

Plot breakdown	Context	Characters
Iago is angry that Othello, the general of the army, has promoted Cassio to be his lieutenant instead of Iago.	The first act of the play is set in Venice, but then the action changes to Cyprus, which is under threat of invasion from the Turks.	<b>Othello</b> is the play's protagonist. He is a black man, but has been accepted by many of the Venetians. He was a slave, but is now a general in the Venetian army. He serves the Duke but he also has a high rank. He marries Desdemona, but is manipulated by Iago into thinking she has been unfaithful. He is a fierce warrior and also a loving husband, so there's conflict between his personal life and military role. Othello is an eloquent and physically powerful figure, respected by all those around him. In spite of his elevated status, he is nevertheless easy prey to insecurities because of his age, his life as a soldier, and his race. Initially, he is self-controlled but by the end of the play, he's irrational and violent. He's part of society, but still an outsider.
Othello has secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of a senator in Venice.	At the time Shakespeare was writing, Venice was a great trading power which was seen as sophisticated, cultured and wealthy.	<b>Iago</b> is Othello's ancient (junior army officer) and the play's villain. He is cruel, ruthless and manipulates the other characters. While his ostensible reason for desiring Othello's demise is that he has been passed over for promotion to lieutenant, Iago's motivations are never very clearly expressed and seem to originate in an obsessive, almost aesthetic delight in manipulation and destruction.
Iago tells Desdemona's father about the secret marriage to cause trouble for Othello.	Venice was widely known in Europe for its sexual tolerance and Venetian women are often seen as promiscuous.	<b>Desdemona</b> is the daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio. Desdemona and Othello are secretly married before the play begins. While in many ways stereotypically pure and meek, Desdemona is also determined and self-possessed. She is equally capable of defending her marriage, jesting bawdily with Iago, and responding with dignity to Othello's incomprehensible jealousy.
Desdemona's father makes a formal complaint about Othello's behaviour to the Duke of Venice. His complaint is ignored and the Duke sends Othello to Cyprus to continue fighting in a war.	Cyprus is an island that lived under Venetian rule, but was often under threat of invasion from the Turks. It was isolated, war-like and seen as uncivilised.	<b>Cassio</b> is Othello's lieutenant. Cassio is a young and inexperienced soldier, whose high position is much resented by Iago. Truly devoted to Othello, Cassio is extremely ashamed after being implicated in a drunken brawl on Cyprus and losing his place as lieutenant. Iago uses Cassio's youth, good looks, and friendship with Desdemona to play on Othello's insecurities about Desdemona's fidelity.
Othello goes to Cyprus and takes his new wife Desdemona with him, together with Iago and Michael Cassio.	In Elizabethan society, most people had stereotypical views of other races – black people were seen as lustful, savage and were associated with sin. Black characters in Elizabethan literature were usually villains.	
Iago encourages Cassio to get drunk whilst on duty. Cassio ends up in a drunken fight and is demoted from his position as lieutenant.	In Othello, Shakespeare challenged stereotypes by portraying the black man as the noble protagonist and making Iago, a white man, the villain of the play.	
Iago begins to plant seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind about his wife's relationship with Michael Cassio. Iago gets hold of a handkerchief belonging to Desdemona and hides it in Cassio's room pretending it is proof of Desdemona's unfaithfulness.	The plot of Othello was inspired by Un Capitano Moro, a story by an Italian writer called Cinthio. The moral of Cinthio's story is that it is unwise for European women to marry men from other races, but Shakespeare makes his moral more ambiguous.	
Desdemona pleads with Othello to give Cassio his job back. She does this innocently but Othello takes this as proof of her feelings for Cassio.	Early audiences would have been shocked to see a black man marrying a white woman. Shakespeare explores the expectation that interracial marriages are unnatural in his play.	
Iago continues to manipulate Othello to the point where Othello murders his new wife as punishment for her supposed unfaithfulness.	Early audiences would have been shocked to see a black man marrying a white woman. Shakespeare explores the expectation that interracial marriages are unnatural in his play.	
Iago's wife, Emilia, tells Othello that Iago has lied. Othello realises his tragic mistake and commits suicide over the body of his wife as Iago is arrested.	Cultural context: the chain of being; nature, black and white; reason; evil spirits; damnation; lying; jealousy; chaos; courtly love; cuckoldry; chastity.	

### Vocabulary

A **tragedy** is branch of drama that treats in a serious and dignified style the sorrowful or terrible events encountered or caused by a heroic individual.

**Tragic terminology:** a worthy but flawed protagonist, serious tone/formality/dignity, peripeteia, catharsis, hamartia, anagnorisis.

A **domestic tragedy** is drama in which the tragic protagonists are ordinary middle-class or lower-class individuals. This is in contrast to classical and Neoclassical tragedy, in which the protagonists are of kingly or aristocratic rank and their downfall is an affair of state as well as a personal matter.

**Moors** were a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent who populated the Maghreb region of northwest Africa during the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

A **cuckold** is a man who has an unfaithful wife, but is the last person to find out.

A **foil** is a character who contrasts to the protagonist.

**Vice characters** personify evil and immorality in plays.

**Alienation** is a state of being cut off or separate from a person or group of people.

A Machiavellian is a term used to describe someone whose sole purpose is to manipulate and corrupt others for their own gain.

**Self-dramatization** means to see and present oneself as an important or dramatic figure.

**Pestilence** is a fatal epidemic disease.

**Deus ex machina** is a plot device whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem in a story is suddenly or abruptly resolved by an unexpected and unlikely occurrence.

### Vocabulary

**Magnitude** is the great size or extent of something.

**Dramatic irony** is irony that is inherent in speeches or a situation of a drama and is understood by the audience but not grasped by the characters in the play.

**Plausible** (of an argument or statement) seeming reasonable or probable.

**Transcendence** is the quality of being able to go beyond normal limits or boundaries.

**Debasement** is the action of reducing the quality or value of something; the fact or state of being lowered in dignity, character, or importance.

**Linguistic convergence** describes how an individual's language changes to reveal that of another person. This is usually as a result of prolonged contact and emotional closeness.

**Pagan** (especially in historical contexts) a person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main or recognized religions.

**Self-aggrandising** means to promote oneself as being powerful or important.

**Monstrosity** a thing which is outrageously evil or wrong.

### Themes

- Race
- Christianity
- Morality
- Tragedy
- Truth and deception
- Social class
- Jealousy
- Gender relations

### Characters

**Roderigo** is a jealous suitor of Desdemona. Young, rich, and foolish, Roderigo is convinced that if he gives Iago all of his money, Iago will help him win Desdemona's hand. Repeatedly frustrated as Othello marries Desdemona and then takes her to Cyprus, Roderigo is ultimately desperate enough to agree to help Iago kill Cassio after Iago points out that Cassio is another potential rival for Desdemona.

**Bianca** is a courtesan, or prostitute, in Cyprus. Bianca's favourite customer is Cassio, who teases her with promises of marriage.

**Emelia** is Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant. A cynical, worldly woman, she is deeply attached to her mistress and distrustful of her husband.

**Brabantio** is Desdemona's father, a somewhat blustering and self-important Venetian senator. As a friend of Othello, Brabantio feels betrayed when the general marries his daughter in secret.

### Further Reading

Aristotle's *Poetics*

A.C. Bradley *Shakespearean Tragedy* 1904

Thomas Rymer *A Short View of Tragedy* 1693

Samuel Johnson *Preface to Shakespeare* 1765

A.C. Bradley *Shakespearean Tragedy* 1904

Nietzsche *Dramatic Theory*

F.R. Leavis *Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero*

Marilyn French *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* 1982

Ania Loomba *Othello, Race and Society* 1989

Jackie Chirco *Gender Conflict in Othello, 'How Women Find Power in a Misogynist* 2005