

Brief Notes on Each Scene

Act I Scene 1

Shakespeare drops us straight into the action. We are intrigued from the start, wondering why it is that Iago has had such access to Roderigo's money.

Cassio has been promoted over Iago's head, despite Iago's having far more military experience. Cassio is a Florentine: an outsider. This is our first introduction to the idea of prejudice against 'foreigners'. Othello is an outsider and has chosen another outsider as his lieutenant and left Iago in the position of ensign or 'ancient'. Christian and heathen are also mentioned, raising the issue of religious prejudice.

Iago seems on the one hand to accept the situation and see it as the way things are: 'Why there's no remedy: 'tis the cures of service: / Preferment goes by letter and affection'. It appears he understands that promotion is dependent on who you know rather than what experience you have and where you stand in the hierarchy or 'old gradation'. Seniority means little nowadays, compared to favouritism and class.

However, he goes on to say that he has no reason to 'love the Moor', which shows that he is far from accepting the situation.

There is an irony to Roderigo not realising that if Iago is only serving himself and is willing to deceive and manipulate others if it suits him. Roderigo is unmoved by Iago's 'I am not what I am'. Shakespeare's audience would have recognised the biblical reference in 'I am not what I am'. God said to Moses, 'I am what I am', and by twisting God's words, Iago shows us that he is akin to a devil. Lucifer fell from heaven because he challenged God's authority when he, Lucifer, was not given the respect he felt he deserved.

Iago describes Iago as a 'thick lips', which would be insulting to a modern day audience but not to Shakespeare's audience.

Iago hides in the shadows and uses Roderigo to stir Desdemona's father into a frenzy.

Bestial imagery shocks the audience along with Brabantio 'an old black ram is tupping your white ewe'.

Brabantio believes Rogerigo's version of Desdemona and Othello's elopement without looking for any further evidence. Othello will behave in much the same way when Iago poisons him against Desdemona.

Iago uses crude sexual imagery and plays on Brabantio's fears by saying that mixed race descendants will overrun Venice. At this stage, Othello is 'the Moor' rather than a named person.

Act 1 Scene 2

Othello refuses to hide from Brabantio and his men. Othello's simple words and honest manner mark him as a very different man to Iago: 'Tis better as it is'. Othello does not fear anything because he knows he is in the right.

Othello refuses to be provoked and our first impression of him is wholly favourable. This is in sharp contrast to what we have heard about him before we ever met him. He answers unmannerly accusations with reason and dignity, reminding Brabantio that he is worthy of respect and does not need to threaten him: 'Good signor, you shall more command with years than with your weapons.'

We can contrast his behaviour here with that of Brabantio who was so easily stirred to rage by Iago's manipulative ways.

Act 1 Scene 3

This scene holds the audience's attention from the start. First, there is news of war and Othello's importance as the man who will defend the Venetian state is established. Second, Othello's tale of wooing Desdemona is a wonderful and exotic narrative.

While Othello is presented as a hero in this scene, there is also a hint of pride in the way he describes himself: 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them.' Here it seems that Othello was attracted by Desdemona's admiration for him rather than any attributes of her own!

Desdemona confirms that she was won over by Othello's tales of bravery and suffering.

Iago sees Othello's 'free and open nature' as a weakness and plans to exploit this. He sneers that such men are easily led.

Iago scorns the love between Othello and Desdemona, saying it was born of a 'violent commencement' and he assures Rodrigo that such hasty passions will soon cool. He assumes their attraction is purely physical and that when Desdemona is 'sated with his body' she will look for another man.

Iago also gives another possible motivation for his hatred of Othello: 'it is though abroad that, 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office'. The suspicion of this is enough for Iago.

The scene ends on a chillingly diabolical note, with Iago calling on 'Hell and night' to 'bring this monstrous birth to the world's light'.

Act 2 Scene 1

The storm neatly disposes of the Turkish threat. It also creates tension and suspense: will Othello arrive safely?

While Montano and the others wait they praise Othello, thus reinforcing our high opinion of him.

The storm imagery suggests turmoil and chaos and hints at what is to come in the relationships between the characters. Cassio bemoans the fact that the storm parted him and Othello; he does not realise that they are soon to be parted again by Iago's lies. Othello says that it is his 'soul's joy' to be reunited with Desdemona and wishes that 'after every tempest' there could be such calm and happiness. This is ironic in light of what is to come.

Act 2 Scene 1

Iago's soliloquy reveals that he wants revenge on Othello for cuckolding him. He fears that Cassio has slept with Emilia too. He also hints that he finds Desdemona attractive: 'Now I do love her too'

However, he provides no single, compelling motive for his plotting and makes it clear that he plans to take advantage of circumstances

Act 2 Scene 2

This is a short scene which simply serves to show that Othello is so important that his marriage is a reason for public celebration. Everyone in Cyprus will celebrate their wedding.

Act 2 Scene 3

There is a clear contrast between the way Iago and Cassio view women. Iago is crude and disrespectful, while Cassio is proper and honourable.

Iago shows just how good he is at manipulating people and taking advantage of changing circumstances. One moment he appears to be Cassio's friend, the next he is telling Montano that he fears 'the trust Othello puts in him'.

Othello said earlier that marriage would not affect his role as a soldier and leader. However, it clearly has. He is furious to be dragged away from Desdemona when the fight breaks out.

We wonder if Iago deliberately prevents Othello and Desdemona from consummating their marriage. Some scholars argue that Desdemona dies pure and virginal.

Othello's passion and rashness is shown clearly here. He admits as much: 'My blood begins my safer guides to rule / And passion, having my best judgement collid, / Assays to lead the way'.

Othello cannot bear uncertainty and is infuriated when he cannot immediately ascertain the reason for the brawl.

He dismisses Cassio because he is determined to do what he sees as just and right, no matter how painful it may be.

Act 3 Scene 1

This scene provides comic relief after the high tension and drama of the last scene in Act 2.

Cassio will do anything to win back his position and unwittingly plays into Iago's hands.

Emilia does not realise that she is endangering her mistress by arranging the meeting between her and Cassio.

Act 3 Scene 2

Short scene which serves to show Othello's trust in Iago.

There is an irony in Othello's ensuring that Cyprus is safe from enemy attack while not realising that the enemy is within the walls of the citadel.

Act 3 Scene 3 - The Temptation Scene

This is the most important scene in the play. By the end of it, Othello has moved from loving Desdemona to vowing to murder her.

Iago's ingenuity is to the fore in this scene. He seizes on Cassio's hasty departure to hint that he is guilty of something.

He is delighted to learn that Emilia has the handkerchief.

By pretending that he does not want to speak ill of Desdemona, Iago drives Othello into a frenzy of impatience to hear the worst.

Iago actually appears more honest to Othello than ever, because he believes that he is reluctant to give voice to mere suspicions.

Iago plays on Othello's vulnerability, saying that it is natural for Desdemona to prefer a young, refined Venetian like Cassio.

Yet again, we see that Othello cannot abide uncertainty: 'I'll have some proof... 'Would I were satisfied!'

Iago's crude and disgusting descriptions of Cassio and Desdemona having sex drive Othello into a fury.

Note the amount of animal and diabolical imagery in this scene.



Act 3 Scene 4

Othello sees the handkerchief as a symbol of fidelity and love.

The loss of the handkerchief means the loss of fidelity and love.

Emilia could save Desdemona here but says nothing.

Othello speaks most formally to Desdemona and suspects everything she says.

The audience is horrified to hear Desdemona pleading for Cassio's reinstatement.

Othello's jealous suspicions are confirmed - in his eyes - by Desdemona's failure to produce the handkerchief and by her pleas for him to take Cassio back.



Act 4 Scene 1

Iago has succeeded in corrupting Othello and the once open and forthright general now lurks in the shadows and eavesdrops.

Iago torments Othello to the point where the latter falls in a fit.

Othello is torn between rage and and love for Desdemona.

The letter from Venice calls Othello home and says Cassio is to replace him. Is this a demotion for Othello? If so, then Desdemona's 'By my troth, I am glad on't' would be bound to enrage him as he would see it as her delighting in Cassio's promotion and her husband's demotion.

Othello's striking of Desdemona in public causes Ludovico to question whether this can be the same man 'Whom passion could not shake'. Othello is falling apart, publicly and privately.

Act 4 Scene 2

Desdemona's innocence and terrible suffering are clear.

She cannot bring herself to say the word 'whore' and her pitiful situation evokes sympathy.

She still loves Othello, despite his cruelty: 'unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love.'

Othello is torn between love for Desdemona and revulsion at her imagined infidelity.

He is consumed by jealous rage and compares his innocent wife to a prostitute.

There is irony in Desdemona pleading with Iago to help her reconcile with Othello, and in Emilia voicing her suspicions of a 'villainous knave' having poisoned Othello's mind against his wife.

Emilia is close to the truth and perhaps Iago underestimates her by not taking notice of this.

Act 4 Scene 3

Desdemona has a premonition of death.

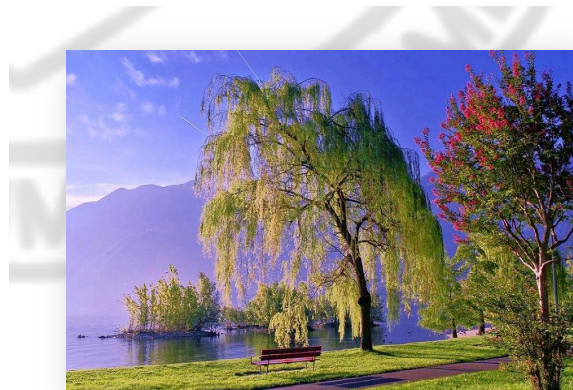
We see the difference in attitude between Emilia and Desdemona.

Desdemona is innocent and trusting while Emilia is cynical and worldly wise.

The willow song is symbolic. Willows at the water's edge are used to represent women deserted by their lovers.

Desdemona is innocent and perfect while Othello has become base and corrupted.

Desdemona's view of love is perhaps naively romantic. She was attracted to an ideal version of Othello and still holds true to this.



Act 5 Scene 1

Once again, Iago and Roderigo plot and scheme under cover of darkness.

Iago reveals another motive for wanting Cassio dead: he, Cassio, 'has a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly'.

Iago's plan is not wholly successful because Cassio does not die.

Iago cannot bear beauty, nobility, innocence, true love or goodness as he does not possess any of these qualities himself. His resentment means he is determined to destroy such virtues whenever he can.

Othello is nothing like the leader he once was. Unlike his actions during the earlier brawl, he now hides in the shadows and delights in what he thinks is the murder of Cassio.

Act 5 Scene 2

Othello believes he is acting justly but he is motivated by jealousy and rage. His once just nature has been corrupted.

Desdemona never stops loving her husband, even when she realises he is going to kill her. Modern audiences may well find such loyalty a little hard to take!

Emilia's Role

Defies both her husband and Othello

Shows great bravery and doesn't fear Othello even when he threatens her: 'I care not for thy sword, I'll make thee known'.

Defies societal norms in disobeying her husband: 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now'.

Emilia has been transformed by her relationship with Desdemona.

She loyally defends her mistress to the end.

Her heroism redeems her and we may forgive her for not telling Othello the truth about the handkerchief.

Touchingly, she asks to be laid beside Desdemona as she dies.

Othello is a pitiful figure.

He realises, too late, that he has lost everything and that he has brought about his own downfall

The story of the Turk he killed is symbolic: he dies the same way as the man who dishonoured Venice. By his actions, Othello has also dishonoured Venice.

Iago remains enigmatic to the end, refusing to explain himself: 'From this time forth I never will speak again'.

