Exam Topics

'Othello is the principal agent of his own downfall.'

Othello is certainly unfortunate to encounter a villain such as Iago whose evil genius enables him to manipulate a range of characters with consummate ease. **However, while the fiendishly cunning Iago plays a central role in Othello's downfall, the Moor is primarily responsible for the tragedy that befalls him.** Iago's success is based on his ability to identify and ruthlessly exploit weaknesses and insecurities in Othello's character. The roots of the tragedy lie in Othello's noble but flawed nature.

Othello is an open, honest and noble character. His frankness is very evident in his account of his wooing of Desdemona. Othello declares that he will deliver 'a round unvarnished tale … of my whole course of love' and his account of how he and Desdemona fell in love is impressive in its sincerity. **Othello lacks cunning and expects others to be as noble, sincere and trustworthy as he is himself.** In the temptation scene he tells Iago, 'Certain men should be as they seem.' **While Othello's lack of guile may be an admirable quality, it leaves him vulnerable to exploitation. Iago regards Othello's open, trusting nature as a weakness to be exploited**, 'The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are.' **From the outset, Othello regards Iago as 'a man of honesty and trust' and at no point does he question Iago's motives.** The Moor never doubts the truthfulness of Iago's account of the initial brawl and, in the temptation scene, concludes that Iago is 'of exceeding honesty'.

Iago identifies another weakness in Othello's character, which he skilfully exploits – Othello cannot bear uncertainty. The brawl scene highlights this aspect of his character. Here Othello feels compelled to act quickly and decisively in response to this very public fracas. As a general, Othello prides himself on being firm and decisive. **However, in his desire to be decisive, Othello can on occasions be impulsive and rash. He dismisses Cassio from his post on the basis of a single account (Iago's) of the quarrel**, failing to conduct a thorough investigation into the incident. Othello's inability to live with doubt facilitates Iago's evil scheming. **Once Iago plants the seed of doubt in his mind, undermining his faith in Desdemona, Othello's peace of mind is destroyed. He cannot cope with conflicting emotions. He must have clarity, 'Away at once with love or jealousy'.** He never takes the time to reflect on evidence which, objectively, is flimsy nor does he pause to question Iago's motives or honesty. Othello's inability to cope with uncertainty means that he is predisposed to accepting, without reflection, Iago's 'evidence' of Desdemona's 'guilt'. In his desire to act decisively, Othello immediately plans his revenge, 'All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven: 'tis gone. Arise black vengeance from the hollow hell!' **Othello's inability to cope with doubt further facilitates Iago's malevolent scheming when he demands that Iago give him 'ocular proof' of his wife's infidelity.** He implores Iago to banish all doubt from his mind, 'Make me to see it, or at least, so prove it, that the probation bear no hinge or loop to hang a doubt on'.

The intense nature of Othello's love for Desdemona may also help to explain his extreme reaction to her supposed disloyalty. Where Othello is concerned, there is no emotional middle ground. He is a character of emotional extremes, loving and hating with an equal intensity. When he loves Desdemona, she is the focal point of his world. He describes her as 'the fountain from which my current runs or else dries up'. Early in the temptation scene Othello declares, 'Excellent wretch! … But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, chaos is come again'. At the close of the play Othello describes himself as 'one that loved not wisely, but too well'. Here he may be suggesting that

his love for Desdemona was too extreme. When Othello's faith in Desdemona is undermined, 'chaos' truly does come again. Othello's jealousy becomes as all-consuming as his love. The desire for revenge replaces love as the driving force of his life.

Othello's sense of insecurity in relation to Desdemona also contributes to his dramatic fall. Othello is an outsider in Venetian society. On a very obvious level, his skin colour sets him apart from those around him. Beyond this, Othello has no knowledge of Venetian culture – he is an open and honest soldier among people renowned for their sophistication. Iago exploits Othello's ignorance of Venetian life, telling the Moor that he knows 'our country disposition' well, and describing Venetian women as being notoriously unfaithful to their husbands, 'In Venice, they do not let heaven see the pranks they dare not show their husbands'. Iago heightens Othello's sense of insecurity by suggesting that it was 'unnatural' for Desdemona not to have married a Venetian nobleman, someone 'of her own complexion, clime and degree'. Othello is left to reflect on the fact that he is racially distinct from his wife and lacking in sophistication, 'I am black and have those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have'.

Another factor in Othello's downfall is his faulty concept of love. Othello is perhaps too self-centred, tending to assess every situation in relation to himself. Othello's egocentric nature is very apparent in his account of wooing of Desdemona, 'She loved me for the dangers that I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them'. Other than her sympathy for and fascination with him, there is no mention of other aspects of Desdemona's character that caused him to fall in love with her. Othello's self-centred concept of love is also evident in his explanation of why he wants Desdemona to accompany him to Cyprus, 'not to please the palate of my appetite … but to be free and bounteous to her mind'.

A related factor in Othello's tragic fall is the fact that he and Desdemona do not know each other as well as most husbands and wives. When Brabantio warns Othello that, having deceived her father Desdemona may also betray him, Othello replies, 'My life upon her faith'. However, when he is confronted with Iago's insinuations, Othello does not possess the type of detailed knowledge of his wife's character that would enable him to emphatically dismiss any suggestion that she had been unfaithful to him. The fact that their courtship was brief and that they have only recently married means that they have simply not had the time together to get to know each other very well.

A range of personal weaknesses makes Othello relatively easy prey for the cunning, ruthless Iago. The tragic hero must bear ultimate responsibility for his own downfall.

'A combination of Iago's skill, Othello's weaknesses and a measure of good luck bring about the tragedy in Othello.*'*

This is an accurate summation of the principal causes of the tragedy. Iago is a formidable villain who manipulates a variety of characters into playing their parts in his evil scheme. However, Othello contributes in a fundamental way to his own demise as Iago remorselessly exploits his flaws and insecurities. Iago also benefits from 'the chance factor' – luck works in his favour until the very end of the play.

Iago is an evil genius. Shrewd and quick-witted, he cynically uses people for his own evil ends. A master of duplicity, he has the ability to hide his true self and convince people that he is absolutely trustworthy, being consistently described as 'honest' and 'good'. While posing (very plausibly) as their friend, Iago plans to 'ensnare' Othello, Desdemona and Cassio in his web of deceit. **Iago is a shrewd judge of character and uses people's weaknesses and even their finer qualities against them.**

Iago sees Cassio's refinement and polished manners as the 'net' with which he will

entrap him. He also exploits his sociable nature, convincing him to drink more than he should, even though he admits to having 'poor and unhappy brains for drinking'. Iago correctly predicts that a drunken Cassio will react in a rash manner if provoked. **Later he exploits Cassio's impatience to regain Othello's favour,** suggesting to him that he should approach Desdemona to intervene on his behalf.

Iago coldly takes advantage of Desdemona's fundamental goodness. Knowing Desdemona's generous nature, Iago is certain that she will plead strongly for Cassio's reinstatement and, in so doing, will further inflame Othello's jealousy. He callously plans to 'turn her virtue into a pitch and out of her goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all'. He sees Emilia as a useful means of achieving another of his villainous ends when he convinces her to steal Desdemona's handkerchief.

Nowhere is Iago's evil genius more strikingly evident than in his manipulation of Othello in the famous 'temptation scene'. In this scene Iago cunningly draws Othello into his web of suspicion, jealousy and confusion, destroying his peace of mind and blackening the reputations of Desdemona and Cassio. **Iago's method of corrupting Othello's nobility is initially subtle and indirect as he uses suggestion and insinuation to plant the seeds of doubt in the Moor's mind.** Iago exploits Cassio's unease at approaching Desdemona to cast suspicion on both of them, putting a sinister interpretation on Cassio's parting, 'I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like'. Iago's answering of Othello's question ('Is he not honest?') with another question ('Honest, my lord?') leaves a question mark over Cassio's honesty. Iago's feigned reluctance to speak his mind leads Othello to believe that he is hiding some monstrous secret. Othello's suspicion inevitably grows when Iago warns him of the dangers of jealousy and makes a subtle reference to the lot of the cuckold (deceived husband). Key words such as 'guilty', 'jealousy' and 'cuckold' are designed to linger in Othello's mind. **Iago now adopts a more direct approach in his efforts to inflame Othello's growing jealousy.** Exploiting Othello's sense of insecurity as an outsider, Iago tells him that Venetian women are notorious for their infidelities, 'In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks they dare not show their husbands'. Iago then reminds Othello that Desdemona deceived her father in marrying him, and points out that it was unnatural for her not to marry someone of her own race and social rank. Iago sees that Othello 'changes with my poison'. The 'pestilence' that the malevolent villain has poured into the Moor's ear destroys his peace of mind. Tortured by the idea of his wife's adultery Othello demands that Iago give him 'ocular proof' of her guilt. Having had the good fortune to get possession of the handkerchief, Iago suggests to Othello that he should ask Desdemona for the precious love token. Othello now wants the love in his heart to be replaced by 'tyrannous hate' and plans 'a capable and wide revenge'.

While Iago is an ingenious villain, his success in corrupting Othello lies in his ability to identify and exploit the Moor's weaknesses and insecurities. One of Othello's main weaknesses is his open, trusting and noble nature. While most would see this as an admirable strength, Iago sees it a weakness that he can advantage of, 'The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are'. Believing everyone else to be as honest as himself, Othello never questions Iago's honesty or motives.

Iago also knows that Othello cannot bear any type of uncertainty. While the ability to act quickly and decisively is a strength in the military world, it can be a weakness in the more complex world of personal relationships. Once Iago undermines his faith in Desdemona, Othello is tortured by doubt and craves certainty, 'Away at once with love or jealousy!' He plays right into Iago's hands when he demands that Iago prove that Desdemona has been unfaithful, 'Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore. Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof'. Othello's need of certainty means that he is inclined to unquestioningly

accept Iago's 'evidence' of Desdemona's 'guilt' (the story of Cassio dreaming about Desdemona and wiping his beard with her handkerchief). There is no room in Othello's heart now for love, only for 'tyrannous hate' and 'black vengeance'.

Othello loves and hates with his entire being. The intense nature of his love for Desdemona may help to explain the extreme, violent reaction to her imagined infidelity. Othello is inclined towards emotional extremes. When he loves Desdemona, she is the source of his life, 'the fountain from which my current runs or else dries up'. Early in the temptation scene, Othello declares, 'Excellent wretch! … But I do love thee. And when I love thee not, chaos is come again'. This remark proves to be prophetic because once his faith in Desdemona is undermined, Othello's world plunges into a state of chaos.

Othello's sense of insecurity regarding Desdemona is another factor underpinning the tragedy. Predictably, Iago exploits this weakness also, highlighting the fact that, as an outsider, Othello is not familiar with the habits and morals of Venetian women who, he claims, are notorious for being unfaithful to their husbands. He goes on to suggest that it was 'unnatural' for Desdemona not to marry someone from within her own world. Othello is left to ponder on those things that set him apart from Desdemona – his age, skin colour and lack of sophistication, 'for I am black and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have, or for I am declined into the vale of tears'.

While the tragedy is essentially caused by Iago skilfully working on Othello's weaknesses, a final factor must be considered – the influence of luck or chance. Iago is lucky in his schemes up to the end of Act 4, with circumstances often working in his favour. Cassio's impatience to regain Othello's favour prompts him to arrange an immediate meeting with Desdemona, facilitating Iago's evil scheming. Desdemona losing the handkerchief is a clear example of luck favouring Iago, as is the fact that it is found by Emilia. In the scene where Iago speaks to Cassio about Bianca, Othello believes that they are talking about Desdemona. In another stroke of luck for Iago, Bianca enters the scene, jealously referring to the handkerchief as 'some minx's token'.

In conclusion, it is a combination of Iago's evil genius, Othello's weaknesses and 'the chance factor' that causes the tragedy.

'Othello is essentially a noble character who loses but ultimately regains our sympathy.'

The Othello of the early part of the play is a strikingly impressive figure. Distinguished and composed, he is admired both for his military ability and his fine personal qualities. **However, as the play unfolds and his noble mind is poisoned by Iago's 'pestilence', we see that this great, noble character is capable of coarseness and cruelty.** As Othello becomes increasingly degraded, it is impossible to admire him although, knowing how he has been ensnared in Iago's evil web, we retain a degree of sympathy for him. **By the close of the play Othello recovers a great deal of his earlier nobility** and our final impression of him is a positive one as he acquires self-knowledge and redeems his honour by taking his own life.

In the early part of the play Othello is widely regarded as the complete man – a great general and a man of admirable character. Towards the close of the play Lodovico reflects on the greatness of Othello before his fall, describing him as having been 'all-in-all sufficient'. He refers to his 'noble nature' and 'solid virtue'. The evidence of the early part of the play substantiates Lodovico's assessment of Othello's character. **Othello is admired for his military prowess and leadership.** Confronted by the threat of a Turkish attack on Cyprus, the Venetian senate immediately looks to 'the valiant Moor' to organise the defence of the island. Even Iago testifies to Othello's military stature, acknowledging that he is a peerless

general, 'Another of his fathom they have none to lead their business'. Othello is also referred to as 'our noble and valiant general' and 'a worthy governor'. Montano has served under Othello and says that he 'commands like a full soldier'.

Othello's nobility and composure set him apart from others. In the face of Brabantio's provocation, Othello remains respectful, reasonable and restrained, defusing a potentially dangerous situation, 'Good signior, you shall more command with years than with your weapons'. We admire his calm, authoritative air as he refuses to respond either to Iago's incitements or Brabantio's racist insults. Nothing disturbs Othello's composure, 'Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it without a prompter'.

We admire Othello's fine personal qualities. He displays concern and affection for Desdemona at various points, particularly on the quayside in Cyprus, 'O my soul's joy!', and after the brawl scene when he wonders if she has been affected by the commotion, 'See if my gentle love be not raised up'. **He is a model of kindness and courtesy as he attends to the wounded Montano**, 'Sir, for your hurts, myself will be your surgeon'. There are many references to Othello's finer qualities in the first half of the play. Desdemona is convinced of Othello's nobility, believing him to be incapable of jealousy, 'my noble Moor is true of mind and made of no such baseness as jealous creatures are'. Perhaps the most significant testimony to Othello's nobility comes from Iago, the man who hates him, 'The Moor, how be it that I endure him not, is of a constant, noble, loving nature'.

However, Othello is not entirely noble and, when he is under Iago's spell, is capable of crudeness and savagery. In the second half of the play Othello's noble mind becomes poisoned and corrupted as Iago plants the seeds of suspicion, mistrust and confusion. Our opinion of Othello begins to change from the moment he asks Iago to have Emilia spy on Desdemona. The earlier, noble Othello would never have stooped to such devious, cynical methods. At the end of the temptation scene, it is strikingly evident that Othello is gripped by a passionate desire for revenge. He speaks of 'black vengeance' and of 'a capable and wide revenge'. As Iago's power over Othello increases, the Moor begins to think and speak like his tormentor. Othello's use of animal imagery in relation to Desdemona and Cassio ('Goats and monkeys!') degrades both himself and his wife. He also regularly uses diabolic imagery in relation to Desdemona – at the end of the temptation scene he withdraws to consider how he will kill 'the fair devil' who, until Iago's malicious intervention, was his beloved wife.

Othello's degradation is dramatically clear when he falls in a trance at Iago's feet, his disordered speech reflecting the chaos in his mind, 'Confess! – Handkerchief' – O devil!' **The Othello who publicly insults Desdemona,** 'cunning whore' and 'impudent strumpet', **and strikes her, is so far removed from his earlier noble self as to be barely recognisable.** Little wonder that Lodovico questions his sanity, 'Are his wits safe?' **The corruption of Othello's once-noble mind is now complete.** In the final scene Othello pictures himself as the impartial agent of justice, 'Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men', but in reality is far more interested in revenge than in justice. Othello acts as prosecuting counsel, judge, jury and executioner, never giving Desdemona a fair hearing and dismissing her protestations of innocence. What transpires in this scene is an absolute perversion of justice. We see Othello as a cruel monster as he ignores Desdemona's pathetic pleas for mercy, 'Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!'

While Iago revels in the success of his malevolent scheming and in Othello's debasement, Othello ultimately regains some of his former nobility. In his closing speech Othello calmly assesses both his service to the state ('I have done the state some service and they know it. No more of that') and his own flawed character. Through suffering, Othello gains insight and self-knowledge. He faces the truth about himself and his terrible crime. He sees himself as 'one that loved not wisely, but

too well . . . one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplexed in the extreme'. He seems to recognise that his love for Desdemona was perhaps too intense – she was so central to his entire existence that his world was plunged into chaos when his faith in her was undermined. Othello also sees how the manipulative Iago left him feeling jealous and utterly confused. Now that he is no longer blinded by jealousy, Othello recovers his composure and dignity. He redeems himself as he pays for his crime by taking his own life. At the close of the play we are inclined to agree with Cassio's tribute to Othello's nobility, 'For he was great of heart'.

'While we are repulsed by Iago's evil and cynicism, we are fascinated by his ingenuity.'

While most villains in literature display signs of humanity at some point, this cannot be said of Iago, who does not possess a single redeeming feature and who appears to be the very embodiment of evil. Iago revels in his malevolent scheming, delighting in particular in his degradation of Othello, who ultimately comes to see him as a 'demi-devil'. **However, such is Iago's evil genius that he always intrigues us.** Iago possesses a keen intelligence and a natural shrewdness. He is an astute judge of character and uses his insight to expertly manipulate others into unwittingly playing their parts in his evil schemes. Iago is also a master of improvisation, turning every situation to his own advantage. In short, Iago is a malevolent but ingenious villain who both disgusts and fascinates us.

From the opening scene, it is evident that Iago delights in causing mayhem and misery. He sends Roderigo to awaken Brabantio to let him know that Desdemona has eloped with Othello. He tells him to 'poison his delight … incense her kinsmen … plague him with flies'. Iago is at his happiest making mischief. Following the dismissal of Cassio he remarks, 'Pleasure and action make the hours seem short'. Iago revels in the suffering of Othello and Desdemona. As Othello falls into a trance at his feet, his disordered speech reflecting the chaos in his mind, Iago gloats, 'Work on my medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught, and many worthy and chaste dames, even thus all guiltless, meet reproach'. **We are repulsed by a villain who takes such perverse pleasure in destroying the lives and happiness of others.**

Imagery and symbolism reinforce the idea of Iago as the epitome of evil. Iago invokes the help of 'all the tribe of hell' in his evil scheming. He clearly identifies himself with the forces of evil, 'Divinity of hell! When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows'. The diabolic imagery with which Iago is associated suggests not only the evil nature of his activities but further suggests that he is more devil than man and that he pursues evil for evil's sake. At the end of the play Othello sees his tormentor not as a man, but as a 'demi-devil'. Othello is not the only one to doubt Iago's humanity – with his dying breath, Roderigo calls Iago an 'inhuman dog'.

Iago is a deeply cynical character, entirely lacking in loyalty and principle. He is motivated only by self-interest, 'I follow but myself … not I for love and duty'. He does not believe in the idea of love, cynically reducing love to the level of lust, and people to the level of animals. Iago delights in infuriating Brabantio with the crude sexual imagery he uses to depict Desdemona's elopement, 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe'. Iago cannot bear beauty or virtue in any form. He envies Othello's 'constant, loving, noble nature' and resents the 'daily beauty' of Cassio's life, which makes him 'ugly' in comparison. Iago has a deeply cynical attitude towards women, 'You rise to play and go to bed to work'.

Ironically, his low regard for his wife, Emilia ('You are a fool, go to') ultimately proves to be his undoing.

While we are certainly repulsed by Iago's

evil, cynical nature, we have a grudging admiration for his genius. One of his most impressive talents is his ability to assess people's characters. Once he identifies a weakness, he exploits it in order to more easily manipulate people. He recognises that Othello's noble, trusting nature leaves him open to being influenced by the 'pestilence' that he will pour into his ear. He also takes advantage of Othello's sense of insecurity as an outsider in Venice. Cassio's desire to please is exploited when Iago encourages him to drink more than he knows he should. He also accurately predicts that Cassio will be bad-tempered if he is provoked when in a drunken state. Iago sees Desdemona's goodness as 'the net that shall enmesh them all'. He knows that she will plead strongly on Cassio's behalf and in so doing will condemn herself in Othello's eyes.

Another of Iago's great talents is his ability to hide his true self. Everybody is convinced of his reliability and integrity. The fact that no one ever doubts Iago's trustworthiness, honesty or goodness suggests that we should not be too harsh in our judgement of Othello who, after all, was only one of many duped by this consummate villain. Roderigo believes that Iago is always working in his interests, Cassio regards him as a good friend ('You advise me well') and Desdemona turns to him for advice on how to regain Othello's love ('O good Iago, what shall I do to win my lord again?'). Of course Othello repeatedly stresses Iago's honesty, 'This fellow's of exceeding honesty'.

Iago is a master of improvisation, turning every situation to his own advantage. Having failed to convince Othello either to take action against Brabantio or to hide from him, Iago ensures that Roderigo (an important source of finance for him) is safe during the threatened fight by being the one to challenge him, 'You Roderigo! Come sir, I am for you'. Iago cunningly exploits Cassio's unease at approaching Desdemona to plant the seed of doubt in Othello's mind that causes the Moor to react, 'Ha! I like not that!' Seeing how Lodovico is horrified to see Othello striking Desdemona, Iago takes the opportunity to cast further doubt on the Moor's character, suggesting that his crazed behaviour is typical, 'It is not honesty in me to speak what I have seen and known'. In the confusion that follows Roderigo's attack on Cassio, Iago quickly stabs Roderigo, pretending to avenge Cassio. In reality, he is eliminating a threat to himself since Roderigo had threatened to go to Desdemona and tell her everything. When Bianca arrives on the scene, Iago casts suspicion on her as a way of deflecting attention away from his own role in the quarrel, 'I do suspect this trash to be a party in this injury'.

Nowhere is Iago's evil genius more strikingly evident than in the temptation scene. Iago is at his manipulative best in this scene. With only the flimsiest of evidence Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona has betrayed him with Cassio. Iago's method of corrupting Othello's nobility of mind is subtle and, initially, indirect as he uses insinuation and innuendo to plant the seeds of suspicion, jealousy and confusion in the Moor's mind. When Othello asks if Cassio is honest, Iago answers the question with a question, 'Honest, my lord?', Iago cleverly suggests that he knows more than he is saying, leaving Othello convinced that there must be 'some monster in his thoughts too hideous to be shown'. Iago reinforces Othello's suspicions when he talks in a vague way about peace of mind, jealousy and the lot of the cuckold (the deceived husband). He goes on to tell Othello, an outsider, that Venetian women are notorious for their infidelities and that Desdemona deceived her father when she eloped with him. He further suggests that it was unnatural for Desdemona not to marry someone of her race and social standing. Without as much as a single piece of concrete evidence, Iago destroys Othello's faith in his wife, leaving him to declare, 'She's gone, I am abused and my relief must be to loathe her'.

In conclusion, while we are appalled by Iago's remorseless destruction of human life and happiness, he remains a fascinating study in evil ingenuity.

'The great mystery surrounding Iago is the source of his motivation.'

When we reflect on the havoc that Iago wreaks in people's lives, the most obvious question to ask is: What motivates Iago to visit such suffering and misery on Othello, Desdemona and Cassio? Why does he want to 'enmesh 'em all'? While Iago himself mentions a number of specific grievances that he harbours, a key element in his motivation is his pursuit of evil for its own sake.

Iago deeply resents Othello passing him over for promotion in favour of Cassio. This grievance seems to be legitimate enough. While Cassio is well educated, he is younger than Iago and lacks practical military experience, 'never set a squadron in the field … mere prattle without practice in all his soldiership'. Iago's professional pride has been offended. He strongly believes that, as the more experienced soldier, he was more deserving of promotion, 'I know my price, I am worth no less a place'. Also, three leading officials in Venice recommended Iago for promotion. He is bitter that these recommendations, combined with his superior experience, were ignored, believing that Cassio was promoted on the basis of favouritism, 'the curse of the service'. Iago wants Cassio's post and so orchestrates his dismissal. However, the depth of his hatred for Othello is not easily explained and we must also take cognisance of a variety of other factors.

Iago is eaten up with sexual jealousy which is probably nothing more than paranoia. He is troubled by a rumour that Othello has had an affair with Emilia, 'I do suspect the lusty Moor hath leaped into my seat'. The imagery that he employs to convey his feelings suggests the depth of his hatred, 'the thought whereof like a poisonous mineral doth gnaw my inwards.' He also suspects Cassio of having been Emilia's lover, 'I fear Cassio with my night-cap too'. Iago plans to gain revenge on Othello by being 'evened with him wife for wife' or, failing that, by putting Othello 'into a jealousy so strong that judgement cannot cure'. He looks forward to destroying the Moor, 'practising upon his peace and quiet even to madness'.

Envy is a key factor in Iago's make-up. He is envious and resentful of beauty and virtue, love and happiness. Iago states that Cassio has 'a daily beauty in his life' that makes him 'ugly' by comparison. He also envies Othello's 'constant, loving, noble nature' and the love that he and Desdemona share. When he witnesses their mutual love and joy as they are reunited on the quayside in Cyprus, he looks forward to bringing discord to a relationship which at this point is beautifully harmonious, 'O! You are well tuned now, but I'll set down the pegs that make this music'. Most cynically of all, he plans to use Desdemona's goodness as the means of destroying them all, 'So will I turn her virtue into pitch, and out of her goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all'.

Racial prejudice is another element in the mix that constitutes Iago's motivation. Iago has a low regard for both foreigners and women. When he describes Desdemona's elopement with Othello to Brabantio, he uses imagery that is both crude and racist, 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe'. In a similar vein he tells him, 'you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse'.

Reflecting on these motivating factors, we may conclude that Iago is a very human villain. However, there is an aspect to his character that leads us to wonder if he is more devil than man. A key factor in his motivation is his pursuit of evil for evil's sake. Iago revels in spreading disorder and misery. Diabolic imagery is regularly employed by and applied to Iago, reinforcing the idea that he is fundamentally evil. He invokes the help of 'all the tribe of hell' in his evil scheming. Later he again looks to the forces of darkness to help bring his evil aims to fruition, 'Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light'. Iago identifies himself clearly with the

forces of evil, 'Divinity of hell! When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows'. He delights in his engineering of Cassio's dismissal, 'Pleasure and action make the hours seem short'. He revels in the suffering of Othello and Desdemona. As Othello falls at his feet in a trance, his disordered speech reflecting the chaos in his mind, Iago gloats, 'Work on my medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught, and many worthy and chaste dames, even thus all guiltless, meet reproach'.

Iago's motivation in relation to Roderigo is a straightforward matter – he sees the foolish nobleman as an easy (and seemingly endless) source of finance. He regards Roderigo with contempt, 'Thus do I ever make my fool my purse'. He also uses the nobleman in his plan to eliminate Cassio. When Roderigo is no more use to him and becomes a possible threat, Iago kills 'the snipe' without hesitation.

In conclusion, Iago's motivation is a complex matter. We can identify some specific motivating factors, but cannot be sure which of these is the most important because Iago tends to mention various grievances without subsequently returning to them. Perhaps the most important motivating factor where Iago is concerned is not a particular grievance but a delight in evil for evil's sake. The mystery surrounding Iago's motivation is heightened by the vow of silence that he takes at the close of the play.

'Desdemona's character is not credible – she is simply too good to be true.'

Desdemona is seen as the personification of goodness and innocence and the polar opposite to Iago. While her love for Othello is admirable in its depth and devotion, her response to Othello's cruelty is unbelievably tolerant and passive. **Just as Iago appears to be more devil than man, Desdemona seems to be more angel than woman.**

The heavenly imagery used in association with Desdemona suggests that she is pure, innocent and perfectly virtuous. Cassio has a reverential attitude towards her, describing her as 'the divine Desdemona'. Reluctant to believe Iago's insinuations about her infidelity, Roderigo insists that 'she is full of most blessed condition'. In times of difficulty, Desdemona looks to heaven. When Emilia suggests that Othello may be jealous, Desdemona replies, 'Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind'. When Othello wrongly accuses her, she asserts her innocence by reference to her religion, 'No, as I am a Christian' and 'By heaven, you do me wrong'. Following her mistress's death, Emilia counters Othello's claim that Desdemona was a liar and is now in hell, 'O the more angel she, and you the blacker devil'. She insists that Desdemona was 'heavenly true'. At the close of the play a guilt-ridden Othello believes that his punishment will be to be forever deprived of the 'heavenly sight' of Desdemona.

Our first impression of Desdemona is extremely positive. We admire her strength of spirit and independence of mind as she publicly asserts her love for Othello. She is respectful towards her father, but firmly maintains that her primary loyalty is now to her husband, calling him 'the Moor, my lord'. **Desdemona's love for Othello is deep, selfless and constant. Her devotion to Othello is very apparent when she tells the senate why she wishes to accompany him to Cyprus,** 'I did love the Moor to live with him, my downright violence and storm of fortunes may trumpet to the world; my heart's subdued even to the very quality of my lord'.

It is ironic that Iago testifies to some of Desdemona's finest qualites. He speaks of her 'blessed' disposition and **tells Cassio that her kindness and generosity are such that she will plead strongly for his reinstatement,** ''tis most easy the inclining Desdemona to subdue in any honest suit; she's framed as fruitful as the free

elements'. Of course the malevolent Iago abuses Desdemona's goodness, regarding her virtue only as the means of creating 'the net that shall enmesh them all'. Innocently, but persistently pleading for Cassio's reinstatement ('Assure thee, if I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it') Desdemona unknowingly intensifies Othello's jealousy.

Desdemona's innocence and purity of heart are very evident in her conversations with the worldly, cynical Emilia. Desdemona is shocked and bewildered by Othello's accusations of infidelity. Even the concept of infidelity is one that she struggles to grasp. Desdemona finds it difficult to believe that a woman could betray her husband, asking Emilia if such women exist, 'Beshrew me if I would do such a thing for the whole world'. While Emilia believes that women should gain revenge on husbands who mistreat them, Desdemona is incapable of even thinking in terms of vengeance, preferring to learn from bad treatment: 'Heaven me such usage send, not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend'.

While we cannot but admire Desdemona's goodness, innocence and capacity for selfless love, there are occasions when she seems too good and too forgiving to be entirely believable. When Othello strikes her, she is shocked, but expresses neither resentment nor anger, saying only, 'I have not deserved this'. Remarkably, her love for her husband remains utterly unchanged by his humiliation of her. She tells Iago, 'Unkindness may do much, and his unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love'. Later she tells Emilia that even Othello's harshness has an attractive quality, 'my love doth so approve him that even his stubborness, his checks and frowns … have grace and favour in them'. It is the closing scene that presents us with a model of selfless love that truly stretches belief. When Othello demands that she confess her sins, Desdemona replies that her only sins 'are loves I bear to you'. Most remarkably of all, she tries to shield Othello from blame after he has smothered her. When she briefly revives in response to Emilia's questioning ('O, who hath done this deed?') Desdemona declares that she took her own life and, with her dying breath, commends herself to her 'kind lord'.

In conclusion, while Desdemona at times comes across as a distinctive personality in her own right (particularly in her spirited defence of her love for Othello), we tend to regard her more as the personification of goodness than as an entirely believable flesh-and-blood character. She seems to be without fault (a tendency to nag Othello about reinstating Cassio notwithstanding), and is unbelievably forgiving. Certainly the closing scene leaves us with an image of Desdemona as an almost saintly figure.

'While Cassio is an admirable gentleman, his weaknesses contribute in no small way to the tragic death of Desdemona.'

Cassio is not a particularly interesting character, but he unwittingly plays a central role in Iago's malevolent scheming. Cassio is a 'proper man' in the sense that he is educated, refined, noble and loyal. However, as Iago points out, Cassio is also 'an honest fool' whose weaknesses he exploits to destructive effect.

Iago knows that, as a chivalrous gentleman, Cassio would be plausible in the role of Desdemona's supposed lover. His courteous behaviour (especially towards women) gives substance to his reputation as a ladies' man. He openly displays his respect and admiration for Desdemona as she arrives in Cyprus, 'O behold, the riches of the ship is come on shore. Ye men of Cyprus, let her have your knees'. He greets both Desdemona and Emilia with a kiss when they arrive on the quayside. He is kind and gentle to Bianca, treating her politely and with respect, 'How is it with you my most fair Bianca? In faith sweet love, I was coming to your house'.

Cassio possesses an admirable nobility of mind. He has a reverential attitude towards Desdemona who brings out his finest instincts.

He speaks of Desdemona in polished language, describing her as 'the divine Desdemona' who 'paragons description'. Even Iago's crude attempt to degrade Desdemona ('What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds like a parley of provocation') does not prompt Cassio to make an improper remark. Cassio describes Desdemona as 'a most exquisite lady', his refinement sharply contrasting with Iago's vulgarity.

Cassio displays great respect for and loyalty to Othello. He expresses genuine concern for Othello's safety when he is at sea during the violent storm, 'Great Jove, Othello guard, and swell his sail with thine own powerful breath'. His speech is eloquent and ornate and even Iago refers, sarcastically, to Cassio as 'a knave very voluble', but the sentiments expressed are sincere. After the drunken brawl Cassio is filled with guilt at having let Othello down, 'I will rather sue to be despised than to deceive so good a commander with so slight, so drunken and so indiscreet an officer'. The depth of Cassio's love for Othello is apparent when he bears no grudge against him even after he learns that Othello consented to his death at the hands of Iago. Feeling hurt but not resentful, he says simply, 'Dear general, I never gave you cause'. Cassio's final words in the play are a generous tribute to Othello, 'For he was great of heart'.

While Cassio possesses many admirable qualities, he also has some serious weaknesses, which are exploited ruthlessly by Iago and contribute in a significant way to the unfolding tragedy. Cassio has a reputation as a ladies' man – Iago describes him as 'a fellow almost damned in a fair wife'. Cassio's relationship with Bianca gives substance to the idea that he is susceptible to the charms of pretty women. Bearing Cassio's reputation in mind, Iago cynically regards the innocent kiss with which Cassio greets Desdemona as a sign of lust, 'lechery, by this hand: an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts'. Iago sees this innocent greeting as the 'web' with which he will 'ensnare' Cassio, having quickly convinced himself that an improper relationship exists between him and Desdemona. To be fair to Cassio, his polished manners and gallant behaviour cannot be viewed as a weakness – it is just that Iago puts a sinister interpretation on his courteous gestures.

Cassio's affability is a pleasant quality, but his desire to humour others is a serious weakness in his character, causing him to be easily manipulated and exploited in certain situations – as the brawl scene illustrates. While Cassio knows that he has 'poor and unhappy brains for drinking', he is still persuaded by Iago to take the wine, 'I'll do it, but it dislikes me'. **In acting against his own better judgement, Cassio shows that he lacks strength of character – he is too anxious to please.** Iago predicts that, once Cassio has taken the wine, he will be quarrelsome – and events prove him right. From this point on Cassio is drawn into Iago's web of deceit and suspicion.

Cassio's preoccupation with restoring his tarnished reputation plays right into Iago's hands, 'O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself and what remains is bestial'. Such is Cassio's impatience to regain Othello's favour that he unquestioningly accepts Iago's advice to ask Desdemona to intercede with Othello on his behalf. **Cassio's lack of self-discipline and his subsequent impatience to be reconciled with Othello allows Iago to draw Desdemona into 'the web that shall enmesh them all'.** Having engineered Cassio's dismissal, Iago can now direct his villainous mind towards Desdemona. Cassio's original meeting with Desdemona allows Iago to plant the seed of doubt in Othello's mind ('Ha, I like not that!') and Desdemona's insistent pleading for Cassio's reinstatement further incites the Moor's jealousy.

Cassio further facilitates Iago's evil scheming by being frank and open when Iago questions him about his relationship with Bianca. Cassio is sociable and good-humoured, 'I marry her! What a customer?' While Cassio is generally respectful towards Bianca, **he allows Iago to bring out his baser instincts**, dismissing her as a mere 'bauble'. Believing that Cassio's disrespectful remarks about Bianca

refer to Desdemona, Othello flies into a jealous rage, 'Ay let her rot and perish and be damned tonight, for she shall not live'. **In allowing himself to be manipulated by Iago, Cassio unknowingly seals Desdemona's fate.**

Cassio is indeed an admirable gentleman who is noble, respectful and loyal. His reverential attitude towards Desdemona and his love for and loyalty to Othello are attractive, admirable aspects of his character. Iago envies Cassio's finer qualities, 'he hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly'. Cassio's standing as a respected, capable officer is confirmed by the Venetian Senate's decision to appoint him in Othello's place. **However, as well as being a 'proper man', Cassio is also an 'honest fool' whose weaknesses, particularly his desire to please others, contribute to the tragic death of Desdemona.** Indeed it is Desdemona who best sums up Cassio's virtues and flaws, 'if he is not one that truly loves you, that errs in ignorance and not in cunning, I have no judgement in an honest face'.

'Emilia is a realistic character whose personal growth is one of the most uplifting aspects of the play.'

Emilia is a realistic character in that she combines strengths and weaknesses. She is not an impressive character in the early stages of the play. She is quite cynical and is guilty of disloyalty to her mistress, Desdemona. **However, Emilia grows perceptibly as a character, displaying great strength, courage and loyalty towards the close of the play.**

Like Cassio, Emilia is a realistic character possessed of both strengths and weaknesses. She plays an important role in the development of the plot when she steals the handkerchief. While she is **disloyal to Desdemona**, particularly since she knows how much the handkerchief means to her, 'she so loves the token', she is unaware of the full significance of her actions. **Emilia's theft of the handkerchief is an act of misguided loyalty to her husband, Iago, who had often asked her to steal it.** She is unaware of his plans for the love token, but seems anxious to please him, 'What he will do with it heaven knows, not I, I nothing but to please his fantasy'. While the theft of the handkerchief does Emilia little credit, **a far more serious criticism of her is her subsequent failure to admit to her theft of the handkerchief, even when she perceives that Othello is filled with feelings of suspicion and jealousy** and that the missing love token is further fuelling these destructive passions. At this point Emilia is guilty of serious inaction – a brief explanation from her could have easily defused the crisis in Othello's relationship with Desdemona.

One of Emilia's strengths is her shrewdness. She is a perceptive character and, unlike the blindly idealistic Desdemona, recognises jealousy when she sees it in Othello, 'Is not this man jealous?' Emilia points out the dangerously irrational nature of jealousy to Desdemona, ''tis a monster begot upon itself, born on itself'. **Emilia is also astute in realising that Othello has been deceived by some 'eternal villain'.** Ironically she does not realise that it is her own husband who has slandered Desdemona's character. It is also ironic that she confides her suspicions in Iago, 'The Moor's abused by some villainous knave, some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow'. Emilia's awareness remains limited and she is horrified when she eventually learns the full truth regarding her husband's role in the tragedy of Desdemona's death.

Emilia is experienced in the ways of the world and her intense realism contrasts sharply with Desdemona's idealism. Her attitude towards men is typically pragmatic and, at times, cynical, 'They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungrily'. Emilia declares that she would cheat on her husband to advance his prospects ('who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?') or to gain revenge on him in the event of being

mistreated, 'Then let them use us well, else let them know, the ills we do, their ills instruct us so'. Emilia's cynical attitude towards men and women may be seen as being disconcertingly close to Iago's negative outlook.

While we tend to see Emilia as a rather ignoble figure in the early part of the play, she emerges in a much more admirable light as the play reaches its dramatic climax. The loyalty and love that she feels for Desdemona gain powerful expression when, in response to Othello's questioning, she defends her mistress's honour, 'I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest, lay down my soul at stake'. She strongly protests Desdemona's innocence and is infuriated by Othello's cruel treatment of her: 'He called her whore; a beggar in his drink could not have laid such terms upon his callat'. **Following Desdemona's death, Emilia courageously defies Othello as she continues to vehemently defend Desdemona's good name,** 'O! the more angel she, and you the blacker devil'. She insists that Desdemona was 'heavenly true'.

It is ironic that it is Emilia, whose suspicions Iago had earlier contemptuously dismissed, who ultimately realises and reveals his villainy. At great risk to herself, **Emilia confronts and dramatically exposes Iago,** 'And your reports have set the murder on'. Iago's attempts to silence Emilia meet with a defiant response, 'No, I will speak as liberal as the north'. Emilia belatedly and angrily tells the 'dull Moor' the truth about the handkerchief. She pays for her courage with her life, but dies with honour, having vindicated Desdemona, 'Moor, she was chaste, she loved thee, cruel Moor'. It has been suggested that Emilia's selfless heroism at the end of the play may in part be attributable to the influence of the virtuous, idealistic Desdemona. Just as Iago has a corrupting influence on Othello, Desdemona has an ennobling effect on Emilia.

While Emilia does not always behave in a noble manner, her occasional moral lapses make her all the more realistic and believable as a character. However, her courageous defiance of both Othello and Iago at the end of the play demands our respect and admiration. Emilia's transformation from dishonest cynic to self-sacrificing heroine is one of the most uplifting aspects of the play.

'Roderigo is a despicable character for whom we feel no sympathy.'

While Roderigo is unfortunate to fall victim to a ruthless, inhuman villain who coldly manipulates his thoughts and actions, we are not inclined to feel any sympathy for him. **It is difficult to imagine a more dull-witted character than Roderigo, but what makes him truly contemptible is the fact that he is devoid of morality.**

We see Roderigo's decadence in his belief that he can use his wealth to win Desdemona's hand in marriage. He pays Iago to act as a go-between for him in his futile pursuit of Desdemona. Iago takes full advantage of Roderigo's belief in the power of money, using him for his 'sport and profit'. Even Desdemona's marriage to Othello fails to deter Roderigo and, encouraged by Iago, he foolishly continues to believe that he still has a chance of winning her heart. Roderigo sees nothing wrong in pursuing another man's wife.

Roderigo's foolishness in allowing himself to be used as Iago's willing dupe is his main fault. He willingly co-operates in Iago's plan to rouse Brabantio in the middle of the night. **Roderigo's racism is an unpleasant aspect of his character.** Roderigo and Brabantio are united in their prejudice against Othello's colour. We see Roderigo's racist attitudes in his reference to Othello as 'thick-lips' and when he speaks of Desdemona rushing 'to the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor'.

Iago regards Roderigo with total disdain, describing him as 'a fool', 'a snipe' and 'this poor trash of Venice'. The common soldier takes great delight in duping the rich nobleman. Even when Roderigo is angered by the news of

Desdemona's elopement, believing that Iago has cheated him, he continues to allow himself to be exploited by Iago, who regards him as a seemingly endless source of finance, 'Thus do I ever make my fool my purse'. Iago also uses Roderigo to advance his evil schemes, effortlessly manipulating him into doing his bidding. Similar to Othello, Roderigo never questions Iago's character and motives. Both Othello and Roderigo only see Iago for what he is when it is too late. Iago convinces Roderigo that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. Although Roderigo finds this hard to believe, 'I cannot believe that in her; she is full of most blessed condition', he still succumbs to Iago's persuasion, going on to play a key role in his evil scheme by provoking the brawl that sees Cassio dismissed from his post.

On occasions, Roderigo seems to finally gain a modicum of common sense but, predictably, his rebellion against Iago does not last very long. Following the brawl with Cassio, which leaves him with a sore head, Roderigo threatens to return to Venice 'with no money at all and a little more wit'. As ever, Iago persuades the gullible aristocrat to be patient, convincing him that all is not lost where Desdemona is concerned. However, Roderigo eventually becomes exasperated when he sees no return whatsoever on his considerable investment. He angrily confronts Iago, 'I will indeed no longer endure it, nor am I yet persuaded to put up in peace what already I have foolishly suffered'. He finally seems to recognise Iago's falseness, 'your words and performances are no kin together.' He even threatens to go directly to Desdemona in the hope of retrieving the jewels that Iago was supposed to have given her on behalf of Roderigo. While Roderigo now poses a real threat to Iago, the quick-witted villain wins him over once again with some rather obvious flattery, telling him that he is greatly impressed by his show of spirit. Iago goes on to convince Roderigo to kill Cassio. Roderigo is briefly troubled by his conscience, 'I have no great devotion to the deed', but such scruples as he has are quickly set aside.

It is typical of Roderigo's ineptitude that he botches the ambush, fails to kill Cassio, and is instead wounded himself. While Roderigo displays little moral awareness in the course of the play, he does at this point acknowledge his wrongdoing, 'O villain that I am!' Roderigo's cries attract only Iago who, now regarding him as a threat, callously stabs him to death. Only when it is too late does Roderigo finally see Iago for what he is, 'O damned Iago! O inhuman dog!' Ironically, Iago's dupe ultimately helps to reveal his villainy, with Montano discovering a damning letter on Roderigo's body.

While we sympathise with Iago's more noble victims, it is difficult to feel any sympathy for Roderigo, such is the depth of his foolishness and lack of moral awareness. His racist attitudes do him little credit. He decadently believes that he can buy Desdemona's love with jewels and seems to see nothing wrong with pursuing a married woman. He brings disorder to Cyprus when he provokes Cassio and a brawl ensues. Most seriously, he agrees to kill Cassio despite his misgivings. In conclusion, we may well feel that Iago's ally in evil ultimately gets what his villainy and immorality deserve.

'Jealousy is a central theme of the play.'

Jealousy is patently a key theme in the play, afflicting three characters in particular (Iago, Othello, Bianca) and ultimately bringing about the play's tragic conclusion. It is an important motivating factor for Iago as he schemes to bring about Othello's downfall. Jealousy is seen to be a devastatingly destructive emotion and it is by inciting Othello's jealousy that Iago gains his revenge on him The fact that there are no rational grounds for the various examples of sexual jealousy in the play does not detract from their potency and destructive power. Iago is himself poisoned by jealousy and ensures that 'the green-eyed monster' devours

Othello's finer qualities, distorts his judgement and destroys his peace of mind.

Perhaps the reason why Iago has such a keen understanding of the poisonous power of jealousy is that he himself is consumed by it. Iago is eaten up with jealousy in a variety of forms – **he experiences professional jealousy, personal jealousy and, most dangerous of all, sexual jealousy.** On a professional level, he is jealous of Cassio who was promoted ahead of him. On a personal level he is envious of anyone he deems to be superior to him in any way. He enjoys fooling Roderigo, 'this poor trash of Venice', because he is an aristocrat and his social superior. He envies Othello, Desdemona and Cassio for a similar reason – all three are fundamentally good and, consequently, are both morally and socially superior to him. He openly admits to envying Cassio's fine personal qualities, 'He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly'. He envies Desdemona's virtuous nature, 'She is so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition'. He envies Othello's 'constant, loving, noble nature'. He envies Othello and Desdemona their happy, loving relationship and looks forward to replacing harmony with discord, 'you are well tuned now, but I'll set down the pegs that make this music'. Iago is also motivated by sexual jealousy believing that Othello has had an affair with Emilia, 'And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets he has done my office'. Iago's description of the effect of jealousy is very apt, 'The thought whereof doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards'. Iago also suspects that Cassio has cuckolded him, 'I fear Cassio with my night cap too'.

Iago sets about engineering Othello's downfall by creating within him 'a jealousy so strong that judgement cannot cure'. He sows the seeds of jealousy in Othello's psyche by exploiting weaknesses in the Moor's character. His malevolent insinuations about Desdemona's infidelity have the desired effect – the 'monstrous birth' of jealousy is brought 'to the world's light' and the consequences are tragic. **The hugely destructive power of jealousy is highlighted by the dramatic transformation that occurs in Othello in the course of the temptation scene. A contented husband at the start of this scene, Othello is ready to kill his wife by its end.** The fact that Othello's faith in his wife is destroyed by nothing more than insinuations and the flimsiest of 'evidence' highlights **the irrational nature of jealousy**. However, the fact that Othello's jealousy is groundless does not make it any less dangerous. The man who, the previous day, was ecstatic at being re-united with his wife and declaring, 'If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy', is now considering 'some swift means of death for the fair devil'. Othello's 'soul's joy' has now become a 'lewd minx'. The Othello who is tormented by jealousy is unrecognisable from his earlier self. Once a model of nobility and dignity, Othello becomes irrational and incoherent, 'Confess! – Handkerchief! – O devil!' He is filled with 'tyrannous hate' and consumed by the desire for 'a capable and wide revenge'. Othello's degradation is evident for all to see when he publicly humiliates and strikes his wife. **Othello's character is so changed by the poisonous effects of jealousy that the shocked Lodovico struggles to recognise him, 'Is this the noble Moor who our full senate call all-in-all sufficient?' Othello deludes himself that justice demands the death of Desdemona, but in reality the 'green-eyed monster' that is jealousy is in full control of his heart and mind when he kills his good and loyal wife.**

The effect of jealousy on Bianca, a minor character, mirrors its impact on Othello, but in a less dramatic way. Ironically, it is Desdemona's handkerchief which inflames Bianca's jealousy. Once in the grip of jealousy, Bianca behaves in a similar way to Othello, becoming angry, bitter and irrational. After Bianca angrily proclaims that the handkerchief is 'some minx's token', Cassio hastily follows her out onto the street fearing that she will start shouting and create a scene, 'she'll rail in the streets else'.

Iago (perhaps from personal experience) observes that jealous thoughts 'burn like the mines of sulphur' and, certainly, Othello is a truly pitiable figure when he is tortured by

jealousy. Emilia rightly describes jealousy as 'a monster'. It corrupts love, honour and nobility, makes both Iago and Othello violent and murderous and destroys relationships and lives. Jealousy corrupts Othello's finer qualities, blinds him to reality and brings about his degradation and downfall.

'Irony is used effectively to heighten the tragic dimension of the play.'

Irony is a powerful dramatic device that Shakespeare uses to heighten tension and increase the audience's sense of the inevitability of disaster. There are many examples of both situational irony and verbal irony in *Othello*. At the heart of all irony is the contrast between appearance and reality.

Irony of situation involves Othello taking a course of action that has very unexpected results. Othello inexorably moves closer to his own downfall, utterly unaware of the reality of his situation. Only Iago (and the audience) know the contradiction between what seems to be the case in Othello's life and the actual reality. One of the greatest ironies in the play is that, in setting out to punish Desdemona's apparent wrongdoing, Othello perpetrates a much graver wrong himself, murdering his entirely innocent and devoted wife. Othello claims that justice demands that Desdemona must die 'else she'll betray more men', yet what transpires in the closing scene is an absolute perversion of justice. This reversal of expectations adds to the tragic aspect of the play.

Irony heightens the tragic dimension when it makes the tragic outcome seem all the more inevitable. From the early stages of the play we feel that Othello's chances of living happily with Desdemona are non-existent as there can be no escape from Iago's evil 'web' of mistrust and suspicion. Iago's use of images of entrapment (he talks of 'ensnaring' his victims in a web and 'enmeshing' them in a net) underlines our sense that there is little hope for Othello. Furthermore, the Moor's personal weaknesses, in particular his open, trusting nature, make him easy prey for the evil genius.

The fact that Othello is at his happiest, 'If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy', **before Iago malevolently plots his downfall, further enhances the play's tragic aspect.** The Moor has no inkling that the future will be dramatically different from how he envisages it. Similarly, Desdemona is supremely happy when she first arrives in Cyprus. While she anticipates consummating her marriage in Cyprus, her marriage bed will tragically become her deathbed, with her beloved husband her killer.

The fact that the audience knows more than the characters, because we are privy to Iago's evil plans, creates a tension that intensifies the play's tragic dimension. It is only in his soliloquys and in his conversations with Roderigo that Iago reveals his true nature and his malevolent plans. Of course his victims do not know that they are being manipulated. We wonder if his malicious schemes will succeed and feel sympathetic towards his victims, who seem to be powerless in the face of his cunning villainy.

The play abounds with verbal irony, which further adds to its tragic aspect. Much of this verbal irony revolves around Othello's repeated description of Iago as 'honest'. It is only after he has killed his innocent wife that Othello becomes aware of Iago's villainy. It is tragically ironic that the person whom he regards as his good and trustworthy friend turns out to be his most vicious enemy. Before he departs for Cyprus, Othello entrusts Desdemona to the care of Iago, ironically describing him as 'a man of honesty and trust'. Even in the closing scene of the play Othello is to be heard praising 'honest, honest, honest Iago'.

Desdemona is also associated with verbal irony, which again heightens the play's tragic quality. She promises Cassio that she will be his dedicated advocate, 'For thy solicitor shall

rather die than give thy cause away'. This remark is charged with tragic irony – it is her insistent pleading on behalf of Cassio that condemns her in Othello's eyes. Desdemona's belief that Othello is too noble to be capable of jealousy ('my noble Moor is true of mind and made of no such baseness as jealous creatures are') makes her death at his hands all the more tragic. It is also tragically ironic that Desdemona should request the assistance of the man who has destroyed her life to regain Othello's love, 'O good Iago, what shall I do to win my lord again?'

The contradiction between appearance and reality is fundamental to all types of irony. There are several examples of misinterpreted situations adding to the play's tragic dimension. When Iago arranges for Othello to overhear Cassio talking about Bianca in a disparaging manner, he leads the Moor to believe that the subject of the conversation is Desdemona. Blinded by jealousy, Othello completely misinterprets the situation and, in a fit of vengeful rage, declares that Desdemona must die, 'I will chop her into messes'. Another example of a situation being tragically misinterpreted occurs close to the end of the play when Othello, on his way to kill Desdemona, hears a cry from Cassio and, wrongly assuming that Iago has killed him, hurries off to kill Desdemona. It adds to the tragic aspect of the play that Othello should draw inspiration for killing his innocent wife from 'honest' and 'brave' Iago, 'O brave Iago, honest and just that has such noble sense of thy friend's wrong, thou teachest me'. In reality, the cowardly villain lurks in the background while Roderigo makes an attempt on Cassio's life.

The obvious irony in the key relationships intensifies the play's tragic quality. It is profoundly ironic that Othello never doubts 'honest Iago', the 'demi-devil' intent on his destruction, while he distrusts and condemns Desdemona, who, with her dying breath, still utters words of love for the husband who has murdered her.

'Othello *is an overwhelmingly gloomy play.*'

While the play is, in many respects, very gloomy, it does not leave us feeling totally despondent. The downfall of the noble hero, the murder of the innocent Desdemona and the vicious malevolence of Iago (to which each character is blind until it is too late) leave us feeling dispirited. However, there are positive aspects to the play that ensure we are not filled with total despair.

The degradation and downfall of the noble Othello is depressing. Admired and respected both for his military achievements and fine personal qualities, Othello is corrupted and destroyed by a combination of personal flaws, which Iago ruthlessly exploits. As Iago's poison gradually eats away at him, the noble Moor shows that he can be both coarse and cruel. When he greets Desdemona in Cyprus, she is his 'soul's joy', but, once he has become enmeshed in Iago's web of suspicion and confusion, she is an 'impudent strumpet' and 'cunning whore'. We are despondent when we see the once imperturbable Othello, almost driven insane with jealousy, reduced to muttering incoherently, 'Confess! – Handkerchief! – O devil!', before collapsing at the feet of his tormentor. To see Othello degrade both himself and Desdemona by publicly humiliating and striking her is particularly dispiriting. Tragically, worse is to follow when, under the delusion that he is acting as the agent of divine justice, Othello murders his innocent wife.

The murder of the entirely good and innocent Desdemona is a major cause of gloom. Respected and admired by all, she is seen as an almost saintly figure. It is depressing to watch as Othello – in what amounts to a gross perversion of the judicial process in which he believes himself to be engaged – pronounces judgement on his wife, ignores her as she pleads for mercy ('Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight') and murders her.

Iago's evil casts a dark shadow over the entire play. The fact that he manipulates so many people with such consummate ease and that his scheming goes undetected for so long is also dejecting. His relish in destroying people's lives and happiness is a dark reminder that devilish evil can and does exist. When Othello collapses at his feet in a fit brought on by jealous rage, Iago takes a perverted delight in his power over him. What is worse, he is completely untroubled by the destruction of Desdemona's reputation and the consequences of this injustice, 'Work on my medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught, and many worthy and chaste dames, even thus all guiltless, meet reproach'.

However, while *Othello* is, in some respects, very dark and pessimistic, there are enough sources of light to ensure that we are not overwhelmed by despair.

Desdemona is a shining example of selfless love. She is totally devoted to Othello and her description of their falling in love is both sincere and moving. She cannot imagine how any woman could betray her husband and has to ask Emilia if such wives actually exist. Desdemona is completely forgiving of Othello. When he publicly humiliates her, she simply says, 'I have not deserved this'. Most remarkably, she tries to shield him from blame for her death. When, after she revives briefly, Emilia asks her who has done this, Desdemona replies, 'Nobody, I myself'. Her final words are words of love for Othello, 'Commend me to my kind lord'.

Cassio's loyalty to Othello is another positive aspect of the play. He is genuinely concerned for Othello's safety as he awaits his arrival in Cyprus, 'O let the heavens give him defence against the elements for I have lost him on a dangerous sea'. At the close of the play, Cassio bears no grudge against Othello for wronging him, simply saying, 'Dear general, I never gave you cause'. His closing tribute to Othello's nobility reflects his own noble, generous nature.

One of the most uplifting aspects of the play is the personal transformation that Emilia undergoes. An unpleasantly cynical character in the early stages of the play, she displays selflessness and courage by its end. She bravely defies both Othello and Iago as she protests Desdemona's innocence and denounces them. She tells Othello that Desdemona was 'heavenly true' and 'too fond of her most filthy bargain' to ever betray him. When Emilia realises that Iago's lies instigated the tragedy, she immediately condemns his villainy. Even when Iago tells Emilia to hold her tongue, she refuses to be silenced, 'I will speak as liberal as the north'. She pays for her loyalty and courage with her life, reiterating Desdemona's innocence with her dying breath, 'Moor, she was chaste, she loved thee cruel Moor'.

The positive aspects to the play's grim conclusion also serve to lift the gloom somewhat. Desdemona's innocence is vindicated. Othello acquires a degree of self-knowledge, describing himself as 'one that loved not wisely, but too well, … one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, perplexed in the extreme'. He regains some of his former nobility and redeems himself by taking his own life. Finally, Iago's villainy is exposed and he is to be punished for his crimes.

The Role and Status of Women in Society

Shakespeare's portrayal of the place and perception of women in society is one of the most interesting aspects of the play. While the three female characters have very different social backgrounds, they all live in a male-dominated society where they are subject to the same prejudices. All three are used and abused by men.

Brabantio's early description of Desdemona offers us an insight into the perception of women in Venetian society. His use of the word 'jewel' to describe his daughter suggests that he

regards her as a valuable possession. We see the patriarchal nature of society when Desdemona tells her father that, just as her mother's primary duty was to Brabantio when she married him, her own primary duty is now to her own husband, to whom she refers as 'the Moor my lord'. Brabantio harshly rejects his daughter when reports of her marriage to Othello are confirmed, describing her independent action as 'a gross revolt'. While Desdemona displays her independence of mind when she asserts her right to choose her own husband and she and Othello seem to have an equal relationship to begin with, things change dramatically when the Moor suspects that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. There is little evidence of equality or respect when Othello publicly humiliates his wife, calls her an 'impudent strumpet' and a 'villainous whore' and refuses to listen to her protestations of innocence. When Othello orders Desdemona to bed and tells her to dismiss Emilia, she obeys like an obedient child, remarking to Emilia, 'We must not now displease him'. Desdemona displays remarkable passivity in the face of Othello's abuse, confining herself to a restrained 'I have not deserved this' in response to the Moor striking her. While this docile response may be the result of her love for Othello, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that her submissiveness is not partly attributable to society's dictum that women must be obedient to men.

The worldly Emilia is under no illusions about male–female relationships. Speaking to Desdemona on the subject of men and marriage, she declares, 'They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungrily. And when they are full they belch us'. While the abuse and cruelty visited on Desdemona bring out the strength and defiance in Emilia's character towards the close of the play, she is initially obedient to her husband Iago, stealing Desdemona's handkerchief because he had asked her many times to do so. While she has no idea why he wants it, she seems anxious to please him, 'I nothing but to please his fantasy'. For his part, Iago generally speaks to Emilia in an abrupt, contemptuous manner. When Emilia expresses her belief that Othello's mind has been poisoned by 'some villainous knave', Iago disdainfully replies, 'You are a fool, go to'. He is only pleasant towards his wife when he wants her to do something for him. He is happy to use Emilia to achieve one of his villainous ends (the theft of the handkerchief), but does not hesitate to kill her when she becomes a threat to him.

Similar to Desdemona and Emilia, Bianca is used and abused by the male characters in the play. While Cassio is happy to spend time with Bianca, he scoffs at the idea that he might marry her, 'I marry her! What a customer?' She is abused by Iago when she comes on the scene of Roderigo's botched attack on Cassio. With Roderigo lying dead (having been killed by Iago), the villain tries to distract attention from himself by falsely accusing Bianca of treacherous involvement in the attack on Cassio, 'I do suspect this trash to be a party in this injury'. He describes the attack on Cassio as 'the fruit of whoring'. Bianca seems to be powerless to refute Iago's false accusations, and has to leave with him when he orders her to.

Iago's misogny (hatred of women) colours both Othello and Cassio's attitudes towards women. Iago talks about women in a cynical, coarse, vulgar manner. We see his contempt for women when he tells Desdemona, 'You rise to play and go to bed to work'. Incapable of any real feelings himself, he reduces love to the level of lust. He uses animal imagery to suggest to Othello the idea of Desdemona and Cassio's lustful activity, 'as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys'. As Othello's once-noble mind becomes increasingly corrupted by Iago's 'pestilence', he too uses the villain's crude language, calling Desdemona an 'impudent strumpet' and a 'cunning whore'. Iago even brings out the baser instincts in Cassio (who is nearly always a model of gentlemanly behaviour) when the latter laughs at the idea of marrying a woman with Bianca's reputation.

While the female characters prove strong and admirable, they are clearly regarded as second-class citizens in Venetian society. We see all three women mainly in relation to the men in their lives. When Desdemona and Emilia

talk, the subject of their conversation is men. Sadly, all three women are used and abused by men, with Othello and Iago ultimately asserting their power over their wives by killing them.

Imagery and Symbolism

Recurring images help to express major themes and convey key character traits. Patterns of imagery also help to create the play's distinctive atmosphere.

Storm imagery

The storm at sea symbolises and points to the storm of destructive passion that will soon engulf Othello's mind and soul. Disorder in the natural world is suggestive of disorder in the world of men. Once Iago plants the seed of doubt in Othello's mind, undermining his faith in Desdemona, chaos ensues, 'when I love thee not, chaos is come again'. While the storm at sea briefly separates Cassio from Othello ('I have lost him on a dangerous sea') he will soon lose the Moor on an even more dangerous sea of suspicion, jealousy and anger. Much of the storm imagery is charged with irony. Othello delights in the calm after the storm, feeling a sense of rich contentment now that he is reunited with Desdemona, 'O my soul's joy, if after every tempest comes such calmness, may the winds blow till they have wakened death'. But even as Othello savours this moment of deep inner peace, Iago is malevolently plotting his downfall by releasing his most destructive passions.

Imagery of Heaven and Hell

Images of heaven and hell are to be found throughout the play. This pervasive imagery suggests the extremes of good and evil embodied by Desdemona and Iago respectively. Heavenly imagery underscores Desdemona's purity and goodness. Cassio refers to her as 'the divine Desdemona'. Roderigo finds it difficult to believe Iago's lies about Desdemona's infidelity, describing her as being 'full of most blessed condition'. When Othello admits to having killed Desdemona and suggests that she has gone to hell, Emilia passionately defends her mistress's virtuous reputation, 'O the more angel she, and you the blacker devil'. Emilia insists that Desdemona was 'heavenly true'.

Diabolic imagery suggests not only that Iago's actions are evil, but that he is himself innately evil, pursuing evil for evil's sake. Iago invokes the help of 'all the tribe of hell' in his evil scheming. He identifies himself with the forces of evil, 'Divinity of hell! When devils will their blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows'. At the close of the play Othello describes Iago as a 'demi-devil', expecting to see cloven hooves under the table. When Othello starts to use devilish imagery in relation to Desdemona, it is another indication that Iago has gained power over his mind and corrupted his nobility. At the end of the temptation scene, he wants 'a swift means of death for the fair devil'. When Othello publicly strikes Desdemona, he exclaims 'Devil!'

Images of Entrapment (Webs and Nets)

Various images of entrapment suggest how Iago traps his unsuspecting victims. When he realises that he can use Cassio's gallantry against him, Iago delightedly remarks, 'With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio'. He also exploits Desdemona's fundamental goodness as part of his malicious scheme, 'So will I turn her virtue into pitch, and out of her goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all'. At the close of the play, Othello finally realises what Iago has done to him, but struggles to understand his motivation: 'Will you, I pray you, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body'.

Animal Imagery

Animal imagery is associated mainly with Iago