

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 4 Scene 1

- The 'Eaves-dropping scene' reveals O's rapid degradation – his transformation that was effected in III.3 becomes clearly visible

Build-up towards the 'eaves-dropping episode' within the scene – reveals O's decline of power and authority – the **continuing fall of the tragic protagonist**

- Scene immediately establishes the continuing change in the power balance between tragic protagonist and villain:
 - O no longer commands, but **asks questions** – *Think so, Iago? What then? May she give that?*
 - Iago's **puns** on the word *lie*
 - Literally: refers to C and D having sex together
 - BUT: also ironically implies the idea of a 'liar'
 - = sign how far Iago's deception has developed – he is so sure of himself that he can even hint to Othello directly that he is lying, yet O is too emotionally invested to notice this
- Iago insists on reminding O of the handkerchief as he is aware what a **powerful symbol** of D's honour/faithfulness it has become for O – O's reaction:
 - *O it comes o'er my memory as doth the raven o'er the infected house*
 - = **Simile** – reveals O's suffering and passivity
 - = **sentence structure** – *my memory / the infected house* are the receiving **objects of the sentence**, revealing that O's mind is being acted upon and has become passive – he is no longer in control of his thoughts
 - *Infected* – **Reference to plague** – O's mind is still being poisoned by Iago
 - *Raven* – an omen of ill luck or death
 - O loses control of his language – his linguistic breakdown mirrors his mental collapse
 - Iago **casually taunts** O with graphic images of D and C – *With her, on her, what you will*
 - O's **language becomes fractured and colloquial**
 - *Zounds, that's fulsome!*
 - *Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief!*
 - *Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? – Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!*
 - = **hyphens** show the fragmentation of O's mind – **broken sentences mirror his inner brokenness**
 - = sentence are partly **unintelligible, helped by the listing of questions and exclamations** – O loses control of meaning
 - = **short shouts** – language is debased, full of curses
- O's epileptic fit (Stage direction: *Falls in a trance*)
 - = signals another stage of his jealousy – after it has so far affected his mind and language, it now even physically torments him

- = also a **physical representation of Othello's fall** – he is now lying on the ground in front of Iago, writhing in *savage madness*
- Even Iago's description of O reveals how jealousy has consumed him
 - *His unbookish jealousy must construe poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behaviours quite in the wrong*
 - = **jealousy is personified** – it acts on O's mind and takes on human qualities to show how powerful it has become
- Iago challenges O's masculinity to increase his torment
 - **Repeated references**
 - *Would you would bear your fortune like a man*
 - *Be a man*
 - *Overwhelmed with your grief – a passion most unsuited such a man*
 - *And nothing of a man*
 - **CONTEXT:** In this patriarchal society that has formed and shaped Othello and in which his self-worth is based on his public reputation as a strong military man, such taunts are particularly effective
 - **BUT** – the only man O can think of is the cuckold
 - *A horned man's a monster and a beast*
 - **IRONY** – O assigns to himself now the monstrous and beastly qualities that Iago used to describe him in Act I
- Iago's **ascend as the tragic villain** is highlighted further through **contrast with the previous scene** (the 'temptation scene')
 - Act 3 Sc 3: I uses insidious persuasive techniques to bend O's mind and behaviour according to his will
 - Act 4 Sc 1: Now I is direct and unambiguous in his instructions to O – he takes command of the situation
 - Consistent use of imperatives
 - Smooth control of characters' entrances and exits

The eaves-dropping episode

- **CONTEXT:** Eavesdropping is a **common dramatic device in traditional comedy** (such as those of Terence and Plautus)
 - Eavesdropper and his gestures and asides – a source of comedy and laughter
 - Any confusion created by eavesdropping – is revealed in time to allow a happy ending
 - **BUT** – S **subverts this dramatic device to suit his tragedy** – O recognises his mistake too late
- **A play within the play** – Iago has staged this moment for O to get the wrong idea about Cassio and the handkerchief
 - O's position as a cowardly, underhand spy – **contrasts** with his earlier openness (Act 1 Sc 2: *I must be found*) to signify the changing fortunes and fall of the tragic protagonist

- O's **asides**
 - = reveal that he has been reduced to a pathetic bystander gloating on what he sees
 - *So, so, so, so: they laugh that wins*
 - = **repeated, basic, monosyllabic language** reveals his trapped mind
 - = **Irony** – audience knows Iago and not Othello will have the last laugh at the end of the play
 - *Do you triumph, Roman?*
 - = compares C to a victorious Roman warrior
 - = **choice of imagery** reveals O's complete confusion of private and public affairs – although he is trying to find proof for the supposed infidelity of his wife (a private matter of love), he employs the language of war (and his public role as a soldier)
- A more questionable side of Cassio is revealed – his double standards about women are emphasised
 - Contrast to his well-mannered behaviour towards D – now C seems to resemble Iago's misogyny
 - Refers to Bianca in degrading terms
 - **Repetition** of *poor* – hints at her helplessness and **role as a tragic victim**
 - *Caitiff, rogue* – compares her to a lowly criminal
 - *A costumer; a perfumed one* – views her as a common prostitute drenched in cheap perfume
 - *The monkey's own giving out* – degrades her to an animal, associates her with ignorant female gossip and rumours
 - Continuous laughter about her behind her back – belittles her genuine affection
 - BUT – when she is angry with him about the handkerchief, he is keen to appease her – yet audience now knows that this is just to exploit her further

After the eaves-dropping episode

- O's language slips from **verse into prose** – reflects his increasing debasement and complete loss of sophistication
- **Language** mirrors Iago's and reflects O's growing focus on violence – this verbal violence builds towards the physical violence of striking D at the end of the scene
 - **Language and imagery are full of violence, savagery and egotism**
 - First thought after the little 'performance' – *How shall I murder him, Iago?*
 - *Let her rot and perish*
 - *Now my heart has turned to stone*
 - *Hang her*
 - *I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!*
 - = another sign that **O's private and public roles clash tragically** – he becomes less of a husband and more like a soldier as he responds to his private worries about his wife with the warlike aggression of a soldier

- Madness vs. pathos
 - First signs of O's madness appear
 - O lets Iago dictate him how to kill D – Iago's imperatives reveal his powerful influence over O
 - *Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed*
 - AND – his response to the idea of strangling her reveals that he is turning mad: *The justice of it pleases*
 - BUT – some pathos and moral code remains
 - O is in pain about killing D – he is torn by thoughts of her sweetness and purity
 - *O, the world hath not a sweeter creature!*
 - *But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!*
 - = key line that reveals O's battle between pure thoughts of D and her supposed lechery – he is torn between the two images that Iago and Cassio created of Desdemona in Act 2 Scene 1
 - O still thinks in religious / Christian images
 - *The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven*
- O's climax of degradation in this scene – he physically strikes D and loses his honour in front of Ludovico who represents Venetian civility
 - Ludovico – explicitly states the change of O's civilised self into a debased animal
 - *My lord, this would not be believed in Venice*
 - Rhetorical questions:
 - *Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate call all-in-all sufficient?*
 - *Is this the nature whom passion could not shake?*
 - BUT – O is trapped in his view of D
 - Speech becomes completely incoherent – jumps between comments to Ludovico and Desdemona
 - *Mistress!* – O addresses D like a prostitute
 - *Goats and monkeys!* – refers back to the image of C and D that Iago planted in his mind in Act 3 Sc 3 – sign that his mind is trapped by his thoughts of his wife's unfaithfulness
 - *Hence, avaunt!* – A brutal, barking dismissal
 - D: *I will not stay to offend you* – prefigures the same obedience and grace she will show when O kills her – she is reverting into the stereotype of the ideal female in the Renaissance