Context

Elizabethan Era (Elizabeth I, 1558-1603)

General
- *Othello* was written after 1601 and before 1604 and was therefore created in the last years of Queen Elizabeth I's reign.
- It was then performed in the Jacobean Era (James I).
- It is seen as a Jacobean play yet clearly the context in which it was conceived was Elizabethan.
- Under Elizabeth it was wise to write in a way that pleased the Queen and Shakespeare would have been well aware of this!
- Under the reign of a powerful queen, there was a questioning of the patriarchial order of society something regarded as facilitating many of Shakespeare's female characters to act in a way which is often seen to be strikingly modern in many ways.
- Like most of Shakespeare's works, *Othello* is a reflection of Elizabethan times, but with themes that are universal. The culture of those times was;
  - ❖ more barbaric,
  - ❖ hierarchical,
  - ❖ with a male dominance that kept women in very subservient roles.
- Human emotion and frailties have not changed, hence the sustained broad appeal of Shakespeare's plays.
- The trend of plays in Jacobean times was to deal with trickery, cuckoldry of older husbands and transitory absence of authority – all of which are found in *Othello*.
- *Othello* was written during Shakespeare's 'tragic era' compromising of Hamlet, King Lea and Macbeth, which are all name after the eponymous hero.
- In Shakespearean times appearance was meant to indicate what lies within e.g. good/evil. A physical deformity was considered to be the mark of the devil. Appearance's can be deceptive and this torments many tragic heroes. Because Iago looks honest, Othello assumes he is: 'Iago is most honest'.
- The 7 deadly sins were the foundation of morality in Shakespeare's time. They believed these sins to send one's soul to hell.
- Telling lies was considered a terrible offence.

Natural Order
In Elizabethan times it was widely believed that prior to creation the world existed in a state of 'Chaos'— formless matter from which the cosmos, or harmonious order, was created. When the natural order was upset, this was believed to be reflected in nature and the heavens.

God and Monarchy
Elizabethans believed;
- God formed an orderly world, aligning the planets, creating the seasons, the rotations of the sun about the Earth, fruitful crops and the conditions for human existence.
- God was the overseer of this order, and the Kings were God's representatives on Earth; hence the 'Divine Right of Kings'.
- God alone was responsible for the appointment of a man to Kingship, operating through a hereditary principle — the inference being that any attempt to remove a

King was a crime against humanity and a crime against God, which would lead to chaos.
- Prayer books of the time exhorted people to obedience and order.

Nature and the Supernatural
- Elizabethans also believed heavily in the supernatural and the presence of malevolent forces, tempting evil to rise above good.
- Most importantly, all matter was made up of the four elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water
- The elements were also represented in the human body, being known as the four humours; choler, blood, phlegm and melancholy.
- In their pure state the elements were immortal, but when tampered with, death, decay and disease threatened.
- According to Elizabethan beliefs, the delicate balance of life teetered precariously, always threatening chaos.
- Shakespeare played heavily on this doctrine of natural balance in the natural and physical world, both with symbolism (such as the advent of a storm to herald disaster) and with his characters who fall victim to inner conflicts of loyalty and betrayal, love and jealousy, honour and revenge to name just a few of his themes.

The theory of humours

- The theory of humours is based on the four elemental body fluids.
- The amounts of **blood**, **yellow bile**, **phlegm**, and **black bile** determined a person's physical or mental health.
- The logic behind the presence of these fluids was that each fluid gave off vapours that ascend to the brain and the person's temperament was decided by the state of his humours.
- The **humours** each had associated physical and mental characteristics; the result was a system that was quite subtle in its capacity for describing types of **personality**, as outlined in the table below;

Humour	*Qualities*	*Element*	*Personality*
Sanguine	hot, moist	air	Optimistic, red-cheeked, corpulent, irresponsible (compare Falstaff).
Choleric	hot, dry	fire	Short-tempered, red-haired, thin, ambitious (compare Hotspur).
Phlegmatic	cold, moist	water	Sluggish, pallid, corpulent, lazy
Melancholic	cold, dry	earth	Introspective, sallow, thin (compare Richard II, Hamlet).

- The perfect temperament was one in which none of the humours dominated.
  - ❖ A person with a dominant presence of blood was supposedly happy and generous.
  - ❖ A dominance of yellow bile meant that the person was violent and vengeful.
  - ❖ If a person were dull, pale, and cowardly it was presumed to be due to an excess of phlegm.
  - ❖ Black bile justified someone's gluttony, laziness, or sentiment.
- Different humours could be combined for more complex personality types: choleric-sanguine, phlegmatic-melancholic, and so on.

- *Othello*, like the rest of Shakespeare's plays, was written in a very hierarchical age.
- It is important to remember that *Othello* is set in Italy, not in England, where Shakespeare wrote; he was not attempting to represent his own society. Nevertheless an understanding of the social environment of Shakespeare's time can illuminate the expectations the audience, and the playwright himself, brought to the play.
- Elizabethan England was a society of deference (respect, esteem).
- Birth mattered a great deal in terms of social standing.
- It was possible to rise socially for example, Cardinal Wolsey, the advisor of Elizabeth's father Henry VIII and one of the most powerful men in England at one time, was the son of a butcher but it was not common.
- The nobility might occasionally marry into the gentry (the class of people who lived off the income from their estates, but did not have noble titles), and the gentry might occasionally marry into the merchant class, but this was not common either. The gentry were beginning to challenge the nobility for the upper hand politically but this did not mean that society was open all the way down. Among the aristocracy (a general term covering the nobility and the gentry) marriage was an important political tool. It could ally one family to another or shore up declining fortunes.

Marriage

- Girls tended to be married off rather young in their teens and to have their husbands chosen for them by their fathers.
- Men tended to be older at marriage, unless they were the oldest son of the family, sure of an inheritance.
- Marriage was not just a spiritual union but also a property transaction; the bride brought a dowry from her father and the groom's father (or the groom if he had already inherited his estate) had to settle lands on her in return, as a "jointure."
- To marry without the bride's father's permission could be seen as an act of theft.
- Ironically, marriage among the lower classes in society tended to be much more companionate and based on personal choice. Working people tended to marry later' in their mid-twenties. They had been independent of their parents for long enough to be able to choose their spouses for themselves, and they owned so little property that this was not the main consideration.
- Girls of the aristocracy, were more carefully chaperoned. Aristocratic girls were even more protected in Italy.
- Women were viewed as possessions, financially dependent on their Fathers until they were 'handed over' to the rule of their husband's.
- There was a social expectation of subservience and obedience of a wife to her husband.
- At the time *Othello* was written, interracial marriages would have been shocking.

Race

- Colour prejudiced society.
- By the time *Othello* was written the English were becoming more and more aware of the existence of other races in the world besides themselves.

- Voyages to the New World during Elizabeth's reign had brought them into contact with native Americans, some of whom had been brought back to England. English traders were doing business in Africa (although they had not yet become involved in the slave trade in a major way), and in 1554 they had brought back a group of West Africans to London, to learn English so they could act as interpreters.
- To the Elizabethans, who thought hierarchically, pale skin was the epitome of beauty - and therefore dark skin ranked below it.
- The term "black" was used in a variety of texts to stand for sin, filth, ugliness, evil, the Devil. To label dark-skinned people "black," therefore, brought a great deal of cultural baggage with it.
- Moors (North Africans) tended to have lighter skin than natives of sub-Saharan Africa; Elizabethans sometimes recognized this by calling the latter "Black Moors." But in general they tended to lump anyone whose skin was dark in the category of "Black."
- They discussed at length whether this skin colour was due to life in a hot climate or whether it was a punishment for sin. Both the idea of hot climates where people wear less clothing, and the idea of sin, helped to create the stereotype of the black man as especially sexual in nature (the black woman as well, although this does not appear in Shakespeare).
- The question of Othello's exact race is open to some debate. The word Moor was used rather broadly in the period that *Othello* was written.
- Othello's darkness or blackness is aluded to many times in the play.
- The opposition of black and white imagery that runs throughout *Othello* is certainly a marker of difference between Othello and his European peers, but the difference is never quite so racially specific as a modern reader might imagine it to be.
- While Moor characters abound on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, none are given so major or heroic a role as Othello.
- Perhaps the most vividly stereotypical black character of the period is Aaron, the villain of Shakespeare's early play *Titus Andronicus.* The antithesis of Othello, Aaron is lecherous, cunning, and vicious; his final words are: "If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it to my very soul" (*Titus Andronicus,* V.iii.188–189). Othello, by contrast, is a noble figure of great authority, respected and admired by the duke and senate of Venice as well as by those who serve him, such as Cassio, Montano, and Lodovico. Only Iago voices an explicitly stereotypical view of Othello, depicting him from the beginning as an animalistic, barbarous, foolish outsider.
- Consciousness of his race comes to trouble Othello in the play.

Setting and Source

Setting

- Act 1 – Venice. Powerful city-state in sixteenth century. Impression given of an orderly, law-abiding and formal society. Important to Europe as a commercial centre and to Christendom (protector of Christian faith against Turkish infidels)
- Cyprus is the setting for the rest of the play.
- Cyprus belonged to Venice for more than 100years until attacked in 1570 by Turkey. Turkish invasion led to famous sea-battle of Lepanto, 1571.
- Turkish threat is what moves the play to Cyprus and demonstrates Othello's importance to Venice.

War and the Military

- *Othello* is set against the backdrop of the wars between Venice and Turkey that raged in the latter part of the sixteenth century.
- Cyprus, which is the setting for most of the action, was a Venetian outpost attacked by the Turks in 1570 and conquered the following year.
- It was not unusual for states/countries to employ soldiers from other places to lead their armies – Othello is employed by the Veneitans to lead their army against Turkish forces.
- Shakespeare's information on the Venetian-Turkish conflict probably derives from *The History of the Turks* by Richard Knolles, which was published in England in the autumn of 1603.

The Original Story

- The story of *Othello* is partly derived from an Italian prose tale written in 1565 by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinzio (usually referred to as Cinthio).
- The original story contains the bare bones of Shakespeare's plot: a Moorish general is deceived by his ensign into believing his wife is unfaithful.
- To Cinthio's story Shakespeare added supporting characters such as the rich young dupe Roderigo and the outraged and grief-stricken Brabanzio, Desdemona's father.
- Shakespeare compressed the action into the space of a few days and set it against the backdrop of military conflict.
- Most notably, he turned the ensign, a minor villain, into the arch-villain Iago.

Shakespearean tragedy

Shakespeare wrote tragedies from the beginning of his career. One of his earliest plays was the Roman tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, which he followed a few years later with *Romeo and Juliet*. However, his most admired tragedies were written in a seven-year period between 1601 and 1608. These include his four major tragedies *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, along with *Antony & Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and the lesser-known *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida*.

Many have linked these plays to Aristotle's precept about tragedy: that the protagonist must be an admirable but flawed character, with the audience able to sympathise with the character. Certainly, all of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists are capable of both good and evil. The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies often hinge on fatal errors or flaws in human nature, which overturn order and destroy the hero and those he loves. In *Othello*, the villain Iago stokes Othello's sexual jealousy to the point where he murders the innocent wife who loves him.

Shakespeare's tragedies are characterised by:

- Five act structure.
- Featuring heroes whom audiences can identify with and feel sorry for.
- Beginning in an ordered society and move toward chaos, as the hero allows his flaws to rule him.
- Often, this chaotic change is reflected in the natural world, with storms and strange mists being characteristic.
- Train of bad decisions by the protagonist than culminate in an eventual 'stoic calm'.
- Character virtuously accepts the consequences of their error(s) at end of play.
- The protagonist of Shakespeare's tragedies are not villains or saints but generally good people destroyed by their own ego or ill fate.

The tragic hero

A hero today is seen as a person who is idolized. Nowadays, a hero does not have to have wealth or certain political beliefs, but instead can be regarded as a hero for his/her actions and inner strength. However, in the plays of Shakespeare, the tragic hero is always a noble man who enjoys some status and prosperity in society but possesses some moral weakness or flaw which leads to his downfall. External circumstances such as fate also play a part in the hero's fall. Evil agents often act upon the hero and the forces of good, causing the hero to make wrong decisions. Innocent people always feel the fall in tragedies, as well.

Concluding comment

Othello exploits fully all of Shakespeare's dramatic intent and Elizabethan beliefs. Othello as the protagonist is a perfect instrument for Shakespeare as he is a flawed hero and hence vulnerable to disturbing the balance of order. He is majestic *and* weak, fearless *yet* fearful. We see the themes of good versus evil, loyalty versus betrayal, jealousy versus trust and honour, unfold through the deceitful and vicious plotting of Iago.

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Definitions

Start a definitions page by find the meanings for these words…

Soliloquy	Moor
Monologue	Ensign
Double Entendre	Adultery
Blank Verse	Bombast
Iambic Pentameter	Cuckoldry

Add words from the text that you are unfamiliar with as we read.

Referencing lines from the text:

Give Act, scene and line numbers, not to page numbers. You may either use Roman numerals or Arabic ones as you prefer.

Example: (1.1.12-23) or (I.i.12-23)