

CONTEXT (AO3) <https://tinyurl.com/2p9enr8w>

Personal	Shakespeare authored at least 37 plays, writing <i>Othello: The Moor of Venice</i> in 1604 (after <i>Hamlet</i> and before <i>King Lear</i>). Shakespeare began as an actor. His company, 'The King's Men', performed at the Globe Theatre, London. Shakespeare married, had three children and became a wealthy man, owning property.
Historical context	Elizabethan: Refers to the period when Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne (1558 to 1603). Queen Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry VIII. The Elizabethan era in the 16th century was one of adventure, intrigue, personalities, plots and power struggles. The 16th century witnessed more religious change than ever before. Elizabethan England was a Christian country and religion played an important part in daily lives. Colonialism and trade meant London began to see more foreigners visiting and settling than in previous eras. They viewed people from other places and faiths with curiosity and at times suspicion. Jacobean 1603 to 1625 Refers to the period when King James I was on the throne (1603 to 1625). When Elizabeth I died King James travelled from Scotland to England to take the throne. Once he was king, his ambition was to unite Scotland and England. King James was a lavish and suspicious king.
	Venice, a city-state, was a centre for world trade which made it rich. Wealthy businessmen invested in merchandise to be shipped and sold abroad. Pirates and storms were a major concern. This trade exposed Europeans to foreigners. Venetians would have owned slaves (as referenced in MOV by Shylock) and encountered 'Moors' or Africans of high status as well.
	Europe was a patriarchal society and women were treated as property, given by a father to a husband. Women could not enter professions and did not receive the same education as men, although wealthy girls and women received a degree of education. Young men and women from wealthy families rarely chose their own marriage partners. Family lineage, wealth and social status were factors in a match and would not have seemed as superficial to Shakespeare's audience as they do to us today. The most powerful person in England, however, was an unmarried woman – Queen Elizabeth I.
Literary context	Theatre was a popular form of entertainment in the 16 th century and audiences included people of a range of social statuses. It was illegal for women to act so women's parts were played by boys.
	Shakespeare alludes to other texts including the Bible and classical mythology. The play was inspired by a number of sources.

Features of a Shakespearean Tragedy (from AC Bradley)

Pre-eminently the story of one person, the hero, who must be high ranking or of a high degree (often kings or princes); his fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire

The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero—he must contribute in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes

It also depicts the troubled part of the hero's life which precedes and leads up to his death...it is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death

Suffering and calamity must extend far and wide beyond the hero, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe

The hero's fall must produce a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence—perhaps the caprice—of Fortune or Fate which no tale of **private life** can possibly rival

The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen: they are the result, at least in part, of the hero's own actions (or inactions)

Wider Reading

Other Shakespearean tragedies	Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet (viewing recommended)
Black Tudors by Miranda Kauffman	A nonfiction text with biographies of specific people and wider context
In Our Time	A BBC radio show with several episodes on Shakespeare https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl
Shakespeare's Restless World	A BBC radio programme looking at historical context around Shakespeare's work—shorter episodes https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017gm45
Tragedy by AC Bradley	Critical article on the form https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16966/16966-h/16966-h.htm
Critical Approaches to 'Othello' (British Library)	Critical Approaches to 'Othello'
National Theatre Performances (link only available in school)	Drama Online - National Theatre Collection (dramaonlinelibrary.com)

- 1.1 Iago reveals that Othello has secretly married Desdemona and that he plans to destroy him. Roderigo promises to help him because he wishes to woo Desdemona.
- 1.2 Othello calmly faces Brabantio and the court, who are very angry about Desdemona's clandestine (secret) marriage.
- 1.3 Othello explains to the court how Desdemona fell in love with his bravery and articulacy.
- 2.1 The enemy fleet that Othello has been fighting has been destroyed. He and Desdemona are joyfully reunited. Iago watches how friendly Cassio is when he greets Desdemona and describes how he will "ensnare" him.
- 2.3 Iago tricks Cassio into disobeying Othello and drinking when is on guard duty. Othello fires him as his lieutenant. Cassio mourns his "reputation".
- 3.3 Desdemona promises to help Cassio by talking to Othello about him. Iago makes this meeting look suspicious and plants a seed of doubt in Othello's mind. Othello demands proof. Earlier, Desdemona dropped the handkerchief which was Othello's first gift to her. Emilia picked it up and gave it to Iago. Iago planned to plant it in Cassio's room. Now, Iago tells Othello that Desdemona gave her handkerchief to Cassio. Enraged, Othello goes on his knees to formally swear that he will get revenge and be loyal to Iago. He swears to punish his wife and Cassio with death and Iago swears to help.
- 3.4 Othello confronts Desdemona. He demands to see the handkerchief. She says she lost it which enrages Othello. Desdemona tells Iago that Othello's anger has upset her and Iago promises (falsely) to help. Emilia explains to Desdemona that Othello may be jealous. Then, Bianca jokingly tells Cassio off for not seeing her more. He gives her the handkerchief, which he found because Iago had planted it in his room.
- 4.1 Iago tells Othello that Cassio has admitted to sleeping with Desdemona. Othello has a fit of rage and faints. When he awakes, Iago makes Othello secretly watch a meeting he is having with Cassio, where he hears Cassio speak disrespectfully about his relationship Bianca. Othello believes that he is talking about his affair with Desdemona. Bianca also gives the handkerchief back to Cassio, which Othello sees and becomes furious. Lodovico enters with Desdemona with a letter saying that Othello must return to Venice and Cassio will take over his position. When Desdemona is pleased, Othello hits her; enraged, he can barely speak.
- 4.2 Othello quizzes Emilia who says there is no reason to suspect Desdemona and Cassio. He does not believe her and sends her to get Desdemona, who he then accuses and becomes angry. Iago pretends to be helpful and comforting to Desdemona. Then, Roderigo complains that Iago has taken his money and jewels and done nothing for him. Iago tells him that Othello has been ordered to leave and that Cassio is meant to replace him as leader. Iago promises to help Roderigo kill Cassio so that Othello will have to stay, and Desdemona will remain within Roderigo's reach.
- 4.3 Othello tells Desdemona that she is to prepare for bed and dismiss Emilia. Desdemona says that she loves Othello despite his anger. Emilia comforts her.
- 5.1 Iago sets up a fight between Roderigo and Cassio, hoping that they will kill each other. Cassio is only wounded but Iago hurts him more before he runs away. Othello sees the wounded Cassio and is happy. Iago returns and pretends to be shocked at seeing Cassio wounded by Roderigo. Iago kills Roderigo in pretended honour.
- 5.2 Othello tells Desdemona to prepare to die because the handkerchief is his proof. He decides to smother her. She says the handkerchief is his proof. She says that Cassio will clear her name. Othello says that Cassio is dead. She pleads for mercy, but Othello smothers her. Emilia appears, and Desdemona recovers enough to say that she is dying in innocence. She dies, and Othello proclaims that he has murdered her because she was unfaithful. Emilia shares the truth – that she gave the handkerchief to Iago. She calls for help. Iago kills Emilia and runs away. Othello is full of grief. He wounds Iago and then kills himself.

KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER: *Othello, The Moor of Venice*

CHARACTERS

Othello	Othello is a general in the army. He begins the play as a respected figure in Venice, but as the play goes on Iago makes him believe Desdemona is in love with Cassio and he becomes more and more unpredictable. He eventually becomes so convinced by Iago's lies that he murders his wife.
Iago	Iago is a soldier in the Venetian army who is well respected and trusted by all for his honesty. However, Iago hates Othello and uses Othello's trust against him to convince him that his wife is having an affair with Cassio. Iago manipulates everyone around him to help him convince Othello to kill his wife.
Desdemona	Desdemona is a young noble woman who has secretly married Othello. She is friendly with Cassio and promises to help him get his job back when he loses it for fighting. Desdemona becomes increasingly confused by Othello's odd behaviour but remains loyal to him until he kills her.
Emilia	Iago's wife and Desdemona's lady-in-waiting and friend. She is a foil for Desdemona and unknowingly helps her husband deceive Othello through the handkerchief trick.
Cassio	Cassio is a young soldier who serves in the army with Othello and Iago. Othello has promoted him and this makes Iago jealous because he believes he is more qualified for the promotion. Cassio is loyal to Othello and is a great admirer of Desdemona. He is very friendly towards her and Iago uses this to convince Othello they are having an affair.
Roderigo	A Venetian nobleman who is in love with Desdemona, but she repeatedly rejects him. Iago manipulates him for his own purposes to get revenge on Othello and he eventually dies. His role is one of a fool.
Bianca	Cassio's girlfriend; another foil for Desdemona and Emilia
Ludovico	A Venetian noble who arrives with a message from the Duke in the middle of the play
Montano	Former governor of Cyprus; greets Venetian arrivals
Brabantio	Desdemona's father

THEMES

Love, romance and marriage	gender norms	prejudice and discrimination
wealth and social status	Deception and trickery	isolation
appearances and reality	hazard, risk, fate	hatred and revenge

SUBJECT TERMINOLOGY

aside	a remark or passage in a play intended to be heard by the audience but not by the other characters in the play; shorter than a soliloquy
dramatic irony	when the audience is aware of something and a character or characters are unaware
eponymous	the character in a text whose name is the title of that text
figurative language	phrasing that goes beyond the literal meaning of words to get a message or point across, e.g. similes, metaphors, personification
foreshadowing	when an author hints at what is to come
juxtaposition	the placing of two things next to each other (often to contrast)
alliteration	A series of words beginning with the same sound
tone	general attitude, atmosphere of a line or speech
antithesis	the direct opposite, a sharp contrast
allusion	a (sometimes indirect) reference to another text, person or event
soliloquy	when a character speaks directly to the audience as if thinking aloud, revealing their inner thoughts, feelings and intentions
motif	a recurring theme, symbol or idea
prose	ordinary language, without the lines breaks and metre of verse.
blank verse	unrhymed iambic pentameter
iambic pentameter	10 syllables a line with alternating stresses, one stressed then one unstressed, so the line divides into five 'feet'
rhyming couplet	a pair of lines that rhyme, often used to mark the end of a scene
foil	A character or pair of characters that have a strong similarity in one regard but also highlight each other's differences
Fatal flaw	character trait that contributes to the downfall of character (e.g. jealousy)

Aristotelian conventions of tragedy

Purpose of tragedy	...to hold up a mirror to society and show audiences how fragile humans can be.
Catharsis	The audience reacts to the tragedy with pathos (pity) and fear and so is cleansed.
Tragic hero	High status at the beginning of the play and has a fatal flaw that leads to his downfall.
Hamartia	The hero's fatal flaw that leads to his tragic downfall.
Anagnorisis	Moment when the hero realises that he is to blame for his downfall.
Hubris	A hero's extreme pride and disrespect for the natural order of the world.
Peripeteia	When the hero's luck shifts from good to bad.
Tragic fate	...must be greater than what the tragic hero deserved, in order to evoke pathos.

Types of Love

Love & Race	Unrequited love
Love & Gender	Friendship (male and female)
Homoerotic love	Love & deception
Love & Loyalty	Love & Marriage
Familial Love	Love & Desire