

*Mr Bruff*

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# MR Bruff's Guide To 'OTHELLO'



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# SAMPLE

## PART 1a: THE ORIGINS OF THE PLAY

You are probably already familiar with the fact that William Shakespeare often based his plays on existing stories. For those of you whose excitement about studying *Othello* stems from your love of Disney's Aladdin (yes, seriously) you can be forgiven (kind of) for recounting your knowledge of the infamous Jafar and his sidekick Iago as a 'warm-up' analysis for your study of this play. Here's why: *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* is widely believed to have been written by Shakespeare and first performed in 1604 and was based on a story called *Un Capitano Moro* (A Moorish Captain) by Cinthio (Giovanni Battista Giraldi) written in 1565. In Cinthio's story, his Moorish general is deceived by his ensign into believing his wife is unfaithful, giving Shakespeare one of the main tragic elements of his plot. However, Cinthio cannot be credited entirely with the plot. *Un Capitano Moro* is said to be based on *The Tale of Three Apples* from *One Thousand and One Nights* – a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales compiled during The Islamic Golden Age (right back in the eighth to thirteenth century). In *The Tale of Three Apples*, a man wrongly kills his wife because a slave tricked him into believing she was his mistress. The slave's proof is a rare apple which the man had bought his wife. It transpires that the slave actually stole the apple from a child who had stolen it from his mother (the man's wife) to use as a toy. Throughout this story the Wazir, Ja'far (no, Walt Disney is not really a modern day Shakespeare) has to find the truth or face certain death.

Set against a backdrop of military conflict between Venice and Turkey (which took place throughout latter part of the sixteenth century) *Othello* is Shakespeare's modernised version of a tale of deception that has transcended time and cultures. In his version, Shakespeare chooses to retain Cinthio's conflict between black and white: both in skin colour and symbolism, yet his choice of a black man as protagonist was original. In Elizabethan England, the colour black was associated with moral evil and death, with a 'Moor' in Shakespeare's earlier play, *Titus Andronicus*, being a villain. However, regardless of the fact that Othello is referred to as a Moor throughout, the importance of his race on his demise is, and has always been, open to some debate. The term 'Moor' was used broadly to describe Africans from various regions as well as anybody with dark skin and, therefore, Othello's actual ethnicity can never be proved. This is exactly why you should not become preoccupied by *Othello* being a racist play; *Othello* is much more complex and disconcerting than that. *Othello* is a play about the reversal of fortune. It is a politically controversial play that challenges what it means to be a noble soldier during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is a domestic play that highlights the struggle between soldier and wife. It is a play exploring how patriarchal order, class, race, and pride can destroy a marriage and lead to death.

## **PART 1b: OTHELLO AS A TRAGEDY**

Shakespeare's *Othello* is considered to be a tragedy (no, not just because it has the word 'tragedy' in its title) because it meets the majority of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Aristotle defined tragedy as a play of direct action, told in a dramatic way, containing a character that has a serious fall from a position of high status. This fall occurs because of the character's own fatal flaw (hamartia), which in Othello's case is, arguably, jealousy. Aristotle wrote that the whole point of a tragedy is to bring about a catharsis after witnessing disaster strike the fortune of the protagonist. According to Aristotle, character is not as important as plot in a tragic play. In fact, the character never has any chance of reversing his fortune as the incidents are not always linked to his personality. Basically, the audience spend the entirety of the play willing Othello to find out the truth and for Iago to be punished, but this psychological torment is a deliberate and necessary ingredient of Aristotle's. He wants us to sympathise with the protagonist, to feel fear and pity, and then to be disappointed at the end as the mistake is realised just seconds too late. How else would we be taught a moral lesson?

Unlike many tragedies, *Othello* doesn't conform entirely to the Aristotelian tragic form. Firstly, as a black man who has converted to Christianity, Othello cannot be considered high status when compared to the white generals at the time. His commitment to Christianity, as told to us by Iago in Act 2, Scene 3, would also raise questions amongst society as Moors were Muslim. Othello openly speaks of his 'redemption' after being 'taken by the insolent foe/and sold to slavery' in Act 1, Scene 3. The redemption was possibly his conversion to Christianity. Many audience members would have been fearful of the religion he formerly followed (especially when people insinuate pagan savagery), and therefore, would question how trustworthy he is. Secondly, there are hints that Othello is not inherently 'good', nor does he have a genuine tragic flaw. It is suggested that he had an affair with Emilia (see the end of Act 1, Scene 3), and that his tragic flaw of jealousy or monomania is not a traditional flaw in personality because it is not something we can be born with – it is a trait that is developed over time. It is more likely that he is a victim of insecurity due to his differences in race, appearance, and perceived character, emphasised continuously by Roderigo, Brabantio and Iago by referring to him as 'the Moor' 'thick lips' and sarcastically as 'his Moorship'. Othello also emphasises himself how different he is by highlighting the fact that he has been a soldier since he was seven years old, '...these arms of mine had seven years' pith'. Additionally, the sub-plot of Iago exploiting money from Roderigo in the hope of receiving sexual favours from Desdemona, interspersed with the visitors from Venice, deviates from Aristotle's one time, one place, and one action unities – as does the juxtaposition of the military and the domestic backdrops.

Finally, Desdemona's murder is not 'accidental' or committed without intent. Othello plots to commit murder by smothering her, regardless of the fact that he believes she is guilty of a crime and he was acting out of 'honour'.

Make no mistake: Shakespeare intended *Othello* to be considered a tragic hero, but he is not the same as Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. Othello is seen to be much more 'ordinary' than a European King like Macbeth; probably because his hamartia is a 'normal' human emotion in comparison to Macbeth's 'vaulting ambition'. Although he has similar military power, his skin colour and race, alongside his journey through slavery, mean he has no real status amongst Venetian society. However, he is of foreign royalty so does have some of the status required to be considered a tragic hero. And a tragic hero he is. Othello falls from his position of hero, loving husband unafraid to speak of his respect of and devotion to his wife, dignified and powerful leader, gifted and musical orator, noble and admirable man, to become a brainwashed incomprehensible puppet controlled by the jealous Iago. We are supposed to mourn his death, and feel sympathy, yet we also feel as satisfied by his demise as we are of Iago's.

It is true that not all tragedies end in death, but all of Shakespeare's do. The deaths in this tragedy seem to be a result of Iago's villainous mind-games. One of the most famous quotations about Iago comes from Coleridge who claims that Iago's soliloquies reveal 'the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity'. However, Iago claims that he has several motives. He accuses Othello of having sex with his wife; he claims he is jealous that Cassio has been promoted in his place, and he states his annoyance at the fact that Cassio is more attractive than he is. What Coleridge possibly meant was that these motives are excuses for inherent evil and the pleasure he takes from the pain and torture he inflicts on others, evidenced by a lack of a clear plan from the start of the play. Shakespeare deliberately stages most of Iago's actions in the dark or at night, suggesting a clear link to the devil, and, therefore, evidence of his desire to commit evil acts with no genuine motive other than a wish to be involved in the thrill of the deaths of others.

Although *Othello* is a play with many victims and deaths, like all good tragedies it ends with a resolution. Unfortunately, the resolution of *Othello* leaves many disturbing and uncomfortable questions with the audience. One particularly troubling question being whether or not the tragedy in *Othello* is the fact that Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo all die whilst the cunning Iago lives and the white and handsome Cassio restores order.

## PART 2a: THE CONTEXT

You will already know from your studies of Shakespeare during GCSE English that the 16<sup>th</sup> century is a time period with a culture of customs and beliefs very different to those we hold today. European countries were beginning to expand their trade routes so were starting to come into contact with new cultures. Mauritania, found in North Africa, is the fatherland of Shakespeare's *Othello* and is one such new culture that Europeans were becoming familiar with. It is from Mauritania that the term 'Moor' is said to derive from; giving further weight to Othello's race and former religious beliefs (Mauritania has been an Islamic region since the 10<sup>th</sup> century). Othello is referred to as 'The Moor' throughout the play, but, contrary to some suggestions, this term was not meant to be negative or derogatory in any way. In fact, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century a person's job was seen to be a true reflection of their character and reputation; being in the army was a job that held prestige, and only those thought to be logical, trustworthy, loyal and courageous were appointed as generals. Therefore, the treatment of Othello as a black man needs to be carefully approached when exploring Iago's main motives. (see Act 1, Scene 1 analysis).

Brabantio, Desdemona's father, is also worth careful consideration when establishing his motive for disliking Othello's marriage to his daughter. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the rules of marriage reflected the patriarchal society. Men made all the decisions for the family, and women were expected to be subservient and obedient. Assertive women were considered a threat to the social order. As is made very clear in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, fathers would often choose a husband for their daughters from similar or higher social and economic rank. Marriage was considered to be much more like a business transaction and a way of improving a family's finances and status. When Desdemona marries Othello without her father's permission, she rebels against the social conventions of the time, which embarrasses her father. Eloping was not respectful or virtuous, no matter who the chosen partner was. In fact, it is this that proves that Othello's behaviour is already considered to be despicable and contemptuous before Iago begins to manipulate him, especially from a 21st century perspective. It is actually his ridiculous dependency on Iago that brings about his downfall.

The majority of the play is set during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century on the small island of Cyprus, but the plot begins in Venice. These two disparate worlds, geographically dichotomous, helped convince a 16<sup>th</sup> century audience that the rapid change in Othello and Desdemona's relationship was possible. Shakespeare's choice to set the play on the island of Cyprus amidst the imaginary destruction of the 'Turks' by a storm is not historically correct. In 1571, the 'Turks' had conquered Cyprus (about 30

years before Shakespeare wrote *Othello*) but Shakespeare's dismissal of the Turks enables the Venetians to arrive safely on the island so the plot of Iago can proceed. Shakespeare often ignored historical facts to suit his plots, his audience, and his country. The Turks were actually the terror of Europe, and Shakespeare needed a big threat to move Othello and Desdemona away from civilised Venice; he would have also scored bonus points with a Christian audience deeply suspicious of one of the most powerful forces in Europe being Islamic. Western Europeans were suspicious of the Ottoman Empire and Shakespeare set his play as a symbol of the struggle between the liberal Europeans and the savage Turks. Therefore, the shift from Venice to (the historically Turkish owned) Cyprus changes Othello. Some may also see virtue, valour and redemption in the way Othello takes his own life in Cyprus because he re-enacts his taking a Turk by the throat and killing him when he brought shame upon the state.

The moral geography is further deepened by Shakespeare's deliberate choice to have Desdemona derive from Venice: the prosperous Italian city full of white people, a city renowned for prostitution. When the English thought about Venice, they imagined a city of culture and civilisation, but also a city of corruption, conflict, and promiscuous women. The Venetian Desdemona never stood a chance. It is much easier for Othello to believe his wife could be unfaithful once Iago reminds him of the apparent behaviour of women in Venice. Additionally, Othello is a perfect oxymoron as a soldier residing on an island devoted to the Goddess of love, Venus. It is tragically ironic that a great soldier dies for love in a war zone.

Finally, to further appease the audience's view of England's power, Iago's name was carefully chosen. Spain was England's greatest enemy due to the competitive nature of colonisation. The English feared invasion by the Spanish yet continued to independently trade with northern Africa, despite Spanish protest. Iago, being a Spanish name, is quite deliberately the play's villain in order to satisfy the Western Europeans.

## **PART 2b: THE STRUCTURE**

*Othello* is often recognised as being the best constructed of all Shakespearean tragedies because the action begins almost immediately and there is hardly any digression from the main plot. From the moment the play opens up, to the point of Othello's suicide, only a few days pass. The short time of such an action-packed plot was a deliberate source of engagement. Although action-packed, the structure of the plot is simple enough to avoid any confusion and Shakespeare chose to use a three-part structure true to the Aristotelian model referred to in his work on dramatic theory *Poetics*. Aristotle states that a play should contain 'a single whole action...A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end'.

### **The Aristotelian Model: The story has a beginning, middle, and end.**

Beginning: The marriage of Othello and Desdemona

Middle: Iago's deception

End: The murder of Desdemona and the discovery of Iago's lies

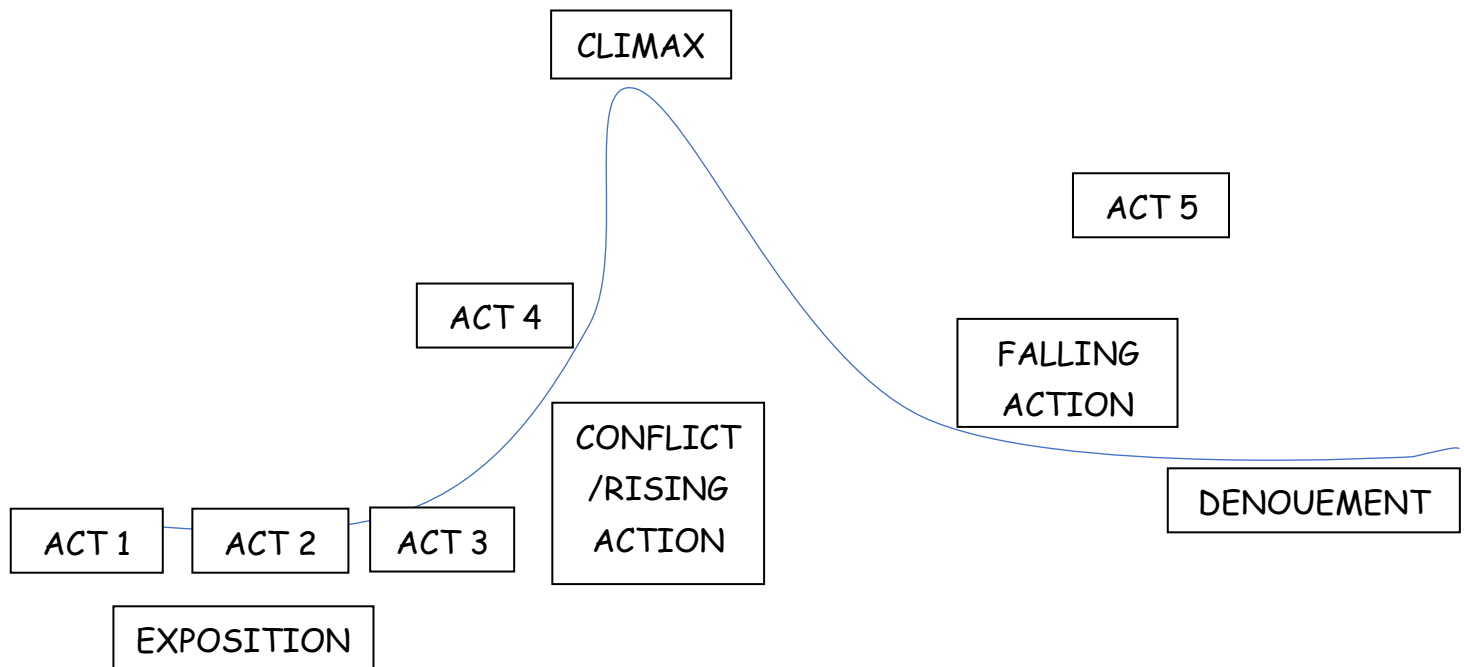
Within this three-part structure are then three main ingredients:

1. Hamartia - a tragic flaw in the tragic hero's character that brings about his downfall
2. Catharsis - a purgation of emotions so the audience feel that they have learned something
3. Anagnorisis - the character's revelation of something that hasn't been realised previously.

Othello, as a protagonist, fulfils Aristotle's requirements for a tragic hero. He begins the play as a man of noble status who falls from his position of power because of his hamartia. The catharsis and anagnorisis come when Othello realises the truth about Iago and Desdemona.

Within this three-part structure, Shakespeare then uses the five recognised structural divisions of a dramatic work according to classical critical theory:

**The Structure of Othello: Shakespeare's classic form of five acts.**



**NOTE: This is open to interpretation - you may have different ideas on how the play fits these categories.**

1. ACT 1 – EXPOSITION: Introduction of main characters and the meaning of the story. Othello's appearance is delayed but he is mentioned repeatedly. Iago is deliberately introduced first to allow him to manipulate the audience into believing his description of Othello as a barbarous, revolting, and threatening man, thus heightening the anticipation of Othello's arrival onstage. Roderigo and Iago start the play by informing Brabantio of his daughter's elopement.  
ACT 2 – Brabantio complains to the Duke of Venice. Othello delivers his defence. Brabantio withdraws complaint.  
ACT 3 – Cassio asks Desdemona to speak to Othello on his behalf. Desdemona agrees. Iago uses the meeting to make Othello doubt Desdemona's faithfulness.

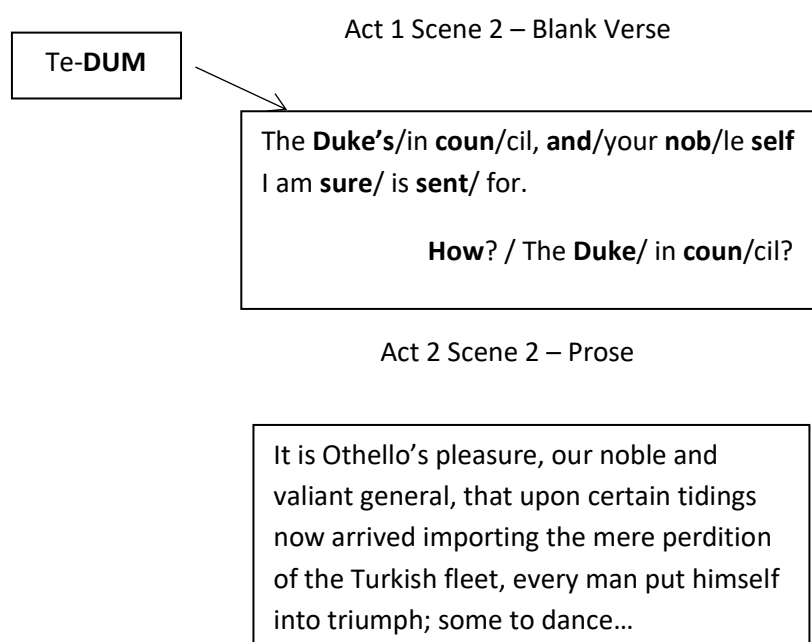


2. ACT 4 – RISING ACTION: Advancements in action occur and difficulties increase. Iago makes Othello question Desdemona's faithfulness. Iago steals the handkerchief and gives it to Cassio. Othello sees Cassio with it. Othello becomes jealous.
3. ACT 5 - CLIMAX – Most intense part of the story. The crisis happens late in the play to preserve the excitement until the end to keep the audience interested. Othello kills Desdemona. Emilia realises what has happened and reveals all. Iago kills Emilia. Othello realises the truth. Othello tries to kill Iago. Lodovico disarms Othello. Iago escapes.
4. FALLING ACTION – The characters resolve the conflict through confessing and then by dying. Othello accepts his mistake. He finds a dagger and begs to be remembered honourably.
5. DENOUEMENT – The conclusion of the story's tragic structure. Othello kills himself. Iago is captured. The play ends with Desdemona, Othello, and Emilia dead on the bed.

### Structure – Blank Verse and Prose:

Othello is written in blank verse and prose. Blank verse is unrhymed poetry written in a meter known as iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter consists of five 'feet' of two syllables each, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. Think of it as a te-**DUM**/te-**DUM**/te-**DUM**/te-**DUM**/te-**DUM** rhythm (yes, really!).

Mr Bruff has written about this already in several of his guides, but let's revisit linked to *Othello*:



So why does this really confusing stuff matter? In Shakespeare's time, verse was considered to be of higher status and moral worth than prose so carried greater significance. Prose was for everyday speech, whereas verse was more formal and usually spoken by the noble characters. If a passage or character is of no particular importance, then you may find that the text is written in prose. If a passage or character is important, then you may find that the text is rhythmic verse. So, verse = nobility and prose = commoner. Simple.

Interestingly, Iago comfortably switches between insincere blank verse and prose. He seems to adopt a manner which suits his purpose and actually chooses to use prose when manipulating others. Most of the prose spoken in *Othello* is instigated by Iago and it is this that contrasts with the blank verse. This can be seen when comparing Iago trying to convince Roderigo not to kill himself in Act 1 when he says 'Thou art sure of me: — go, make money: — I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted;' to Iago's seamless transition into verse when speaking to the audience to reveal his devious plans:

'Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:  
For I mine own gain'd knowledge should profane,  
If I would time expend with such a snipe.  
But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor:'

There is a departure from the usual blank verse of the play...

### Structure – Scene Endings:

It was common practice on the Elizabethan stage to end each scene with a rhyming couplet. This was to signify the end of a scene, signal a change, and provide entertainment.

The last two lines of Act 1 Scene 3 – Rhyming Couplets

For if such actions may have passage <b>free</b> , Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen <b>be</b> .
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In Othello, a number of scenes end with iambic rhyming couplets. The first four acts end in rhyming couplets delivered by Iago as a way of creating suspense and excitement for his plan. The final rhyming couplet of the play offers a moral comment on the action and 'ties-up' the events, as well as ensures the message is memorable.

Myself will straight aboard, and to the state This heavy act with heavy heart relate.
--

### **Symbols and Motifs**

Symbols (concrete images, ideas, sounds, or words) and Motifs (recurring abstract images, ideas, sounds, or words).

Look out for the following:

- The handkerchief – a love token given to Desdemona as a symbol of love and fidelity (see Othello's explanation of its origins). It is also used as a tool of manipulation and a symbol of infidelity. Being red and white, and covered in strawberries, it could also symbolise love and loss of virginity. This red on white imagery (like their bed sheets from their marriage night) is private and precious to Othello.
- The 'Willow' song – Desdemona was taught a song by her mother's maid, Barbary, who suffered a misfortune and died singing. The lyrics suggest both sexes are unfaithful and represent Desdemona accepting her fate.
- Candles and light – symbolic of hope and life. Othello blows out a candle just before he kills Desdemona.
- Animals – often used in relation to Othello to reflect some of the racist attitudes of the characters and audience.
- Plants – Iago's speeches often involve reference to plants as a metaphor for inevitable wild natural forces.
- Poison – Iago appears to be obsessed with poison, metaphorically, in the sense that he refers to his thoughts and words as such.

- Eyes and Vision – Othello makes many demands for ‘ocular proof’ of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, but he often accepts stories without visual proof.
- Hell, Demons, and Monsters – Jealousy is often referred to as a monster in the play. Images of hell are constantly referred to in relation to betrayal, death, and religion.
- Locations – Venice represents civilisation, while Cyprus represents the wilderness (see chapter on context).

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