

Summary of Shakespeare's *Othello*

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This summary provides a quick review of the play's plot including every important action in the play. The summary is divided by the five acts of the play and is an ideal introduction before reading the original text.

Act I.

Shakespeare's famous play of love turned bad by unfounded jealousy begins in Venice with Iago, a soldier under Othello's command arguing with Roderigo, a wealthy Venetian. Roderigo has paid Iago a considerable sum of money to spy on Othello for him, since he wishes to take Othello's girlfriend, Desdemona as his own.

Roderigo fears that Iago has not been telling him enough about Desdemona and that this proves Iago's real loyalty is to Othello, not him.

Iago explains his hatred of Othello for choosing Cassio as his officer or lieutenant and not him as he expected.

To regain Roderigo's trust, Iago and Roderigo inform Brabantio, Desdemona's father, of her relationship with Othello the "Moor." Brabantio sends parties out that night to apprehend Othello for what must obviously be in Brabantio's eyes, an abuse of his daughter by Othello.

Iago lies that Roderigo and not himself, was responsible for angering Brabantio against Othello; Iago tells Othello that he should watch out for Brabantio's men who are looking for him.

Othello decides not to hide, since he believes his good name will stand him in good stead.

We learn that Othello has married Desdemona. Brabantio and Roderigo arrive, Brabantio accusing Othello of using magic on his daughter.

Othello is called away to discuss a crisis in Cypress, much to the anger of Brabantio who wants justice for what he believes Othello has done to his fair Desdemona.

The Duke is in council with several senators discussing their enemy, the Turks (Turkish people). Brabantio complains to the Duke that Othello bewitched his daughter and had intimate relations with her.

Desdemona is brought in to settle the matter; Othello meanwhile explains how he and Desdemona fell in love. Desdemona confirms this and the Duke advises Brabantio that he would be better off accepting the marriage than complaining and changing nothing.

The Duke orders Othello to Cypress to fight the Turks, with Desdemona to follow, accompanied by the trusted Iago.

Roderigo despairs that his quest for Desdemona is over now that she is married, but Iago tells him not to give up and earn money instead; soon Desdemona will bore of Othello.

Alone, Iago reveals his intention to continue using Roderigo for money and his hatred of Othello (Othello picked Cassio and not Iago for his lieutenant).

Iago's plan of revenge is to suggest to Othello that Cassio is sleeping with Desdemona (Othello's wife).

Act II.

Several weeks later in Cypress, Montano and several others are awaiting Othello's arrival by bark or ship. We learn that a terrible storm has largely battered and destroyed the Turkish fleet, which no longer poses a threat to Cypress. Unfortunately there are fears that this same storm drowned Othello as well.

Montano reveals his high praise of Othello, which is shared by many. Cassio, who has arrived, sings Desdemona's praises. A ship is spotted but it is Desdemona and Iago's ship, not Othello's. Iago suspects that Cassio loves Desdemona and slyly uses it to his advantage.

Iago tells Roderigo that he still has a chance with Desdemona but Cassio whom Desdemona could love is in the way. Killing Cassio (who became Othello's lieutenant instead of Iago) will leave Desdemona to Roderigo, Iago slyly explains.

Othello finally arrives to everyone's great relief. Iago decides to tell Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona's so Iago will be rewarded whilst Cassio will be punished.

A Herald announces celebration that "our noble general Othello!" has defeated the Turkish fleet, calling on all to celebrate this great triumph and also to celebrate Othello's "nuptial" or wedding to the fair Desdemona.

Iago learns more of Cassio's high regard for Desdemona, and Iago manipulates Cassio into drinking too much since he is certain Cassio will do something he will regret.

With Cassio gone, Iago tells Montano of Cassio's drinking problem turning Montano's high regard for Cassio into dust. Iago also tells Roderigo to attack Cassio. This happens, and Cassio wounds Roderigo and then Montano who was trying to break up the fight.

Othello is now awake and Cassio's reputation is ruined.

Othello, though he loves Cassio, has no choice but to demote him from his position as his lieutenant. Next Iago comforts Cassio by suggesting he speak with Desdemona who could put in a good word for him with Othello (again, to make it seem to Othello that they are having an affair).

Iago comforts a wounded Roderigo, telling him he has won by ruining Cassio's name. Iago has his wife Emilia ensure Desdemona and Cassio will talk to each other, so Othello can see his wife talking with Cassio (again, allowing Iago to convince Othello that Desdemona is being unfaithful).

Act III.

Iago's scheme to convince Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful continues.

Cassio tells Iago that he has arranged to meet Desdemona.

Iago's wife, Emilia, tells Cassio that Othello would like to reinstate him as his lieutenant, but the fact that Cassio's fight is public news, prevents Othello from doing this immediately.

Emilia tells Cassio that she can arrange a meeting with Desdemona.

Some time later, Cassio speaks with a very sympathetic Desdemona who assures him that Othello still very much loves him. Furthermore, Desdemona resolves to keep putting in a good word for Cassio with Othello until he is again Othello's lieutenant (which seems suspicious to Othello).

At a distance, Iago manipulates Othello by first suggesting shock and then hiding his outbursts about Cassio from Othello. This guarantees Othello's attention, as Iago plants seeds of doubt in Othello's mind about Desdemona's fidelity, especially where Cassio is concerned.

Iago suggests to Othello that he observe Desdemona's behavior with Cassio. Iago leaves Othello almost convinced that his wife is having an affair with Cassio.

Othello now complains of a headache to Desdemona, which results in her dropping a strawberry patterned handkerchief, Othello's first gift to her. Unbeknownst to Othello or Desdemona, Emilia picks up the handkerchief and gives it to Iago. Iago decides the handkerchief could help his manipulation if he ensures Cassio receives it.

Iago arranges to place the handkerchief near Cassio's lodgings or home where Cassio is certain to find it and take it as his own, unaware that it is Othello's gift to Desdemona.

A furious Othello returns to Iago, certain his wife is faithful and demanding proof from Iago of Desdemona's infidelity.

Reluctantly and hesitantly (very cunning!), Iago tells Othello he saw Cassio wipe his brow with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello is convinced, cursing his wife and telling Iago who is now promoted to lieutenant to kill Cassio. Othello will deal with Desdemona.

Desdemona worries about her missing handkerchief and comments that if she lost it, it could lead Othello doubting her fidelity. Emilia when asked about Desdemona's lost handkerchief, lies, denying having seen the handkerchief she picked up and gave to Iago.

Othello enters asking Desdemona for the very same handkerchief, and Desdemona assures him that the handkerchief is not lost and will be found.

Desdemona now tries to change the subject to Cassio, but Othello continually stresses the value the handkerchief has to him, this leading to Othello angrily ordering his wife away.

Cassio arrives, Desdemona telling him that her attempts to help him are not going well. Iago claims total ignorance to the cause of Othello's fury.

Cassio gives Othello's handkerchief, which he has found, to his suspicious courtesan¹ Bianca who reluctantly starts to copy its patterning (presumably its strawberry motif / design) for him.

Act IV.

Iago fans the flames of Othello's distrust and fury with Desdemona's supposed "infidelity" by first suggesting Desdemona shared her bed with Cassio and then that her giving away the handkerchief is no big deal. Iago knows exactly how hurtful the idea of Desdemona giving away this sentimental gift is to Othello,

Next Iago suggests to Othello that Cassio will "blab" or gloat to others about his conquest of Desdemona before telling Othello that Cassio boasted to him that he did indeed sleep with Desdemona.

Meeting later with Cassio, Iago cunningly talks to Cassio about Cassio's mistress Bianca, each smile and each gesture made by Cassio infuriating a hidden Othello who thinks Cassio is talking about sleeping with Desdemona .

Next Bianca (Cassio's courtesan) arrives, angrily giving back the handkerchief Cassio gave to her.

This infuriates Othello since as Iago puts it, Cassio not only received Othello's handkerchief from his wife but then gave it away to his "whore" (Bianca) as if it were worthless.

Othello decides to kill Desdemona by strangulation in her bed, Iago's idea. Iago pledges to kill Cassio.

Lodovico arrives, announcing that Othello is to return home and Cassio is to be the next Governor of Cypress. Desdemona's joy for Cassio enrages Othello, leaving Lodovico and Iago to wonder how much Othello seems to have changed and leaving poor Desdemona to wonder how she offended the man she truly loves...

Othello questions Emilia as to whether Desdemona was unfaithful to him. Annoyed that Emilia's answers suggest nothing has happened between Desdemona and Cassio, Othello dismisses her comments as those of a simple woman.

Othello meets Desdemona, Desdemona becoming increasingly upset with her husband's anger towards her, an anger she cannot understand.

Othello eventually reveals to Desdemona that her infidelity is the source of his anger, calling her a "strumpet" (a prostitute); Desdemona pleading her innocence on deaf ears.

Emilia and Desdemona discuss Othello's strange behavior. Emilia is certain some evil fellow has twisted Othello to believe Desdemona has been unfaithful, not realizing that this evil man is her own husband Iago.

We learn that Iago has been pocketing Roderigo's gifts to Desdemona, which never reached her. Fearing Roderigo will learn this, Iago tells Roderigo that Cassio must die.

Lodovico tries to calm Othello down. Othello orders Desdemona to bed to await him later, an order Desdemona dutifully obeys out of love for Othello.

Emilia notices that Othello is much calmer now and tells Desdemona that her bed has been made with her wedding sheets as requested. Desdemona asks to be buried in those same sheets should she die before Emilia, a hint of trouble ahead (Foreshadowing).

Desdemona, depressed, recalls a song (The Willow Song) of a maid who was similarly abused by her husband and sings it.

Desdemona and Emilia talk about infidelity. Desdemona would not be unfaithful to her husband (Othello) for all the world; the more cynical and worldly Emilia would for the right price.

Act V.

Iago and Roderigo wait in a street to ambush Cassio. Iago tells Roderigo how to kill Cassio though Iago does not care which man ends up dead. Iago is worried that about Roderigo's increasing questioning of what happened to jewels that were given to him to pass on to Desdemona.

Roderigo attacks Cassio but Cassio wounds Roderigo instead. Iago from behind stabs Cassio, wounding him in the leg. Othello hearing Cassio's cries is pleased, announcing that he too will soon kill (Desdemona).

Lodovico and Gratiano and Iago reappear, Iago claiming total innocence to Cassio's injuries even though he inflicted them.

Seizing Roderigo, Iago stabs and wounds him "in revenge" for wounding his "friend" Cassio.

Gratiano and Lodovico tend to Cassio's wound. Bianca arrives, and Iago cleverly accuses her for Cassio's injuries making Iago appear less suspicious.

Othello enters Desdemona's bedchamber (bedroom) trying to convince himself that he is killing her for her own good. He kisses his still asleep wife one last time. Desdemona awakens, but Othello will still kill her, telling her to pray so her soul will not die when she does.

Desdemona again asks what wrong she has committed, and Othello replies that she gave Cassio his handkerchief, by which he means he believes she had an affair with him.

Desdemona pleads her innocence, telling Othello to bring Cassio over to prove she did not give away her handkerchief. Othello says Cassio dead, and Desdemona's fear and surprise prompts Othello to believe she does care for Cassio.

Othello smothers Desdemona.

Emilia banging on the door outside cannot stop this. Later Emilia is let in, and she reveals that Iago has killed Roderigo. Desdemona who was thought dead, murmurs her last breaths but loyally does not say Othello killed her.

Othello tells Emilia he killed her, and Emilia, despite Iago's attempts to remove her, reveals the truth about the handkerchief: she found it, and then gave it to Iago. Iago now in trouble, stabs his wife Emilia and escapes.

Emilia dies, singing the "Willow Song" before criticizing Othello for killing his loving wife.

Lodovico, Montano, Cassio and the now captured prisoner Iago soon appear, Othello stabbing Iago but not killing him before having his sword removed.

Lodovico is disappointed that Othello, a man so honorable, has reverted to acting like a slave. Othello tries to argue that killing his wife was a noble action but it falls on deaf ears.

Lodovico learns that Othello and Iago plotted Cassio's death. Lodovico reveals letters in the dead Roderigo's pocket proving Cassio was to be killed by Roderigo.

Iago proudly confirms that Cassio did find the handkerchief in his bedchamber because Iago placed it there to be found.

Othello, realizing what he has done, kills himself with a concealed weapon and lies himself on top of his wife.

Cassio is placed in charge of Iago and Lodovico leaves to discuss this sad matter with others abroad.

¹Courtesan: "a prostitute with a courtly, wealthy, or upper-class clientele." (Courtesy of the Merriam Webster dictionary)