertly plot his contemporaries’ downfalls while also seizing unpredictable opportunities to interfere with their lives in seismic ways adds to his enduring appeal as a villain. What separates Iago, however, from other formidable Shakespearean villains, is his lack of clear motive. His actions are thoroughly diabolical, yet we are never reliably informed of his reasoning for them.

Section 1: Iago at the outset of the play

We first meet Iago in the opening scene, where (hints: discussion with Roderigo, his self-interest, some motive provided, reveals his intentions)

Section 2: He takes immediate action, advising Roderigo to wake Brabantio and “poison his delight .”

(hints: discuss his ability to remain concealed so as to remain inconspicuous, his use of racial language, his subsequent dishonesty towards Othello where he feigns loyalty)

Section 3: His use of Roderigo

Key quote: “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.”

Some motivation provided here (financial) but Iago seems to derive more satisfaction from creating chaos and discord.

Section. 4: His plotting versus his opportunism

(hints: discuss his ability to plot- include soliloquies- coupled with his ability to seize opportunities as they arise)

Consider: Causing Cassio to become intoxicated, convincing Roderigo to provoke him, encouraging Cassio to have Desdemona plead his case to Othello, reacting to Cassio leaving suddenly, the handkerchief

“Iago’s cunning and manipulative intelligence, coupled with his chilling lack of discernible motive, is what makes him Shakespeare’s most compelling and terrifying villain.”

With close reference to the text, and supporting your points with relevant quotations, write a response agreeing or disagreeing with this assessment of Iago's character.

Section 5: His manipulation of Othello

The Temptation Scene (Act III, Scene 3) Act IV, Scene 1

Iago plants seeds of doubt in Othello’s head in a patient and methodical way. Refer to his references to sex in bestial terms in order to enrage Othello, his references to Othello’s masculinity and his eventual suggestion on how to murder Desdemona

Section 6: The play’s end

Refer to the closing events of the play, the murder of Roderigo, Desdemona and Emilia, Emilia’s moral courage serves to emphasise Iago’s true villainy even further. His refusal to provide a legitimate reason for his actions adds to his enduring appeal as a character - include quote.

A motive would serve to humanise a truly despicable character.

Conclusion: No new information, reiterate central points

Othello

"She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them."

I.iii

Defines the unconventional, romantic basis of his love for Desdemona.

Othello

"But alas, to make me / The fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at!"

IV.ii

Expresses his profound agony and sense of public humiliation upon believing he is cuckolded.

Othello

"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men."

V.ii

Illustrates his tragic descent, believing his heinous act is an impersonal, moral duty.

Othello

"For naught did I in hate, but all in honour."

V.ii

A final, desperate attempt to rationalize his crime as a noble act of justice.

Othello

"Of one that loved not wisely, but too well; / Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme."

V.ii

His famous final words; a definitive self-assessment, accepting his flaw but highlighting his depth of feeling.

Iago

"I am not what I am."

I.i

The ultimate statement of his duplicity and deceptive nature.

Iago

"But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at: I am not what I am."

I.i

His cynical reason for maintaining his disguise.

Iago

"And what's he then that says I play the villain, / When this advice is free I give and honest..."

II.iii

His masterful manipulation; he recognizes his own villainy but presents it as helpful advice.

Iago

"The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are."

I.iii

His perfect understanding of Othello's vulnerability.

Iago

"When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now."

II.iii

A terrifying moment of self-awareness regarding his evil methods.

Iago

"Patience, I say. Your mind perhaps may change."

III.iii

His feigned reluctance to speak, which only increases Othello's anxiety and prods him toward jealousy.

Desdemona

"My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty."

I.iii

Her declaration of mature devotion to Othello, balancing her obligations.

Desdemona

"I never did / Offend you in my life; never did dream / Of such a thing."

IV.ii

Her simple, heartbreaking declaration of innocence, which Othello tragically ignores.

Desdemona

"Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!"

V.ii

Her final words, protecting Othello even as she dies.

Cassio

"Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial."

II.iii

His deep concern for honour and the devastating effect of Iago's plot.

Cassio

"Drunk? And speak parrot? And squabble? Swagger? Swear? And discourse fustian with one's own shadow?"

II.iii

His reflection on the loss of self-control while drunk.

Emilia

"She was too fond of her most filthy bargain."

V.ii

Her immediate reaction after Desdemona's death, contrasting with Othello's warped view.

Emilia

"Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak."

V.ii

Her final courageous stand against Iago and her oath to reveal the truth.

Roderigo

"What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe, / If he can carry't thus!"

I.i

A racist comment that establishes Othello as the "other" and reveals Roderigo's petty envy.

Brabantio

"Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee."

I.iii

A curse and a warning that plants the first seed of doubt in Othello's mind.

Jealousy

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

III.iii

The most famous line in the play, a chilling metaphor for destructive envy.

Jealousy

"But jealous souls will not be answer'd so; / They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself."

III.iv

Emilia's insightful definition of the irrational, self-consuming nature of jealousy.

Jealousy

"Why, why is this? / Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy?"

III.iii

Othello's boast of his rational nature moments before he succumbs to the "monster."

Love

"T'assume a virtue where you have it not."

III.iv

Othello demands an absolute, impossible purity and virtue from Desdemona, destroying his love.

Love

"Prithee, no more. Let him come when he will; / I will deny thee nothing."

III.iii

Desdemona's innocent persistence in pleading for Cassio is misconstrued as evidence of her guilt.

Love

"I'll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster."

V.ii

Othello's perverted focus on Desdemona's physical purity as he prepares to kill her.

Love

"If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself! / I'll not believe it."

III.iii

Othello's initial, strong faith in Desdemona's goodness, which Iago immediately undermines.

Jealousy/Reputation

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of their souls."

III.iii

Iago's deceptive speech that makes Othello value reputation and honor above all else, including Desdemona's life.

Manipulation

"Divinity of hell! / When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now."

II.iii

Iago celebrating his dark brilliance in using virtue (helping Cassio) as a cover for evil.

Manipulation

"With as little a web as this will I ensnare / as great a fly as Cassio."

II.i

Iago's predatory image of his manipulative plotting.

Manipulation

"He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly."

V.i

Iago's candid admission of his envy of Cassio's inherent nobility.

Manipulation

"O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites!"

III.iii

Othello's immediate internalization of Iago's misogynistic view of women.

Manipulation

"Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ."

III.iii

The quote that explains Iago's use of the handkerchief as the "ocular proof."

Appearance

"Men should be what they seem; / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!"

III.iii

Iago's ironic statement, using the expectation of honesty to plant suspicion.

Appearance

"Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word."

V.ii

Iago's final act of malicious silence, preserving his mystery and power.

Tragedy/Fate

"It is the very error of the moon; / She comes more nearer earth than she was wont, / And makes men mad."

V.ii

Othello's desperate attempt to blame an external force (fate or the supernatural) for his madness.

Race/Othering

"Your son-in-law is far more fair than black."

I.iii

The Duke's attempt to compliment Othello by suggesting his character transcends his race.

Race/Othering

"Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!"

III.iii

Othello explicitly links his rage and desire for revenge to his race.

Tragedy

"O fool, fool, fool!"

V.ii

Othello's final, devastating realization of the horrific mistake he has made.

Tragedy

"This is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite."

V.i

Iago's admission that his plot has reached its irreversible climax.

Light & Dark

"An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe."

I.i

Iago's crude, racist image of Othello and Desdemona's relationship, contrasting blackness and whiteness.

Light & Dark

"Put out the light, and then put out the light."

V.ii

Othello's morbid pun on extinguishing the candle and Desdemona's life.

Animals & Nature

"Fie, there is no such man; it is impossible."

IV.i

Othello is reduced to a trance, speaking in incoherent animalistic sounds ("Pish! Noses, ears, and lips.") as his noble mind breaks.

Animals & Nature

"But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety."

I.iii

Iago compares his suspicion to a dangerous, compelling creature, justifying his evil.

Poison & Disease

"The thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards."

II.i

Iago's use of imagery of consumption and internal destruction to describe his own envy.

Poison & Disease

"I'll pour this pestilence into his ear."

II.iii

Iago's famous line establishing the oral transmission of his destructive lies.

Water & Chaos

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

III.iii

Othello's poetic use of "chaos" foreshadows the dissolution of his ordered world upon the loss of his love.

Water & Chaos

"Nor poppy nor mandragora, / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world, / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep / Which thou owedst yesterday."

III.iii

Iago celebrates Othello's permanent descent into sleepless, tormented misery.

The Handkerchief

"There's magic in the web of it."

III.iv

Othello elevates the handkerchief from a simple object to a symbol of mystical fidelity and power.

The Handkerchief

"A liberal hand! The hearts of old gave hands; / But our new heraldry is hands, not hearts."

III.iv

Othello's comment on Desdemona's moist hand—a symbol of lust and infidelity in his jealous mind.