

Othello - Act2, scene 3

RESOURCES

***Othello* (published by Oxford University Press)**. Please note that this is the text I have before me. I will use act, scene and line references rather than page numbers, as they will differ from publication to publication. Do not forget to make constant reference to the **two booklets** that were compiled for you, and which contain detailed explanations of the drama.

Looking Back

Were you able to list Iago's reasons for wanting to destroy Othello? Were you able to discern the more disturbing and deplorable aspects of Iago's nature, from his soliloquy at the end of Act 2, scene 1? Well done! You now have a basic understanding of the antagonist. Do you despise Iago, empathise with him, pity him or even view him as being extremely intelligent, and admire his cunning? Before you decide, keep the following lines from the soliloquy in mind:

"That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it."

"I do suspect the lusty Moor hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards; and nothing can or shall content my soul till I am evened with him, wife for wife."

"I fear Cassio with my night-cap too."

"I'll make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me, for making him egregiously an ass."

Something on which to reflect

One of the themes you will discover in *Life of Pi*, is that of the importance of stories. Pi will tell two stories about his 227 days at sea and we will have to choose which one to believe. The idea is that when reality is not what we would like it to be, we shape it into something that helps us survive, into something that allows the mind to cope. Does Iago convince himself of a certain reality to justify actions that are irrational? *Life of Pi* suggests that like Pi's name (an irrational number in mathematics, meaning there is no finite value), life is irrational, and we find ways to make sense of it.

Perhaps it is too difficult for Iago to accept that he is **innately jealous** or unhappy. Rather than introspect he tells himself that everyone else is to blame for his misery. This story or perception of reality allows him to justify his desire for revenge.

Remember, it is important for you to be able to **evaluate** characters and their actions. Now, let's get back to the play!

Overview

- The difference in tone between Cassio and Iago when they speak about Desdemona and what it reveals about their attitude to women
- Cassio's weaknesses or deplorable qualities
- Othello's gullibility and trusting nature
- The change in Othello, as he acts rashly when provoked
- Iago's ability to manipulate circumstances
- Iago's ability to deceive and to use the weaknesses and virtues of his victims, to their detriment.



Scene 3

The scene begins ironically with Othello reminding Cassio to practise restraint: "Let's teach ourselves...not to out-sport discretion," L2. Iago is already aware of Cassio's inability to control his temper. Cassio admits a second weakness: "I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking," L25. These could be viewed as Cassio's deplorable qualities. Iago ensures that he convinces Montano, the governor of Cyprus whom Othello is set to replace, that Cassio is an alcoholic: "See his vice...I fear the trust Othello puts in him," L109-111. Iago does this to cast doubt on Othello's leadership.

Montano's words are filled with **irony** when he comments about Cassio, and says that Othello "Prizes the virtue that appears in Cassio and looks not on his evils... 'tis great pity that the noble Moor should hazard such a place as his own second with one of an ingraft infirmity," L119-126. Montano's words are a description of Iago. Othello takes the same view of Iago, trusting him, unaware that Iago is jealous, feels overlooked and has a deeply rooted desire for revenge.

Iago's plan is successful; the drunken Cassio becomes involved in a fight with the high-ranking Montano. Othello is outraged since peace had just been restored to the island: "He that stirs next to carve for his own rage holds his soul light: he dies upon his motion," L157.

Iago **lies** when Othello asks who had started the fight: "I do not know," L163. For the first time the "noble" and "valiant" **Moor displays the ability to be ruled by passion and not reason**: "Now by heaven my blood begins my safer guides to rule, and passion having my best judgement collied, assays to lead the way," L188.

Task

- With your knowledge of the play thus far, can you explain the irony in Othello's words: "'Tis monstrous. Iago, who began't?" L201
- Read Iago's account of the fight. Does his story reflect correctly what had happened except for his plan?

In line 220, Iago says that he had never before witnessed such behaviour from Cassio. This contradicts the bad light in which he had previously placed Cassio, in Montano's esteem, where he had painted a picture of an alcoholic Cassio: "Tis evermore the prologue to his sleep," L115. No one notices this lie. Iago will continue his **manipulation** of others and circumstances, without suspicion.

Iago's words (Lines 225 to 227) foreshadow Othello's behaviour, once he is convinced of Desdemona's infidelity: "But men are men; the best sometimes forget...As men in rage strike those that wish them best."

Othello is **misled** by Iago's **outer "flag and sign of love"**: "I know Iago thy honesty and love doth mince this matter." He **rashly** dismisses Cassio, L 233.

The **disgraced and embarrassed** Cassio and **seemingly concerned** Iago discuss reputation – Lines 245 to 264. Cassio might as well be speaking about Iago: "I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is **bestial**." Iago's comment about reputation: "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving," will later be contradicted by what he says to Othello.

Cassio's words ironically foreshadow the decline of Othello: "To be now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a **beast!**" L285

Iago confirms **Othello's passionate love for Desdemona**: "Our general's wife is now the general...he hath given himself up to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces," Lines 294-297. He is confident about **Desdemona's goodness and generosity**: "She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, that **she holds it vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested**," Lines 299 to 301.

It is obvious that Iago has studied his impending victims well. It is he who **convinces Cassio to plead with Desdemona rather than directly to Othello**.

Cassio like others, will trust "**honest Iago**".

Task

Read Iago's soliloquy: "And what's he then that says I play the villain...out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all," Lines 314 – 340.

- Make a list of Iago's assessment of Cassio, Othello and Desdemona.
- "Iago has aligned himself with evil!" Comment on this statement.
- Evaluate Iago's words and actions. Do you find him despicable?

Iago masterfully convinces Roderigo that he has not been fooled: "I have been tonight exceedingly well cudgelled," L343. Once again, Roderigo chooses to trust Iago. Iago's plan is to ensure that Othello witnesses the conversation between Cassio and Desdemona, which will allow him to plant doubt in Othello.