

English Literature – Summer Independent Learning Y12 – Y13

Compulsory Content:

Part 1: NEA

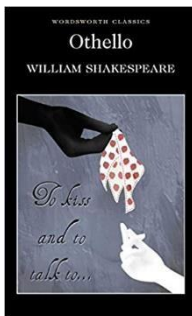
Your NEA reading, research, and drafting should continue throughout the summer. Make sure you have the following tasks completed:

- Complete the reading of both your chosen NEA stimulus texts.
- Complete your critical reading and contextual research, ensuring that you keep a log of all sources for your bibliography.
- Complete a full draft of your NEA response- **at least 2500 words**; this must be submitted electronically to your teacher as instructed by the first day of college.

Part 2: Purchasing the relevant texts

You need to purchase the following text to read over

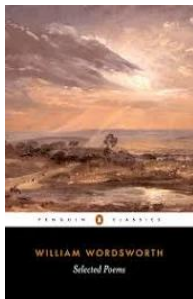
the summer: • Othello – ISBN: 978 1853260186



You should also purchase your set poetry text:

Selected Poems: John Keats, editor John Barnard

(Penguin Classics, 2007) ISBN 9780140424478



Part 3: Othello Preview

Read the whole of the play (feel free to watch adaptations as well, but do not substitute this for the reading of the text).

- Summarise the key events of each scene in brief, bullet-point form.
- To support your understanding of the play, use the following link to ensure you know what is happening in each scene.

<https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/othello/> - Sparknotes study guide and 'No fear' translation of the script to assist reading.

- Read the following Othello context resource and create a summary in your chosen form: this could be Cornell notes, a mindmap, an electronic resource...
- All of the headings in this information need to be covered and summarised in your resource but you may also wish to extend and supplement this.
- You will be tested on your context knowledge and should submit your resource in or by your first English Literature lesson.



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OTHELLO PREVIEW SIL



The context of Othello

The medieval world

Medieval maps divided the world into three continents: Africa, Europe and Asia.

- Only the northern coast of Africa was known in any detail, whilst the further reaches of Asia were largely the stuff of fable
- By 1000, Vikings had settled in Iceland and Greenland and even landed in America. But they did not settle there and this continent remained unknown to the West, as did the Pacific Ocean and Australasia
- Sea journeys were for trade and stayed close to the coastline. Western civilization was based around the Mediterranean basin
- The world was also understood symbolically: maps often placed the holy city of Jerusalem at the centre.

Background to Renaissance exploration

The East

Europe bought luxury goods from China (known as Cathay). Marco Polo's experiences there in the thirteenth century were known, but there was little first-hand knowledge of the Orient. Commodities were transported overland by the 'Silk Route'. Besides expensive luxuries, a vital resource was spices (from the Moluccas or 'Spice Islands'), essential for preserving food.

Turkish threat

Trading routes were threatened by the Turkish Empire, especially after the fall of Constantinople (now Istanbul) to the Turks in 1453. This prompted Europeans to search for maritime routes to China and the Spice Islands.

Renaissance exploration

Portugal

The Portuguese were great seafarers. Under royal patronage, they explored the coast of Africa, eventually finding sea routes to India:

- In 1487 Bartolomeo Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope
- In 1497 Vasco da Gama sailed round Africa and reached India
- In 1519 Ferdinand Magellan (funded by Spain) began the first circumnavigation of the world. Magellan died in 1521 but the voyage was completed in 1522.
- Columbus believed that the Spice Islands could be reached by sailing west. In 1492, he landed in the Bahamas, believing them to be close to the Indies (hence the name 'West Indies'). Columbus never reached the American mainland. America was named after the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci in 1507.

Spain

Columbus was followed by the Spanish conquistadors, who were determined to exploit the New World. The sophisticated civilizations of South America were destroyed. Cortés defeated the Aztecs in Mexico, Pizarro the Incas in Peru.

South America was colonized by Spain (and Brazil by Portugal, as agreed in a papal treaty). Westerners brought with them diseases for which American natives had no immunity. Consequently vast numbers of indigenous inhabitants died. Syphilis is thought to have been carried back from America to the West.

Economic benefits

Spain exploited America for its silver and gold. This treasure flooded European markets, causing inflation in the sixteenth century.

Westerners discovered new commodities, including tobacco, potatoes, tomatoes, maize and chocolate from the New World.

Cultural Consequences

Impressions of 'the other'

Early explorers struggled to make sense of the new peoples they encountered:

- Native inhabitants were usually seen as inferior savages, fit for exploitation and in need of conversion to Christianity
- An alternative view saw them as noble savages who were purer than decadent Western man: Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has elements of both these views
- Africans were also regarded as an inferior race but Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello, a Moor who was of Moroccan or Berber origin, helped to change people's perceptions. Othello is shown as a personable leader, admired as a soldier and as a man. He is also a man of mystery and fascination, having fought against mythical creatures and experienced many fantastical adventures which were completely alien to the current European world view.

'New world' imagery

Travel writings, from explorers' accounts to serious histories, began with the compilation of travels by the Elizabethan writer Hakluyt. Subsequent travel accounts often had a propagandistic intent, normally justifying 'white' superiority.

The mystery of 'new worlds' generated a range of poetic metaphor and imagery:

- Seventeenth-century writers refer to the fabled riches and beauty of the New World: examples are the **Metaphysical** poets **John Donne** (see *Elegy 19*) and Andrew **Marvell** (*Bermudas*)
- In **Renaissance** drama, America is a golden and exotic world, similar to the **Garden of Eden**: an example is John Fletcher's *The Island Princess*
- Africa is seen as a land of mystery and exoticism, where mythical and fantastical creatures live, such as the Anthropophagi, referred to in *Othello*.

The era of Othello

Historically, Cyprus became an overseas colony of the Venetian Republic in 1489, but fell to Turkish invaders in 1570. This puts the events of the play somewhere between the two dates, in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Shakespeare wrote the story in 1603, about a hundred years later. So compared to many of his history plays, this one has an almost contemporaneous feel to it. Certainly, the attitudes and beliefs of the play's characters accord with the prevailing beliefs of Shakespeare's age. There are some racist terms used in the play, such as 'thick lips' and 'sooty bosom', which may well have resounded to the Shakespearean audience, but it is perhaps significant that Shakespeare made Othello a Moor, with presumed origins in North Africa. This would have made him more acceptable to Elizabethan society than a sub-Saharan African.

The exercise of authority

What makes a good ruler?

The question of what makes a good ruler is debated through many of Shakespeare's plays. In Act IV of *Macbeth*, Malcolm lists the virtues appropriate to a king as:

'Justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude.'

- Leadership in battle is important; Othello is seen as a good new governor for Cyprus because of his warlike qualities
- Judgement of character is also important; Othello, though 'noble', is open to criticism for his choice of deputy, who supposedly has a problem with alcohol. This is shown much more starkly when Othello fails to perceive Iago's evil motives through his naivety and gullibility and so causes the play's tragedy.
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The faith setting of Shakespeare's plays

Although Shakespeare was almost certainly a [Christian](#) (and in any case would have had to attend [church](#) by law) not all of his plays are set in a Christian world.

Differing faith settings

- Shakespeare's Roman plays, such as *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are set in a world where people believe in ancient [pagan](#) gods such as [Jupiter](#). The same pagan world is the background to *King Lear*. In these plays there is no suggestion of a life after death, whereas those set in a Christian universe strongly present the ideas of [heaven](#), [hell](#) and [judgement](#)
- Some plays present a mixed set of beliefs, for example *The Winter's Tale*, where pagan gods are mentioned alongside a reference to [Whitsun](#), a Christian festival.
- It is significant that Shakespeare consciously chooses to set plays such as *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* in a Christian universe, because what may happen to characters after death is as much an issue in these plays as what happens to them in life. It is important when the characters in a play are conscious of [sin](#) and of [God's](#) judgement whereby they will go to heaven, hell or [purgatory](#) after death.

Biblical allusions

The [Authorised Version](#) of the [Bible](#) (sometimes called the King James Bible after the monarch who authorised it) was familiar to Christians from its publication in 1611 until the middle of the 20th century. Its language is

very close to that of the slightly earlier translation of the Bible known to Shakespeare and his audience prior to 1611 (called *The Great Bible*).

Shakespeare often echoes the language and themes of the Bible. For example, *Othello* contains dozens of phrases from universal Christian usage:

- 'Heaven is my judge' (Iago)
- '[Amen](#) to that, sweet powers' (Othello)
- 'God forgive us our sins' (Cassio)
- 'the [serpent](#)'s [curse](#)' (Emilia)
- 'The [devil](#) their [virtue](#) tempts' (Othello)
- 'rot and perish and be [damned](#)' (Othello)
- 'Fire and [brimstone](#)' (Othello)
- 'as I am a Christian' (Desdemona)
- '[Saint Peter](#)' (Othello)
- 'heaven and [grace](#)' (Othello)

and many others.

Shakespeare would have assumed that his audience all knew, and believed, a variety of Christian teachings and practices.

Heaven, hell and judgement

Life after death

Christians believe that they have an immortal [soul](#). In other words, a human being does not simply consist of a body which will die, but also has a spirit which will live on for eternity after the death of the body.

Judgement

Christians also believe that, after death, all humans will be judged by God according to their actions on this earth. Because of the religious turmoil which had taken place in England just before and during Shakespeare's lifetime, beliefs would differ about what might happen after God's [judgement](#).

For Shakespeare's audience, there were three possible after-life existences: heaven, hell and [purgatory](#).

Heaven

Christians believe that heaven is a place of eternal joy, where God is enthroned and surrounded by [angels](#) — creatures of pure spirit who act as God's messengers to earth. It is depicted as a place of shining light and great beauty: the most famous vision of the Christian heaven is in the last book of the Bible, [Revelation](#).

No human being deserves to enter heaven because all are guilty of sin. However, the Bible teaches that those who [repent](#) of their wrong attitudes and actions, put their faith in the fact that [Christ](#)'s death has saved them and seek to live in obedience to God while on earth, will spend [eternity](#) in heaven with him.

Purgatory

However, according to a [Catholic](#) belief portrayed in *Othello*, there is also a place called purgatory — a place between heaven and hell where the souls of those who are not [damned](#), but who are not yet fit for heaven, may go to be [purged](#), or purified, of sin (though this idea is not found in the Bible). For example, Emilia states that she is prepared to suffer purgatory for worldly gain, implying that she believed she would still eventually gain heaven.

Hell

The Bible taught that those who had rejected [Jesus](#) on earth, and were guilty of evil acts of which they did not repent, would be condemned by the judgement of God to hell — a place of eternal separation from God and thus eternal torments (far worse than those believed to take place in purgatory).

Although the Bible does not provide a detailed description of hell, Christian tradition has included the following beliefs:

- Hell is a place of fire and suffering
- Hell is the abode of [devils](#) and [demons](#) — evil spirits (traditionally, angels who have rebelled against God). These devils torment souls in hell and also tempt humans on earth. In *Othello*, Emilia curses her husband with, ‘hell gnaw his bones.’
- Hell is the home of [Satan](#), the chief evil spirit, whose name means ‘enemy’ (as he is the enemy of God and of humankind). As Othello says, ‘The devil their virtue tempts.’

Mercy and forgiveness

With death an ever present reality in Elizabethan life, it is no wonder that there was such a preoccupation with what happened to people when they died. People's fears were focused on the torments of punishment, but the influence of the [Reformation](#) meant that there was also a clearer understanding of God's [grace](#) and the possibility of forgiveness.

Changing emphasis

The Bible states that God, who created the world and entrusted its care to humankind, will judge all according to the way they have lived:

- The [Old Testament](#) frequently shows God punishing individuals for sinful behaviour
- However, both the Old Testament and the [New Testament](#) also show God offering mercy and the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, even when individuals or nations have previously ignored him and refused to obey him. In the New Testament, God's love is emphasised as he is shown sending his son [Jesus](#) to die on a [cross](#), making the [sacrifice](#) necessary to wipe out, or [redeem](#), people's sins and making forgiveness and a new start available to all
- It was this which particularly inspired Reformers like [Martin Luther](#), whose writings had a huge influence.

Confession and repentance

In order to gain forgiveness, according to Christian belief, individuals needed to recognise their failure to live in obedience to God, confess their sins, and repent (turn their back on that way of living), thus accepting the

forgiveness and new life made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In response to true repentance, God washes away all guilt of sin. In *Othello*, Cassio prays aloud, ‘God forgive us our sins.’

Justice and mercy

According to the Bible, since all people are in need of God's grace and forgiveness, all should show forgiveness to others in their turn. In many of his plays, Shakespeare illustrates that those who judge others harshly may expect to be so judged themselves.

In *Othello*, Cassio forgives Othello for plotting to have him killed. But when Othello realises that he has killed his own wife unjustly and without forgiving her, he believes that he will not enter heaven: ‘This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven, and fiends will snatch at it.’

Vengeance forbidden

Vengeance, or revenge — the taking of retribution for a perceived injustice or harmful act — is directly opposed to ideas of mercy, forgiveness and grace. Consequently, in Christian theology, it is seen as being entirely the wrong response to an injury. Although the phrase from the Old Testament, '[an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth](#)' is well-known, by contrast in many places in the New Testament the followers of Christ are told to forgive and not to seek revenge

So, when Othello believes his wife has committed adultery with Cassio, and plans to kill them both, this actually leads him to his self-condemnation at the end of the play.

Prayer

What is Christian prayer?

To pray is to enter into a two-way conversation with God, sometimes using words, sometimes in silent thought. Prayers are often requests, but may also be in praise and [worship](#) of God, saying sorry or thank you, as well as meditations. Traditionally, Christians have kneeled to pray, since kneeling before one's ruler was a sign of respect..

Othello joins in with Desdemona's prayer that their love for each other will increase when he replies, ‘Amen to that, sweet powers!’ Near the end of the play, Othello wants to know that Desdemona has prayed before he kills her, so that he can be sure she will go to heaven.

The Ten Commandments

The impact of the Commandments

In chapter 20 of [Exodus](#) in the Old Testament, the [prophet Moses](#) was given by God [Ten Commandments](#) which summed up the laws by which humans should live.

- These commandments were often written up on the walls of Christian churches, thus they would be very familiar to Shakespeare's audience
- In addition, the Ten Commandments would be recited by the priest and people during the service of Holy Communion held each Sunday
- The Commandments formed the basis of English law as well as affecting the day to day inter-relations between people. For example, casually swearing using terms referring to God (the act of [blasphemy](#) which was contrary to the third Commandment) was used by dramatists as an indicator of immorality,

as was failing to set apart Sunday as a time to focus on God and to take physical rest (as stated in the fourth Commandment).

Respecting parents

Commandment five is:

'Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.'
([Exodus 20:12](#) AV)

It was taken as a 'given' that all children were subject to their parents and should always speak respectfully to them and about them. Not to do so was to upset the Elizabethan perception of order and degree by which God maintained both the macrocosm and the microcosm.

It was also expected that children would obey their parents when they were to be married. This was especially true of girls, who would usually marry at a young age (sometimes even before puberty), while boys would often wait until they had reached financial independence from their fathers. Hence many young women were married to older men. Given this expectation, it is understandable that:

- Othello is portrayed as an experienced soldier, much older than Desdemona
- Desdemona's father is angered and dismayed when she marries Othello without his permission..

Murder and suicide

The sixth Commandment is:

'Thou shalt not kill.' ([Exodus 20:13](#) AV)

Suicide or 'self-slaughter' is not separately forbidden by the Ten Commandments but was held by the Christian Church to be a sin, since killing oneself is just as much taking away a God-given life as killing someone else. Those who committed suicide were thought to have died in sin and to have offended against the laws of God. When Iago treacherously kills Roderigo, the latter in his dying breath curses Iago with, 'O damned Iago!' with the strong implication that Iago would be condemned to hell. When Othello kills himself at the end of the play after murdering his innocent wife, much of the tragedy lies in the fact that Othello has willingly condemned himself to hell.

Adultery

The seventh Commandment is:

'Thou shalt not commit adultery' ([Exodus 20:14](#) AV)

Nowadays adultery is usually held to mean 'the action of a married person who has sexual relations with someone other than their lawful spouse.' However, Christian theologians extended the meaning of the term since, in the Bible, in Matthew 5:27-28, Christ points out that the desire to commit adultery is as much a sin as the act itself:

'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.'

(AV)

By this interpretation, a character may commit adultery whether or not they have sexual intercourse.

There was something of a double standard regarding this commandment in Shakespeare's day. Young noblemen often indulged in pre-marital sex, partly because they would marry later in life. However, young women would be expected to be chaste before marriage and faithful within it. The possible pregnancy resulting from illicit sex would end any hopes a young woman might have of marrying well, and the penalty for committing adultery was usually much more severe for women than for men.). Thus Othello perceives Desdemona's supposed adultery with Cassio as just cause for murdering her.

Other Commandments

The remaining Commandments, not to steal (eighth), lie (ninth), or covet (desire) what belongs to others (tenth) were (and still are) the basis of ideal social behaviour - and failure to abide by them the source of much drama and tension in literature. Iago embodies the transgression of all three commandments and is portrayed as one of the most despicable characters in Shakespeare's plays:

- **Stealing** – As the play progresses it becomes clear that Iago has persuaded Roderigo to give him money to pass on to Desdemona, with which Roderigo will woo Desdemona and gain her affections. But Iago admits to the audience that he has kept all the money for himself: 'Of gold and jewels that I bobbed (tricked) from him...'
- **Lying** - Iago lies to everyone in the play and very seldom speaks the truth to anyone, all in the cause of getting his revenge on Othello and Cassio
- **Coveting** - In his very first long speech, Iago shows that he is bitter because he has been passed over for promotion, and he speaks scathingly and enviously of Cassio, who has been promoted instead of him. He spends the whole play plotting how to disgrace Cassio and take his place in Othello's service:

Let me see now,

To get his place, and to plume up my will

In double knavery.' (Act 1 Scene 3)

The nature of humanity

According to [Christian](#) belief, all human beings are creatures – that is, they are created. Shakespeare's audience believed that everything and everybody was created by [God](#), the all-powerful and loving father of the universe.

An ordered created world

At the time Shakespeare was writing, the universe was seen as a hierarchy, known as the Chain of Being:

- God, the Creator, was at the top
- Next to God in the order of creation were the angelic spirits: there were thought to be nine orders, or ranks: Seraphs, Cherubs, Thrones, Principalities, Virtues, Powers, Dominions, Archangels, Angels

- As spirits, these were unchangeable, bodiless intermediaries between God and man; although they did not have bodies, they were thought to be able to create themselves bodies out of air so that they could appear to humans
- Below these spirits were human beings, who were thought to be unique in having both a body, like animals, but also a spirit (or soul)
- Below mankind came animals, having body but no soul
- Finally were plants; then stones.

The state as a body

Parallel orders

Just as God is at the top of the hierarchy in the Universe

- So are kings and other rulers the highest within the state
- So is the head, the seat of reason, within the person.

Shakespeare often compares the state, or body politic, to the human body:

- For example, just as the physical body may be subject to disease, so the state may be riddled with corruption
- In many of his plays, Shakespeare uses images of disease metaphors for the corruption seen in Elizabethan society.

Reason versus passion

Shakespeare frequently stresses that it is reason which informs the soul of man and makes humans higher than animals:

- Because people have a soul, they can aspire to reach beyond their body and mortality
- If they debase their soul and lose their reason – especially through drunkenness or by giving way to extreme passion – then they are no better than animals.

Sexual activity

Part of human nature is sexual activity. Shakespeare shows that, here too, it is important to get the balance right:

- Characters for whom sex is merely sensual, involving no commitment, are rarely respected
- For Shakespeare's audience, marriage under the previous [Roman Catholic](#) regime had been regarded as a [sacrament](#) – a special sign of spiritual grace
- Even though [Protestants](#) did not accept marriage as a sacrament, it was nevertheless an important ceremony involving vows made in the presence of God
- Although there was inevitably sexual activity outside marriage, it was very much frowned upon and the woman would usually be considered disgraced. Shakespeare himself got Ann Hathaway pregnant and had to marry her hastily before the child arrived, so he would be well aware of this.

Astronomy and astrology

Definitions

- Astronomy studies the movement of the planets and stars
- Astrology deals with the supposed influence of the stars on human life.

This distinction is a modern one, however: while astrology is regarded as a pseudo-science today, for centuries it was accepted as a way of explaining and predicting terrestrial events. Before the seventeenth century, astronomy and astrology were not usually separated, and observation of the 'heavenly bodies' was accompanied by ideas about their effects on man and his earthly habitat.

Astronomy

A universal study

All settled civilisations have studied astronomy:

- Knowledge of the movement of the moon and the sun was vital for a pre-industrial society, as a way of telling the time
- The codification of such knowledge produced a calendar, by which the best periods for sowing, reaping, herding and other activities could be determined
- Observation of the stars was also necessary for sea navigation and long land journeys

The calculations involved in this study made astronomy a main stimulus for mathematics.

Astrology

The influence of the heavenly bodies

Astrology describes the influence of the stars on human life. It was generally accepted until about 1600. Because the sun is the source of life, and the moon causes tides, it was felt that other heavenly bodies must also influence the earth. In the absence of modern science, this helped explain human behaviour and terrestrial phenomena, and allowed for predictions.

The planets

According to astrology, each planet has an individual influence:

- Jupiter (Jove) disposes someone to be merry or 'jovial'
- Mars and Venus influence humans to be warlike ('martial') or loving respectively
- The influence of Mercury is seen in the term 'mercurial' (lively and unpredictable)
- A 'lunatic' is affected by the lunar cycle of the moon
- The influence of Saturn is seen in the adjective 'saturnine' (having a gloomy temperament or appearance)
- Planets also dominate particular days of the week (Sun-day etc.).

Planetary influence is affected by the planets' relation to each other (their constellation or aspect). Though planets could influence human behaviour, they could not determine it since, in Christian thinking, man has free will).

The stars

If the geocentric universe is pictured as a circle, it can be divided like a cake into twelve equal slices. For about a month (starting on March 21st), each 'slice' will appear in the east where the sun rises. This segment is said to be 'in the ascendant'.

Each segment has a distinct grouping of stars, referred to by the signs of the Zodiac: Aries (the Ram), Taurus (Bull), Gemini (Twins), Cancer (Crab), Leo (Lion), Virgo (Virgin), Libra (Scales), Scorpio (Scorpion), Sagittarius (Archer), Capricorn (Goat), Aquarius (Water-carrier), Pisces (Fishes). The stars in the ascendant were believed to further affect the influence of the planets passing through them.

In *Othello*, there is a reference to the Bear constellation and the stars which are 'the guards of th'ever-fixed pole.' (star)

Credibility

There were some scholarly attacks on astrology in the sixteenth century, but in general people from all social ranks turned to astrologers to help them make important life decisions. The mathematics behind it seemed dazzling and there was no alternative explanation of most events. Astrology also provided a satisfying link between the earth and the rest of the universe. Astrology thus formed part of the general way of thinking until it was displaced by modern science from the seventeenth century. When Edmund laughs at his father Gloucester in *King Lear* for ascribing events to the stars, it is a sign of a shift in belief at this time.

Language

The impact of astrology can be traced in language:

- 'influence' itself comes from the idea of power flowing in from the planets and stars
- 'dis-aster' refers to a 'bad star' having a malign influence.

More on Astronomy

Cosmology

The accumulated knowledge of the stars gave a cosmology, a picture of the whole universe. Before modern science, cosmology was closely related to theology: as well as describing the physical shape of the universe, a cosmology also explained its meaning, and gave an account of man's nature and purpose. The two central cosmologies in Western history were the geocentric and the heliocentric universe. Both were based on the basic shape of a wheel revolving around a hub.

The geocentric (or Ptolemaic) universe

In the geocentric universe, the earth (geo) is at the centre, with other planets (the Sun being counted as a planet) revolving around it in concentric circles. Looking out from the earth, astronomers noted the Moon, then Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Beyond these came the stars. These were held to be all equidistant from the earth and were placed on a further circle (hence the 'Fixed Stars').

This was the conception of the cosmos held by the ancient Greeks, as described by [Aristotle](#) (384-322 BC). It is often referred to as the Ptolemaic universe after the Egyptian scientist [Ptolemy](#) (c.90-168). This cosmology persisted throughout the [Middle Ages](#) and much of the [Renaissance](#), until the new science started to supplant it from about 1600.

The influence of the geocentric view

Christianity

Though the geocentric universe was originally pre-[Christian](#), it was comfortably Christianised. Aristotle had described a 'Prime Mover', a force outside the heavens setting them in motion. To Christians, this Prime Mover corresponded to [God](#). They believed that the universe involved human-like intentions: for example, the (presumed) circular orbit of the planets expressed the planets' desire to be close to God.

The music of the spheres

The planets were believed to revolve on invisible but solid crystalline spheres. Their combined movement made the music of the spheres, which expressed divine harmony. The entire design of the universe was seen to reflect the will of a perfect God.

Geocentricity

The central position of the earth reflected the idea that the human race were privileged creatures, and that the cosmos literally revolved around them. But the geocentric universe also put Earth at the furthest possible distance from Heaven (the 'empyrean'), which lay beyond the Fixed Stars. Thus it also suited ideas of humility, with humans as [fallen sinners](#).

Dual nature

The heavens were held to be perfect and unchanging. Earth, however, was [mutable](#) and corrupt. Earthly and heavenly natures were believed to be different, and therefore obeyed two sets of physical laws. Earth corresponded to the body, the heavens to the spirit.

Sub-lunar / super-lunar

Beyond the moon (super-lunar), the heavens existed in the perfect atmosphere of 'ether', the natural element of [angels](#). Man occupied the sub-lunar sphere. Here the atmosphere was polluted, and matter was composed of the four elements (Earth, Air, Fire and Water). Beneath the moon, all things were liable to corruption and decay.

Finite

The cosmos was seen as being vast but finite. Medieval man looking up at the stars imagined he was looking at the outermost edge of the universe.

Heliocentric

In the heliocentric cosmos, the sun (Greek helios) was believed to be at the centre, and the earth and other planets revolved around it. Copernicus' *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543) showed that apparent aberrations in planetary orbits on the old model could be better explained if the sun were put at the centre. Thus Earth spins around its axis and revolves around the sun, giving the appearance that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

Later astronomers continued this work:

- Kepler (1571-1630) worked out that orbits are elliptical, not circular
- Using the telescope, Galileo (1564-1642) observed sunspots on the sun and irregularities on the moon, showing that the heavens were not perfect.

The response to the heliocentric view

Heretical

The heliocentric cosmos was a matter of great controversy. The [Catholic Church](#) authorities condemned the theory, forcing Galileo to recant in 1616, and banning Copernicus' book. The Ptolemaic model had informed Church teachings about God and man, thus the new model presented a challenge to the authority of the Church. [Protestant](#) reactions were very mixed; heliocentrism was enthusiastically adopted by some theologians and taught in some Protestant universities.

Culture

The heliocentric picture took centuries to be generally absorbed. Writers continued to use ideas and images drawn from the older picture, as is still common today in the words sunrise and sunset.

The Renaissance

Changing attitudes

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a changing attitude to religion and the place of humankind in the world, part of a movement now known as the [Renaissance](#) (meaning re-birth) which affected many areas of life from art to exploration.

MORE on the origin of the Renaissance: Much of its impetus came from Italy, where the study of ancient [Latin](#), and particularly Greek, manuscripts led scholars to question the ideas that the [Church](#) had for so long put forward – especially that the [Catholic Church](#) was the holder of all wisdom essential for [salvation](#). This movement was strengthened by an influx of Eastern scholars who fled to the west, bringing with them important ancient manuscripts, when Constantinople (the modern Istanbul) fell to the invading Turks in 1453. This led to a new direction in art, in which non-theological painting, drama and music all began to flourish.

Printing

Information explosion

The spread of new knowledge was hugely accelerated by the invention of printing in Germany in the mid-fifteenth century (about 1450). In England, the first printing press was set up by William Caxton in London in 1476. Its impact was like that of the internet today.

MORE on printing: Printing had actually been known in China for centuries, but not in Europe. Prior to this, texts (including such lengthy works as [Bibles](#)) had to be copied out by hand. This was usually done in [monasteries](#) under the supervision of the church. There were very few books available and these were very expensive.

Once material was much cheaper and easier to reproduce by printing, scholars could much more easily disseminate information. Adventurous new ideas could spread, including material attacking institutions such as the church.

Books Shakespeare read

Shakespeare read many printed works translated from French and Italian. They suggested the plots of his plays – for example:

- *The Decameron* by Boccaccio provided Shakespeare with material for *All's Well That Ends Well*
- Sir Thomas North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives of the Romans* gave Shakespeare the information he needed for *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*
- Some of Shakespeare's references in *The Winter's Tale* seem to be drawn from the Latin work *Metamorphoses*, by Ovid, which Shakespeare probably read in Latin as well as in the translation by Arthur Golding in the mid-C16th
- Shakespeare based the plot of *Othello* on a story he had read in *Gli Hecatommithi (A Hundred Tales)* by the Italian Cinthio Giraldi. In the play he also described the mythical creatures called Anthropophagi, which suggests he may have read about them from the writings of Pliny or Herodotus.

Advice on how to govern

Kings and **courtiers** began to be more aware of political theory and the need to study how to rule. One of the most famous books published in Italy during the **Renaissance** was Machiavelli's *The Prince*. This suggested the need for rulers to be prepared to be pragmatic and possibly devious. It was translated into English and certainly known in England by the time of Henry VIII.

However, 'Machiavellian' ideas were soon seen as being despicable, and the term became synonymous with villainy. For example, in 1592 the writer Greene had one of his characters remark:

'Is it pestilent Machiavellian policy that thou hast studied?'

In *Othello*, Iago's scheming and his heartless plot to destroy Othello would have been seen as typically Machiavellian behaviour. Iago also plots to disgrace Cassio and to rob Roderigo. He knows that this will also bring great suffering to Desdemona and Emilia, his own wife, who is Desdemona's devoted servant. In doing this, he again shows typical Machiavellian behaviour, as he never shows any regret or remorse at the consequences.

New areas of exploration

Religious art

As interest grew in areas of life not governed by the church, art began to change too.

MORE on the dominance of religious art: Previously, virtually all art in Western Europe was religious: Bibles and **prayer books** were illustrated with designs and figures; **altar**-pieces were painted with pictures of **Christ** and of the **Madonna and Child**; and imaginary portraits were made of **saints**, to be placed in **chapels** and used for **devotional** purposes.

Humanism in art

Renaissance artists started to be much more interested in the human form.

MORE on the human aspects of art: [Michelangelo](#) and [Leonardo da Vinci](#), who worked for the [Pope](#) and made religious works, also promoted an interest in the human figure, since they made detailed sketches of the torso, working from real models. Paintings of the Madonna now had realistic landscapes as a background, and artists began to be much more interested in exploring perspective and other artistic techniques.

The known world extended

Frequently undertaken at this time were voyages to find out new sea-passages to China and India, and to discover other lands.

MORE on exploration: In England, some of the most famous names from the time of Shakespeare are those of explorers such as Sir Walter Raleigh or Sir Francis Drake. There were many dangers at sea, which Shakespeare well knew and recorded in such plays as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*.

Mystery and morality plays

The beginning of English drama

In the [Middle Ages](#), there were no permanent theatres in England. Any drama was associated with the [Christian church](#). Beginning with dramatisations of the key elements of Christian belief and events in the Christian year, such as the [resurrection](#) of [Christ](#) at [Easter](#), the [Medieval Church](#) allowed short dramatic performances within [services](#), or on the steps of churches. These helped to show to the people the mysteries of [faith](#) within the [Latin liturgy](#).

Theatre on the streets

These short dramas then developed into processions, in which the [priests](#) and civic dignitaries in their colourful [vestment](#)s and robes added to the spectacle. Gradually, these processions included 'pageants' – a word we usually use today to mean a kind of open-air theatrical display, but which originally meant the mobile stage/cart on which scenes were performed.

As the citizens stood in the streets, carts moved past carrying actors depicting biblical events such as [Adam](#) and [Eve](#) in the [Garden of Eden](#), [Moses](#) receiving the [Ten Commandments](#) or the resurrection of [Christ](#).

Drama in English

Eventually some dialogue was introduced, and although the language of church services was Latin, actors in the pageants spoke in English, so that all the people listening could understand; in this way drama was used by the church.

The plays which thus developed are known as [Miracle](#) or [Mystery](#) plays.

MORE on mystery plays: The name arises from the French ‘métier’, meaning craft/profession, since it was the craft guilds who took over the production of the plays in the Middle Ages. (This is the sense in which, in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, the executioner Abhorson describes his job as ‘a mystery’ in Act 4 Scene 2). Some mystery plays, originating from towns such as Chester, York and Coventry, still survive and are still regularly performed.

Morality plays

Alongside the Mystery plays, in the later Middle Ages, dramas known as **Morality plays** developed. Instead of enacting events from the **Bible**, morality plays focused instead on the **spiritual** struggles of individual **souls**. The central characters, who have names such as Mankind or Everyman, act out the spiritual challenges faced by every human being. **Vices** and Virtues, such as deceit or kindness, the **Seven Deadly Sins** or the even more abstract Good and Evil, are **personified** and presented as debating or struggling against one another while the eternal destiny of the human **protagonist** hangs in the balance. The most famous of these plays is *Everyman*, which is still performed today.

Influence on Shakespeare

We see the influence of Morality plays in Shakespearean drama:

- Although the characters of *Othello* develop and display very human inconsistencies, they seem to embody moral ideas at points in the play. For instance:
 - Othello can be seen to represent the Everyman who succumbs to temptation and is destroyed by it
 - Iago represents deceit and ambition
 - Desdemona is a figure of truth and fidelity
- In Act 2, Scene 1 of *Measure for Measure*, Escalus is referring to the kind of characters found in Morality Plays when he asks, ‘Which is the wiser here, Justice or Iniquity?’
- In Act 3 Scene 3 of *Hamlet* there is a struggle between good and evil within the soul of Claudius
- In *Macbeth*, Macbeth wrestles with himself and against the urgings of his ‘fiend-like’ queen, before succumbing to evil.

Shakespeare’s characters are never one-dimensional and they all display very human inconsistencies; however, they clearly descend from the embodied values of medieval morality plays.

Permanent theatres

The rise of non-religious drama

When England became a **Protestant** country during the reign of Edward VI, and again under Queen Elizabeth, the church no longer supported the use of drama. Instead there was a rise in **secular** plays.

The actors still had no fixed playhouse but performed either in venues around the country such as inn-yards or in the houses of aristocrats.

Government attitudes to drama

Since these plays could be politically provocative, the government eventually made moves to restrict them, in particular by targeting the touring actors – or ‘strolling players’ as they are sometimes called - such as Shakespeare depicted in *Hamlet*.

In 1572, [Parliament](#) passed an act which imposed severe penalties on vagabonds – and touring actors came into this category unless they were in the service of an aristocratic master. Fortunately, the Earl of Leicester, who already had an interest in a particular group of actors, applied for an official licence for this group, and they became known as Lord Leicester’s Men.

The role of James Burbage

The leader of the Lord Leicester’s Men was James Burbage. He later headed The Lord Chamberlain’s Men (who, when [James I](#) came to the throne, became known as the King’s Men) with whom Shakespeare wrote and acted. Burbage was a carpenter by trade as well as an actor, and decided to build the first permanent theatre in England.

Burbage faced a problem: the London City Council had decided that they did not want theatres within the City. So in 1576, Burbage leased a site just *outside* the jurisdiction of the City, and constructed the first English playhouse, which he called simply The Theatre.

The popularity of theatres

Within a short while several other theatres, such as The Curtain, The Fortune and The Swan, were also built. By 1599, when the lease of the land on which The Theatre was built had run out, Burbage’s sons and their company, The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, had constructed the most famous theatre of all, The Globe, on the south bank of the Thames.

Design of theatres

Purpose built theatres

Actors sometimes performed inside large houses, by daylight or candlelight. The first recorded performance of *King Lear*, for example, took place in the banqueting hall of Whitehall in December 1604.

However, the first permanent theatres in London were usually open to the sky – although in 1596, Burbage had developed the site of a former [monastery](#) and opened it as the (second - he had earlier had another on the site) Blackfriars theatre. This was unusual in being enclosed and in using artificial lighting.

Blackfriars and child actors

From early in the sixteenth century, choristers from the [Chapel](#) Royal and [Saint Paul](#)’s [Cathedral](#) had taken part in pageants at court. Later these groups formed companies of child actors, the most famous of which was The Children of the Chapel. In 1597 Burbage leased the Blackfriars theatre to this group, who performed many plays by important playwrights such as Webster and Jonson.

Shakespeare felt the popularity of child actors to be a real threat to his company of older actors; gradually, however, children’s companies became less popular.

Indoor theatre

Because of the decline in popularity of The Children of the Chapel, in 1608 Burbage and his company, the King's Men (of which Shakespeare was a part) took over the Blackfriars theatre during winter seasons. The different nature of the building, with its artificial lighting, allowed them to introduce new effects into the drama.

Masques

James I and his Queen, Anne of Denmark, were very fond of theatrical entertainments known as masques (from the fact that, in early versions, players were masked). The masques at James' court were held indoors, and involved spectacular scenery and costumes – made at great expense. They also contained a great deal of music and dancing. The participants were often courtiers, and James' Queen enjoyed taking part. In these ways, the court masques were very different from the normal theatrical performances in London at the time, in which women could not act on stage and where scenery and props were minimal.

However, when the King's Men moved into Blackfriars theatre, they too were able to develop more elaborate staging, and in plays such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* Shakespeare introduced masque-like sequences into his drama. For example, the dance of the satyrs in Act 4 Scene 4 of *The Winter's Tale* is a reflection of the kind of dance that might be seen in court masques; Ben Jonson introduced a dance of satyrs into his *Masque of Oberon* in 1611.

The Globe theatre

While the child actors occupied the Blackfriars theatre, the King's Men acted at the Globe theatre, and this continued to be their summer venue (whilst they went back to Blackfriars for winter performances after 1608).

We do not know all the details about the Globe's construction, though the reconstructed Globe theatre built in the twentieth century is based on much research and is accurate enough to give us a good idea.

The 'Wooden O'

The Globe was built as an octagonal outer frame, probably 30 metres in diameter, with several tiers of seating covered by a straw roof. A bird's-eye view from above would show what Shakespeare famously, in the Prologue to *Henry V*, called a 'Wooden O'. Those who could not afford seats could stand in the area around the main stage.

Four levels of acting

- The main stage was a platform which projected out from one side of the outer framework into the central courtyard. This 'apron' stage was about 1.5 metres in height, 13 metres across and 7.5 metres deep. There were no curtains around the stage to conceal the actors
- Above the stage, and offering some protection from the elements for the actors, was a roof, painted on the underside with stars, and known as 'the heavens'. Through a trapdoor in this roof actors could descend on a sort of trapeze as gods (as some productions have the character Time doing in *The Winter's Tale*)

MORE on the trapeze: Shakespeare makes reference to this device in Act V of his play *Cymbeline*:

'Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle.' Some details on this subject.

- In the centre of the main stage was a trapdoor through which actors could ascend from and descend to the space below the platform, which was surrounded by curtains – brightly painted for comedies, more sombre for tragedies. This enabled actors to mysteriously appear and disappear

MORE on the trapdoor: For example, this was necessary for the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*:

‘The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,

And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?’

- At the back of the stage was a balcony, as used in *Romeo and Juliet*, and perhaps for the ramparts where the ghost appears in *Hamlet*. This was sometimes referred to as the ‘upper stage’. The first scene in *Othello* has Brabantio appearing at an upstairs window, whilst in Act 2, two characters are above the stage, watching out for news of the sea battle taking place.
- Between the doors was an alcove known as the ‘inner stage’ or ‘discovery space’ which would be curtained off but where actors could be dramatically revealed. In Act 5, Desdemona dies in her bed, which then has to be curtained off to conceal the sight from her maid, who enters straight afterwards.

The flow of the drama

Actors could be seen by the audience from all three other sides of the main stage. In the wall at the back were two doors, one on each side, from which actors could arrive on stage from the ‘tiring house’ (i.e. dressing rooms and backstage area). As one group of actors left by one of the rear doors, another group could be arriving without pause from the other.

Scenery

Because of the open nature of the stage, scenery was minimal or non-existent; there was nothing to stop the action being supposed to be inside a building one moment and outside the next. Instead of scenery, the playwright indicates to the audience what they need to imagine:

- In *Othello*’s first scene Roderigo says ‘Here is her father’s house’, showing clearly the setting. Act 2 begins on the coast of Cyprus, which we know from the first line: ‘What from the cape can you discern at sea?’
- In *The Winter’s Tale* Paulina announces (in Act 2 Scene 2), ‘The keeper of the prison, call to him.’
- In Act 3 Scene 3 of *The Winter’s Tale* Antigonus asks ‘Thou art perfect, then, our ship hath touch’d upon / The deserts of Bohemia?’
- In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Oberon’s first line is, ‘Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania’ and she asks him, ‘How long within this wood intend you stay?’ So the audience knows that the action is taking place in a wood, at night.

Shakespeare did not need a backdrop showing a shoreline, or artificial trees and electric lighting to assist his audience’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. (In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Shakespeare specifically makes us laugh at those who feel such artificial aids to imagination are necessary: it is the unintelligent mechanicals who ask how they are to reproduce moonlight and a wall in a play.)

Properties

- These were easily movable objects, such as the stocks that Kent is put into in *King Lear*. The soldiers would also have needed weapons when they marched across the stage. Objects may also have been used to denote social position, such as a sceptre and crown for the king. In *Othello*, where much of the play takes place at night, the actors would often enter carrying torches to show this.

Effects

- There is a storm scene in *Othello*, where sound effects may have been used such as flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder. These were produced by lighting sulphur or vernis powder, shaking it from a container into a flame
- Later a ringing bell is used to dramatic effect, as it heralds the dismissal of Cassio for drunkenness
- Music is used to lighten the mood in Act 3 when a group of musicians appear on stage.

Costumes

Costumes were neither elaborate nor historically accurate, as they usually are today.

This explains why, in *Julius Caesar*, although productions nowadays usually have actors in Roman togas, we have what seem to be **anachronisms** in Shakespeare's text: for example, in Act 1 scene 2 Casca says,

'You pulled me by the cloak,' rather than 'toga'.

Women barred

In Shakespeare's day, women were not allowed to act on the stage in England. All his female roles were played by adolescent boys whose voices had not broken – including such famous romantic leads as Cleopatra and Juliet. In *Othello* Desdemona and Emilia would have been played by boys.

This situation did not change until after the **Restoration** of Charles II in 1660, who had spent many years in France where customs were different.

In several of his plays, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare has female characters disguise themselves in boys' clothing, which must have been more comfortable for the boy actors.

More on the arrival / exit of actors

MORE on the arrival / exit of actors: Shakespeare uses the possibilities of this uninterrupted flow of actors to create **juxtaposition** – that is, the setting side-by-side of episodes to create dramatic tension. For example:

- In *Othello*, a dramatic scene ends with the threatening prospect of the Duke's council for Othello and is immediately followed by the next scene of the Duke *in* council
- In Act 2, Iago slanders Cassio by reporting on his liking for drink, which is immediately followed by the noisy entrance of a drunken Cassio beating up the unfortunate Roderigo
- In Act 3, one scene ends with Othello cursing and denouncing Desdemona for her supposed adultery with Cassio, while the next scene begins with her seeking out Cassio at his lodgings, which the audience knows is a dangerous thing for her to do, given her husband's suspicions.

In Act 4, there are two scenes in one, with Iago goading Cassio to talk lasciviously about Bianca, knowing all the while that Othello is eavesdropping and believing that Cassio is talking about his sexual adventures with Desdemona. Othello speaks in fury to the audience about what he hears, while Iago continues to encourage Cassio to boast of Bianca's dotting on him, knowing how it will further enrage Othello. Shakespeare has prepared for all the stage-managements necessary:

- Othello entering, then fainting
- Cassio entering then exiting
- Othello recovering and standing hidden

- Cassio then returning and boasting of his conquest of Bianca, with Othello hiding and listening.

It almost resembles a French *farce*, were it not for the tragic consequences.

Revenge tragedy

Origins of revenge tragedy

The revenge tragedy was very popular during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. An early example is Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*; probably the most famous example is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Although ideas about tragedy and other forms of drama originally came from Ancient Greece, Greek was not widely understood and it was the works of the Roman dramatist *Seneca* that popularised tragedy in Elizabethan England. Seneca's works were first translated into the English language in 1559, and by 1581 Senecan tragedies had circulated widely among the English literate.

In Seneca's plays the element of impiety towards the gods was replaced by the theme of revenge. In consequence, the emotions displayed were crude rather than elevated and various devices were employed in these plays, which added to the atmosphere of terror and retribution. These became common features of the genre.

Other critics have argued that, in addition to Seneca's influence, the Italian novella provided another literary source for the revenge tragedy. Many of these Italian tales feature a sinister, *Machiavellian* villain, sexual betrayals that culminate in private revenge and bloody vendettas between rival families.

Features of revenge tragedy

Usually one or more characters are exacting revenge, which may well have a 'snowball' effect.

Machiavellian villain

The works of the Italian writer *Machiavelli* were popular at the time. In his book *The Prince*, he advised kings and other rulers how to plot and be devious in order to keep their power. Such advice was exaggerated in popular sentiment and popularly condemned. When Iago tells Othello that his wife has been unfaithful, Othello's decision to exact a cruel, heartless revenge on her would have been perceived as 'Machiavellian' and thus rejected as unacceptable (rather than excusable) by Shakespeare's audience.

Soliloquies

These are necessary, not only for advancing the plot, but also to reveal a character's state of mind. There are important soliloquies from a number of characters, particularly Iago, who tells the audience of his plots and motives on eight separate occasions.

Iago never hides his intentions from the audience, while all the time lying to and deceiving everyone on stage. He seems to delight in his evil plans, which makes the audience appreciate his relish for manipulation whilst condemning its outcomes. Only once does he appear to try to defend himself and engages the audience with his attempts at self-justification. But this rather backfires when the audience realises that his so-called good advice to Cassio is only meant to advance his evil plans still more.

In contrast, Othello has only one soliloquy, which shows how open and transparent he is compared to Iago. In this soliloquy he questions his decision to kill Desdemona, finally justifying it with the belief that it will prevent her from betraying more men with her wiles. Although his reasoning is fatally flawed, the soliloquy enables the audience to see into the agony of his soul.

Murders and corpses

There are usually a number of murders that happen both on and off stage. In *Othello*, there are three murders, two attempted murders and one suicide, all of them on stage. Two of the killings take place in the street at night, while the other three happen in Desdemona's bedroom. They are all done with knives or swords, with the exception of Othello's smothering of Desdemona with her pillow. Both wives are killed by their husbands and the most foolish character in the play is killed treacherously by his own accomplice, Iago.

Sudden reversals

Incidents such as the murder of Emilia in the last scene of *Othello* were designed to shock the audience and maintain dramatic tension. She suddenly turns against her husband and is murdered by him in revenge. This was as unexpected as the murder of Desdemona was anticipated – although her apparent restoration to life is also a shock, both for the audience and her husband. The several acts of violence in the last act of *Othello* would keep the audience in a state of shocked horror and maintain the dramatic tension till the end of the play. These are still staple elements of horror films today.

The malcontent

Origins of the malcontent

The early seventeenth century was said to be pervaded by an air of melancholy in contrast to the optimism of the sixteenth century. Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which shows the interest in this phenomenon, was published in 1621.

Many of the reasons for this atmosphere of discontent were due to the social and economic conditions of the time. This included the difficulties courtiers faced in trying to make their way in the world.

The malcontent in drama

A character typified as a 'malcontent' appeared in plays in the early seventeenth century. There was even a play called *The Malcontent* written by John Marston, but plays like *Hamlet* and *Othello* also feature malcontents.

In *Othello*, Iago is the arch villain throughout and his every speech and action is motivated by his envy of Cassio who has been promoted as lieutenant, as well as by his bitterness towards his master Othello for promoting the younger Cassio instead of him. Feeling cheated by the world, Iago is able to appreciate the virtues of those he manipulates, but despises them none the less. In his pursuit of revenge, he shows no redeeming characteristics (unlike some malcontents who have redeeming moments when they seek to do good) and treats everyone else treacherously and with contempt, even the witless Roderigo and the innocent Desdemona. He succeeds in destroying Othello and almost brings down the whole structure of the society in which the play is set.

Summary



The population of London was still closely knit enough for the theatre of Shakespeare's day to have a profound impact on the whole of society, much as television drama does today. It was a powerful medium to entertain, and to unite popular sentiment and provoke thought, something that 'everybody talked about'.

Verse and prose in *Othello*

Speech patterns

Like most of Shakespeare's plays, much of *Othello* is written in **blank verse**, i.e. lines that on the page resemble lines of poetry but which do not **rhyme** nor have a dominant **rhythm** when spoken aloud. However, there are still patterns to be found in blank verse. The general **metre** is **iambic pentameter**, i.e. five 'feet' of two syllables each, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. For example, 'The **native act** and **figure of my heart**' (Act 1 Scene 1) is a line of perfect iambic pentameter.

As blank verse is the linguistic vehicle for the majority of the play, the exceptions to it take on interesting meanings and implications.

Verse versus prose

In Shakespeare's day, verse was considered to be of higher status than **prose** and therefore carried greater significance and moral worth. Prose was for everyday speech, but verse was of a more formal nature and usually spoken by more noble characters. So when a passage is of no particular importance, such as Act 2 Scene 2, the text will often be written in prose.

The high moral points of the play are all spoken in rhythmic verse. For example, in Act 2 Scene 1, Cassio speaks a prayer for Othello's safety which (with the elision of 'powerful' to two syllables) is in iambic pentameter:

Great Jove, Othello guard,
And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,

This speech demonstrates Cassio to be a virtuous person who has faith in **divine** protection, of which Shakespeare's audience would approve.

Language and social status in *Othello*

The language of power

Nearly all the characters in *Othello* speak the educated English that the audience would expect their betters and noble folk to speak. This is true even of Emilia and Bianca, a servant and a prostitute.

It is a mark of Othello's 'civilisation' that a Moor, whose origins are in North Africa, has an excellent command of language, even whilst he disclaims this. As a commanding officer in Venice's army he has learned to speak in the same way as others of senior rank. His nobility of speech accentuates his heroic stature. Even in the midst of later psychological torment, he maintains his cultured language.

There is only one point at which Othello forgets his elevated status, when Iago finally convinces him of Desdemona's adultery. He cries out in torment, 'Damn her, lewd minx! O damn her, damn her!' (Act 3 Scene 3). For some in Shakespeare's audience, this would be taken as evidence of his intrinsic Moorish 'savagery'.

Language and sex

Shakespeare is no prude, and in Act 2 Scene 1 he gives Cassio a speech about Othello's imminent arrival on Cyprus and his welcome by his wife which is full of sexual imagery:

And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,
Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms,

Spoken in a refined way by a refined young officer, this is unlikely to cause offence to a discerning audience.

In contrast, Iago, who is the equivalent of an NCO or sergeant major and not of officer rank, refers to sexual matters in a coarse and offensive manner. In Act 1 Scene 1 he speaks to Desdemona's father, referring to Othello's behaviour towards his newlywed wife in these words:

an old black ram is tupping your white ewe .. your daughter covered with a Barbary horse .. your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.

Such bestial imagery gives the clear impression that Iago is from a lower social class, as well as being full of bitterness and vile thoughts, deliberately offending Brabantio's feelings. Iago is attributed with degenerate language to signify his moral degeneracy, setting the audience against him from the start.

Language and character

Roderigo

It is interesting that, although a 'gentleman', Roderigo speaks almost entirely in [prose](#) after Act 1 Scene 1 (when his gullibility has not yet been fully revealed). This may well be Shakespeare's way of showing us that Roderigo is a shallow, ignorant character with few redeeming moral qualities: he is determined to woo or seduce Desdemona by bribery, even when she is married, and is easily duped by Iago into doing anything, including murder, to achieve his goal.

Iago

In general, Iago speaks in [blank verse](#), except when he is lying, arguing or persuading others to follow his treacherous advice. In such passages he uses prose, reinforcing the idea that prose is the language associated with low moral behaviour, and helping the audience to recognise and reject the character who is speaking.

In Act 2 Scene 1, Iago is challenged to offer a paean of praise to Desdemona – a skill a [Renaissance](#) gentleman would regularly expect to demonstrate. He displays his verbal dexterity by speaking in [rhyming couplets](#) and is perhaps trying to add proverbial weight to his observations, but the overall effect is one of shallow aphorisms.

When he does engage in the exercise more seriously, speaking of an ideal female in rhyming couplets, his cynicism about women undercuts the image and his conclusion is 'lame and impotent'. The whole exercise has a hollow ring to it. Shakespeare later gives Iago a traditional [ballad](#) to sing (using iambic tetrameter) in Act 2

Scene 3, when he is trying to make Cassio drunk. Again, Iago undertakes a socially acceptable linguistic form yet seems to stand aside from the atmosphere he is meant to be creating.

Iago's complexity is demonstrated by his facility with language and the ability to question its meanings. His soliloquies are often in verse yet, rather than giving us access to noble emotions, demonstrate his ability to undercut generous ideas:

And what's he then that says I play the villain,
When this advice is free I give, and honest,
Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
The inclining Desdemona to subdue
In any honest suit; she's fram'd as fruitful
As the free elements. And then for her
To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,
(Act 2 Scene 3)

Perhaps it is the fact that so many of his lines contain an extra syllable (11 rather than 10) that gives an unsettling edge to his observations.

Othello

Othello's speech changes dramatically in the concluding scene of the play. Until then he speaks predominantly in blank verse, with the occasional prose passage when dealing with business. At the beginning of Act 5 Scene 2 Othello's tight self-control and iron resolve is reflected in the regularity of the [iambic pentameter](#) he uses as he philosophises on the need for Desdemona to die:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light.

Yet there are 'cracks' in his resolve, lines which slip in extra syllables as he contemplates his wife's beauty ('And smooth as monumental alabaster. '; 'Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,') or which contain both [caesurae](#) and extra syllables as he switches thought:

'Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,'
'That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose,'
'It needs must wither: I'll smell it on the tree.'
'Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. One more, and this the last:'
'But they are cruel tears; this sorrow's heavenly,'

It leaves us with the impression that even Othello is struggling to be convinced by his argument. His emotional turmoil is reflected by the increasing disintegration of the iambic rhythm, most obvious when he is disturbed by Emilia's knocking:

Ha! No more moving.
Still as the grave. Shall she come in? Were't good ?

I think she stirs again. No. What's best to do?
If she comes in, she'll sure speak to my wife.
My wife, my wife! What wife? I ha' no wife. (Act 5 Scene 2)

After all the revelations of evil and error, Othello seems only to recover his equilibrium as he talks to Gratiano of military exploits ('Behold! .. should Othello go?') – until he looks again at the dead body on the bed, when the pentameter breaks down again as violent imagery engulfs his mind.

It is only in his final speech ('Soft you .. him thus'), once he has determined on effective 'military' action (the noble self-sacrifice associated with Roman soldiers), that he speaks evenly, even reflectively. At the end it is as if he has reverted to the bluff, impervious, emotionless soldier he was before he courted Desdemona. He dies, speaking of his former life of soldiering when men killed and were killed and acted of necessity, without regret.

Language and structure

Scene endings

For dramas played on an open stage, with no closing curtain to signify a change of location or time, it was common Elizabethan practice to signify the end of a scene by using a [rhyming couplet](#).) So in *Othello*, excluding two very short and inconsequential sections where we might expect new actors to be arriving on stage to continue the action even as the previous speech is coming to a close, seven of the thirteen scenes end with [iambic](#) rhyming couplets. (Occasionally Shakespeare also employed this technique after a passage of high drama or rich poetic imagery, to allow the audience to 'process' the ideas as it were, before moving on.)

The completion of tragedy

Inevitably, the final rhyming couplet of the play's last scene carried more dramatic weight. In tragedies, the couplet might offer a moral comment on the preceding action, as with *Romeo and Juliet*:

For never was a story of more woe,
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

Alternatively, the final couplet served to 'tie up' the events which had just taken place on stage and re-establish the continuity of 'normal' life. This also allowed the audience to start to let go of their emotional engagement with the drama and prepare for the humdrum daily life of London. Thus in *Othello*, the respectable Lodovico explains the desperate events which have just taken place:

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

Strongly Recommended Review Activities:

Part 1: Revision of Y12 content

You should be revising the content of the poems of the decade, 'A Streetcar Named Desire', 'Frankenstein' and 'The Handmaid's Tale'.

- Rereading your texts and updating your notes / annotations is strongly advised