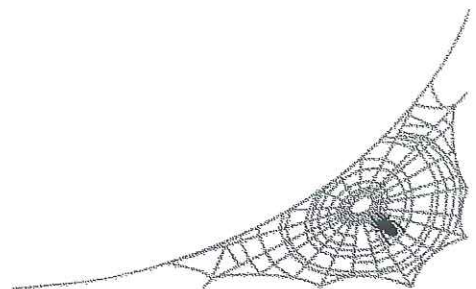


## Paradoxes and ironies

Paradoxes form the linguistic and philosophical basis and pattern of *Othello*, in which nothing is what it seems to be, white is black, and generally things have two simultaneously true but contradictory aspects. This feature creates ironies throughout the play on every level: plot, character, theme and language. Irony is one of the characteristics of tragedy, since it makes the outcome seem unfair and unnecessary, and therefore unacceptable, and yet gives it an inevitability.



- (1) Which events could be seen as both honourable and dishonourable?
- (2) Which characters achieve the exact opposite of that which they would wish to achieve?
- (3) Which characters are in themselves a paradox?
- (4) Which incidents or situations could be termed paradoxical or ironic?
- (5) Which characters have qualities that are essentially worthy but which can, ironically, be used by Iago as weapons against themselves or others?
- (6) List oxymoronic phrases which show that paradox is built into the language of the play.
- (7) One of the play's paradoxes is that Nature itself is unnatural. What evidence is given for this idea?
- (8) How is love presented as a paradox in the play?
- (9) What effect does the play's use of paradox and irony have on the audience?
- (10) There are many other ironies in the play which have not yet been mentioned. Which ones have you noticed?



## Paradoxes and ironies

(1) Which events could be seen as both honourable and dishonourable?

- ◆ the elopement
- ◆ Cassio's drinking to the health of the newly-weds
- ◆ Desdemona bullying Othello to reinstate Cassio
- ◆ Othello's murder of Desdemona (he thinks it a matter of male honour and that he has a 'cause')
- ◆ Roderigo's giving information against his partner in crime
- ◆ Othello's suicide

(2) Which characters achieve the exact opposite of that which they would wish to achieve?

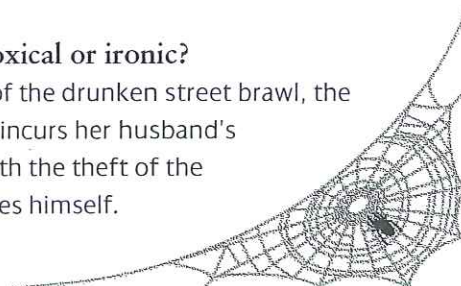
Brabantio loses the daughter he has tried to keep close to him; Othello wants to kill the two people who love him most, Desdemona and Cassio. Cassio wants to impress his general and do well in his new job, but loses it in disgrace. Emilia loves her mistress enough to die for her, but is the cause of the missing handkerchief which condemns Desdemona to death. Cassio's visits to Desdemona compromise the person he would do anything not to harm. Some directors interpret Iago's actions as indicative of a wish to win Othello back for himself, the way things were before Desdemona and Cassio came on the scene, and instead he loses him forever. The question is whether Iago achieves what he wanted to achieve.

(3) Which characters are in themselves a paradox?

Othello's character and situation are paradoxical: he is an aristocratic barbarian; a crusading Christian and ex-Moslem; a rejected son-in-law employed by the Senate (which includes his father-in-law); an alien sent to kill other aliens; a 'bond-slave' and a general. He is both confident and unsure of himself, trustful and doubtful, rational and superstitious. Desdemona is 'free of speech' with a rebellious streak, but also a pure and blushing maiden who knows her place and her duty to her lord, even to the point of forgiving him for killing her. Though representing the truth and the light, she dies 'like a liar gone to burning hell' (V.2.130). Cassio is thought worthy to be Othello's lieutenant — and later governor of Cyprus — but is a drunkard dismissed as unfit for service who seriously injures a high-ranking officer. Emilia, aware of the unfairness of women's position in society, nonetheless would commit adultery for her husband's benefit, tries to please her husband by betraying her mistress, and allows him to malign her in public whilst staying silent. Iago appears to be the epitome of honesty, but he is not what he seems; he commits himself to being a walking, talking paradox when he announces 'I am not what I am' (I.1.66). He talks of conception and gardening, when his interest is in death and destroying, of proof when he means implication. His very being is paradoxical, as a clever slave, 'dog' and 'demi-devil', and inhuman human.

(4) Which incidents or situations could be termed paradoxical or ironic?

The watch, supposed protectors of the peace, are the causers of the drunken street brawl, the breaking of the curfew and the rousing of the populace. Emilia incurs her husband's displeasure, having destroyed everyone to gain his approval with the theft of the handkerchief. She curses her own husband, and Brabantio curses himself. Roderigo's interest in Desdemona is sexual but he praises her 'blessed condition'; if she were available, he would not want



## answer sheet

her. Bianca falls in love with a client. Othello thinks he finds evidence in his interrogation of Emilia in the 'brothel scene' that she is lying, but in fact she is telling the truth. Othello kills Desdemona on Christian principles and is much concerned about the salvation of souls, but Desdemona, being chaste, white, pious and Venetian could be a symbol of Christianity, which he chooses to extinguish. He is provoked to kill her when she weeps for Cassio, when it was tears of pity which made him love her in the first place. Othello's suicide is the act of a non-Christian, though he seems to be trying to reassert his credentials as a Christian by enacting the slaying of a Turk. But a real Christian does not try to play God and execute possibly adulterous women, with or without trial: that is, in fact, a Moslem privilege.

The marriage is a source of joy for Desdemona, but her father describes it as 'an evil'. She makes things worse for herself, Cassio and Othello by pleading so hard for Cassio's reinstatement, an altruistic act to reunite her husband and his best friend. By going to Othello's bed, Desdemona loses her virginity and shows evidence of her sexual appetite, making it possible for him to suspect that what she has done with him she could do with another man.

Desdemona dies whilst uttering a 'sublime falsehood', as the *Penguin* introduction calls it, confirming Othello's accusation that she is a liar whilst simultaneously trying to save her accuser. Throughout the play, Iago is thanked, praised and rewarded for giving advice or information which is malicious; his final refusal to speak is ironic, as he has been the main speaker and word manipulator in the play. His amoral view of life, and of people as either flies or spiders, is an unacceptable one, and yet he proves it to be accurate: the world of the play does consist of only fools and villains, tricks and traps, and the punishment of virtue.

**(5) Which characters have qualities that are essentially worthy but which can, ironically, be used by Iago as weapons against themselves or others?**

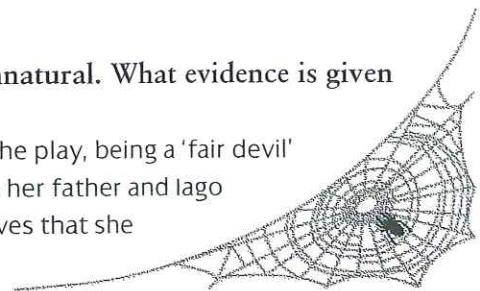
Desdemona's charitable mind and pity for others is a 'goodness' from which Iago can fashion a 'net' to 'enmesh them all'. Othello's desire for knowledge and objective 'ocular proof', so as not to fall into an error of judgement, is what makes it possible for Iago to abuse his eyes. Othello loves Desdemona because she is unconventional and 'free of speech', but this can be later held against her. Cassio's good manners, his 'courtesy', prevent him from refusing to drink a toast to the marriage and result in his getting drunk. Emilia's loyalty to her husband destroys her mistress, and thereby herself. There is a general problem with innocence, which is a requirement for goodness but goes hand in hand with naïveté, which in turn causes misjudgement and disaster, as in Desdemona's case, since without experience one cannot protect oneself from those, such as Iago, who wish to deprive us of it.

**(6) List oxymoronic phrases which show that paradox is built into the language of the play.**

'Divinity of hell!' (II.3.340); 'excellent wretch' (III.3.90); 'fair devil' (III.3.475); 'this sorrow's heavenly' (V.2.21); 'an honourable murderer' (V.2.291). At some point in the play 'honest Iago' becomes a contradiction in terms too.

**(7) One of the play's paradoxes is that Nature itself is unnatural. What evidence is given for this?**

Desdemona is the main representative of unnatural Nature in the play, being a 'fair devil' in three men's eyes, (or four, counting Roderigo). According to her father and Iago — and, ironically, Othello in the end — her love for Othello proves that she is unnatural, and therefore a monster and a devil. As Iago



## answer sheet

says, 'she would never have loved the Moor' if she had been 'blessed', because he is perceived by the Venetians as an abnormality, and natural taste would incline her towards the younger, whiter and more handsome Cassio. Desdemona's unconventionality is also evidence of her unnaturalness. She goes against accepted codes of behaviour for daughters in her society by being undutiful to her father, forward with suitors and outspoken in the Senate. Her loss of virginity to Othello is natural in one sense but can be used as evidence of her unnatural sensuality. At the time women were in tune with nature if they were maidens or mothers (i.e. pure or fertile), but accused of being unnatural if they were spinsters, childless wives or whores (i.e. ugly and rejected by men, barren or promiscuous). Othello is a product of nature yet his skin colour renders him unnatural in the eyes of others. Iago has inhuman qualities which cause him to be considered a devil, yet he too is a man born of woman. All three of these main characters attract the word 'monstrous', (a word much used in the other major tragedies too) meaning not just horrible but an aberration of Nature, which highlights the paradox that a monster can only exist in and be created by Nature, yet is a symbol of unnaturalness.

**(8) How is love presented as a paradox in the play?**

Love is not under human control, and therefore cannot be rationally defined or measured, yet all the male characters in the play try to apply reason to explain it. Desdemona's genuine love for Othello cannot be shown in any way other than the ones she uses — obedience, going to Cyprus, desiring to patch things up with his best friend, accepting his mistreatment of her — but these can also be seen as suspicious and false. The handkerchief is a symbol of the paradox of love in that Desdemona drops it in her sympathy for his headache, but will then have it used as evidence of her not loving him. Out of love she lies for him as she dies, but Othello is quick to seize upon this as proof of her falsity. For Desdemona, love causes the betrayal of her father and evokes disgust from observers who cannot approve of her marriage; for other characters it causes madness, murder, and many other sins and vices, yet it is vaunted as the highest, noblest emotion humans are capable of, is the basis of religion, and even Iago refers to the belief that love can make base men more noble (II.1.209–10). Love is easily confused with lust, infatuation, sex and money, and it can be easily debased from an abstract and altruistic state into a matter of 'a permission of the will' (I.3.331–32) and a crude bodily function. In the name of love, Othello kills Desdemona.

**(9) What effect does the play's use of paradox and irony have on the audience?**

They have a disconcerting effect on the audience: our beliefs and securities are undermined and we are forced to re-evaluate our perceptions and interpretations, which puts us in the same position as Othello. We, like him, suffer from not knowing what we really know and what can be trusted, or how to find information which can make us sure. To be in doubt is painful, and this is the state which paradox creates. If everything has two sides, then there is no truth to be had, however hard we try to establish it, and therefore the basis of human values and morals — and religion — is brought into question, and we lose our confidence in being able to judge ourselves or our fellow humans. Knowledge is both necessary and destructive. If life insists on turning out contrary to our expectations, desires and intentions, then where does that leave us?

