

Context	Othello in 7 Key Scenes		Text vocab	Definitions
<p>16th Century Venice: The Venice in Othello is very unlike the bustling, greedy Venice of <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>. Admired for its wealth, its cosmopolitan society and republican constitution, which it fiercely defended against repeated Papal assaults and attempts to take control, this Venice, was “the idealized city of classical theory – a place where the turbulence of individual emotion is subjected to the rational calm of authority”. It is a dynamic port city, a site of transition and exchange, which connects it to the play’s exploration of bifurcated characters.</p>	Act 1 Scene 1:	In Venice, R (an unsuccessful suitor to D) persuaded by I to overthrow O. I has been passed over for promotion by O in favour of C. I tells R that he hates O but will pretend to love him while plotting his downfall. R and I wake B with the news that D has eloped with O. When B discovers that his daughter really has gone, he accepts R’s offer to take him to O and D.	1) desolate	spiritual ruin; loss of soul
	Resentment and redress		1) laconic	using few words; concise
<p>The Music of the Spheres: originated in the Ptolemaic conception of the finite, ordered universe, thinkers during the Renaissance were in agreement that the universe possessed a finely constructed and harmonious natural order. This divine sense of order is often transformed, through another conception from the era, “The Chains of Being”, to be running through all “hierarchies” of human existence, from the brutish conception of the lowest forms of nature, right up to the divinity of God. Iago draws on these concepts in conceiving of his plan for the domestic disruption of O and D’s relationship. (II:I – 196-198)</p>	Act 1 Scene 3:	Duke and senators are concerned the Turks will invade Cyprus. Duke thinks B and O have arrived to discuss the military situation but B accuses O of abducting his daughter. O explains how he wooed D unintentionally recounting his past life. D confirms this version of events and since she is married to O, her father is told to make the best of it. The Duke orders O to go to Cyprus immediately. O tells ‘honest’ I to escort D who pleads to accompany. Thinking he has lost D forever, R is urged by I to get money and follow them to Cyprus where he will have the opportunity to cuckold O. Once alone, I reveals that he will convince O that D and C are having an affair.	1) sordidness	lacking in morals
	Talk of Love and War in Venice.		1) candid	sincere; straightforward
<p>Venetian – Turkish War – Othello is set against the backdrop of the wars between Venice and Turkey that raged in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Cyprus, which is the setting for most of the action, was a Venetian outpost attacked by the Turks in 1570 and conquered the following year. Cyprus would have been seen as an embattled military outpost, a island belonging to the story domain of the passions. If Venice is a place of social order, Cyprus is suspended between a locus of “civilisation” and African barbarism</p>			1) bombast	pretentious words
			1) guileless	open with words; honest;
<p>Gionvanni Cinzio’s text – The story of Othello is also derived from another source—an Italian prose tale written in 1565 by Giovanni Cinzio The original story contains the bare bones of Shakespeare’s plot: a Moorish general is deceived by his ensign into believing his wife is unfaithful. To Cinzio’s story Shakespeare added supporting characters such as the rich young dupe Roderigo and the outraged and grief-stricken Brabantio. Shakespeare compressed the action into the space of a few days and set it against the backdrop of military conflict. And, most memorably, he turned the ensign, a minor villain, into the arch-villain Iago. Also, D and O’s relationship is not disastrous in the source text. Also, Iago is in love with Desdemona.</p>	Act 2 Scene 3:	Turkish fleet destroyed in a storm and Venetian forces in Cyprus celebrate. Before O retires to his marriage bed with Desdemona, he leaves C in charge of the guard. I, aware that C is alcohol-intolerant, deliberately plies him with drink. A tipsy and quarrelsome C, encouraged by R, gets into a fight during which he attacks Montano when he tries to stop him pursuing R. The fight is stopped by Othello, who has left the bridal chamber. I pretends to defend C but O strips C of his officership. I pretends to reassure the devastated C and offers to bring about reconciliation with O through his wife, E, who will ask D to intervene.	1) perdition	abandoned by friends/hope
	Cassio Carouses in Cyprus		1) subjugating	bringing under control
<p>Moors and racial identity: The word Moor now refers to the Islamic Arabic inhabitants of North Africa who conquered Spain in the eighth century, but the term was used widely in the period and was sometimes applied to Africans from other regions. George Abbott in his <i>A Brief Description of the Whole World of 1599</i>, made distinctions between “blackish Moors” and “black Negroes”; a 1600 translation of John Leo’s <i>The History and Description of Africa</i> distinguishes “white or tawny Moors” of the Mediterranean coast of Africa from the “Negroes or black Moors” of the south. Jacobean theatre often wrote hostile, critical roles, associating black skin with primitivism, barbarism and lasciviousness. The binary between black and white imagery that runs throughout Othello is certainly a marker of difference between Othello and his European peers. However, on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, none are given so major or heroic a role as Othello. The most vividly stereotypical black character of the period is Aaron, the villain of Shakespeare’s early play <i>Titus Andronicus</i>. The antithesis of Othello, Aaron is lecherous, cunning, and vicious. Othello, by contrast, is a noble figure of great authority, respected and admired. Only I voices an explicitly stereotypical view of O, depicting him from the beginning as an animalistic, barbarous, foolish outsider.</p>	Act 3 Scene 3	D tells C that she will speak to O on his behalf. As they approach, I suggests to O that C is guilty. Despite D’s pleas, O refuses to recall C. Once alone with O, I continues to suggest that there is something going on between D and C. O begins to have doubts about his wife’s fidelity. D senses that O is unwell so offers him a handkerchief, his first gift to her. O pushes the handkerchief away and it drops to the floor, where E finds it and hands it to I, who has been eager to obtain it. O returns and demands I give him proof of D’s unfaithfulness. I tells O that when he shared a bedroom with C, he overheard him plotting with D in his sleep. He has also seen C wiping his beard with the handkerchief. O vows that he will tear D apart and makes I swear to kill C.	2) forbear	to refrain or abstain from
	“The Green Eyed Monster” jealousy is aroused		2) circumspection	caution; thoughtfulness
<p>The age of Exploration and the impact of exchange on conceptions of self: In his study of the period, sociologist Daniel Lerner defines the West as a “mobile society”; one characterized by a <i>“mobile sensibility</i>” so adaptive to change that rearrangement of the self–system is its distinctive mode." He established an opposition between traditional societies based on a “highly constrictive personality”, one that resists change and is incapable of grasping the situation of another” with the newly modern West, where the mobile personality of Western society "is distinguished by a high capacity for identification with new aspects of his environment." He labels these terms as forms of <i>empathy</i>, defined as “the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow’s situation” (50). In the West, this capacity fostered first by the physical mobility initiated by the Age of Exploration, then confirmed and broadened by mass media. The play seems to question the association between these faculties and beneficence through I. He, more than any other character, demonstrates these imaginative faculties, using them exclusively for diabolic outcomes.</p>	Act 4 Scene 1	I stokes the flames of jealousy until O collapses in an unconscious fit. When C appears, I tells him that O has epilepsy and if roused will be enraged, so C agrees to return later. As O revives, I urges him to hide and overhear his conversation with C. I and C laugh and joke about B, who loves C, but I tricks O into thinking they are discussing D. To make matters worse, B angrily returns the special handkerchief to C, who has previously given it to her, having discovered it in his chamber, where I had secretly planted it. This charade convinces O of D’s guilt and he vows to kill her. I suggests O should strangle her in bed and he promises to kill C. When D arrives with news from V, she inadvertently ignites O’s fury by referring to her regard for C, for which he strikes her.	2) facile	easily done or performed
	Othello receives “proof”		2) beguile	to influence by trickery
<p>Gender and “sexual order”: The concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign to most in Shakespeare’s day: Adam was created first, and Eve from his body; she was created specifically to give him comfort, and was to be subordinate to him, to obey him and to accept her lesser status. A dominant woman was unnatural, a symptom of disorder. The medieval church had inculcated a view of women that was split between the ideal of the Virgin Mary, and her fallible counterpart, Eve, or her anti-type, the Whore of Babylon. Unfortunately, the Virgin Mary was one of a kind, so there was often a general distrust of women; Renaissance and Medieval literature is often misogynistic. Queen Elizabeth cultivated the view that she was the ideal; Joan of Arc, on the other hand (at least in Shakespeare’s play <i>Henry VI, Part One</i>), was seen as a devil.</p>	Act 5 Scene 1:	Under cover of darkness, I hides, while R strikes the approaching C with his sword but fails to kill him. In defending himself, C seriously wounds R. I secretly stabs C in the leg. His cries are heard by O, who thinks I has fulfilled his promise of killing C. Delighted, O leaves to deal with D. I reveals himself and pretends to respond to the commotion. He finds R and kills him in the darkness. Then he attends to C and accuses B of being behind the attack. Finally, he instructs E to inform O and D.	2) alacrity	cheerful willingness
	The deadly attack on Cassio		3) consecrate	to make or declare sacred
<p>The Age of Exploration: absorption and displacement – sociological reading of early European colonialism, with its displacement and absorption of native cultures, posits that power is exercised by absorbing that which is “other” by partial replication and then displacing the original. This exercise of power connects to Othello’s cultural role in the play and Iago’s role as the arch-mainpulator.</p>	Act 5 Scene 2:	A resolute O approaches the sleeping D, bends over the bed and kisses her. When she wakes, he urges her to pray because he is about to kill her D professes her innocence, insisting she doesn’t love C and never gave him the handkerchief. O tells her that C is dead but her tears at this news provoke him to smother her. E pleads to be let in to the chamber and eventually O obeys. E informs O that R has been killed by C, who is still alive. D revives temporarily and E hears her cries. Her dying words affirm her innocence and she insists that O is not to blame. O and E argue about D until she reveals he has been deceived by her husband, I. E calls for help and when Montano and Gratiano arrive with I, she accuses O of murdering D and I of being a liar. Gratiano brings news from Venice that D’s father, B, has died from grief as a result of her marriage to O. E confirms that she gave the handkerchief to I. O tries to kill I, who fatally stabs E before escaping. The truth discovered, O mourns his innocent D. When I is brought back as a prisoner, O stabs him but fails to kill him. I resolutely refuses to say anything. O’s command in Cyprus is given to C, so he is ruined professionally as well as personally. O stabs himself with a sword he has previously concealed then kisses the lifeless D and dies. It is left to C to decide I’s punishment.	3) wanton	without motive or provocation
	Smothering Love and Exposing Villainy		3) usurped	taken or used by force
			3) sated	satisfied; full
			3) surfeited	indulged in excess
			3) paragon	models of excellence
			4) peevish	annoyed; irritated
			4) impervious	incapable of being persuaded
			4) entreat	ask earnestly; beg
			4) dilatory	tending to waste time
			5) vehement	strongly emotional or vocal
			5) castigation	severe verbal punishment
			5) pernicious	causing harm or ruin
			5) odious	deserving hatred
			5) traduce	speak maliciously and falsely

Characters: motivations and readings

Iago	A working class soldier. Hates O and resents his preference of Cassio for promotion and possibility that O has slept with D. <i>Treats O according to a colonial ideology, as an "erring Barbarian"</i> using rhetoric that involves fears of darkness and passages from the Old Testament that associates black skin with fear. <i>I's subordinate position allows him to conceal his power. The play draws us into his purview, whilst maintaining distance from Othello's consciousness. His name may allude to Santiago, a Spanish conqueror of the Moors, who is famously pictured on a white horse trampling Moors.</i> Crit Interests: the surrogate creative dramatist who relishes ability to bring all characters into submission to his "narrative"; manipulation is based on profound interpersonal intelligence. Coleridge: "fiendish motiveless malignancy." A nihilistic-truth teller , who grasps reality of interaction more than superiors because of cynicism. His reductive truths based on seeing positive abstractions (love/nobility) as trifles that result in self-deception. Conflicted by lack of material success brought by this perspective. Leavis sees him as an externalisation of Othello's weakest fears. Greenblatt sees manipulation based on ability to play on Othello's own fears about his relationship with D as adulterous.
Othello	<i>A general, both an influential figure in Venetian state and an outsider to its social norms. A committed idealist, living for abstract constructs that the play reveals as limited. His final speech sees him clinging on to his self-idealization. Some see him as generous and open, based on his reinstatement of Cassio on the basis of love. Others also blame D and C for making I's manipulations easier. Name may be an allusion to Johnson's Thorello, a jealous husband, which emphasizes the importance of this theme. O is self-critical & hesitant and believes his non-existent limitations with language are caused by race. Has internalised V's social norms in self-identification. An unstable character, evident in contrasting judgments formed about Cassio and Desdemona. Sexually repressed and guilty, his harm of D and self-explores his guilt for erotic drive. Berger sees Othello trapped in sado-masochistic desire for punishment: "the guilty sinner's discourse." O enlists I's help to enact his own self-punishment. Schlegel sees him as a "divided being." At the end of the play, "he suffers as a double man, at once in the higher and the lower sphere in which is being divided." Builds on of the Xtian convert interpretation, which sees O as recanting a faith not fully absorbed in the final scenes. Eliot sees O's final speech as an effort to cheer himself up, a kind of wilful self-delusion. This reading relies upon vision of O as a unified self.</i>
Desdemona	<i>Daughter of nobility, seen by all as pure and chaste. Committed in her idealistic love to O. Resists simplistic black/white good/evil binary constructed by characters like Iago, but figures O's racial character according to another theory of human development (the humours). She argues that southern climate has burned up the hot and moist humours most likely to cause jealousy. Has refused the suits of other men. Naive and youthful, reflected in way she takes up C's cause in spite of severity of his transgression against O. Her desire is motivated by youthful need to prove ability to influence O and public life. She, rather than O, speaks language of "passion," associated by I with O, as he evokes idea of unbridled black sensuality, and racist readings reliant on these associations. Auden unique in his hostility who he sees as active solicitor in relationship and compares her passion to "the romantic crush of a silly schoolgirl rather than a mature affection." He believes exoticism of Othello's adventures, rather than character, is source of fascination. Jan Kott: "The more violently Desdemona becomes engrossed by love, the more of a slut she seems to Othello; a past, present, or future slut. The more she desires, the better she loves, the more readily Othello believes that she can, or has betrayed him."</i>
Cassio	<i>From Florence and lacks connection with Venice and its sense of change/dynamism. An intellectual and a tactician, resented by I for his lack of experience on the battlefield. Eager to be self-lenient and excessively proud of new rank granted by Othello and a snobbish sense of superiority regarding social status. Displays maudlin religiosity in response to his gratitude to Othello. Unstable, evident after his transgressions in Cyprus, whereby he initially takes the blame for his misadventure. Iago manages to convince him of his blamelessness, externalising the blame to the "devil drunkenness." Displays a superficial and misogynistic quality in his behaviour with Bianca. His description of her as a "bauble" reflects his juvenile treatment of her as a plaything. His simple desire for a sexual liaison stands in contrast to unrealistic idealisation of Desdemona, who he sees as an archetype rather than a fully-realised individual.</i>
Emilia	<i>Older and more worldly than D, but develops a close relationship with her. Trapped in an unhappy marriage to most malevolent Shakespearean villain, leads her to formulate a 1D prejudiced view of men that contrasts with D's idealism. She mirrors I's intense gender hostility. Her one flaw, to steal D's handkerchief, causes her death. She does clear D's name and is punished for unmasking I.</i>
Roderigo	<i>Play's most limited character. Rich & unintelligent, thinks that expensive gifts will be enough to get D to fall in love. Iago uses him as he is most vulnerable to manipulation, for which he falls repeatedly. Appears, at times, to function akin to an unreliable narrator, revealing ease with which we can be deceived. Calls Othello "thick lips" and ascribes to racist ideology shared with I.</i>
Bianca	<i>She is in love with Cassio, who sees her as a nuisance. She functions as foil to the idealised D. O fails to recognise the difference between her and D, which reveals the way all women are treated with suspicion in the play. Name symbolises whiteness, innocence and purity, in spite of her role which embodies inverse.</i>

Key concepts and the play's arguments.

Sexual Anxiety, Fear and Disgust	<i>The play is both fascinated and disgusted by the spectacle of sexuality. Deferral charivari in I.1. O substitutes war for love (Mars v Venus), but war is also deferred. O cannot comprehend that D could love him as a real human being, with contradictions & complexities, rather than a pure, inviolable hero with Desdemona hungry for his heroic stories, rather than him.</i>
The unstable nature of the self	<i>The unstable nature of the self, Shakespeare suggests that our sense of self is a mental and social construct and that an "essential," inner I is nothing more than a construct that is often the source of self-delusion. This is evident in the ways these constructs are at the source of each of the characters' downfalls.</i>
Human vulnerability to manipulation	<i>The play seems to argue for the righteousness of noble human abstractions, like love, honour, virtue, whilst revealing the ways in which they invite vulnerability. It is because of these abstractions that Othello is able to prey on the self-delusions of a range of characters in ways that bring them all to ruin. He convinces Cassio that he is too severe a "moralist," his persuasion of Brabantio takes advantage of his deceptive sense of nobility. He takes advantage of the unconscious ways in which people want to see the world and corrodes their own personal vision.</i>
Contrasting forms of love and passion	<i>Desdemona and Othello embody the contrast between youthful, febrile passion and an elder sense of composure and self-restraint. Othello places great value on self-control, which he calls "government." Desdemona, on the other hand, entirely trusts her feelings. Othello only emotionally abandons himself when thinks he has lost the woman he loves. The play appears to be warning about the dangers of singular and excessive forms of regulation.</i>
Relationship between happiness and self-deception	<i>The play exposes the need for suspicion, whilst, at the same time, exposing the way this precludes the possibility of love and happiness. It seems caught between the sense of divine order and its promise of trust, whilst acknowledging the more humanistic cynicism of thinkers like Machiavelli. Issue of trust speaks to political anxieties of the Jacobean era.</i>
Race and cultural conflict	<i>Othello's religion and race are evident throughout, as a bifurcated Christianised Moor living in mercantile Christain Venice. Some have read his final scenes as barbarous reversion. The marriage elopement plot has also been read as a geopolitical metaphor, equivalent to Venice's loss of Cyprus to the Turks. The sexual hostility and interruptions that O and D experience suggests an intense hostility to the spectacle of inter-racial marriage. Finally, O's final scene and disintegration seems to suggest the play is more a parable of the irreconcilable multiplicity of outsiderliness. The play constructs a Venice where racist discourse is prevalent, but not naturalised. I, R and B share a racist worldview that I exploits, but Desdemona does not. The Duke participates in the discourse of race, but is willing to look past it. Shakespeare presents a world where race and its importance are contested.</i>

Motifs and symbols

Motif – sight, blindness & vision: ocular imagery in the play emphasizes unreliability of various "visions." Desdemona sees beyond visible markers of Othello's otherness, even though he can't. Othello, however, demands "ocular proof", but is convinced by unreliable "evidence" whilst Emilia cannot figuratively "see" the evil nature of Iago. This motif represents the way in which judgment itself is unreliable.
Motif – "honesty": Empson traces 52 uses of motif. It can mean: chastity, truth telling, good friendship. These meanings combine ironically, at times: I uses lies to convince O that D is sexually dishonest, whilst pretending to be looking out for a friend. Its polyvalency is marker of unreliability of judgment.
Motif – Plants and vegetation: Iago's speech littered with vegetable metaphors. Behaviour of others seems driven by inevitable natural force (self-deception) which grows if left unchecked. Iago understands these forces best and takes advantage of them. His plots consume other characters and ease with which his "seeds" are planted reveals minds as fertile ground for deceptions and suspicion.
Motif – Animals, beasts & monsters: functions as marker for "civilization" in binary terms, esp. by Venetians. Bestiality of sexual imagery reveals hostility of Venetians when norms are transgressed. O's relationship with D is the central "transgression". O internalises social codes and understands his identity and race on these borrowed terms. Monstrous imagery is grotesque extension.
Symbol – the handkerchief: represents flawed nature of competing "visions" through its polyvalency. Diff ways characters view symbol reveals flaws. For D, its symbol of O's love ; I manip O to see it as a symbol of D herself; its importance to I and D result of its importance to O, who originally sees it as a guarantee of both chastity and virginity (red of straw=blood).
Symbol – the song "Willow": symbolises the guaranteed and perpetuated nature of jealousy and infidelity. To D is represents a melancholy resignation to her alienation from O.
Symbol – the candle: represents the fragility of D's life in the midst of a barrage of hostilities.

Critical approaches

17th C: Thomas Rymer (1693) A Short View of Tragedy A largely negative reading of the play labelling O a "joyless booby" and criticism of the I character for being "too evil to be believed." Perspective resorted to racist ideology by describing the play as a warning about marrying outside race.
Late 18th : Dr Johnson saw the play in positive terms and Othello as an earnest, limited, true tragic hero. He identified in Iago a cool malignity and saw Desdemona as innocent and unconscious of the suspicions of O.
Early 19th C: ST Coleridge Iago demonstrates "motiveless malignity" and insisted on seeing O as a noble, chivalrous Moorish chief, rather than a "Negro." O is not jealous and places D on a pedestal and anything other than perfection is unthinkable and intolerable. William Hazlitt sees I as a diseased intellectual with total indifference to morality.
Early 20th C: AC Bradley rescued O as a tragic hero, claiming his speeches as the most poetic of all Shakespearean heroes. He defends O as a victim of I's irresistible force, going against the grain of racist reading of inner-savagery.
Mid 20th C: F. R Leavis (New Crit) ignoring context and authorial intent, believed I offered values and order lacking in society and was self-sufficient. He argued O destroyed by own egotism and I an externalisation of O's faults.
Recent readings: Race -- Germaine Greer -- sees Iago as an objective correlative of the mindless inattentiveness of racist aggression. Feminist readings have tended to stress the patriarchal fear of female sexuality and to de-essentialize the archetypal readings of D as embodying purity or virtue.
Karen Newman: has focused on D, and explained how she experiences the standard punishment for deceiving, sexually-empowered women, but her love for O is noble and transgresses social norms
Political readings: emphasise the need for a focus on the power structures of the context that impact on the play. Jonathan Dollimore argues that Jacobean Drama reflects social anxieties, especially the conflict between The Divine Right of Kings and the cynical humanism of Machiavelli . Power structures attempt to make the political, social and spiritual metaphysical.