

Key moments

Act 1

- Iago and Roderigo disclose their grievances against Othello, and Iago reveals his resentment of Cassio.
- Desdemona's father, Brabantio, is outraged to hear of her elopement with Othello.
- Roderigo and Iago succeed in provoking Brabantio to seek to have Othello and Desdemona arrested.
- Othello, one of Venice's top military commanders, is summoned before the senate about the latest Turkish threat.
- Brabantio demands that the senate consider his daughter's elopement.
- Othello makes two impressive speeches defending his actions and wins the Duke's approval.
- Desdemona supports Othello's version of events and declares her love for him.
- Othello must go to defend the Venetian colony of Cyprus against the Turks. Cassio, Iago and Desdemona will also travel to Cyprus.
- Othello swears his faith in Desdemona.
- Iago reveals his sinister plan to make Othello believe that Desdemona and Cassio are lovers.

Act 2

- The action moves to Cyprus, where a storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet.
- Cassio's absolute loyalty to Othello and devotion to Desdemona are established.
- Iago convinces Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. Iago will use Roderigo's anger to further his own plans.
- Othello and Desdemona are delighted to be safely reunited in Cyprus.
- Iago shares his hatred for Othello with the audience, but also acknowledges Othello's good qualities. He claims that Othello and Cassio have betrayed him and he intends to get even with both men.
- Othello has declared an evening of festivities to celebrate both the end of the Turkish threat and his recent marriage to Desdemona. Cassio is left in command.
- Iago succeeds in making Cassio drunk, and convinces Montano that Cassio is often drunk.
- Roderigo, incited by Iago, provokes Cassio to a fight. A riot erupts.
- Othello intervenes and Iago manipulates the situation to make sure that Othello blames Cassio and dismisses him as his lieutenant.
- Pretending to console Cassio, Iago persuades him to ask Desdemona to intervene with Othello on his behalf.
- Iago plans to bring Othello to where he will find Cassio and Desdemona together, hoping that this will arouse Othello's suspicions.

Act 3

- Cassio begins his campaign to win back Othello's favour.
- Desdemona responds with enthusiasm to Cassio's plea that she intercede with Othello on his behalf.
- Iago uses the meeting of Cassio and Desdemona to create a nagging doubt in Othello's mind about their relationship.
- Iago hints that there may be some sinister significance in the fact that Cassio acted as a go-between when Othello was wooing Desdemona.
- Othello invites Iago to incriminate Cassio, but Iago implies that if he told him all he knows (or suspects) it would take away Othello's peace of mind.
- Othello has doubts. He states that he will need proof of Desdemona's guilt, or of her innocence.
- Iago tells Othello that a Venetian woman hides her affairs from her husband and reminds him that Desdemona has already deceived her father by eloping. Othello is deeply troubled by this 'evidence'.
- Iago further emphasises their differences and suggests that Desdemona may be regretting that she did not marry a Venetian gentleman.
- Desdemona accidentally drops her handkerchief. Emilia steals it for Iago.
- Iago lies that he overheard Cassio dreaming of Desdemona and talking of their love in his sleep. Othello finds this 'evidence' convincing.
- Iago claims that he has seen Cassio with Desdemona's handkerchief. This 'evidence' is the ultimate turning point of the play. Othello now believes that Cassio and Desdemona must be guilty.
- Othello decides that he will kill Desdemona. Iago will kill Cassio.
- Othello makes Iago his lieutenant in place of Cassio.
- Desdemona's failure to produce the handkerchief when Othello demands it, and her further pleas for Cassio, infuriate Othello, who departs in a rage.

Act 4

- Iago invents lurid details of Desdemona's supposed relationship with Cassio, causing Othello to fall down in a fit.
- Iago offers Othello an opportunity to witness Cassio giving details of his affair with Desdemona. Othello does not know that Cassio is actually discussing Bianca.
- Bianca returns the handkerchief to Cassio, further inflaming Othello's anger.
- Othello repeats his sentence of death on Desdemona. At first he wants to chop her up, then he decides to poison her, but finally he accepts Iago's suggestion that he strangle her in her bed. Iago promises to deal with Cassio.
- Othello is summoned to return to Venice, and Cassio is appointed in his place. Desdemona angers Othello when she expresses pleasure at Cassio's promotion. Othello strikes her.
- Emilia does not take the opportunity to tell Othello the truth about the handkerchief.
- Othello is outraged by Desdemona's denials of guilt.
- Desdemona requests Iago's help in understanding what has distressed Othello. Iago makes excuses for Othello's behaviour.
- Iago persuades Roderigo that he should kill Cassio.
- Othello orders Desdemona to dismiss Emilia and go to bed. Desdemona has a strong sense of foreboding but cannot think wrong of Othello.

Act 5

- Iago aims to arrange things so that Cassio and Roderigo kill each other.
- Roderigo dies, but Cassio survives.
- Othello makes it clear that he is not going to kill Desdemona as an act of personal revenge, since that would be murder. Instead, the killing will be an act of justice, as if he is ridding the world of a criminal.
- Othello's order to have Cassio killed, however, is clearly an act of personal revenge. He tells Desdemona that if Cassio had as many lives as he has hairs on his head, he would want to take all of them.
- Desdemona, almost with her final breath, undermines Othello's claim that her death is an act of justice.
- Emilia exposes Iago's lies to Othello about Desdemona and Cassio. Iago kills Emilia.
- Othello acknowledges his guilt, foreseeing Desdemona in heaven and himself in hell, but persists in regarding himself as an honourable killer.
- A letter in Roderigo's pocket confirms Iago's complicity in the attempted murder of Cassio.
- Iago runs off but is captured and brought back. Othello wounds him.
- Othello takes his own life.
- Cassio takes over in Cyprus.

Useful quotes

*Another of his fathom they have not
To lead their business.* (Iago, 1.1.152–3)

*Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense
That thou hast practis'd on her with foul charms,
Abus'd her delicate youth with drugs or minerals*
(Brabantio, 1.2.72–4)

*Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see,
She has deceived her father, and may thee.*
(Brabantio, 1.3.292–3)

*The Moor, howbe't that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, noble, loving nature,
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband.* (Iago, 2.1.283–6)

*be merry, Cassio,
For thy solicitor shall rather die
Than give thy cause away.* (Desdemona, 3.3.26–8)

*Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it,
That he would sneak away so guilty-like,
Seeing you coming.* (Iago, 3.3.39–41)

*Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.* (Othello, 3.3.91–3)

*By heaven, he echoes me
As if there were some monster in his thought
Too hideous to be shown!* (Othello, 3.3.110–12)

*Trifles light as air
Are, to the jealous, confirmations strong
As proofs of Holy Writ.* (Iago, 3.3.327–9)

*Thou hast set me on the rack.
I swear 'tis better to be much abus'd
Than but to know't a little.* (Othello, 3.3.341–3)

*Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature
Whom passion could not shake?* (Lodovico, 4.1.260–2)

*For if she be not honest, chaste and true,
There's no man happy.* (Emilia, 4.2.17–18)

*Unkindness may do much;
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love.* (Desdemona, 4.2.161–3)

*O brave Iago, honest and just,
That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong,
Thou teachest me.* (Othello, 5.1.31–3)

O damn'd Iago! O inhuman dog! (Roderigo, 5.1.62)

*O perjur'd woman, thou dost stone thy heart
And makest me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.* (Othello, 5.2.64–6)

*O insupportable, O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon* (Othello, 5.2.100–2)

*Nobody, I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!* (Desdemona, 5.2.126–7)

My friend, thy husband: honest, honest Iago. (Othello, 5.2.155)

*I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak.
My mistress here lies murder'd in her bed.* (Emilia, 5.2.185–6)

*Nay, lay thee down and roar,
For thou hast kill'd the sweetest innocent
That e'er did lift up eye.* (Emilia, 5.2.199–201)

*Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?* (Othello, 5.2.302–3)

*Then must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme* (Othello, 5.2.344–7)

For he was great of heart. (Cassio, 5.2.362)