OTHELLO: NOTES

THEMATIC AND CONTEXTUAL BREAKDOWN:

Appearance vs. Reality
Context:
- Honesty is valued.
- Tbh appearance vs. reality was, is and always will be a thing. It’s pretty much everywhere and is a fairly well-explored theme.
- See: Machiavellianism
- Christians -> temptation -> the Devil appears in many forms
- Commandment 9: thou shalt not bear false witness to thy neighbour. Deception is not a thing.

Appropriate techniques:
- The dramatic tension that develops in the very first conversation (that the audience is exposed to).
- Iago.
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- Anything Iago says. (See: soliloquies.)
- Dramatic irony. Mostly stuff involving Iago.
- Pay attention to how the scenes are set out. Juxtaposition is a thing that exists.

Jealousy
Context:
- Envy = one of the seven deadly sins. (See: Christians).
- Ten commandments. See: covet, adultery.
- The ability to be content with what you have/generally not being jealous of anything is valued. (So basically everyone is a non-ambitious loser.)
- See: Ambition Is Evil.
- Preoccupation with cuckoldry was a thing: it’s seen as dishonourable if a man is betrayed by his wife’s adultery with another man (where his wife is supposed to be a loyal and obedient subject to him).
- So yeah, there was this belief that a man’s honour was dependent on his wife’s chastity.
- The importance of wifely submission, female chastity/tact and discretion is stressed.
- Jealousy is a preoccupation in literature of Shakespeare’s time.

Appropriate techniques:
- Anything Othello says after talking to Iago.
- Any reference/metaphor to the ‘green-eyed monster’.
- Any general comment about men made by Emilia.
- Irony, dramatic or otherwise. Look at Othello’s ocular proof lines.

Racism
Context:
- It’s Shakespeare.
- Remember how black people used to be treated?
- The Moors – people not like them.
- Portugal began to explore and exploit Africa in the fifteenth century.
- Growing awareness of racial difference among Europeans.
- Europeans saw darker-skinned people as inferior.
- Elizabethans equated blackness as a colour with negation, dirt, sin, death, nakedness, savagery, forbidden sex, heathenism, slavery and general depravity. Also lust and sexuality.
- See: Cham, son of Noah.
- Moors were stereotypically portrayed as of doubtful moral integrity.
Black people can apparently perform magic.

Appropriate techniques:
- Any time the colours black and white are put together side-by-side.
- Any time Othello questions why Desdemona would commit adultery.
- Seriously just any time people talk about Othello and Desdemona.
- Evidence of this thing being prevalent can be found in every racial slur in the text ever.

SCENE-BY-SCENE ANALYSIS:

Act 1, Scene 1:
- The scene’s opening finds Roderigo and Iago mid-conversation – some shady stuff about how Roderigo is paying Iago in order to gain Desdemona’s favour.
- Iago uses this as an opportunity to express his hatred of Othello (who had evidently denied him the position of lieutenant because Othello wanted some guy called Michael Cassio [a battle theorist with no practical experience whatsoever] to have that position instead) and tells of how Othello’s now married to Desdemona desesperes.
- “I am not what I am” is perhaps the most famous quote from this play, holding about the same meaning as “things are not what they seem” or “I’m just pretending to be something I’m not” – a reflection of Iago’s Machiavellian character.
- “Thick lips” – a racist comment. See: social context.
- When it is suggested that he no longer work under Othello, Iago clarifies that he only does so in the hopes that he’d one day exact revenge on his superior.
  - “I follow him to serve my turn upon him.”
- Shortly afterwards, they did the “I’ll poison Othello’s reputation” thing.
  - (That means talking to Desdemona’s father and trash-talking Othello, really.)
  - “Call up her father,/Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight”.
- Upon engaging in a conversation with Brabantio about the Othello/Desdemona canon shipping Desdemona marrying Othello, Iago describes Othello through bestial imagery.
  - “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe.”
  - “… your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”
- It’s important to note that Iago never shows his face while badmouthing Othello, and leaves the scene promptly afterwards.

Act 1, Scene 2:
- Note how Iago acts friendly and loyal towards Othello here in contrast to the way he acted at the end of Scene 1. (Scene juxtaposition.) Here, Iago pretends to be Othello’s friend – keeping up an honourable visage as he (metaphorically) stabs him in the back.
  - We also know something that Othello doesn’t, so that’s dramatic irony right there.
  - “He prated and spoke such scurvy things upon your honour/that I did full hard to forbear him.”
- Want to see some bigotry? Look no further:
  - “Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her...” Black people can apparently perform magic.
  - ”If she in chains of magic were not bound...” Ditto above.
  - “... Would ever have – t’incur a general mock -/Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/Of such a thing as thou: to fear, not to delight.” Racist? Check. Witchcraft accusations? Check. This description strips away Othello’s humanity, too.
  - “For an abuser of the world, a practiser/Of arts inhibited, and out of warrant.” Black people do witchcraft.

Act 1, Scene 3:
- Set in the Duke’s council chamber. Brabantio plans to accuse Othello of magic in front of the council (or the Duke, really, who’s likely the most powerful person in the play.)
  - “She is abus’d, stol’n from me, and corrupted/By spells and medicines bought off mountebanks;” – Brabantio implies that Othello couldn’t have possibly seduced his daughter through normal means – what he’s basically saying is that Othello must’ve drawn her attention with shady love potions or witchcrafts or spells or whatever.
- It doesn’t work, though. Othello makes a big speech about how there’s no magic involved in his and Desdemona’s relationship. The court buys this.
- When they all leave, Iago talks to Roderigo for a while. Turns out he’s trying to keep Roderigo in the whole “wooing Desdemona” business and, in turn, feeding him money.
- After which he’d stay behind and go off into a soliloquy describing how he’s developed a (decidedly evil) plan and is about to set it in motion.

ACT II

Act 2, Scene 1:
- “Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards,” – evidence that Othello’s not the only one who suffers from jealousy in the play. Iago gets plenty of this, too (mostly of Cassio and his position).
- “Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor/At least into a jealousy so strong/That judgement cannot cure.” Iago explains in his soliloquy that he plans on (through Cassio) driving Othello to the point where he’s so jealous and paranoid that it completely wipes out his capacity to think clearly and make rational decisions.

Act 2, Scene 3:
- The conversation between Cassio and Iago:
  - “You advise me well”. Dramatic irony. We know that Iago’s trying to bring Cassio down, not help him, but y’know, the guy doesn’t.
  - Friendly reminder that nobody can see through Iago’s ploy because he never appears to be doing anything wrong (or at least, not until the last act). “I am not what I am,” indeed.
  - “When devils will the blackest sins put on/They do suggest at first with heavenly shows/As I do now.” More Appearance vs. Reality. What Iago’s saying is that “those who commit the most atrocious acts don innocent facades and sweet faces”.
- Shortly afterwards, he explains his plan: Cassio will appeal to Desdemona in order to get back in Othello’s good books. However, Iago’s words will ensure that it turns Desdemona’s pleas into ‘poison’ that supports the theory that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair. Or something like that.

ACT III

Act 3, Scenes 3, 4:
- This is basically Iago setting up the whole “oh Desdemona and Cassio might be having an affair” thing with Othello.
  - “Men should be what they seem;” lol. Iago’s saying this. This hypocritical statement gives us a little something to giggle about. Kinda. It’s dramatic irony.
  - “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!/It is the green-eyed monster, which doth/The meat it feeds on.” The green-eyed monster, a metaphor for jealousy. This metaphor emphasises the destructive nature of jealousy – its capacity to eat away at and consume someone, y’know, like a monster.
- “I had been happy if the general camp,/Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,/So I had nothing known.” Othello is slowly descending into madness. His paranoia is beginning to consume him, and he expresses how he’d rather be blissful in ignorance than being in whatever state he currently is in.
- “Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!” As above. Reinforcing/supporting statement.
- “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore;/Be sure of it: give me the ocular proof...” Othello demands that Iago provides him with some solid, irrefutable proof of Desdemona’s infidelity. Notice, however, that all it takes for Iago to break him is a sentimental handkerchief and some pretty words.
- “It is impossible you should see this,/Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,/As salts as wolves in pride, and fools as gross/As ignorance made drunk.” The animal motif returns! Not quite sure what the significance of this may be, but it’s something worth looking into.
- “Thinkst thou I’d make a life of jealousy?” Back to the original exchange, Othello challenges Iago’s implications – of course, it’s all just part of Iago’s ploy.
“Exchange me for a goat,/When I shall turn the business of my soul/To such exsufflicate and blown surmises/Matching thy inference.” Compare to what happens shortly afterwards... like that one quote previously mentioned.

“I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;” “I want solid, irrefutable proof.” See above.

“Till I am to pray you, not to strain my speech/To grosser issues, nor to larger reach/Than to suspicion.” Reverse psychology. This is exactly the opposite of what Iago wishes.

“Note if your lady strain his entertainment/With any strong or vehement importunity...” “Watch for Desdemona frequently asking for Cassio’s reinstatement as lieutenant.” And then, behind Othello’s back, Iago urges Cassio to try to regain his position through appealing to Desdemona.

“Trifles light as air /Are to the jealous confirmations strong/As proofs of holy writ.” Iago states that this tiny, insignificant detail (the handkerchief) will put the nail in the coffin for the jealous Othello’s suspicions.

“To be direct and honest is not safe.” Excuse me, Iago? “I’m being honest with you and now you’re abusing me”? Lol.

Note that Othello has not a single reason to not trust Iago (or at least, not as far as he knows), and that’s why he’s so easily swayed. Kind of.

“Like to the Pontics sea,/Whose icy current and compulsive course/Ne’er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on.” An analogy that compares Othello to the Pontics Sea – driven, compulsive, relentless. This is the point at which Othello crosses the moral event horizon (a.k.a. the point of no return) and discards any feelings of love towards Desdemona that he might have had. These are soon replaced by a burning, overwhelming desire for one thing, and one thing only: revenge.

“And, but my noble Moor/Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness/As jealous creatures are, it were enough/To put him to ill-thinking.” Desdemona realises she’s lost the handkerchief. However, she doesn’t believe that Othello would be upset about this at all. (Protip: she’s wrong.)

“I have sent to bid Cassio come speak with you.” Take note that Desdemona brings up Cassio with no regard for Othello’s current mood (or anything else, really) whatsoever.

“But jealous souls will not be answered so;/They are not ever jealous for the cause,/But jealous for they’re jealous. It is a monster/Begot upon itself, born on itself.” A call back to the aforementioned “green-eyed monster”. There needs not a reason for people to be jealous, she says.

If you ever need to describe the following characters:

**Othello**
- Magnanimous – generous or forgiving, especially towards a rival or less powerful person.
- Artless – without guile or deception.
- Ardent – passionate, enthusiastic.
- Inflexible – unwilling to change or compromise.
- Obdurate – stubborn. Unwilling to change one’s opinion or course of action.
- Relentless
- Covetous
- Naïve
- Guileless
- Paranoid
- Righteous
- Renowned

**Iago**
- Malignant/Malevolent – evil in nature or effect.
- Duplicitious – two-faced.
- Subtle
- Resentful
- Fiendish
- Machiavellian – pretty much the same as duplicitious, only fancier.
- Unscrupulous – amoral.
- Perfidious – deceitful, untrustworthy.
- Artful
- Disingenuous
- Shrewd
- Astute
- Heinous
- Adroit

Nobody in this fucking play could keep it in their pants omg.

ACT IV

Act 4, Scenes 1 & 2:
- “Work on./My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught...” Note the recurring medicine/poison motif(?). His plan – er, poison – catches and crushes fools.
- “Do but encape yourself/And mark the... notable scorns/That dwell in every region of his face.” Iago’s instructions specifically tells Othello to go hide and pay close attention to Cassio while the guy laughs about someone that isn’t Desdemona.
- “O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog/I shall throw it to!” Cutting off or slitting the nose was common punishment. Othello intends to punish Cassio not immediately, but when the time is right.
- “No, my heart is turned to/stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand.” The nail in the coffin. Remember when I said he crossed the moral horizon before? Yeah, well, this is him going even further beyond.
- “Is this the nature/Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue/the shot of accident, nor dart of chance/Could neither graze nor pierce?” Othello is reputable amongst the senate as someone morally unshakeable – incapable of being affected by emotions or passions. His striking Desdemona and everything related to it catches Lodovico by surprise, and he lampshades this.
- “Where either I must live, or bear no life,/The fountain from the which my current runs,/Or else dries up; to be discarded thence,/Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads/To knot and gender in.” Without love, Othello is nothing. Compare and contrast with something.
- “I will be hanged if some eternal villain .... Have not devised this slander; I'll be hanged else.” Emilia, oblivious to Iago’s plan, manages to hit the nail on the head. “This can only be the work of someone driven by ambition.” Dramatic irony. Extra points because she’s actually saying this to Iago, who is of course, the culprit.

Act 4, Scene 3:
- “If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me/ In one of those same sheets.” Ironic echo of Iago’s “Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even/the bed she hath contaminated,” in Act 4, Scene 1. Also, foreshadowing. Kind of.

ACT V

Act 5 is where a catharsis occurs – a spiritual cleansing, a restoration of the great chain of being/order. Everyone has to die.

Act 5, Scenes 1 and 2:
- In scene 1, Roderigo attempts to murder Cassio (at Iago’s convenience). Iago remarks that it would be best for him if they ended up killing each other.
- Scene 2 has a short soliloquy by Othello as he prepares to kill Desdemona.
- “Some bloody passion shakes your very frame;/These are portents...” At this point, even Desdemona could pick up on Othello’s jealousy.
- “O, falsely, falsely murdered!” How the hell does she speak after dying of asphyxiation? But eh, yeah, Desdemona uses this opportunity to insist that she killed herself. “Nobody; I myself. Farewell./Commend me to my kind lord. O farewel!”
- “My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago.” We’re not sure if this is dramatic irony anymore, but yeah. This is the part just before it is revealed that Iago might not be so honest after all.
- “Go to, charm your tongue.” “God damn it, Emilia, shut the fuck up.”
“Drops tears as fast as Arabian trees/Their medicinal gum.” Return of the plant/medicine/poison motif?

“Demand me nothing; what you know, you know./From this time forth I never will speak word.” In a sense, this was a very good decision on Iago’s part. To a degree, this knowledge provides him some sort of power over the others. He could provide them with some sort of closure, but he doesn’t. In a sense, he wins.

Note that, in this particular instance, Iago’s death is never shown on screen. He survives the catharsis (for now).