

# Act 3 Summary

## Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Cassio brings in some musicians, perhaps to cheer himself. Othello's clown comes in and makes some rude comments about their music. Once the clown has sent the musicians away, Cassio pleads for him to ask Desdemona for a little time to talk.

Iago enters after the clown goes off. Cassio asks him if he might entreat Emilia to put in a good word for him with Desdemona. Iago sends Emilia out to Cassio. Emilia tells Cassio that Othello and Desdemona are already discussing the matter, and that Desdemona is pleading Cassio's case. She says Othello is torn: on one hand, he thinks he has been humiliated by Cassio's drunken ruckus; on the other hand, he truly loves Cassio and would have him back in a moment. Cassio begs Emilia to secure him some time alone with Desdemona to talk with her further. Emilia promises she will.

## Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Cassio is the main figure in this scene. His mistaken trust in Iago is the most tragic event so far. He even goes so far as to say about Iago, "I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest." The problem is that Cassio cannot bear to be out of favor with Othello. Iago skillfully manipulates and capitalizes on that emotion, with tragic results. Indeed, tragedy is often either forged or derived from strong emotions, such as pride. If Cassio viewed his association with Othello as merely a business acquaintance, the loss of his job would mean little emotionally to him. However, because he is deeply tied to Othello and personally invested in their relationship, he is the perfect tool for Iago to wield in the implementation of his revenge. Cassio seems desperate to see Desdemona alone, and Iago encourages this. Of course, we know it's all for Iago's own purposes, but Cassio believes it is his best recourse.

The clown is often considered an unnecessary character in this play. His function in this scene is certainly not essential. He contributes a slight amount of levity through his remarks about the musicians, and perhaps Shakespeare slips in the limited comic relief for his audience's enjoyment.

After all, Shakespeare had to make a living; even within a tragedy, humor was often an effective way for him to succeed with the populace.

## **Act 3, Scene 2**

### **Act 3, Scene 2 Summary**

This scene, another short one, involves Othello giving Iago some papers to deliver to the senate while he examines the fortifications.

### **Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis**

The main effect of this scene is to get Othello out of the way so that Cassio can be alone with Desdemona. Of course, Iago is there to make sure his plan proceeds smoothly.

## **Act 3, Scene 3**

### **Act 3, Scene 3 Summary**

The scene opens with Desdemona talking to Cassio; she is reassuring him that she will do everything she can to repair his reputation in Othello's eyes. She, like others before her, calls Iago an "honest fellow." She assures Cassio that she will make every moment of Othello's life all about Cassio.

Othello and Iago enter, which makes Cassio nervous. He insists on leaving. Even though Desdemona tries to encourage him to stay, he cannot make himself do it. When Iago sees Cassio rushing off, he cleverly initiates the process of planting doubt into Othello's mind. When Othello asks if that was Cassio leaving, Iago says he can't imagine why Cassio would be stealing away in such a guilty fashion.

Desdemona greets Othello and tells him she was just visiting with someone, namely Cassio. She begs Othello to call Cassio back, but Othello says it is not the time now. She asks when he will, pressing Othello to name the time and day. She reminds him that Cassio was the one who often sent messages from Othello to her when she and Othello were courting. How can he turn his back on so true a friend, she wonders. Desdemona reminds him that even when she spoke ill of Othello during their wooing stage, Cassio always stood up for him, and so played a big part in endearing her to Othello. She persists in asking why he won't bring Cassio back.

Worn down by her constant pleas, Othello finally says to let him come when he will. But Desdemona will not have it. He spoke too grudgingly for it to be heartfelt. She wants it to be truly said from his heart. He tells her to do whatever she wants, if she will just leave him alone.

As she leaves, Othello comments how much he loves her. He does not yet suspect her of infidelity. However, Iago now speaks up, asking questions about Cassio. He seems suspicious, and Othello asks what he is thinking. Iago feigns to be afraid to speak openly for fear of damaging Cassio's reputation. Othello can clearly see that something is on Iago's mind, so he presses the point. He thinks monstrous, hideous thoughts must be in Iago's mind if they cannot be spoken. They speak for a long while of honesty, love, and loyalty.

Othello asks Iago again to tell him what's on his mind, saying he will not believe anything without proof anyhow. Finally, Iago, appearing to give in, tells Othello to watch out for his wife with Cassio. He reiterates that he has no proof, only that he has observed that Desdemona is good at deceiving. She tricked her father when she married Othello, for example. After he puts this bee in Othello's bonnet, Iago acts sorry for upsetting Othello. However, Othello continues to insist that Iago's comments do not bother him. Iago slyly works in hints about Desdemona's ostensible unfaithfulness even while appearing to worry that he has said too much and is disturbing Othello.

Othello tells Iago to keep a watch on Desdemona, and to report back to him if he sees anything suspicious or spots any proof of her wantonness. Immediately, Othello begins to doubt Desdemona, wondering why he ever got married in the first place. Iago returns to say a few more comments to raise Othello's ire and suspicions. He cautions Othello not to believe her guilty until he brings proof. Othello states that he will maintain control of himself.

Left to himself, Othello ponders the honesty and wisdom he believes Iago possesses. Then the agonizing doubts about Desdemona's fidelity return. He wonders if Desdemona might find him inferior to other gallant gentlemen because he is black, or because he is a little bit older. He bitterly curses marriage. Desdemona returns with Emilia, chiding Othello for being late to a dinner with the islanders. He uses a headache as an excuse for his lateness. Desdemona takes out her handkerchief to offer him some comfort, and he pushes it away. It drops to the ground, and they go in to dinner.

Emilia takes advantage of the situation. She picks up the handkerchief from the floor, recognizing it as the first gift Othello ever presented to Desdemona. Iago has been encouraging her to find some way to take it from Desdemona. She doesn't know why he wants it, but she is sure he will be happy with her for getting it. Iago sees her, they talk, and he snatches the handkerchief from her. She asks him why he needs it, and he tells her to mind her own business. She says that if it's not important, then she should give it back, because Desdemona will be distraught if she finds it gone. He orders her to leave.

On stage alone, Iago decides that he will use the handkerchief to activate more than Othello's mere suspicions: he will incriminate Cassio and Desdemona more explicitly by planting the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings. He comments that trivial items such as a handkerchief can offer a jealous husband as much "proof" as if a sacred document proclaimed the accusations true. He knows that Othello's jealousy and hot temper have been aroused by the poisonous seeds of doubt Iago has already planted. Therefore, he believes that Othello will most certainly accept a handkerchief in Cassio's possession as proof of both Cassio's and Desdemona's treachery.

Othello enters, complaining that he was much happier when he was free of jealous doubts. Even if his wife were unfaithful, he says, he would rather not know about it. Essentially, Othello argues that ignorance is bliss. He even goes so far as to say that he'd have no problem if she were sleeping with all the soldiers as long as he didn't know about it. He declares that he is nothing now.

Iago reacts predictably, and Othello grabs him by the throat, telling Iago that he better have proof beyond any doubt. He wants to have his suspicions confirmed with his own eyes. Iago obsequiously says that he himself will never love since it causes so much misery, which softens Othello. He then

more calmly tells Iago that he demands proof, as he is too confused to know what to think otherwise. Iago asks him if he really wants to actually catch Desdemona and Cassio in the act; Othello finds this idea so horrible that he curses.

Iago then plants his next shameless seed. He tells Othello that he had to share a bed with Cassio recently, and he claims that Cassio talked in his sleep about Desdemona. In fact, Iago says, Cassio actually started kissing Iago and trying to hold him, thinking that he was Desdemona! Othello is horrified by this, but Iago backs off, reassuring him that it was just a dream and doesn't prove that anything has truly occurred. However, Othello's mind is already poisoned, and he says that it will add to the proof along with other things.

Iago warns him to be patient, since they have not witnessed anything for sure yet. Then he nudges Othello a little more by bringing up the handkerchief. He tells Othello that he recently saw Cassio wiping his beard with it. This convinces Othello without further doubt that his wife has indeed slept with Cassio. He vows to see Cassio and Desdemona dead. Iago promises to help him. Othello says Iago is now his lieutenant, and Iago says, "I am your own forever."

## **Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis**

There is much irony in this scene. Although Iago is often referred to as honest, the audience well knows that he is the most deceitful villain in the city. The characters' love for one another, or lack of it, adds other ironic twists. For example, Desdemona and Cassio, who do truly love Othello, are made out to be the villains; in contrast, Iago, who bitterly hates Othello, is the character Othello holds dearest throughout most of the play. The effective use of irony within a tragedy can perfectly illustrate the human capacity for deception. Although the reader or audience may wonder how Othello is unable to discern Iago's true colors, the fact is that nearly everybody has probably been deceived by a person they trusted, at least once.

The ultimate irony is that Othello demands real proof: not just circumstantial evidence, but something he can actually see with his own eyes to prove beyond all doubt that Desdemona has been unfaithful.

However, when it comes right down to it, he is swayed by very little. Othello is decidedly convinced of Desdemona's guilt as soon as he hears two things: Cassio's fictitious dream about Desdemona (courtesy of Iago), and Iago's lie about seeing Cassio with Desdemona's handkerchief. The tragedy here is that Othello doesn't stick to his original ideals: obviously, he is ready to be convinced despite his demands of proof. If he would only have the patience that Iago pretends to implore him to have, he would have time to get to the real truth. But apparently, as the scene reveals, the real truth is not what is most important to Othello: other passions, such as pride, jealousy, and insecurity, appear to be driving him. Indeed, there is much about passion in this scene, passion that cannot be controlled.

Modern audiences may wonder how someone could go from being so wholeheartedly in love and thinking his wife perfect to turning so jealous that he is ready to kill her. Shakespeare's answer might be that jealousy, like a virus, propagates itself. Once a jealous thought is planted, it uses everything it sees to support its hypothesis. Hence, Othello's passionate love is turned nearly instantly to passionate hatred. Iago has done his work; now he need only sit back and watch it all play out.

## **Act 3, Scene 4**

### **Act 3, Scene 4 Summary**

Desdemona asks the clown where Cassio is lodging. After giving her the runaround with some puns, he finally goes to retrieve Cassio. As she is waiting, Desdemona wonders aloud to Emilia where her handkerchief might have gone. In a bit of foreshadowing, she says it's a good thing that Othello isn't the jealous type; after all, he might think something amiss if she doesn't have that special gift. Emilia queries her about his temperament; ironically, Desdemona says he is not of that humor (prone to jealousy).

Othello enters. She greets him warmly, but he takes her hand and makes comments alluding to her wanton behavior. She does not follow his meaning, but tells him that she awaits Cassio, and that now is the perfect time for Othello to forgive him. Othello pretends to have watery eyes and asks for her handkerchief. When she offers him one, he says he wants the special one he gave her. She replies that she does not have it with her. The audience can see that she doesn't want him to know it is lost,

while he doesn't want her to know that he thinks it is lost. He tells her a story claiming that the handkerchief is magical, and she becomes upset. He insists she go and get it to prove to him it is not lost. She tries to change the subject by focusing on Cassio's dilemma.

Othello leaves in a fury, and Emilia remarks that he certainly seems jealous. Desdemona tells her that she has never seen him like this before. Iago then enters with Cassio, who is still very hopeful that Desdemona will be able to sway Othello's feelings toward him. Desdemona tells him that although she is doing everything she can, Othello seems out of sorts at the moment; she implores Cassio to have patience. Upon hearing that Othello is angry, Iago perks up and says he will go to Othello, on the pretense of calming him down.

Desdemona is worried, but tries to rationalize Othello's behavior by his distraction with affairs of state. She also thinks it might be that he has already fallen out of love with her and does not care for her anymore. Again ironically, the one thing of which she is sure is that she has given him no cause to be jealous. Emilia explains that jealousy does not need cause; it feeds upon itself. Desdemona tells Cassio to wait a while and she will see if she can bring Othello back.

Meanwhile, Bianca enters. Cassio is surprised to see her, and she is surprised to see him with a lady's handkerchief. She immediately jumps to the wrong conclusion that he has another woman. He assures her that he does not, and he asks her to please take the handkerchief to get a copy of the design. She does not want to leave him so soon, but he insists that her presence will not help his cause with Othello. She submits.

## **Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis**

Jealousy is the central theme of this scene. At first, Desdemona claims to Emilia that Othello has not a jealous bone in his body. However, as Othello questions her about the handkerchief, she begins to perceive a man who differs from the one she thought she married. She does not understand how Othello can possibly be jealous, for she loves him and knows she has done nothing wrong. The theme is later reiterated with gender roles reversed, when Bianca is momentarily jealous of Cassio.

The story Othello tells Desdemona about the handkerchief is also interesting. It could be fabricated to elicit a reaction from her so that he can accuse her of infidelity, or it could be true. Perhaps his mother did give it to him, and perhaps it is infused with magic (witchcraft?) to make one's lover be true. Perhaps that is why he gave it to Desdemona in the first place. Maybe Othello had already been worried that Desdemona would someday leave him, even before Iago's sinister machinations. Maybe this explains why he is so upset over the lost handkerchief and believes it to be certain proof that she has been with Cassio. If any of this is so, then it's not just Iago's poisoned words that generate Othello's jealousy; Othello himself originally created it. In this case, it could be possible that Othello would have thought Desdemona unfaithful as soon as she lost the handkerchief, even if Iago had never set up his plot. Of course, all this is speculation supported by Shakespeare's rich, challenging text, which is partially what makes Shakespeare such a fascinating author to study in the first place.

Although Iago doesn't know anything about the handkerchief story, he is still eager to use the handkerchief to fan the flames of jealousy smoldering inside Othello. While Desdemona is beginning to think Othello really believes ill of her, Cassio still has no idea about anything that is going on. In fact, he doesn't know whose handkerchief he has, or what he should do with it. He is the most innocent of all.