



SCENE BY SCENE SUMMARY

Shello

ACT I

Summary

ACT 1 SCENE 1

- The play opens as Iago is telling Roderigo that he hates Othello because Othello has promoted Cassio to be his lieutenant instead of him, even though Cassio 'never set a squadron in the field' and has much less experience. Iago tells Roderigo 'I follow him to serve my turn upon him'. The two men stand outside Brabantio's house and shout to wake him up. From the shadows, they tell him about his daughter's secret marriage to Othello. Iago makes Brabantio angry by describing Othello and Desdemona as 'making the beast with two backs' and uses other sexual animal imagery. Brabantio doesn't recognise them at first but eventually sees Roderigo and the scene ends with Roderigo offering to help Brabantio find the married couple to 'apprehend her and the Moor'.

Summary

ACT 1 SCENE 2

- Iago tells Othello that Brabantio knows about his marriage and ‘spoke such scurvy and provoking terms against your honour’ but Othello dismisses this and says ‘let him do his spite’. Cassio then arrives with a message from the Duke asking Othello to come to the Senate to talk about the war in Cyprus. Just as they are about to leave, Brabantio and Roderigo arrive with soldiers to arrest Othello for bewitching Desdemona. When he hears that the Duke has called for Othello, Brabantio allows him to go saying ‘the Duke himself, / Or any of my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong as ‘twere their own’.

Summary

ACT 1 SCENE 3

- Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, Iago and Roderigo arrive at the Senate while they are talking about the war. Brabantio tells the Duke that Othello has bewitched his daughter saying she is 'abused, stolen from me and corrupted'. The Duke listens to Othello who explains that she fell in love with him as he told her stories about his life and that 'she loved me for the dangers I had passed'. Desdemona is called for and she tells the Senate she married Othello for love and her duty is now to him rather than her father. Desdemona asks to go with Othello to Cyprus and Brabantio warns Othello 'she has deceived her Father, and may thee'. Othello asks Iago to bring his wife Emilia to Cyprus to 'attend on' Desdemona. Alone with Roderigo, Iago persuades him to follow them to Cyprus, saying Othello and Desdemona's love will not last long. Alone, Iago tells the audience of his plans to make Othello believe Desdemona is being unfaithful to him with Cassio 'to get his place, and to plume up my will / In double knavery'.

Discussion questions

- Notice what Iago says about Othello in the opening scene. Can you find a line in the text that shows Iago has ulterior motives?
- Notice Iago's soliloquy in Act 1. What effect does it have when you and the audience know more than the main protagonist, Othello?
- Take note of everything we learn about Desdemona's relationship with her father and how she fell in love with Othello. What do we learn about their relationship? Do you think this marriage can work?
- Act 1 is important because it sets up the characters – letting us know Othello is an outsider, that Desdemona betrayed her Father and lied to marry Othello. What do you think is the most important detail Shakespeare gives you about each character in this Act of the play?

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ACT II

SUMMARY

ACT 2 SCENE 1

- News is brought to Montano, the Governor of Cyprus, that 'our wars are done!' because the Turkish fleet has been badly damaged by storms. The messenger announces that Michael Cassio, 'lieutenant to the warlike Moor, Othello / Is come on shore'. The next ship to arrive carries Desdemona, Iago and Emilia. Cassio describes Desdemona as 'a maid that paragons description and wild fame' and greets her very affectionately. Observing how close Cassio and Desdemona seem, Iago tells the audience 'with as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio'. Finally, Othello's ship arrives and he and Desdemona are delighted to be together again. Left alone with Roderigo, Iago convinces him that Desdemona is already bored with Othello and has switched her attention to 'handsome, young' Cassio, and that since Cassio is 'rash and very sudden in choler', Roderigo should provoke him into a fight later that evening. Alone with the audience, Iago offers more reasons why he hates Othello

Summary

ACT 2 SCENE 2

- Othello's herald announces a party to celebrate the triumph over the Turks and Othello's marriage to Desdemona.

Summary

ACT 2 SCENE 3

- Othello leaves Cassio and Iago in charge of the party and goes to spend time alone with Desdemona. Iago convinces Cassio to drink even though Cassio protests he has 'very poor and unhappy brains for drinking'. With Cassio clearly drunk, Iago tells Montano 'I fear the trust Othello puts him in' and secretly sends Roderigo to provoke Cassio to fight. Montano tries to stop the fight but Cassio fights him instead and injures him. Othello arrives asking 'Are we turned Turks?' and demands to know what is going on. Iago protests that he does not want to speak badly of Cassio, 'Yet I persuade myself to speak the truth'. Hearing of Cassio's drunkenness and fighting, Othello says 'Cassio, I love thee, but never more be officer of mine'. Believing Iago is his friend, Cassio tells him how upset he is, 'O, I have lost my reputation, I have lost the immortal part of myself and what remains is bestial', and that he remembers 'a mass of things, but nothing distinctly; a quarrel, but nothing wherefore'. Iago tells him to ask Desdemona for help in convincing Othello to give him back his job and Cassio agrees saying 'You advise me well'. Left alone, Iago tells the audience that as Desdemona 'for him pleads strongly to the Moor' he 'will pour this pestilence into his ear: that she repeals him for her body's lust'. Roderigo arrives, complaining that he is bruised from the fight, has no money left and thinks it's time to go home. Iago assures him the plan is working well.

Discussion questions

- Notice the relationships between characters when they first arrive in Cyprus. This is a different setting so how do the characters change? Cassio kisses Desdemona's hand but is also affectionate with Emilia. What does this reveal about him? How does Iago react? What kind of relationship do you think Emilia and Iago have?
- In Iago's soliloquy at the end of Scene 1, how many reasons can you find for him wanting revenge on Othello? Create a list of every reason he has given or suggested.
- Look at Desdemona's behaviour, both before Othello arrives in Cyprus and later at the party. What do her actions reveal about her character?
- Act 2 is where we learn more about the world of Cyprus and see the practicalities of Iago's plan begin to take shape. What do you think the most important moments are in this Act?

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ACT III

Summary

ACT 3 SCENE 1

- The morning after the fight, Cassio asks Emilia to help him speak to Desdemona and Iago offers further support. Emilia tells Cassio that Desdemona is already speaking up for him to Othello 'and she speaks for you stoutly'. Cassio asks Emilia to help him speak 'with Desdemona alone'.

Summary

ACT 3 SCENE 2

- Othello passes through, talking to Iago and others about affairs of state.

Summary

ACT 3 SCENE 3

- Desdemona reassures Cassio that she will continue to speak to Othello on his behalf. She says, 'Do not doubt, Cassio, but I will have my lord and you again as friendly as you were'. Iago makes sure Othello sees the end of their conversation and notices Cassio leaving Desdemona. He says to Othello that it can't have been Cassio because 'I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like seeing you coming'. Desdemona then persuades Othello to talk to Cassio and he claims, 'I will deny thee nothing'. As she leaves, he says 'Perdition catch my soul / but I do love thee! And when I love thee not, / chaos is come again'. Iago immediately begins to sow seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind, subtly at first and then more obviously, suggesting that something is going on between Cassio and Desdemona, advising him to 'Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio'. Iago leaves Othello convinced of his wife's infidelity, saying 'She's gone, I am abused, and my relief must be to loath her'. When Desdemona comes back with Emilia, Othello complains 'I have a pain upon my forehead, here'. As Desdemona tries to help him, she drops her handkerchief. Left alone, Emilia picks it up, telling the audience, 'My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it'. Iago returns and takes it from her. He tells the audience that he will plant the handkerchief in Cassio's room, hoping it will provide further 'proof' of Cassio's affair with Desdemona.
- Othello returns to see Iago, furious at the idea of his wife with Cassio, saying 'thou hast set me on the rack!' He demands that Iago provide 'ocular proof'. Iago winds him up more saying 'Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys' it would be hard to catch them in the act. He pretends he has heard Cassio talking in his sleep about the affair, then adds that he has seen Cassio using Desdemona's handkerchief which 'speaks against her with the other proofs'. Othello is convinced and vows a 'wide revenge'. He asks Iago to kill Cassio and plans to kill Desdemona himself.

Summary

ACT 3 SCENE 4

- Desdemona is upset about losing her handkerchief, but Emilia pretends she knows nothing about it. Othello comes in acting strangely and asks to borrow the handkerchief, telling her 'there's magic in the web of it'. She tries to make him talk about Cassio, but he keeps talking about 'The handkerchief' until he walks off and she is left confused.
- Iago returns with Cassio and, hearing Othello was upset, Iago leaves to find him. Desdemona thinks affairs of state must have 'puddled his clear spirits'. Emilia thinks he is jealous but Desdemona says, 'I never gave him cause'. They leave and Bianca, a woman who is in love with Cassio, arrives. Cassio gives her the handkerchief, saying 'I found it in my chamber', and asks her to copy the design.

Discussion questions

- Look closely at the beginning of Scene 3 and notice how Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona and Cassio are more than friends. How would you describe the tactics Iago uses? Which lines do you think offer the best examples of these tactics?
- Othello's soliloquy in the middle of Scene 3 suggests reasons for Othello's sense of insecurity. What reasons can you find in this speech? What further reasons can you find in the rest of the Act?
- The handkerchief becomes increasingly important in Scene 3 and Scene 4. List all the things we learn about it in this act and consider why you think Emilia keeps quiet about it.
- Act 3 is important because it shows how Iago poisons Othello's mind against Desdemona and Cassio. Which of Iago's lines do you think are most effective in convincing Othello and why?

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ACT IV

Summary

ACT 4 SCENE 1

- Pretending to be supportive, Iago continues to wind up Othello about Desdemona and Cassio until Othello is so disturbed he collapses in an epileptic fit. Iago comments 'Thus credulous fools are caught'. When he comes round, Iago tells him to hide and listen as he talks to Cassio about Desdemona. Iago confides in the audience 'Now will I question Cassio of Bianca' and then jokes with Cassio about his relationship with Bianca. Bianca then arrives angrily returning the handkerchief to Cassio, saying, 'This is some minx's token'. Othello is convinced that Cassio was laughing about his affair with Desdemona, that she gave him the handkerchief 'and he hath given it his whore'. Othello is determined to kill Desdemona that night, saying 'I will chop her into messes' and Iago suggests 'strangle her in her bed – even the bed she hath contaminated'.
- Just then, Desdemona enters with Lodovico. He brings a letter from Venice telling Othello to travel home and leave Cassio in command of Cyprus. As Othello reads, Desdemona and Lodovico talk about the disagreement between Cassio and Othello and Othello becomes so angry at Desdemona for defending Cassio that he hits her, insults her and yells at her 'Out of my sight!' He then leaves, after attempting to regain his composure. Lodovico is shocked at Othello's behaviour asking 'Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate call all in all sufficient?' Iago suggests that Othello's behaviour has become increasingly erratic.

Summary

ACT 4 SCENE 2

- Othello questions Emilia about Desdemona and Emilia defends her saying 'For if she be not honest, chaste and true there's no man happy'. He then questions Desdemona herself, calling her 'Impudent strumpet!' and 'cunning whore of Venice', but does not ask her directly about Cassio or the handkerchief. She says 'By heaven you do me wrong' but he refuses to believe her. Desdemona asks Iago for his help. Emilia says she is convinced 'The Moor's abused by some most villainous knave' but Iago tells her 'You are a fool, go to'. He sends the women away with the promise that 'all things shall be well'.
- Roderigo arrives, angry that Iago's promises to help him win Desdemona have come to nothing, despite all the jewels he has given Iago to give to Desdemona. He comments, 'your words and performances are no kin together'. Iago convinces Roderigo that in order to stop Othello and Desdemona leaving Cyprus, he must 'remove' Cassio by 'knocking out his brains'.

Summary

ACT 4 SCENE 3

- Emilia helps Desdemona get ready for bed and expresses her concern about Othello's behaviour. Desdemona remains loyal to him but cannot get a song out of her head which she heard sung by her mother's maid 'called Barbary' who was in love with a man who went mad, 'it expressed her fortune and she died singing it'. Desdemona says she cannot believe that any woman would be unfaithful to her husband, 'Beshrew me if I would do such a wrong for the whole world'. Emilia blames men for not understanding that women have feelings just like they do, saying 'I do think it is their husbands' faults if wives do fall'.

Discussion questions

- Notice how Othello listens to Iago and believes what he says but cannot believe anything Desdemona and Emilia say to him. Which images in the text do you think best explain how Othello feels?
- Notice how nobody doubts Iago's motives. Look back at his conversations in this scene and consider why his opinions are trusted by Cassio, Lodovico, Desdemona and Roderigo.
- Consider why Shakespeare includes Scene 3 between Desdemona and Emilia. This scene was often cut in performances in the 1900s. How might this scene affect an audience watching the performance?
- Act 4 is where Othello starts to plan and talk about Desdemona's death. How has this act set up tension for the audience, even in scenes where Othello and Desdemona don't appear together? What might an audience expect to happen next?

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ACT V

Summary

ACT 5 SCENE 2

- Desdemona is asleep on her bed. Othello says he will not 'shed her blood' but 'she must die, else she'll betray more men'. He kisses her and she wakes up. He tells her to pray because 'I would not kill thy unprepared spirit' and urges her to confess that she gave the handkerchief to Cassio. She replies 'No, by my life and soul' but he refuses to believe her. She pleads for her life but he suffocates her. He hears Emilia calling him and lets her in. She tells him that Cassio killed Roderigo and that Cassio lives. Emilia hears Desdemona calling out and finds her just as she dies. Othello confesses 'Twas I that killed her', adding 'She was false as water' and 'Thy husband knew it all'. Emilia is shocked at her husband's involvement 'May his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day! He lies to th'heart'. She yells for help and Montano, Gratiano and Iago rush in. Emilia confronts Iago, who admits he told Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful with Cassio and tries to stop her talking. She says, 'I am bound to speak: My mistress here lies murdered in her bed'. Othello defends himself saying, 'Tis pitiful, but yet Iago knows that she with Cassio hath the act of shame a thousand times committed' and says he saw his handkerchief in Cassio's hand. Emilia says 'O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speak'st of I found by fortune and did give my husband'. Finally, Othello realises the truth. Iago stabs Emilia and runs away. Montano runs after him.
- Lodovico, Montano and Cassio come in with Iago as a prisoner. Othello asks 'Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?' Iago says, 'From this time forth I never will speak a word' but they piece together what has happened from letters found in Roderigo's possession. Othello is arrested. Lodovico tells Othello 'Your power and your command is taken off and Cassio rules in Cyprus', but before they can take him away, Othello asks that they 'speak of one that loved not wisely but too well' and 'threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe'. Then he stabs himself, kisses Desdemona and dies.

Discussion questions

- Notice how action-packed Scene 1 is. Look at how Iago controls this action and consider what could have happened differently.
- Notice the language used about Iago as being 'inhuman' once his deceptions have been revealed. What examples of this imagery can you find and why do you think it is used?
- Look at Othello's speeches at the beginning and end of Scene 2. What effect do you think each speech might have on how an audience feel about Othello?
- Act 5 is important because it brings everything together and reveals the truth of all the characters' actions. Which character are you most interested in and what has been most interesting about their journey for you?