

Themes - Checklist

A theme is an issue or concern in the text which the writer is trying to explore. The theme is not the plot: don't confuse the two. There can be several themes in a text. You should know the main ones in *Othello* and be prepared to answer a question on each. When you are reading the text, consider the following:

INTRODUCTION

- ✓ How is the theme introduced?
- ✓ Is there a key moment that gives us an indication of the message the author is trying to explore?
- ✓ Does one of the central characters say or do something that sets us on the path of understanding the theme? Or is it conveyed by the minor characters or even the setting?

DEVELOPMENT

- ✓ How does the author develop this theme?
- ✓ Is it through a series of small events?
- ✓ Do we see situations developing that we know must lead to a crisis of some sort?
- ✓ How does the author interest us in the theme?
- ✓ Is it through a central character with whom we can empathise?

CLIMAX

- ✓ Is there a moment of crisis or a turning point in the text?
- ✓ Does the central character have to make a difficult decision?
- ✓ Does the character do the right thing?
- ✓ How is this decision linked to the theme?

RESOLUTION

- ✓ How is the theme resolved?
- ✓ Are you very clear on the author's view of the ideas explored in the theme?
- ✓ Have we learned anything about human behaviour or society in general from the exploration of this theme?

Theme of Jealousy

Jealousy is one of the central themes in this play. We see how lives can be destroyed when people succumb to jealousy and become convinced that merely circumstantial evidence is proof of wrongdoing. Iago famously uses jealousy to bring Othello down, yet he, Iago, also admits jealousy of others. Whatever form jealousy takes in the play, be it sexual or professional, it is destructive.

At the end of his tale to Roderigo about how he was passed over for promotion to lieutenant, Iago admits his jealousy of Cassio when telling Roderigo how he, Cassio, was selected as lieutenant instead of Iago. He bitterly says that Cassio, a 'counter-caster' who 'never set a squadron in the field' has been promoted, while Iago has to remain 'his Moorship's ancient'.

In the same scene, Roderigo admits that he envies Othello because he has married Desdemona: A little later, Roderigo, who is desperately in love with Desdemona, expresses his jealousy of Othello's marriage to Desdemona by exclaiming, 'What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe / If he can carry't thus'.

Iago also indicates that he might be jealous of Othello, believing him to have slept with his wife: 'I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheet / He has done my office'. To Iago, the solution seems obvious: either he must cuckold Othello by sleeping with Desdemona or he must send Othello into a frenzy of jealousy: 'nothing can or shall content my soul / 'Till I am evened with him, wife for wife, / Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgement cannot cure'. Iago's jealousy is so strong that he also suspects Cassio of having worn his 'night-cap too'.



Brabantio, Desdemona's father, also expresses a most vindictive and bitter form of jealousy. After Desdemona states her intention to remain with Othello, Brabantio warns the new bridegroom that if Desdemona could betray and abandon her loving father, she may equally easily do the same to her husband. 'Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee'.

Despite Brabantio's warning, Othello does not seem to suspect his wife of any misbehaviour. Before Iago's hints take hold, Othello says he is happy to see his wife laughing and talking with Cassio and others: 'Tis not to make me jealous / To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company / Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well;/ Where virtue is, these are more virtuous'.

However, Iago cunningly fuel's Othello's jealousy by hinting at a relationship between Desdemona and Cassio, but refusing to elaborate. He tells Othello that such things are not worth thinking about and says that it is probably nothing but his own 'nature's plague' which leads him to 'spy into abuses'. He claims that his jealousy 'Shapes faults that are not'. This is an important line. Although Iago probably means his suspicions rather than actual jealousy, he is giving us an insight into his true self. He has already convinced himself of 'faults that are not' when he suspected Emilia of having slept with both Othello and Cassio.

Iago goes on to warn Othello against jealousy while all the time fanning the flames of Othello's jealous rage:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on; that cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!

This speech is one of the most famous in Othello, and for good reason. It perfectly describes the psychological destructiveness of jealousy. It feeds on the 'meat' of a person's heart but at the same time mocks the person by making him or her feel ashamed and miserable. The 'green-eyed monster' is never satisfied, constantly gnawing away so that the jealous individual will never know peace again. Compared to this horror, the person who is merely angry because he has been cuckolded (cheated on) is in 'bliss'. This is exceptionally cunning of Iago: he is encouraging Othello to leap from suspicion and jealousy to certainty and anger. If Iago's plan is to work, it is essential that Othello never has time to stop and think rationally about what he is being told.



Iago's warnings against jealousy have the desired effect: Othello denies that he is jealous. This suits Iago perfectly. Othello claims that he is not the sort of person who would ever fall prey to jealousy, but would instead learn the truth and resolve the issue immediately: to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved.' Now all Iago needs to do is convince Othello of Desdemona's guilt.

The difficulty for Othello is that he has no way to resolve his doubt. He says to Iago that he will not concern himself with 'such exsufflicate and blown surmises / Matching thy inference'. Here he is comparing Iago's inferences to disgusting, rotten meat in which flies have laid eggs. These overblown or 'exsufflicate' exaggerations are repulsive to Othello. However, Iago has not actually accused Desdemona of anything specific and has not made any claims that could be proven to be true or false. It is Othello himself who is making the inferences although he continues to deny that he is jealous. He points out that Desdemona is virtuous and pure and that, after all, she chose him. Still, we may wonder why he needs to remind himself of this point if he is not at all jealous.

Othello finishes his speech in which he claims not to be jealous by declaring that if he has any doubt about Desdemona he will seek proof at once: 'And on that proof, there is no more but this, - Away at once with love or jealousy!'. It is clear that Othello, whatever he may say, has his suspicions after he has listened to Iago. Othello misjudges both himself and Iago. He believes that Iago is honest and that he, Othello, is not the sort of man to be jealous.

Iago pushes the issue, telling Othello to watch Desdemona and Cassio together and worrying aloud that Othello's 'free and noble nature' may be 'abused'. This is very clever reverse psychology. He tells Othello not to be jealous, but also warns him that if he is not jealous and suspicious, Desdemona is likely to take advantage of his good nature.

Later in the same scene, (Act 3 Scene 3), Othello reveals his plan. He will use the handkerchief to provide Othello with proof. If he places it in Cassio's room and Othello sees Cassio with it, this will be all the confirmation he, Othello, needs. Although the handkerchief is such a tiny thing, it will be enough to destroy Othello and Desdemona's lives. As Iago says, 'Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ. Iago is proven right.

When Othello sees Cassio holding the handkerchief, he is filled with jealous rage.



Desdemona is unhappy when she can't find the handkerchief but never suspects that its loss might make Othello jealous. She tells Emilia that she's glad her husband 'Is true of mind and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are', because otherwise her losing his gift might 'put him to ill thinking'. Emilia is more sceptical and far less sure that Othello could never be jealous but Desdemona says loyally that 'the sun where he was born / Drew all such humour from him'.

When Othello looks for the handkerchief and berates Desdemona for its loss, Emilia astutely asks, 'Is not this man jealous?' Desdemona is distressed and confused, and tries to persuade herself that it is something else bothering Othello but Emilia still believes that jealousy is the root of the problem. She wonders if Othello suspects Desdemona of infidelity. Desdemona is shocked at the suggestion, crying 'Alas the day! I never gave him cause'. Emilia, like her husband, compares jealousy to a monster 'Begot upon itself, born on itself'. In other words, whether or not Desdemona has given Othello cause is irrelevant: jealousy is born of nothing and feeds on nothing. Desdemona is horrified at this notion, hoping that heaven keeps 'that monster from Othello's mind'. Emilia leaves the matter there and says no more about it.

Bianca, Cassio's girlfriend, is another character who suffers from jealousy. The sight of the handkerchief upsets her greatly because she has already been feeling neglected by Cassio. She suspects the handkerchief is 'some token from a newer friend'. Cassio manages to placate her, saying that her words are 'vile guesses'. Emilia agrees to copy the intricate needlework of strawberries and seems relatively content at this stage.



In Act 4, Scene 1 there is an interesting contrast between Othello and Bianca, both of whom are jealous. Othello is overwhelmed by his jealousy, but Bianca is not. Iago makes insinuations about what Cassio and Desdemona might be doing in bed until Othello is so enraged and distressed that he falls into a fit or a trance. Bianca, however, deals with her jealousy in a different way. She confronts Cassio and tells him that she does not believe his story about the handkerchief and has decided she will not copy it. She says that he should give it back to the 'hobby horse' he got it from.

She still wants to see Cassio later, despite her anger, and invites him to dinner. She storms off and Cassio follows her.

Othello has not managed to control his jealousy at all. He turns on Desdemona, calling her a whore. Emilia guesses that someone has been poisoning Othello's mind. She suspects some 'busy and insinuating rogue, / Some cogging, cozening slave' has 'devised this slander'. Iago is unhappy to hear both the accuracy of her guess and the way in which he – the master plotter – is described. He denies the existence of such a man and when Emilia continues to insist the villain is real, he tells her to be quiet. Emilia says that it was some such man who 'made you to suspect me with the Moor'. Iago is angry at this mention of his sexual jealousy and tells his wife she is a fool.

Another aspect of Iago's jealousy is his envy of Cassio's charm and looks. While lurking in the shadows, waiting for Roderigo to kill Cassio, Iago says that he wins, whichever of the two men kills the other. He says that Cassio has 'a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly'. Ultimately, however, it is Othello who suffers most from the jealousy that has consumed him. He convinces himself that Desdemona is a whore who must be killed before she treats other men as she has treated him. Too late, he discovers that he was wrong. Before he commits suicide, Othello makes a speech about how he wants to be remembered. He says he should be spoken of as 'one not easily jealous, but being wrought / Perplex'd in the extreme'. Whether this is true or not depends on your view of Othello. On the one hand, Desdemona said earlier in the play that there was no jealousy in Othello's nature, but on the other hand he did fall



victim to Iago's vile manipulation without once checking the truth of the matter. He was certainly 'perplex'd' or tormented and confused by his jealous thoughts and eventually driven to murder the wife he loved so dearly. The critic A.C. Bradley summarises Othello's jealousy thus: 'His tragedy lies in this - that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to deception, and, if once wrought to

passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable.'¹

¹ *Shakespearean Tragedy* by A. C. Bradley. London: MacMillan and Co., 1919.

