

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 4 Scene 2

- Opening of scene – emphasises O's reduction to a pathetic and desperate man
 - Repeated questioning of Emilia
 - = reveals his desperate need of further evidence to justify his course of action
 - = unlike a military leader – O's frame of mind is not fit for that of a fair investigator
 - AND: Even when Emilia swears that D is honest, O dismisses it – his mind is trapped in the view of his wife that Iago has planted there
 - E correctly identifies this: *Remove your thought; it doth abuse your bosom.*
 - Juxtaposition of E's level-headed, logical arguments and O's emotional blindness to the truth – emphasises O's narrow-mindedness even further
- Presentation of the character of Emilia – evokes contrast with villain Iago
 - E's genuine honesty/ loyalty to D contrast with I's false loyalty and betrayal of O
 - Her use of definite assertions when questioned about D's supposed misconduct
 - Repetition of *Never*
 - = definite answers, states explicitly how it is
 - = contrast to Iago's implied suggestions that make O come to his own conclusions and assume the worst
 - *To wager she is honest / Lay down my soul at stake* – the fact that she would bet her soul to prove D's honesty reveals the strength of her loyalty to D
- The tragic villain Iago's influence over Othello is immediately established (although Iago is absent from the scene) – O adopts I's view on women and his misogynist attitude
 - Views E and D as a brothel-keeper and common prostitute
 - E – *a simple bawd*
 - D – *a subtle whore*
- Women are reduced to stereotypes in O's view – Extended metaphor of the brothel in O's interaction with E and D
 - *Some of your function, mistress* – i.e. get on with your job and leave those engaged in sex alone
 - Repeatedly refers to D as an object and a prostitute – series of insults:
 - *What art thou?*
 - *thou public commoner*
 - *impudent strumpet*
 - Exaggeration – although O only thinks D has slept with C, he treats her as if she is a full-time street prostitute
 - *I took you for that cunning whore of Venice that married with Othello*
 - CONTEXT: O evokes the stereotypical Renaissance perception of Venetian women as promiscuous (that Iago planted in his mind earlier)

- ALSO: O refers to himself in the third person – reveals his alienation from his true self, feels he is losing his identity
 - *There's money for your pains* – O pays the women like prostitutes
- O's continued use of exaggeration – reveals his mind's entrapment within Iago's suggestions
 - Imagery of nature suggests that D's sin is so far-reaching and revolting that the whole universe reacts to it
 - *Heaven stops the nose at it* (the smell of D's sin)
 - *the moon winks* (the moon refuses to look at it)
 - *the bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets, is hushed...and will not hear it* (even the wind that freely caresses everyone's cheeks as if kissing them is unable to acknowledge such sin)
 - BUT: In fact, O is the only one who 'sees' D's betrayal
- O's language is full of contrast and contradiction – revealing his inner battle between his love for D and his jealousy
 - Talk about his love for D
 - *The fountain from which my current runs* – water metaphor – suggests that D's love is the core of O's being, his life blood
 - *Keep it as a cistern for foul toads* – image is subverted into one of defilement – the water is now inhabited by disgusting animals representing the idea of D's corruption
 - Flower imagery to represent D
 - *Art so lovely and smell'st so sweet* – image of a beautiful and enticing flower
 - *Thou weed* – image is subverted into that of an annoying, ugly plant
 - References to D
 - *This fair paper, this most goodly book* – compares her body to a pure and virtuous book
 - *To write 'whore' upon* – image of corruption
- Use of religious imagery between O and D – a further sign of O's growing delusion – he interprets D's honest devotion and virtuous practice of religion as a measure to mask her betrayal
 - Sequencing of text reveals O's misreading of his wife's conduct
 - Refers to D's *villainous secrets* (i.e. his assumption of her affair with C)
 - Next line: *And yet she'll kneel and pray. I have seen her do't*
 - Juxtaposition: *rose-cheeked cherubin* vs. *grim as hell*
 - = shows O's inability to see – his wife's angelic looks betray her honesty and purity, yet he believes that they only mask her betrayal (*grim as hell*) and therefore increase her sin
 - AND: O poses the question to D of whether it is possible to be saved from one's sins in a religious sense
 - BUT – within the framework of the tragedy, the question gains heightened significance and carries foreboding – audience knows that it is

indeed too late for D to be saved from death in a literal sense (as we know of O's plan to murder her this very night)

- After O's exit: **Symbol** of the wedding sheets
 - = symbolic of D's purity, virginity, virtue – a reminder for O of her purity and their union
 - = similar symbolic meaning to the handkerchief
- **Establishment of D as the tragic victim**
 - Her only soliloquy in the play (l. 106-108)
 - = extremely short – reveals her waning influence
 - = emphasises her submissive nature – she looks to fault herself for O's anger
 - D's naivety is underlined
 - Repeated statements that she does not understand O's sudden transformation
 - *I cannot tell*
 - *I do not know*
 - Compares herself to a child (*I am a child to chiding*) – underlines her vulnerability
 - D **repeatedly refers to Iago as good friend** – emphasises her lack of understanding and entrapment in the villain's web of lies and deceit
- D's vow – reminder of the 'vow of revenge' between Othello and Iago at the end of Act 3 Sc 3
 - Similarities:
 - *Here I kneel* – like O, D kneels in front of Iago
 - *By this light of heaven* – echoes Iago's *witness you ever burning lights above* = uncanny reminder that Iago has taken the place of D

- BUT – Contrasts:

Desdemona's vow (Act 4 Sc 2)	Othello and Iago's vow (Act 3 Sc 3)
D vows the strength of her love	Expressions of hatred and the vow of death/revenge between I and O
D's honesty, purity and loyalty to O	False vow of loyalty I offered to O

- AND: **Foreboding** is created
 - *His unkindness may defeat my life* – D foresees her own death and reminds the audience of this – increasing tension
- **Dramatic irony:**
 - Emilia correctly identifies that O's delusion has been caused by a villainous character

- *If some eternal villain, some busy and insinuating rogue, some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office, have not devised this slander*
 - Repeatedly refers to the man she suspects of manipulating O as a *villain / villainous* – **IRONY** as audience is aware that Iago inhabits this role within the tragedy
 - AND: Although Iago stands right beside her, neither Emilia nor Desdemona grasp how accurate her interpretation is
- BUT: Two characters, Emilia and Roderigo, come dangerously close to the truth in their statements
 - E: Repeatedly refers to a *most villainous knave* who has distorted O's view of the truth
 - R:
 - *I do not find that thou deal'st justly with me* – almost detects Iago's dishonest treatment of him
 - *for your words and performances are no kin together* – begins to realise that Iago makes empty promises that are not followed by action
 - *I will make myself known to Desdemona* – problematic as this would reveal Iago's deceit and stealing of Roderigo's jewels
 - Iago's reactions – can be interpreted as first signs of nervousness of being detected
 - To E – repeatedly tries to silence her or suggest that her explanation is nothing but ignorant gossip
 - *Fie, there is no such man*
 - *You are a fool*
 - To R – repeats the same phrase at first as if not sure what to say and still thinking of a better response
 - *Well, go to; very well*
 - *Very well*
 - For the first time, Roderigo seems to be the more dominant character in the conversation
 - **EFFECT for the tragedy as a whole:** Action will speed up towards the tragedy's climax – creates the impression of an inevitable and unstoppable event as Iago now has to act to avoid detection
- End of scene – reminder of Iago's brilliant skills as a manipulator
 - Techniques employed by I to persuade R:
 - Flatters Roderigo – *Build on thee a better opinion than ever before*
 - Appeals to R's masculinity
 - *There's mettle in thee*
 - *Purpose, courage, and valour*
 - CONTEXT: Patriarchal society – these values gain heightened value
 - Mentions that O will be posted to Mauritania (North Africa)
 - = reminder of O's otherness and therefore his unfitness to be D's husband as a black man
 - = creates a sense of urgency for R – if he does not act now, he will lose D forever as he will move to Africa with O

- AND: R role as a victim is stressed – lack of intelligence
 - Does not understand Iago's subtle suggestions
 - *How do you mean 'removing' of him?*
 - Only understands when Iago retorts to brutal, graphic language – *knocking out his brains*
 - Although he comes so close to the truth, is easily blinded by Iago and does not even question the idea of killing Cassio
- **Roderigo's function at the end – not only victim, but also plot device:** it is his actions and unintentional threat to reveal the truth that accelerate the tragic ending