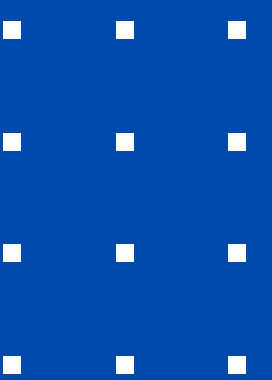
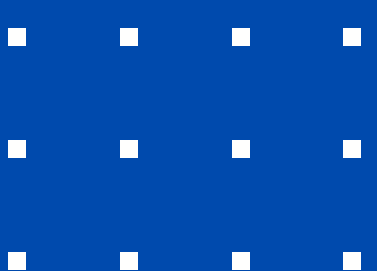


'OTHELLO'

EASY ENGLISH:
COMPREHENSIVE
STUDY GUIDE



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PLOT SUMMARY

"Othello," one of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedies, is the tale of a valiant Moorish general in the service of Venice, trapped in a web of deceit and jealousy, spun by his malevolent ensign, Iago. The story begins in Venice, with Roderigo, a wealthy individual, bitterly conversing with Iago. Desperate to win over Desdemona's affection, Roderigo is infuriated to learn she has married Othello. Iago, equally aggrieved, confesses his hatred for Othello for promoting Michael Cassio over himself. Iago's manipulative nature comes to the fore as he seeks vengeance against Othello by ensnaring him in a destructive plot.

At Iago's instigation, Roderigo alerts Desdemona's father, Brabantio, of her elopement with Othello. Brabantio confronts Othello, but the Duke of Venice, finding Othello's and Desdemona's love genuine, sends Othello to Cyprus to defend it against the Turks. Iago, joining the group traveling to Cyprus, sees in Cassio's courtesy towards Desdemona an opportunity to ignite Othello's jealousy.

In Cyprus, after Othello has left to consummate his marriage, a duplicitous Iago gets Cassio drunk and orchestrates a brawl that leads to Cassio's dismissal. Iago convinces Cassio to appeal to Desdemona, intending to use their interactions to fuel Othello's suspicions of infidelity. Desdemona's genuine attempts to reinstate Cassio inadvertently stoke Othello's growing mistrust.

Iago continues his insidious manipulation by planting Desdemona's handkerchief, a token from Othello, in Cassio's lodging, deceiving Othello into believing it is proof of their affair. Othello, overcome with jealousy and rage, vows to retaliate against Desdemona and Cassio.

Othello's jealousy festers, leading to physical and verbal outbursts against Desdemona. As these suspicions consume him, Iago further ensnares Roderigo in the plot, convincing him to kill Cassio. The attempt fails; Cassio wounds Roderigo, who is then killed by Iago.

The climax unfolds with Othello murdering Desdemona, convinced she has betrayed him. Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid, discovers the murder and reveals Iago's treachery. In the chaos, Iago kills Emilia to silence her, but the truth about his manipulative scheme becomes known. In the devastating aftermath, Othello, realising his tragic error and Desdemona's innocence, kills himself. Iago is arrested and remains defiant, refusing to explain his actions. The Venetian



authorities arrive to deal with the tragic events, with Cassio appointed as Othello's successor in Cyprus.

This dense network of betrayal and deception comes to a catastrophic resolution, showcasing the potent effects of jealousy, the complexity of human motives, and the precariousness of trust. The characters' fates are tragically entwined, leaving an enduring reflection on the darker aspects of human nature.



CHARACTER

Oedipus

Oedipus, the deeply complex protagonist of Sophocles' tragedy, is a figure of high status and tragic flaw. Although he begins his tale as the wise and powerful ruler of Thebes, Oedipus is not without his vulnerabilities. He grapples with issues of identity and the consequences of ignorance, all against the backdrop of a plague that ravages his city—a plague that, unbeknownst to him, is a result of his own actions.

The character of Oedipus thrives on the certainty of knowledge and the power it grants. Famed for solving the riddle of the Sphinx, he becomes a symbol of intellectual prowess, a man who believes unwaveringly in his own logic and detective skills. There is a sense of dramatic irony in Oedipus's hubris, as audiences are acutely aware that his trust in his intellect will lead to his downfall. His investigation into the death of the former king, Laius, reveals Oedipus's determination and his commitment to Thebes, as well as a desperate desire for clarity that ultimately proves to be his undoing.

The tragic hero is dogged by a prophecy that predicted he would kill his father and marry his mother, which creates a dramatic tension between fate and free will. Oedipus's fleeing from Corinth, in an attempt to outmaneuver the oracles, only sets him on a path to fulfill them. His fate is sealed by his past actions, which Sophocles slowly unravels as the play progresses.

Deeply human in his emotions, Oedipus is both self-assured and quick to anger, often directing his rage at those who hint at the truth of his origins, such as Tiresias, the blind prophet. It is through this interaction that his paradoxical nature as a blind seer becomes most evident. Oedipus's eventual true physical blindness amplifies the play's recurring motifs on the limits of sight and knowledge.

Ultimately, the fall of Oedipus is a poignant examination of human frailty. It shows that, despite our efforts to control our lives and destinies, there are forces—whether they be the gods, fate, or simply the unknown aspects of our own lives—that we can neither predict nor prevent. His final realisation of the truth is crushing; it is a testament to the character's tragic stature that, even in his complete devastation, he seeks to take responsibility for his fate, punishing himself for actions committed in ignorance.



Iago

Iago, the malevolent ensign in Shakespeare's "Othello," stands out as both a deviant character and a master manipulator, fascinating for his unparalleled malice and the seemingly unmotivated actions that lead to the tragic downfalls of others. His character is defined by a disturbing lack of clear motivation for his treacherous deeds.

From the outset, Iago expresses resentment toward Othello for promoting Cassio over him, a decision he perceives as an injustice against his own merit and experience. He further suspects Othello of an affair with his wife, Emilia, which adds a personal vendetta to his general disdain for the Moor. The possible infidelity ignites a kind of tit-for-tat mentality in Iago, where he aims to be **"even with him, wife for wife"**. Yet these reasons alone do not seem to justify the deep-seated hatred he harbors, nor do they fully explain the extent of his cruel intentions.

Iago displays moments of cowardice, such as when he unexpectedly kills his wife to silence her from revealing the truth about his diabolical plans. This act also hints at a broader misogynistic attitude that permeates his actions throughout the play, as he sometimes shows a demeaning and callous disposition toward women.

Aside from his dealings with others, Iago seems to take an unhealthy pleasure in preventing Othello from enjoying marital bliss, which has led some readers to suggest an underlying, unrequited passion for Othello. His twisted sense of love reveals itself through his manipulations that effectively sever Othello's ties with Desdemona.

Iago's mastery over manipulation is truly his most daunting trait. He possesses a unique talent for understanding and exploiting the desires of those around him. Be it by skillfully misdirecting Othello towards jealousy or convincing Roderigo to pursue fruitless endeavors, Iago weaves a net of deceit with remarkable ease and confidence. Such is the level of his craft that he secures the unquestioning trust of those he seeks to destroy, which ultimately proves fatal for Othello.

Behind his guise of honesty and loyalty lies an inclination towards chaos and destruction. His ability to deceive the other characters stems from his profound understanding of human nature and his willingness to exploit it for his own amusement or gain. Iago's pernicious influence in "Othello" is felt from beginning to end, casting a shadow over the actions and fates of all the



central characters. His blend of charm and evil, wisdom and immorality, makes him one of the most formidable antagonists in literature, embodying the very idea that the most dangerous villains are those who masquerade as friends.

Desdemona

Desdemona, the young and virtuous wife of Othello, is a character marked by depth and complexity, often underestimated in literary criticism. Capable of both vigor and vulnerability, Desdemona initiates her trajectory in the play with clarity of mind and spirited autonomy, as she openly declares the divided loyalty between her father and her husband ("**My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty**").

Her strength of character is further evident in her indignation at being struck by Othello, a moment in which she asserts her worth and integrity ("**I have not deserved this**"). This assertion of her dignity flies in the face of the stereotype of Desdemona as a passive and submissive victim. What's more, Desdemona exudes a youthful and playful energy, as seen in her witty and perhaps unexpectedly risqué banter with Iago. This not only highlights her multifaceted personality but also underlines her status as someone recently married and very much alive to the joys and intimacies of that state.

However, Desdemona also embodies the role of the obedient wife, a characteristic that manifests in her tragic acceptance of responsibility for her own murder. In her dying words, she absolves Othello of his heinous act, expressing her enduring love and loyalty despite her cruel fate ("**Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell**"). This moment encapsulates the paradoxical nature of her characterisation: a woman who is both self-effacing and assertive, independent yet profoundly connected to her husband.

The distressing nature of Desdemona's death—smothered with a pillow in the confines of her marital bed, cocooned in the very sheets that symbolise her nuptials—serves as a potent symbol of her entire narrative arc. It symbolises the choking of her agency and voice by the very same structures—marriage, duty, love—that had once empowered her. From her eloquent self-advocacy to her stifled attempts to defend her integrity, Desdemona's journey highlights the precarious balance women of her time had to maintain between independence and subjugation.

Forebodingly aware of her impending demise, Desdemona foreshadows her end by requesting her bridal sheets be used as her shroud should she die before Othello. Her haunting rendition



of "Willow," a song of love and loss, heralds her own story of forsaken love. Yet in the face of despair, she remains steadfast in her innocence and even extends forgiveness to Othello, which may prompt the audience to reconcile with him as well.

Desdemona is ultimately a tragic figure, one that Shakespeare crafts with nuance and tenderness. Her final act of forgiveness is not a testament to weakness but a profound expression of her capacity for love and compassion, transcending the torments she has endured.

Emilia

Emilia, the wife of Iago and attendant to Desdemona, initially seems to embody the role of a compliant and unwitting accomplice in her husband's malign plot against Othello and Desdemona. Early in the play, she facilitates a meeting between Desdemona and Cassio at Iago's behest, hinting at a passive, if not somewhat complicit, participation ("**my wife must move for Cassio to her mistress**"). When Emilia happens upon Desdemona's fabled handkerchief, she remarks on her husband's prior insistence on obtaining the item, showing only a slight suspicion of his intentions and scarcely protesting his refusal to explain his plans ("**my wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it**"). This lack of resistance, coupled with Iago's disrespectful comments towards her ("**It is a common thing... to have a foolish wife**"), suggests a subservient disposition and acquiescence to Iago's schemes.

However, Emilia's character arc reveals a more perspicacious and self-aware woman than her initial actions imply. She develops into a commentator on the societal wrongs inflicted on women, recognising the vulnerabilities they face: "**If wives do fall... it is their husbands' faults**". Her burgeoning disillusionment with marital dynamics and the treatment of women provides a candid critique of gender relations.

In stark contrast to her earlier passivity, Emilia demonstrates boldness and outright defiance when faced with the tragic consequences of Iago's manipulations. When Othello murders Desdemona, Emilia confronts him with unwavering courage, excoriating his actions and vowing to expose the truth, even at the risk of her own life ("**I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives**"). This turning point in Emilia's character illuminates her capacity for moral courage and her shift from an unsuspecting pawn to an assertive seeker of justice.

Ultimately, Emilia becomes a tragic figure mirroring Desdemona in her fate—a woman killed for unveiling a truth her husband



wished to silence. In her final moments, Emilia is steadfast in her denunciation of Iago, despite his threats, firmly insisting on speaking freely to reveal the heinous deceit ("**I will speak as liberal as the north**"). Her death is thus not just a personal tragedy but a poignant commentary on the place of women within the social order of the play, where their assertions of truth are met with fatal retribution.

Emilia's death serves as an attempt at atonement for her unwitting role in Iago's ploys. Her transformation from silent complicity to outspoken defiance is a bold stand against the manipulations that have led to Desdemona's demise. Her final words, "**So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true**", express a devout hope for redemption through her last act of truth-telling. Yet her ultimate fate, much like Desdemona's, underscores the grim reality for the women of the play: challenging the patriarchal status quo comes with dire consequences.

Cassio

Cassio, depicted in Shakespeare's classic "Othello," is a critical character who unwittingly propels the plot as a tool in Iago's conniving plan. While his internal musings are not thoroughly exposed, his charismatic and appealing nature forms the perfect bedrock for Iago's machinations. Iago himself comments on Cassio's smooth disposition and handsome appearance as traits that make him an ideal candidate to be framed as a lover and incite jealousy. This perceived threat of Cassio as a possible rival in love is crucial in driving Iago's plot forward and ensuring its believability.

His natural charm and tendency towards courtly behavior towards women, though innocent, are susceptible to malicious interpretation. When Cassio interacts with Desdemona, his polite gallantry is twisted by Iago into evidence of infidelity. Cassio's deep sense of honor and decency further distances him from any crude discourse about Desdemona, emphasizing his virtue and respect for her. The contrast between his dignified stance and his fall from grace, as he laments the loss of his reputation after a staged drunken debacle, highlights his personal valuation of honor and integrity.

Cassio's character is marked by a degree of naiveté and trustfulness, perhaps attributable to his Florentine background and lesser military experience when compared to his Venetian counterparts. Despite these qualities, or perhaps because of them, Cassio's trajectory in the play mirrors that of Desdemona, with both characters being unjustly accused due to misconceptions about their nature.



Ultimately, Cassio undergoes a significant transformation, shedding his innocence as he learns of Iago's betrayal. By the play's end, he helps Othello recognise the true depth of Iago's perfidy. Cassio's elevation to a central role in the governance of Cyprus by Ludovico signifies his evolution from a guileless soldier to a potentially wiser and more astute leader, entrusted with the solemn responsibility of dealing justly with Iago's crimes.

The shattering betrayals and violence that Cassio witnesses change him, presumably hardening him against future deceptions and grooming him for capable leadership. Thus, Cassio's development from a duped subordinate into a commanding officer embodies a maturation process, illustrating the transformative power of adversity and the eventual triumph of virtue over deceit.

Roderigo

Roderigo, in Shakespeare's "Othello," is a character instrumental to Iago's plot against the Moor. His defining characteristic throughout the play is his susceptibility to manipulation due to his gullible and weak nature. His anger and envy over Othello's marriage to Desdemona render him an easy target for Iago, who inflames Roderigo's emotions for his own ends. This exploitable trust illuminates Roderigo's simplicity and lack of judgment, qualities that Iago disparages even while making use of them for his nefarious purposes.

Roderigo's fixation on Desdemona, despite being unequivocally rebuffed, denotes his inability to recognise or respect her agency and autonomy. In contrast to Othello, whose love for Desdemona is enriched by humility and respect, Roderigo's approach is superficial and materialistic, as he attempts to secure her affection with gifts rather than personal virtue.

As Iago orchestrates each step of his treacherous strategy, Roderigo is consistently maneuvered into complicity, regardless of his own reservations or the moral reprehensibility of the deeds. His willingness to engage in schemes such as the attempted murder of Cassio—albeit without earnest commitment—highlights a perilous and self-centered impotence. He remarks on his own foolishness, which has cost him dearly, indicating a slight cognisance of his being duped by Iago ("**I do follow here in the chase not like a hound that hunts but one that fills up the cry. My money is almost spent I have been tonight exceedingly well cudgelled; and I think the issue will be I shall have so much experience for my pains**").



He is an embodiment of gullibility and unreciprocated obsession, serving as a foil to Othello. Both men are manipulated by Iago, but Roderigo lacks the complexity and heroic stature of Othello. His presence thus amplifies the tragedy of Othello, who, despite his noble qualities, falls prey to the same manipulations that ensnare a character as foolish as Roderigo. Yet, despite Roderigo's shallow and insipid qualities, the audience may be inclined to pity him as a victim of Iago's deceit, a pawn sacrificed in a much larger game of vengeance and jealousy. Roderigo's journey is marked by an oblivious descent into the darker recesses of manipulation and betrayal, culminating in a realisation of his misuse but without any redemption or resurgence from his fallibility.



T H E M E S

Military heroism and love

In Shakespeare's "Othello," the theme of the incompatibility of military heroism and love emerges as a poignant and tragic undercurrent that ultimately steers the narrative towards its disastrous conclusion. At the heart of this theme lies the conflict between the demands of a soldier's duty and the vulnerabilities of the human heart. Othello's own words encapsulate the tension between these two worlds, as he consecrates his soul and fortune to the honor and valor of military duty ("**to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate**"). He appeals to the Venetian lords to permit Desdemona's accompanying him to war, arguing not for his carnal satisfaction but to honor her wishes and mental freedom ("**But to be free and bounteous to her mind**"). He vows not to let his love interfere with his martial responsibilities, assuring that the romance will not corrupt his professional obligations ("**That my disports corrupt and taint my business**").

The irony of Othello's belief lies in the tragic unraveling of his personal life due to his inability to separate the battlefield's discipline and distrust from his marital relationship. The honorable qualities that endear Othello to Desdemona—his courage, leadership, and tales of valor—become overshadowed by the vulnerability these same attributes create within the sphere of love. His experiences in war, upon which his identity as a hero is based, leave him ill-equipped to navigate the subtleties and vulnerabilities inherent in his marriage.

The play vividly illustrates that the very elements that make a great warrior, such as decisiveness, authority, and a propensity for action, can be detrimental in love, leading to jealousy and impulsive decisions. Othello's precipitous transition from loving husband to jealous executioner underscores the contention that the control and suspicion essential on the battleground are antithetical to the trust and openness required in a loving relationship. The tragic hero's military mindset prompts him to view Desdemona's supposed infidelity as a battle to be won—a confrontation with an enemy rather than an occasion for discourse or reflection.

Furthermore, the distinct martial values—those of honor and reputation—are shown to exacerbate the conflict between love and duty. Othello's preoccupation with his reputation impels him towards a catastrophic decision-making process, as he perceives Desdemona's alleged unfaithfulness as a personal



affront and a blemish on his honor—a fate worse than death for a soldier of his stature.

In summary, the incompatibility of military heroism and love in "Othello" signals an inevitable clash between public duty and private sentiment, wherein the virtues of one realm become vices in another. Iago's manipulations only intensify this conflict, twisting Othello's virtues into fatal flaws. The tragedy of Othello's fall is not merely a tale of deception; it is the calamitous result of trying to reconcile irreconcilable modes of life within one fragile human existence. The stark chasm between the realms of martial prowess and affection ultimately suggests that the soldier's glory on the battlefield offers little armor against the assaults of passion and the vulnerabilities of the heart.

Isolation

The theme of isolation in "Othello" is a critical element that underscores the tragic trajectory of the play's events. This motif is most acutely observed in the case of its titular character, Othello, who is distanced not only physically from his social surroundings but also psychologically, which paves the way for his tragic downfall.

Othello's isolation is initially a product of his racial and cultural difference in Venice, which Iago exacerbates for his manipulative ends. The poignant soliloquy in which Othello bemoans the loss of his reputation showcases his deeply felt alienation, **"O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial"**. In this line, Othello articulates a social death that precedes his literal end, demonstrating how fundamental his esteem and integration within Venetian society are to his identity.

Iago, the play's conniving antagonist, strategically deepens Othello's sense of isolation by weaving a web of lies, notably he warns Othello, **"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock The meat it feeds on"**. Here, Iago both isolates Othello from the truth and projects onto him feelings of envy and suspicion, leading Othello further into psychological seclusion. The continued use of manipulation contingently severs Othello's ties with those who would support him, most cruelly reflected in his relationship with Desdemona.

Desdemona, too, becomes tragically isolated, particularly in her marital relationship. Her detached situation is represented in her desperate expression, **"And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then When your eyes roll so"**. Her isolation becomes literal and fatal in her bedchamber, the very space she should share intimately with Othello. With this private geography turned into her



deathbed, Desdemona's isolation comes to a deadly crescendo, highlighting the devastating effects of disrupted communication and emotional separation.

Similarly, Cassio, once Othello's esteemed lieutenant, finds himself socially isolated following his demotion, a state emblematic of his fall from grace within the military ranks he cherished. He ruefully admits, **"I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial"**. This declaration echoes the gravity of his social exclusion as Cassio's standing was more than a position—it was his entire identity.

Isolation in "Othello" serves as both a weapon wielded with precision by Iago and a condition that engulfs the characters. Each instance of isolation underpins the broader narrative of dissolution and tragedy that grips the play, affirming it as a perilous emotional state that propels individuals towards ruin. The lack of veritable kinship and support, as well as the dereliction of open and honest dialogue, reveals isolation not merely as the absence of company, but as a fertile ground for mistrust and misunderstanding to take root and flourish with disastrous consequences. The characters' disparate experiences of isolation culminate in a shared destiny where loneliness and seclusion from community and compassion precipitate downfall, accentuating the inherent dangers when one is cut adrift from the anchor of human connection.

Jealousy

Jealousy, the catalyst for tragedy in Shakespeare's "Othello," is a consuming force that drives the characters towards destruction. Iago, often cited as Shakespeare's most sinister villain, consciously plays upon this visceral emotion, invoking the image of jealousy as a **"green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on"**. This metaphor vividly emphasises the destructive nature of jealousy, which both sustains and derides those it possesses. It feeds upon the soul and malcontents the spirit, amounting to a state of living damnation for the jealous individual.

Othello himself is transformed by jealousy, departing from the valorous and dignified general to a man tormented by doubt and suspicion. Iago's insinuations about Desdemona's faithfulness and his fabrications regarding Cassio spark an internal struggle within Othello. His descent into the hell of jealousy reflects the swift devastation it wreaks: **"O misery!"**. Othello's initial disbelief in the possibility that he could become enveloped in jealousy, **"Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy, / To follow still the changes of the moon / With fresh suspicions?"**, starkly contrasts with the unyielding grip of jealousy that soon



overtakes him.

The irony of Iago's warning about the dangers of jealousy is that while he voices a wish to be spared from it, "**Good heaven, the souls of all my tribe defend / From jealousy!**", he actively sows and cultivates it in others to suit his agenda. His orchestration brings about a state in Othello where the Moor, who had previously found richness in his contentedness with Desdemona ("**Poor and content is rich, and rich enough**", now foresees only poverty in his relentless jealousy, which marks his downfall and eventual tragic end.

Iago's manipulation of Othello is particularly sinister because it exploits Othello's intimate relationship with Desdemona, twisting his profound love into something insidious and dangerous. The jealousy which unfolds in Othello's heart undermines his rationality, overtaking his sense of justice and his previously steadfast devotion. The emotion Iago instills in Othello is like a poison, transforming his love into a weapon against the very person he cherishes the most.

Through the portrait of jealousy in "Othello," Shakespeare meticulously examines the thin line between intense love and destructive suspicion. The potent combination of Iago's mendacity and Othello's vulnerability results in a powerful illustration of how jealousy can overtake wisdom, honesty, and trust, leading to irrevocable acts and irrevocable loss. The play deftly navigates the human capacity for jealousy, warning of its dangers and its inevitable results. Thus, jealousy is not just a theme but a formidable, active agent within the play, one that shapes the trajectory of the narrative and delivers its most gut-wrenching outcomes.

Deception and treachery

Deception and treachery lie at the heart of Shakespeare's "Othello," as catalysts for the tragedy that unfolds. The plot is rife with deceit, most of which is masterminded by the enigmatic Iago, whose machinations sow discord and misery. From the onset, Iago reveals his nefarious intent, admitting that his malice "**Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards**". This metaphor lays bare the destructive quality of his deceptions, which eat away at the fabric of other characters' lives as they do his soul.

Iago's plot to deceive Othello is rooted in personal envy and the unproven suspicion of his own wife's infidelity with Othello, which he projects onto Othello's marital life. He aims to poison Othello's mind with jealousy "**so strong / That judgement cannot cure**", tapping into the destructive potential of betrayal. His treachery



is carefully veiled, as he notes, **"Knavery's plain face is never seen till us'd"**. This line encapsulates the guile inherent in deception; the damage it causes becomes apparent only when it is too late.

The diabolical cunning with which Iago maneuvers is displayed through his perfidious manipulation of Cassio, who becomes an unwitting accomplice in the scheme against Othello: **"Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me, / For making him egregiously an ass / And practicing upon his peace and quiet / Even to madness"**. Iago's admission here lays out his intricate plan to play upon the insecurities and trust of Othello by making Cassio, symbol of virtue and loyalty, the object of his suspicion.

Through Iago's deceits, the play explores the danger of treachery cloaked in a facade of honesty; Iago is repeatedly referred to as **"honest Iago,"** a bitter irony that highlights how deception can thrive under the guise of trust and friendship. Each dishonest act brings forth ruin and forces the characters to confront the disastrous consequences of misplaced trust.

In "Othello," deception is not merely a theme but a vehicle that drives the play to its tragic end. It lays bare the fragile nature of perception and the ease with which the truth can be obscured. The layers of treachery and betrayal suffuse the play, overshadowing reason, and virtue with suspicion and cynicism, serving as a warning of the perils of placing faith in appearances and the folly of overlooking the duplicitous potential of those closest to us.

Justice

In "Othello," the theme of justice is intricately bound to the unfolding of the characters' fates and the resolution of the drama's central conflicts. While the Venetian society depicted in the play upholds certain ideals of justice, the personal vendettas and manipulations at play expose a more complex and often perverse understanding of what constitutes just action.

Othello, a noble and revered military leader, first approaches the concept of justice with an adherence to fairness and a confidence in his own judgement. However, his faith in justice becomes warped by Iago's deceitful machinations, leading him to commit one of the gravest injustices in the play. Convinced of Desdemona's infidelity and believing it to be his right to punish her, Othello declares, **"Get me some poison, Iago; this night"**. This moment illustrates both his susceptibility to Iago's insinuations and his deep moral confusion, where he equates his impulse for revenge with the execution of justice.



Iago's response, "**Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated**", further corrupts the notion of justice by suggesting a form of execution that is both deeply personal and symbolic. The bed, a private space of marital intimacy and trust, becomes a perverse site of 'justice.' Othello's satisfaction with Iago's idea, "**The justice of it pleases**", reflects how his perception of justice is profoundly distorted, equating the act of murder with rightful retribution.

The play does not allow this warped justice to prevail, however. Instead, Shakespeare crafts a resolution where the true nature of justice is restored, although not without severe and tragic costs. In the end, justice in "Othello" is not merely about punishment; it encompasses the broader themes of righteousness and equity that have been violated throughout the play. It suggests that justice, when influenced by unchecked emotions such as jealousy and rage, can devolve into mere justification for one's actions, ultimately highlighting the perilous balance between administering justice and succumbing to personal vendetta.



SYMBOLS

The handkerchief

The handkerchief in Shakespeare's "Othello" is a complex symbol infused with deep significance, both in terms of plot development and thematic exploration. A seemingly trivial object, the handkerchief is laden with history and meaning, as revealed when Othello explains its origins: **"That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give"**. It is said to hold mystical properties since it was given by a charmer who could **"almost read / The thoughts of people"**, which underscores the handkerchief's connection to themes of fate and foreboding. Othello's mother used it to maintain his father's love, and Othello, in turn, gives it to Desdemona, both as a token of his love and, unbeknownst to her, a test of her fidelity.

The handkerchief's journey through the play becomes emblematic of the characters' interconnected fates and the destructive power of misinterpreted signs. Iago uses the handkerchief, **"a token from Othello"**, to weave his lies more tightly around Othello, convincing him of Desdemona's alleged infidelity. When Iago states, **"I know not that: but such a handkerchief-- / I am sure it was your wife's--did I today / See Cassio wipe his beard with"**, he exploits the token's shared history and the trust Othello places in it to deceive Othello and incite his jealousy.

As the tragedy unfolds, the handkerchief transforms from a pledge of love to a symbol of betrayal and jealousy, reflecting the play's broader themes of trust and honesty. Its manipulation by Iago is particularly heartbreaking because of its significance to Othello, revealing the immense power that such a token can hold over the human heart and mind. The handkerchief's significance is amplified by its absence; once lost by Desdemona, it leads Othello to conclude that **"Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face"**, suggesting that Desdemona's supposed infidelity has dishonored her as much as his blackness supposedly taints him.

Ultimately, the handkerchief represents the perils of giving physical objects undue dominion over our affections and beliefs. Its role in the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona is a powerful reminder of the human tendency to infer meaning from the insignificant, to read signs where none exist, and to allow such signs to drive us to unreasonable ends. It is a symbol that encapsulates the themes of jealousy and perception that



underpin the tragedy, serving as both a literal and figurative centerpiece to the unraveling of trust and the manifestation of misplaced judgement that lies at the heart of the play.

The "Willow" song

The "Willow" song in "Othello" is a poignant symbol that encapsulates the themes of loss, forsaken love, and the forsaken woman's lament. The song is sung by Desdemona as she prepares for bed, unaware that it is to be the final night of her life. It is introduced when she asks Emilia to lay her bridal sheets on the bed and, if she should die, to shroud her in them: **"That song tonight / Will not go from my mind"**. The song hearkens to her mother's maid Barbary, who also died of a broken heart after being betrayed by her lover: **"She was in love, and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her"**.

Desdemona's choice to sing "Willow" foreshadows her own fate and reflects on her intuitive sense of sadness and disenchantment. The lyrics of the song resonate with the imagery of weeping willow, traditionally associated with sorrow and mourning, and thereby hint at her impending doom. The song's refrain, **"Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve"**, eerily echoes Desdemona's forgiving nature, even as she faces the ultimate betrayal from Othello. The willow's connotations with forsaken love come to life as Desdemona unwittingly parallels the song's narrative with her plight, emphasizing the tragic irony of her situation.

Further, the "Willow" song serves as a counterpoint to the masculine world of war, honor, and betrayal that permeates the play. As a woman's lament, it lends a haunting voice to the otherwise silent suffering of female characters like Desdemona and Emilia, who are otherwise largely powerless against the deceit and manipulation of men like Iago. It is a somber meditation on the vulnerability of women subjected to the whims of men, highlighting the enduring theme of gender and the imbalance of power and autonomy between men and women in the play.

The mournful strains of "Willow" capture the essence of Desdemona's tragic innocence and her poignant resignation to her fate. Through this symbol, Shakespeare delves into the emotional landscape of his heroine, providing a moving contrast to the external forces of duplicity and malice that dominate the play. The song's recurring motif serves as a subtle, yet powerful representation of the tragic undercurrents that flow through "Othello," culminating in a symbol that is as enduringly haunting as the events it presages.



The candle

The candle in Shakespeare's "Othello," particularly in the climactic bedroom scene, operates as a multifaceted symbol. It denotes the transience of life, the introspection of the murderer, and the tension between light and darkness, both literally and metaphorically.

As Othello prepares to kill Desdemona, he reflects on the action he is about to take: **"Put out the light, and then put out the light"**. The repeated phrase first refers to the candle's flame and then to Desdemona's life, underscoring the irreversible nature of murder versus the simple act of snuffing out a candle. Othello's musing about the candle reveals an internal struggle, recognising that extinguishing a life is a much graver act, lacking the possibility of reversal: **"If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, / I can again thy former light restore, / Should I repent me"**.

Othello's invocation of the "flaming minister" suggests a recognition of the innate divinity within Desdemona, likening her existence to a sanctified light. The candle thus becomes an emblem of Desdemona's purity and innocence, intensifying the agony and doubt Othello experiences as he contemplates her murder. His struggle with the act he is about to commit captures the thematic interplay between light as knowledge and wisdom, against the darkness wrought by ignorance and deceit throughout the play.

Moreover, the candlelight casts a soft and intimate illumination within the bedroom, stressing the tragic disintegration of intimacy and trust within this private space. It signals the last flicker of enlightenment before Othello is consumed by the darkness of Iago's lies and his own jealousy: **"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men"**. Here, Othello's delusion is laid bare—the belief that his act of murder is a perverse form of justice or protection.

As such, the candle in "Othello" is not merely an object within the scene but a layered and potent symbol representing life, clarity of thought, moral choice, and the fragile boundary between illumination and darkness. It evokes the themes of the precariousness of life, the weight of decisions, and the desolation that can result from a mind clouded by jealousy and betrayal. The extinguishing of the candle foreshadows the emotional and moral darkness that soon envelops Othello, as he extinguishes the light of his own honor and Desdemona's life in one fateful act.



Animal imagery

In "Othello," Shakespeare employs animal imagery as a complex symbol to elucidate themes of savagery, sexuality, and race. From the very beginning, Iago crudely uses such imagery to provoke Desdemona's father, Brabantio, by alerting him to his daughter's elopement with Othello: **"you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you"**. The reference to a **"Barbary horse"** dehumanises Othello, reducing him to a bestial figure, which reflects both Iago's own prejudices and the racial attitudes of the time. This invocation of animalistic characteristics to describe interracial relationships serves to expose the characters' underlying fears and attitudes toward race and the "other."

Iago's insinuation that Desdemona and Othello are **"now making the beast with two backs"** further emphasises this point. His need to depict their union in such a base, carnal light, rather than acknowledging the genuine affection the couple shares, is a powerful example of how animal symbols are utilised to challenge the audience's perception of relationships and to amplify societal taboos concerning race and sexuality in the play.

Animal symbolism continually arises throughout the text to underscore the degeneration of characters or to highlight their perceived traits. For instance, Othello's transition from the dignified, composed general to the enraged, murderous husband is paralleled with an increasing association with animalistic behavior, reflective of losing his rational human qualities to base instincts. The repeated animal metaphors and similes used by Iago when describing Othello serve to fan the flames of the latter's jealousy and rage, leading him to act more on primal impulse than on thoughtful judgement.

Moreover, this bestial depiction forewarns the devolution of Othello's rationality and the broader societal tendency to degrade that which is different or misunderstood. The interplay of these animal symbols captures the essence of the disintegration of moral order and the surrender to chaos and unbridled emotion within the play. Shakespeare's use of animal imagery as a significant symbol thereby acts as a barometer for the characters' emotional and psychological states and reveals the play's broader commentary on the dark facets of human nature veiled by the veneer of civilization.