

Othello Plot Synopsis

Othello begins with a man named **Iago**, who is exceptionally good at manipulating others and causing trouble, tricking a gullible wealthy man named **Roderigo** into doing exactly what he wants. Roderigo is in love with the beautiful **Desdemona**, and has unsuccessfully asked her father to marry her; now, Desdemona has secretly run off and married a Venetian general, **Othello**, behind her father's back.

We find out early in the play that Iago *hates* Othello, for many reasons. One of his main complaints is that Iago believes that Othello should have promoted him for his services in the army instead of **Michael Cassio** – a young man who has less battle experience than Iago, but who is scholarly and honorable. Because of this hatred, Iago begins his many lies and schemes. First, he convinces Roderigo to publicly wake up **Brabantio**, Desdemona's father, and tell him of her secret and hasty marriage to Othello. Iago is betting that Brabantio's racism will cause him to become enraged, and try to break up their union.

Othello is a Moor, meaning an inhabitant of lower Spain or Northern Africa. In the play, this means that Othello has a dark skin while everyone else has light. Brabantio believes Othello is more hot-tempered and uncivilized than the Venetians. He accuses Othello of employing witchcraft to woo his daughter because he cannot believe Desdemona would marry Othello willingly. He barges in on a war council, where the very respected Othello is advising the **Duke of Venice** and some senators about a Turkish fleet that is on the verge of attacking the isle of Cyprus. In front of the whole assembly, Brabantio forces Othello to defend himself and explain how Desdemona fell in love with him. After hearing Othello speak, everyone agrees that the courtship and marriage, though secretive, is legitimate. Brabantio, on the other hand, is still angry and suggests that Othello take note that, since Desdemona was capable of lying to her own father, she might be capable of other deceit in the future.

The Venetian soldiers sail to Cyprus to assist in battle, but the Turkish fleet, who they are supposed to be fighting, is destroyed in a storm at sea. This leaves a lot of soldiers with a lot of free time on the island! Desdemona is there, too, and wants to spend time with her new husband. Iago's wife, **Emilia**, has traveled to Cyprus to attend on Desdemona. Iago very cunningly pits Roderigo and Cassio in a fight with each other, after getting Cassio intoxicated. This marks another occasion where Iago paints himself as a friend to everyone, and seems like a totally innocent bystander, when he is in fact the one secretly causing all of the unrest. Othello strips Cassio of his rank for causing such trouble in Cyprus' streets. Cassio is distraught that he has lost his good reputation; Iago uses Cassio's distress to come up with a new scheme. He tells Cassio that Desdemona is a sympathetic person and that perhaps Cassio should go to her and plead forgiveness because she could put in a good word for Cassio the next time she speaks with Othello. Cassio agrees to the plan.

Meanwhile, Iago begins to persuade Othello that his wife is having an affair with Cassio. Imagine how Othello would feel, then, if Desdemona started saying nice things about Cassio! Iago knows how jealousy affects people. Othello begins to have doubts about his wife's faithfulness. When Desdemona drops a handkerchief, with a unique strawberry pattern, Emilia picks it up and Iago takes it from her to leave in Cassio's quarters. Iago knows that having this tiny amount of physical "proof" will make his plan a sure thing. Cassio finds the handkerchief and – since he has no idea where it came from – gives it as a gift to a woman he knows named **Bianca**. This handkerchief will be very important.

Iago is a master at manipulation. He convinces Roderigo to attack Cassio again and breaks Othello's heart by convincing him that his wife is unfaithful. The events that occur when all of these characters are acting based on lies leads to the epic conclusion of *Othello*.

NOTE: This summary of the play provides clarification of initial plot occurrences and character introductions. Several surprising twists or climactic moments have been omitted to preserve the drama during performance time.