

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 1 Scene 1

- Setting: Venice in 1570
 - Military events referred to in the play: defence of Venice's outpost Cyprus against the Turkish fleet – took place that year
 - = **contrast** to other great Shakespearean tragedies – set in different times
 - Macbeth – medieval Scotland (11th century)
 - King Lear – focused on events taking place in 8th century BC
 - Romeo and Juliet – Verona that resembles a medieval city-state in England
 - = increases impact of the tragedy – it is set in contemporary time
- **Symbolic setting:**
 - Italian settings in Elizabethan drama:
 - Association with something foreign and exotic
 - Courts often portrayed as being full of villainy, sexual perversion, decadence
 - Plays focus on intrigue, secret love affairs, revenge
 - Heat – fitting background to explain characters' hot-blooded and ferocious conflict that leads to the tragic outcome
 - Venice
 - Reputation of a city of wealth – great trading power – a thriving commercial centre
 - Associated with sophistication, civilisation, law and order – a seat of power
 - Establishes O as an outsider – he serves the Venetian senate, but is not Italian (a mercenary)
 - Title of the play – *The Moor of Venice*
 - = **Oxymoron** – a moor cannot be originally from Venice in S's time
 - = establishes the contradictions and dilemmas in O's character from the start and places **his position as an outsider at the core of the tragedy**
 - BUT ALSO – Venice as a place of loose morals – Venetian women were viewed as promiscuous
 - = reflected later in the play when Othello refers to Desdemona as "*that cunning whore of Venice*"

- Time: *A street at night* – darkness of setting
 - = first allusion to the darker purpose of the villain Iago who features strongly in this scene – he is associated with night, darkness and hell
 - = link to the metaphorical difficulty of seeing – a key theme that stands at the core of the tragedy
 - Characters struggle to differentiate between appearances and reality
 - O's 'misreading' of Iago's clues leads him to give in to his jealousy and to kill his wife
 - Key moment: Act 3 Scene 3 – *Now do I see 'tis true*
 - O believes he has finally realised the truth of his wife's deception and decides to kill her
 - BUT: O does not in fact see anything but what Iago wants him to see – he does not respond to any visible evidence but to Iago's made-up stories about seeing Cassio use the handkerchief!
 - = built on a few lines later
 - Iago: *And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof at Rhodes, at Cyprus*
 - = O supposedly overlooked Iago's military skill and loyalty
 - = suggests the precarious nature of 'ocular proof' and its misreading in the play
- Opening of the play – dialogue between Iago and Roderigo
 - = mid-conversation – creates a sense of confusion and uncertainty from the start as the audience has to guess who/what they are talking about
 - = crude conversation about O – but his name is never used – increases confusion of the audience
 - = tone – argumentative
 - = establishes the idea of conflict (continued by Brabantio's anger)
 - tense atmosphere anticipates the disputes later on
- Roderigo – the first victim of the tragedy?
 - *Thou, Iago, who hast had my purse / As if the strings were thine*
 - = he has hired Iago to assist him in winning Desdemona
 - = lines can be read as accusing Iago of being a party to O's wooing and marrying D
 - = image of being led on a string – a first hint at Iago's power of deception and abuse of characters for his own good
 - Idea is strengthened later in the scene – Brabantio: *Thou hast heard me say my daughter is not for thee*
 - = Roderigo has already been rejected as a suitor to D
 - Roderigo clearly trusts Iago – he has entrusted him with winning a wife
 - = gains our pity
 - = audience clearly sees that Iago is not a man to be trusted, yet R is oblivious to that
- Roderigo's quest for Desdemona – introduces the subplot of the tragedy
- Establishment of Iago as the tragic villain

- First information – *Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate*
 - = I is immediately associated with hate and bitterness towards the protagonist – identifies him as the villain and antagonist
- Establishment of the villain's supposed **motive** for his hate of O – **jealousy and revenge**
 - Desire for revenge **sets the tragic action in motion**
 - Iago seeks revenge on Othello and Cassio for being overlooked
 - Roderigo becomes his instrument as he seeks revenge on Othello for marrying the woman he desires
 - = Brabantio is alerted and the conflict begins
 - **Parallel:** Just as Roderigo has been rejected as D's lover, Iago has been rejected by O for a promotion to become lieutenant
 - = fabricates a **link between rejection and revenge** at the play's core

GENRE CONTEXT: Revenge as a common motive in Renaissance tragedy

- **Revenge tragedies** – derive from Roman tragedies by Seneca, but were a popular form in Elizabethan England (e.g. Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*)
- Shakespeare's revenge tragedies – *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*
- *Othello* has revenge at its heart – includes some key elements of conventional revenge tragedies and can therefore be viewed as a revenge tragedy
 - = revenge is led by a Machiavellian villain
 - = revenge plot is a cleverly coordinated intrigue of the villain
 - = link between revenge motive and romantic love
 - = ritualistic swearing of the vow of revenge between Othello and Iago (Act 3 Scene 3)
 - = a play within a play takes place (Act 4 Scene 1)
 - = protagonist's descent into madness as a result of Iago's revenge plot
 - = ends in a bloody climax borne out of the revenge of Iago against Othello and Othello against Desdemona
- However: not all conventional elements are present
 - = reasons for revenge – not profound but petty – borne out of personal jealousy
 - = no ghosts
 - = only one possible scene of goriness

- **NOTE:** The motive for the tragic action blurs the boundaries between private/public or domestic/professional in the play
 - Roderigo's rejection as a suitor concerns a private matter – mirrors Iago's rejection as a lieutenant which is professional
 - = **foreshadows** the constant interference of both spheres that manifests itself in the play
 - = **foreshadows** O's increasing difficulties of separating his roles as military general and husband

- = comes to a head in Act 3 Scene 3 – when O returns to the stage convinced of his wife's adultery (a private matter), his immediate thought is of the loss of his professional reputation: *Farewell! Othello's occupation gone.*
- **Foreshadowing** of Othello's *hamartia*, his fatal flaw, that will lead to his tragic downfall
 - *He, as loving his own pride and purpose*
 - = Iago assigns O excessive pride – *hubris*
 - = identifies O as the tragic hero
 - It is this pride (of his own worth, of his professional achievements and reputation, and of his honour as a man) that leads O to listen to Iago's lies and follow these up with the murder of D
 - AND – arguably, Othello commits two other 'errors of judgement' that are key in this scene
 - = his decision to appoint Cassio as lieutenant (and its link with Iago's resentment and vengeful nature)
 - = his decision to marry Desdemona without procuring her father's consent
 - = these errors bear a **potential for tragedy** and eventually lead to the **tragic hero's downfall**
- Iago's description of Cassio
 - = further **builds on Iago's role as villain** by revealing his bitterness and contempt
 - *A fellow almost damned in a fair wife*
 - = crude insult
 - = implication that Cassio is engaged in an adulterous affair and not focused on military matters?
 - = or suggestion that he is a ladies man?
 - = I challenges C's ability as a soldier and his masculinity – **language** reveals Iago's misogyny
 - *Nor the division of a battle knows more than a spinster*
 - *Mere prattle without practice*
 - = **Alliteration** emphasises his **tone of contempt** towards Cassio
 - [**Contrast** to Iago's description of Cassio to Montano in Act 2 – *He is a soldier fit to stand by Cesar / And give direction* – reveals Iago's ability to adapt any situation in a way that suits his purpose]
 - = crude, negative imagery of women as thoughtless chatterers
 - = link to another aspect of tragedy revealed in this scene – the **stereotyping of women in a patriarchal world like the one in the play**
- Further key aspects of Iago's character revealed that **firmly establish him as a Machiavellian villain**
 - Self-pity
 - *'Tis the curse of service*
 - = bound by loyalty to O despite his disregard for him
 - Deception, selfishness

- *I follow him to serve my turn upon him*
 - *In following him, I follow but myself*
 - = uses O to achieve his own means
 - = his loyal following is only a disguise to mirror his true goals
- Link to performance and deception – revealed in [semantic field of sight](#)
 - Visages of duty
 - *Throwing but shows of service*
 - Seeming so
 - = a skilful actor who can adapt his behaviour to any situation to suit himself
- *I am not what I am*
 - = KEY QUOTATION that sums up Iago's character
 - = stresses the inconsistency between appearance and reality in his character
 - = mysterious, elusive nature of I – does not show his true thoughts
- Manipulator of others, 'stage manager'
 - [Use of imperatives](#) towards Roderigo to guide his actions
 - *Rouse him – Poison his delight – Proclaim – Incense – Plague*
 - = reveals Iago's managing and control of other characters and their actions
- Language – suggests I's darker purpose and link to destruction and death
 - Poison his delight, Plague him with flies, *Throw such chances of vexation on't*
 - = association with poison and disease
 - = [prepares the audience](#) for Iago's poisoning of Othello's mind that occurs in Act III – [structural significance](#)
- Introduction to [the tragic hero/protagonist](#) Othello – is cast in a negative, prejudiced light through the [voices of other characters](#)
 - O not in the scene – all information is second-hand – creates [anticipation in audience to meet the tragedy's protagonist](#)
 - *As loving his own pride and purposes*
 - = proud, selfish, arrogant, boastful
 - *Evades them with a bombast circumstance, horribly stuffed with epithets of war*
 - = a clever rhetorician who can blind people to his true purpose and gets away with promoting his favourites
 - O's name is never used – instead:

Repetition of <i>The Moor</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • = focus on his skin colour, otherness – evokes prejudice against his race • = takes away O's individuality
Repetition of <i>Thieves!</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • = links O to crime – makes B believe that O

	<p>has stolen his daughter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> = repetition is used to convey urgency and prey on B's fears/prejudice him against O
<i>The thick-lips</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> = racist comment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>An <u>old black ram</u> is tugging your <u>white ewe</u></i> <i>You'll have your daughter covered with a <u>Barbary horse</u></i> <i>Your daughter and the Moor are now making <u>the beast with two backs</u></i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> = bestial, animalistic imagery to portray O as an uncivilised savage – dehumanisation = contrast of <i>old</i> and <i>ewe</i> – emphasises age difference of O and D to create the image of an experienced, dangerous predator exploiting a young, chaste virgin = crude sexual imagery – contemporary belief that black men have uncontrollable sexual desires and lust and that unions between black men and white women lead to monstrous births = absence of any mention of love – subtle hint of an image of rape AND – consistent contrast of O's blackness/sinfulness and D's whiteness/innocence
<i><u>The devil</u> will make a grandsire of you</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> = association with ultimate sinfulness and evil
<i><u>gross clasps</u> of a <u>lascivious Moor</u></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> = more focus on O's uncontrolled sexuality
<i>An extravagant and wheeling <u>stranger</u></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> = emphasis on O's position as a dangerous outsider to Venice
<i>Is there not <u>charms</u> by which the property of <u>youth and maidenhood</u> may be <u>abused</u>?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> suggestion that D was a passive victim in the marriage with O <ul style="list-style-type: none"> = idea that O used love potions to deceive her into marrying him = reflects Renaissance stereotype of the black man as cunning sexual predator CONTEXT: Renaissance fears were of black men as rapists of white western women – the idea that a woman would actually encourage and take pleasure from a sexual relationship with a moor is too alarming for this patriarchal society to accept

- BUT – Iago's comments also include a **first hint at O's worth and his high status that make him a worthy tragic hero**:
 - *I do know the state...cannot with safety cast him*
 - *For he's embarked with such loud reason to the Cyprus wars*
 - *Another of his fathom they have none*
 - = O as an effective, powerful soldier who holds the trust, respect and support of the Venetian senate
 - = audience realises that **his worth means that he will fall from grace** – is **identified as tragic protagonist**
 - **AND: Does Iago also secretly admire Othello (as he cannot help but make this comment despite his apparent hate for O)?**
- Conversation with Brabantio – establishes the society of Venice as a patriarchal one where women are expected to fully conform to men's wishes
 - Language used by the male characters when discussing Desdemona reveals this attitude
 - *Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!*
 - = D as part of B's wealth
 - = **Parallelism** suggests that her status is no higher than that of a lifeless object – she is equated with monetary wealth
 - *Sir, you're robbed*
 - = D as B's possession has been taken away
 - *What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe*
 - = D is again equated with money and wealth – dehumanised, viewed as an object of a business transaction
 - = sets up **framework for the domestic tragedy** of O and D
 - = their love is passionate, emotionally charged and equal
 - = poses a threat to the rules of patriarchy, challenges patriarchal ideas about class, race and conformity of women that are suggested to be at the core of Venetian society in the play
 - O+D's marriage is established as the **key event that sets the conflict of the tragedy in motion**
- Conversation with Brabantio – also reveals Iago's **skills as a versatile actor** that make him such an **effective tragic villain**
 - Switch between **verse and prose**
 - Conversation with Roderigo – in **blank verse**
 - Conversation with Brabantio – in prose
 - = more informal tone – helps I to gain B's confidence
 - = for the audience – I is revealed as a low character with immoral purposes
 - **Contrast** of Iago and Roderigo at that moment
 - R – finds it difficult to assert himself to B – *Sir, sir, sir* –
 - I – only his crude, drastic descriptions finally capture B's attention and fear

- *I do hate him as I do hell's pains – I must show out a flag and sign of love*
 - = contrast of I's actual feelings and his appearance
 - = double meaning of *show out a flag*
 - Literally: he is O's flag bearer
 - Metaphorically: he will only pretend to be loyal and to love O
- **Irony:**
 - B: *Thou art a villain!* – I: *You are a senator*
 - = with the **pronoun you** (polite, formal address), Iago uses mock-politeness towards his social superior
 - **Double meaning of villain**
 - Intended here: an insult – scoundrel, lowly peasant
 - Unwittingly: Brabantio hits the nail on the head – the scene has established Iago has **the tragedy's villain**, but neither characters nor audience know it at this point!
- Brief reference to **fate – a key aspect of Renaissance tragedy**
 - *This accident is not unlike my dream; / Belief of it oppresses me already*
 - = *this accident* – refers to Desdemona's elopement with Othello
 - = suggestion that Brabantio has had a dream / omen that foretold the calamity
 - = creates **a sense of inevitability of the tragedy** and the impression that fate has had a hand in the tragic events about to unfold
- Iago's exit
 - *It seems not meet nor wholesome to my place / To be produced...against the Moor*
 - = well planned – another reference to the **meta-theatrical level of this text** that casts Iago as a 'stage manager' who controls other characters' entrances and exits
- End of the scene – again **blurs the lines between private and public**
 - Brabantio:
 - *At every house I'll call*
 - *Get weapons, ho!*
 - = makes the private affair of his daughter's elopement a public concern
- **IMPORTANT:** The opening scene of the play is dominated and orchestrated by Iago; a key function of the scene is to unfold to the audience in some detail Iago's art of deception and manipulation to establish him firmly as the villain of the tragedy. Iago's dominance in this scene can be seen to foreshadow his dominance over other characters and in particular the tragic protagonist Othello – Iago is the character who speaks the greatest number of lines in the play.