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Othello

William Shakespeare · *c. 1603–04 (published 1622)* · *original English text*

A great general, newly married, is ruined not by a battlefield but by a lie he is taught to call proof. Shakespeare's tragedy of jealousy is a study in truth, trust and the deadly skill of a villain who never looks like one. The question is how a loyal mind can be made to doubt what it most loves.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How can a lie, once believed, turn love into a weapon against itself?

"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; / It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on."

Iago · Act III, Scene III

Iago names the disease while he inoculates it. Othello's noble confidence is real, and so is his inexperience in the hidden warfare of slander. Desdemona's honesty never changes; what changes is the eye that looks at her. The play is a warning against counsel that feeds suspicion and calls it wisdom.

KEY CHARACTERS

Othello
valor in war; unguarded in trust

Desdemona
steadfast love, slandered

Iago
envy that never looks like itself

Cassio
good name, weak watch

Emilia
late, costly truth-telling

Roderigo
the purse Iago empties

Brabantio
a father's wound and warning

Bianca
used as a prop in the "proof"

A GOOD NAME

> *"Who steals my purse steals trash. 'Tis something, nothing; / 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. / But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed."*
>
> **Iago (to Othello)** · Act III, Scene III

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Venice

ACT I

A marriage is declared, and a hate begins its work.

- Iago, passed over for promotion in favor of Cassio, begins to use Roderigo
- He and Roderigo wake Brabantio with the news that Desdemona has married Othello
- Before the Senate, Othello and Desdemona defend a true love; they are sent to Cyprus
- Already Iago is teaching Roderigo to wait, and to put money in his purse

02 Cyprus

ACT II

A storm, a landing, and a lieutenant disgraced.

- The Turkish fleet is wrecked; the island is briefly given over to joy
- Iago watches Cassio's courtesy to Desdemona and begins to twist it
- He gets Cassio drunk on the watch; a brawl costs Cassio his place
- The remedy Iago offers is a plea to Desdemona, which will be made to look like guilt

03 The Garden

ACT III

A handkerchief changes hands, and a mind is remade.

- Desdemona honestly intercedes for Cassio; Iago calls the honesty a sign
- He warns Othello against jealousy while teaching him to feel it
- Emilia finds the lost handkerchief and gives it to Iago; it will be planted with Cassio
- Othello demands ocular proof and binds himself to revenge

> *"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; / It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on."*
>
> **Iago** · Act III, Scene III

04 The School of Proof

ACT IV

What is shown is not what is; humiliation follows.

- Iago stages a conversation with Cassio about Bianca; Othello hears it as a confession about his wife
- The handkerchief appears in the wrong hands and is treated as a verdict
- Othello strikes Desdemona in public and questions her as if she were already condemned
- Emilia begins to see that some villain has slandered her, but the plot is still faster than the truth

05 The Bedchamber

ACT V

Murder, discovery, and a last accounting.

- Roderigo is used and struck down in the dark; Cassio is wounded and lives
- Othello kills Desdemona, still calling the act a duty
- Emilia tells the truth of the handkerchief and is slain by Iago
- Othello knows at last what he has thrown away, and takes his own life; Iago is left to silence and the state's justice

> *"Then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely, but too well"*
>
> **Othello** · Act V, Scene II

Truth vs Slander | Jealousy | Trust | Envy | A Good Name | Courage to Speak

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Iago tells the truth about jealousy while he is planting it. Why is a warning from a dishonest mouth so hard to refuse?
2. The handkerchief is a small object made to carry a huge verdict. Track who holds it, and what each person thinks it means.
3. Desdemona's loyalty does not change. Watch the language Othello uses of her before and after Act III, Scene III.
4. Emilia's last speech is the play's delayed daylight. What did she know earlier, and what does it cost her to say it?
5. Iago's speech on a good name is itself a theft. He uses a true saying to steal the trust in which a good name lives.
6. Othello's last self-judgment—loved not wisely, but too well—is not the whole truth. What else must be named: credulity, pride, or the refusal to test a slander?

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1531, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/othello/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.