

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 2 Scene 1

- **Setting: Change from Venice to Cyprus**
 - = opposite to Venice – a vulnerable outpost rather than a seat of mercantile power
 - = isolated setting
 - = on the edge of civilisation – here O and D no longer have protection and security for their love by the Senate
 - = isolation **creates a claustrophobic atmosphere** – characters are trapped with no war to fight
 - = in this atmosphere O and D will be isolated from each other and wrenched apart
 - ALSO a **symbolic setting**
 - = *warlike isle*
 - = conflict and danger of setting – mirrored in tragic events that unfold there and the conflict that arises among the characters
 - = threatened by the Turks – mirrored in O's love and peace of mind being threatened by Iago
 - **IRONY:**
 - Cyprus – in Greek mythology the birth place of the goddess of love Aphrodite
 - BUT this **idea is subverted in the tragedy** – O and D's love will be destroyed in this place
- **Opening setting: Storm**
 - Emphasis on violence of the storm:
 - *high-wrought flood*
 - *A fuller blast ne'er shook our battlements*
 - *The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds*
 - *The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane*
 - *The enchafed flood*
 - Interpretations:
 - **Symbolic function:**
 - = foreshadows the passions that will be unleashed on the island
 - = related to O's violent emotions of jealousy and rage that are about to unfold OR the chaos in his mind that Iago will create
 - = reflective of Iago and the threat/violence he represents
 - **Atmospheric device linked to the key metaphor of the inability to see in the tragedy:**
 - *What from the cape can you discern at sea? – Nothing at all.*
 - = storm means the soldiers cannot see clearly – foreshadows the problems of the characters to see clearly when under Iago's manipulations – they fail to **differentiate between truth and deception**

- = mirrors the confusion of the opening of Act 1 Scene 1
- **Dramatic device – a *deus ex machina*:**
 - = a means for Shakespeare to get rid of the Turkish threat – no longer needed for plot
 - = focus is solely on the relationship of O and D and its disintegration
 - = **tragedy turns from a political tragedy into a domestic tragedy**
- Order of arrival is significant – **symbolises character relationships:**
 - Iago arrives before Othello – takes charge of the new setting – alerts audience to the idea that **the tragic villain dominates the play and the tragic protagonist from this point onwards**
 - Iago arrives a week before he was expected
 - *He had most favourable and happy speed*
 - = fortune seems to favour Iago
 - = **reference to fate** creates a **sense of inevitability** of Iago's victory
- Presentation of Cassio – **in contrast to Iago:**
 - C:
 - Loyal, cares about Othello – *yet he looks sadly / and prays the Moor be safe*
 - Gallant, polite – kisses Emilia
 - Sophisticated – describes D in poetic terms of admiration
 - *A maid that paragon's description and wild fame*
 - *The divine Desdemona*
 - *The riches of the ship is come on shore*
 - I:
 - Dismissive of his own wife, sees her as inferior – *Would she give you so much of her lips as of her tongue she oft bestows on me, you would have enough*
 - 'Banter' crudely with Desdemona – *You rise to play and go to bed to work* – implies that women are manipulative and promiscuous, degrades them to prostitutes
 - Views women as false, inferior creatures – *you are...players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds*
 - Contrast – emphasises Iago's narrow, twisted nature
- BUT: Cassio is also hinted to **become one of Iago's victims**
 - *You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar*
 - = implies Iago's lack of intelligence
 - BUT – audience knows that C underestimates Iago – this **error will lead to his tragic fall** and will make him **a gullible victim to the Machiavellian villain**

- Presentation of Desdemona before O's arrival:
 - *What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?*
 - = a new side is revealed – she banters flirtatiously with Iago
 - = understands Iago's puns and crude sexual innuendos – *Fie upon thee, slanderer*
 - Possible interpretations:
 - = reinforces her attractive image as an independent and outspoken young woman
 - = her sexuality is stressed to underline her physical attraction to Othello – exonerates O of witchcraft
 - = makes the couple well-suited – **so collapse of their marriage is truly tragic**
 - OR – difference of the saucy tone to Othello's romantic speeches forebodes the couple's doom?
- Iago – clear **link to the Machiavellian villain of Renaissance tragedy**
 - Carefully observes Cassio and Desdemona – moment inspires his plan of fabricating the story of an affair between them
 - Speaks in an *aside* – audience becomes his unwitting confidante as he shares his scheming with them
 - Uses images of deception and entrapment
 - *With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio*
 - *I will gyve thee in thine own courtship*
 - = reveal his character as the 'puppeteer' or stage-manager who will trap the other characters
 - Switch in voice
 - Before with D – verse, cynically playful tone
 - In his aside – prose, more serious tone
- Othello's arrival:
 - Reunion with D – highlights their mutual love and affection, but also his emotional excess
 - *My fair warrior*
 - = he associates her with his military role and acknowledges that she had to put herself in danger by taking part in the masculine affairs of war
 - = structure of his words is mirrored in D's exclamation *My dear Othello!* – reveals their mutual, balanced, well-suited relationship
 - *My soul's joy* – adds a spiritual dimension to their love
 - *It gives me wonder great as my content to see you here before me*
 - = strength of emotion – suggests that his negative emotions will be equally intense and destructive and therefore **his emotional statements bear tragic potential** at this point
 - BUT – **ironic references to death and fate**
 - *If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy*

- *If after every tempest come such calms, may the winds blow till they have wakened death*
 - **Metaphorical significance** – Iago will unleash a tempest on O's mind and death will indeed be wakened and carried out by O's hand
 - *I fear...that not another comfort like to this succeeds in unknown fate*
 - = O implies a darker side to their love – he feels that it has reached its climax and that future happiness cannot match his current one
 - = unwitting hint at the **inevitable tragedy** that awaits O and D
 - = link to the contextual **significance of fate and its role in tragedy – fortune's wheel** is about to turn for Othello and bring about his inevitable downfall
- **AND: Structure** – Iago's asides interrupt the blissful reunion and leave the audience uneasy about the future of O + D's relationship
 - O: *This the greatest discords be that e'er our hearts shall make*
 - I [Aside]: *I'll set down the pegs that make this music, as honest as I am*
 - = **use of a musical metaphor** that suggests that Iago will slacken the strings of their relationship so it is out of tune
 - = use of word *honest* – used ironically by Iago, mocks Othello's gullible nature
- Iago's conversation with Roderigo – another part of the villain's scheming
 - Barrage of crude insults
 - *What delight shall she have to look on the devil?*
 - *Begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor*
 - *Blest fig's end!*
 - *History of lust and foul thoughts*
 - *Pish!*
 - = overwhelms Roderigo who is presented as the victim here
 - = Iago ignores his doubts
 - = speaks very little
 - = is easily persuaded by Iago's initially incredible statements of Cassio's love of D and his prediction of her imminent abhorrence towards O
- Iago's **final soliloquy**:
 - = **mirrors previous** scene that **also ended with his soliloquy**
 - = suggests that Iago has the last word and that **the villain will triumph**
 - = also shows the **development of the villain's scheming**
 - previous scene ended with his decision to plot something, but it was only *engendered* (i.e. conceived)
 - now Iago has fleshed out his plan with detail – he spreads rumours about Cassio's love for D and instructs R to provoke C in order to get him fired from his military rank
 - **Language of poison and disease**:
 - *The thought whereof doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards*
 - *A jealousy so strong that judgement cannot cure*

- = suggests Iago's predatory nature
- = suggests Iago uses his own feelings about jealousy to shape the plan of making O endure the same and bring him to raging jealousy
- Reveals new but questionable motives for his actions:
 - Love for D
 - *Now I do love her too*
 - BUT – immediate reference to *lust* afterwards makes us question this declaration
 - AND – *partly led to diet my revenge* – D is only a means to an end for Iago that he uses to revenge himself on O
 - O has slept with E
 - *I do suspect the lusty Moor has leaped into my seat*
 - = no evidence but Iago's word that we have come to mistrust
 - AND – *for I fear Cassio with my night-cap too* – Iago appears to make up ideas to justify his plot against Cassio too
- HOWEVER: Despite his hatred for O, Iago cannot help but mention his positive qualities
 - *The Moor...is of a constant, loving, noble nature*
 - Does Iago secretly admire Othello?