

OTHELLO



An A-level guide for classroom study and revision



OTHELLO - Act One

Act One, Scene One

- Iago and Roderigo outside Brabantio's house.
 - News of Desdemona's marriage to Othello.
 - Roderigo's feelings.
 - Iago's anger at Cassio's appointment and his contempt for the 'counter-caster'.
 - Iago's philosophy of service.
 - Rousing of Brabantio with foul images.
 - Brabantio's gradual acceptance of what they say, and his distress.
1. Think about the presentation of Othello in this scene - what impression do we get of him from Iago's comments?
 2. Examine the relationship between Roderigo and Iago.
 3. What do we discover about Iago's feelings and values, and how might this dispose us to think about him?
 4. What types of language is used about Desdemona and Othello?
 5. How is the news conveyed to Brabantio, and how is it received?
 6. What is the setting of this scene?

Act One, Scene Two

- Iago presenting himself to Othello as his defender.
 - Othello pointing out that he has nothing to be ashamed of, and is Brabantio's equal in power.
 - Cassio's entrance to ask Othello to report to the Duke for duty.
 - Brabantio's entrance, for entirely different purposes, and Othello's response ('Keep up your bright swords').
 - Brabantio's speech indicating that he thinks his daughter has been charmed (literally), and only that explains her 'revolt'.
 - Brabantio's plan to imprison Othello rather spoiled by news that Duke wants them both on state business.
1. What does this scene add to our impression of Iago?
 2. What roles does Othello have in this scene? i.e. how is he presented?
 3. What impression do we have of Othello by the end of scene 2, and how does it fit with Iago's description of him in scene 1?
 4. Comment in extreme detail on Brabantio's final speech of the scene (1.94-)



Act One, Scene Three

- Disputed reports of Turkish advance.
- This discussion interrupted by arrival of Brabantio et al, and the injection of a slightly more personal note.
- Brabantio's accusations of witchcraft.
- Othello's defence of himself: two main speeches before the arrival of Desdemona... ('Rude am I in my speech...' and 'Anthropophagi' ones).
- Desdemona's entrance and duty speech.
- Brabantio's resignation about marriage... hurt and angry?
- Desdemona's request to accompany Othello to Cyprus.
- Brabantio's final warning to Othello that Desdemona may also deceive him.
- All exit, leaving Roderigo and Iago, the former threatening to drown himself with love...
- Iago's scorn at the idea of anyone should feel so... 'our bodies are gardens' etc.
- 'Put money in thy purse' speech.
- Iago's soliloquy: 'I hate the Moor'... followed by rough plan to inculcate Cassio by suggesting adulterous liaison... and thus fill up his 'place'.

What all the details about the Turks' activities at the beginning of the scene?

What do Othello's two main speeches reveal about him/ his idea of himself?

Why rhyming couplets at 1.211?

Iago's final speech of scene to Roderigo, and after his departure. What is revealed here about Iago's nature and values? What do you make of the way Iago uses language generally?

Comment on the effect of final two lines of this Act.

HOMEWORK

Write about the play's presentation of (a) love, (b) sorcery, (c) conflict, (d) appearances, in Act One. You need only do this briefly, but please include quotations.



OTHELLO - Act Two

Act Two, Scene One

- Cyprus: Iago intends to undermine Othello's own moral defences against the threat of evil.
- Iago's conversation with Desdemona concerning his attitude towards women (direct relevance to later plots).
- Iago reveals to audience that he will transform Cassio and Desdemona's innocent gestures of courtesy into evidence to support his allegations of Desdemona's dishonesty.
- As Desdemona welcomes her husband, Iago reminds the audience that their happiness will be short-lived.
- Iago and Roderigo discuss their plan - Roderigo is fooled into helping him, and now believes that Desdemona and Cassio are in love. Therefore, he believes that he must first discredit Cassio.

What is significant about Iago's discussion with Roderigo in this scene?

How is the play beginning to follow the pattern of a Tragedy? What predictions can we make about the play's conclusion?

Analyse Desdemona's character at this point of the play. Do we believe her to be innocent, flirtatious, or cunning?

Examine Iago's soliloquy in detail - what does it reveal about his character and his intentions towards the other characters?

Act Two, Scene Two

- The Turkish fleet has been destroyed.
- Othello and Desdemona's wedding celebrations will take place this evening.
- Othello grants Iago the freedom to carry out the first part of his plan at the wedding celebrations.



Act Two, Scene Three

- Iago and Cassio discuss the virtues of Desdemona whilst Iago persuades Cassio to drink more wine with him.
- Iago tells the audience his plan to make Cassio drunk and quarrelsome.
- Iago tells Montano that Cassio's qualities as a soldier are marred by his habitual drunkenness.
- Iago now assumes the role of a peace-maker, and tells Othello that it is Cassio that started the quarrel.
- Iago urges Cassio to ask Desdemona to plead with Othello on his behalf.
- Iago tells the audience that he will convince Othello that this is because she is in love with Cassio.
- Iago secures the help of Emilia in implicating Cassio with Desdemona.

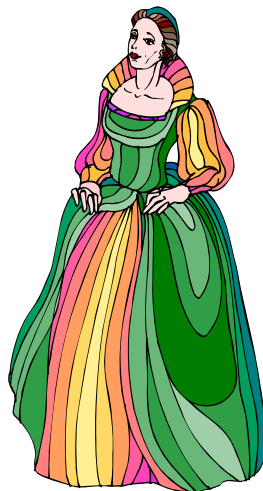
What do we know of Cassio before this scene? How does (a) our view, and (b) the view of the other characters, of him change by the end of the scene?

What is the significance of this scene in terms of Iago's plotting?

Why is it important for the audience to understand Iago's plan before we see it being put into action?

Revisit Act 2, Scene 1, and Iago's comments about women. How do these comments relate to his involvement of Emilia in his plot?

What is the significance of Cassio's feelings for Desdemona?



Revising Acts One and Two

After you have finished reading Act Two, you will need to do the following:

Make sure you have a decent summary of the play so far. This involves an outline of events and notes about the ideas and issues we have discussed in class. Make a note of any useful quotations, or any point that strikes you as interesting...

Check that you understand what has happened in the play. If there are any passages/scenes which you find incomprehensible, ask!

Now answer the following questions.

1. Find examples of the following words and comment on their use in context:
honest jealousy
2. Find examples of Iago's use of a) sea metaphors, b) animal imagery, c) references to sex. Comment upon these.
3. Outline the development of Iago's plotting, making sure you have a record of conversations and soliloquies.
4. List Iago's values... what does he think about women; love; servitude; anything else he mentions?
5. Look for different and contrasting examples of Othello (warrior/lover/husband/general/friend/outsider).
6. Write about the differences between Venice and Cyprus. Look out for any contrasts.
7. Choose a short speech (about 20 lines) by either Iago, Othello, Desdemona or Cassio and write a critical analysis of the way in which it uses language to reveal character (try to pick an interesting speech!).

You should have accurate references for any examples that you quote in response to these questions.



OTHELLO - Act Three

Act Three, Scene One

- Cassio has asked a troupe of musicians to serenade Othello and Desdemona.
- Cassio asks the rather bawdy clown to convey a message to Desdemona's lady-in-waiting (Iago's wife, Emilia) - he agrees.
- Iago arrives and agrees to help Cassio to speak to Desdemona - Emilia arrives and says that Desdemona has agreed to ask Othello to reinstate Cassio.

What purpose does the clown scene play? Would it make any difference if a director omitted it from the play?

Note how the end of this scene prepares for the next...

Act Three, Scene Two

- Othello is inspecting the town's fortifications.

What is the purpose of this short scene? What is the irony here?

Act Three, Scene Three

- Desdemona and Emilia assure Cassio that he will soon be reinstated, after they plead his case to Othello.
- Desdemona promises to be persistent in her plead to Othello, and Cassio leaves when he sees Iago and Othello approaching.
- Iago suggest to Othello that his leaving at this moment suggests that he has been guilty of speaking to Desdemona out of her husband's hearing. Iago refuses to comment further on his 'suspicions'.
- Desdemona immediately begins to beg Othello to reinstate Cassio, and his response suggests that he doubts her honesty at this stage.
- Desdemona leaves and Othello re-emphasises his love for her.
- Iago again hints that Cassio's conversation with Desdemona may not have been as innocent as he would like Othello to believe.
- Iago begs Othello not to become jealous, and reminds him of Brabantio's warning that she may deceive her husband as she deceived her father.
- Desdemona returns to remind Othello of an official duty that he has forgotten to carry out.



- She notices a change in her husband's manner, and accidentally drops her handkerchief.
- When they leave, Emilia picks up the handkerchief and gives it to her husband, as previously requested.
- Iago reveals to the audience that he will plant this in Cassio's room as 'evidence' of the affair between Cassio and Desdemona.
- Othello now appears to be completely convinced of his wife's guilt, but asks for further proof - Iago suggests that he asks his wife for her handkerchief.
- Othello returns to thoughts of revenge and Iago promises to 'help' in causing Cassio's death.
- Othello declares that Iago will be his new lieutenant, and they leave together.

Look at the conversations between Desdemona and Cassio, and Desdemona and Othello. What do these suggest about Desdemona? Give examples from the text.

1.90 - 1.1.261 ('Excellent wretch'... Iago's exit)

Make sure you have a good understanding of the means by which Iago begins to plant doubts in Othello's mind. You should have detailed notes on the methods he uses, and Othello's changing responses. How does the relationship between the two men change during the course of this scene?

Now comment in detail on the following scenes:

11.90-93 'Excellent... Chaos is come again'

11.129-130 'Men should... seem none'

These words, and the concepts they seem to represent in *context*:

honest jealousy unnatural

HOMEWORK

To be written up and handed in:

11.262-283 'This fellow... not believe't'

What does this speech indicate to the audience about Othello's frame of mind, and his changed attitude to his wife (you may refer back to previous speeches in your response)? You will need to look very carefully at the language used.



OTHELLO - Act Four

Act Four, Scene One

- Iago reminds Othello what Desdemona may have given to Cassio. Honour is invisible, and its absence cannot be proved, but the missing handkerchief is substantial evidence of an affair.
- Othello compares Iago's portrayal of Desdemona to his knowledge of his wife, and begins to doubt Iago's version. Iago forces Othello's defences to crumble and he falls to the ground.
- Cassio talks to Iago whilst Othello is unconscious. Iago asks him to return later.
- Othello wakes and wants more proof of the affair. Iago devises a plot to have him overlook a conversation with Cassio and view his reactions. Othello hides himself.
- Iago's soliloquy. Outlines his true plot in more detail. He will ask Cassio about Bianca, his prostitute/mistress. Iago knows that Cassio always laughs when he hears of Bianca, and that Othello will assume that he is bragging about Desdemona.
- Cassio enters. Othello sees only his gestures, but can't hear what is being said and misinterprets the meaning.
- Bianca storms in with the handkerchief - this is further 'proof' for Othello.
- When Cassio and Bianca leave, Othello comes out of hiding and is convinced of his wife's dishonesty and Cassio's guilt. He determines that both should die.
- Iago suggests that Othello strangles Desdemona in her bed, and Iago says that he will arrange Cassio's murder himself.
- News arrives that Othello is to return to Venice and that Cassio is to govern Cyprus in his place.
- Lodovico arrives from Venice and witnesses Othello hitting his wife and storming off in an inarticulate rage - he turns to Iago for an explanation.

Find quotes in this scene to illustrate Othello's changing attitude towards his wife.

Begin to draw a 'tension graph' to plot the level of tension from the start of Act three to the end of the play. How does Shakespeare ensure that the tension created in Act three is not allowed to ebb away in this scene?

What is the purpose of Lodovico in this scene?

Look at Shakespeare's use of a) irony, and b) dramatic irony in this scene. Make sure that you are clear about the difference between these two!



Act Four, Scene Two

- Othello questions Emilia in order to determine Desdemona's guilt. She can offer no evidence of Desdemona being unfaithful, but Othello refuses to listen to her.
- Emilia returns with Desdemona and leaves her alone with Othello. Desdemona doesn't understand her husband's accusations and continues to protest her innocence. This frustrates Othello, and he turns her defence against her.
- Emilia returns to find her mistress being accused of being a prostitute. Desdemona is stunned and asks for Iago to be summoned.
- Iago pretends to be ignorant towards the cause of Othello's behaviour. Emilia tries to find an explanation, and accidentally stumbles on part of the truth. Iago dismisses her suggestions as improbable.
- Iago's explanation is that Othello may be disturbed by military responsibilities. He then changes the subject by urging the two women to go to supper.
- Roderigo enters, and threatens to approach Desdemona directly. Iago persuades him to help him in killing Cassio. Roderigo is convinced that this is for his own good, but demands to know more about the plot.

What evidence of Desdemona's continued innocence is demonstrated in this scene?

Plot Iago's level of control over Othello in scenes one and two - does Othello conviction of Desdemona's guilt become any stronger after moments of doubt?

Act Four, Scene Three

- Othello is invited to go for a walk with Lodovico. He agrees and sends Desdemona to bed.
- Emilia helps Desdemona to prepare for bed, and is critical of Othello's recent behaviour towards his wife. In response, Desdemona continues to be loyal towards Othello, despite his cruel treatment.
- She begins to have thoughts of death and remembers a song once sung by her mother's maid, just before she was killed by her husband.
- Desdemona begins to question Emilia about whether such women actually exist that could deceive their husbands by having an affair. Emilia says that they do, and that they are just as entitled to do this as men are.

Compare Emilia's views about infidelity to those of her mistress? What do her comments reveal about Desdemona's character?

What values does Desdemona express in this scene?

What is the significance of Desdemona singing her mother's maid's song?



OTHELLO - Act Five

Act Five, Scene One

- Whilst Desdemona prepares for bed, Iago and Roderigo prepare to murder Cassio.
- Iago reveals to the audience that it would be convenient for Roderigo and Cassio to kill each other.
- Cassio escapes Roderigo's attack, but is wounded by Iago. Othello believes him to be dead and leaves to carry out his revenge on Desdemona.
- Lodovico and Gratiano are led to the wounded Cassio by Iago.
- Roderigo was wounded by Cassio, but as he cries for help, Iago kills him.
- Bianca is accused of being involved in the assault on Cassio, and when Roderigo's body is discovered, Iago suggests that Cassio and Roderigo were fighting over Bianca.
- Emilia is instructed to inform Othello and Desdemona about what has happened.
- Iago's soliloquy at the end of the scene reveals his pleasure that the evening's events so far.

This scene begins with an exchange between Roderigo and Iago... look at what it underlines about their relationship, particularly Iago's attitude towards Roderigo. Any parallels, echoes, elsewhere in the play?

This is a busy, confusing, and violent scene. It contrasts with the long scenes of conversation, argument and reflection which make up a large part of the play. Where else are there such short violent bursts of action in the play?

Look at the role Iago plays in the dramatic action of this scene. How would you describe his part in it?

What is the function of Bianca here?

This is the last scene before the play's climax, and Othello's murder of Desdemona. In what light do we briefly see him here?



Act Five, Scene Two

- Othello stands over the sleeping Desdemona and tries to justify his future actions in a soliloquy. He is disturbed by the knowledge that once Desdemona is killed, he will be unable to revive her again.
- Desdemona awakes, and he asks her to pray for her soul. She is frightened, confused and vulnerable, but defends her innocence again when questioned about the handkerchief.
- Desdemona is smothered by Othello whilst Emilia knocks on the door from outside.
- When Othello lets Emilia in, she reveals that Cassio is not dead, but that Roderigo is.
- Desdemona regains consciousness and is again smothered - she dies reiterating her own innocence and wish to absolve Othello from her death.
- Emilia is shocked and questions Othello about the death whilst declaring Desdemona's innocence.
- The truth about Iago's plot emerges and Emilia screams for help, causing Montano, Gratiano and Iago to enter.
- Iago is confronted about his involvement - he tries to silence Emilia but she tells how Cassio gained Desdemona's handkerchief.
- Othello strikes Iago, who responds by stabbing Emilia and running away.
- Othello is disarmed and Montano and Gratiano search for Iago and Emilia dies.
- Iago is returned and Othello wounds him in an attempt to kill him.
- Lodovico relieves Othello of his command in Cyprus and hands the government over to Cassio.
- Othello commits suicide - whilst he and Desdemona lie dead on their marriage-bed, Lodovico turns his attention to Iago, who has caused the tragedy.
- Iago is led away to be tortured and Lodovico promises to tell the tragic story in Venice.

The majority of this scene takes place in the dark/half-light. Why?

Read Othello's opening lines and consider what they suggest about his state of mind. You should look closely at what he says, and think about the role(s) he seems to be casting himself in, and what his feelings are.

Comment on Desdemona's response to Othello's plans to kill her. Why can't/won't he listen to her protestations of innocence?

What is Emilia's role in this scene?

At what point does Othello begin to realise what it is precisely that he has done?

Look at Othello's speech at line 259 ('Behold, I have a weapon'). What is the significance of what he says here? Can you link it to earlier speeches of his?



Why does Othello refer to himself in the third person?

How do you respond to Othello's final speech?

Comment on the significance of the following:

Line 1 - 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!'

Line 7 - 'Put out the light, and then put out the light!'

Line 65 - 'A murder, which I thought a sacrifice!'

Line 98 - 'Me thinks it should be now a huge eclipse'

Line 189 - I thought so then: I'll kill myself for grief'

Line 243 - 'But why should honour outlive honesty?'

Line 292 - 'For nought I did in hate, but all in honour'

Line 356 - 'I kissed thee ere I killed thee'



Dramatic Function

The following exercise is a way of looking at the *dramatic function* of certain scenes and speeches, and linking them to other areas of the text.

Remember, by 'dramatic' we are looking at how Shakespeare portrays: **conflict** (physical and mental); **contrast** (between characters or within the same character who has undergone a change, like Othello); **tension** (includes effects on the audience); **variety** (how does Shakespeare maintain the audience's interest); **pace** (speed of events); **humour**, and **context** (what has just happened and what is about to happen).

All the above includes analysing closely the language used by the characters - is it consistent? Does it change? What type of imagery is used and can you find patterns? The whole exercise should make you aware of the *structure* of the whole play and *how* the ideas and issues are raised.

So below there are six sets of extracts focusing on a particular character(s). Your task is to analyse them in the light of their dramatic function and link them to show change, development, contrast etc. All line references are for the *New Swan* edition.

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|--|--|
| <p>1) OTHELLO
Act 1 Scene 2 - lines 53 - 83
Act 3 Scene 3 - lines 429 - 460
Act 5 Scene 2 - lines 335 - 353</p> | <p>4) DESDEMONA
Act 1 Scene 3 - lines 179 - 188
Act 3 Scene 3 - lines 45 - 84
Act 4 Scene 3 - lines 11 - 58</p> |
| <p>2) OTHELLO AND DESDEMONA
Act 2 Scene 1 - lines 1 - 30
Act 4 Scene 2 - lines 31 - 94</p> | <p>5) EMILIA
Act 4 Scene 2 - lines 114 - 147
Act 4 Scene 3 - lines 59 - 107
Act 5 Scene 2 - lines 148 - 165</p> |
| <p>3) IAGO
Act 1 Scene 1 - lines 1 - 30
Act 2 Scene 3 - lines 315 - 341
Act 5 Scene 1 - lines 46 - 110</p> | <p>6) CASSIO AND BIANCA
Act 2 Scene 1 - lines 66 - 86
Act 2 Scene 3 - lines 248 - 290
Act 4 Scene 1 - lines 131 - 164</p> |

You can work either in pairs or individually - it is up to you. But be prepared to report back on your chosen character in a coherent and organised fashion in class on _____.

Also, although I've split these scenes up so they concentrate on one or a pair of characters, this doesn't mean that you ignore other characters in the extracts - you must analyse their role as well.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS TO BE USED WHEN DISCUSSING 'OTHELLO'

In order to demonstrate your knowledge of literature, you need to develop your vocabulary of literary terminology in your writing about 'Othello'.

It would be a good idea to check your understanding of the following terms, and find an example of how each one is used in the play.

Try to use this terminology in class discussions and practice essays - you'll begin to use them more naturally in your essays and any mistakes in usage can be corrected before the exam!

ALLITERATION

A sequence of two or more words beginning with the same letter placed close together.

APHORISM

Any short pithy statement into which much thought or observation is compressed.

ASSONANCE

The similarity of vowel sounds without actual rhyme.

CONNOTATION

The extended significances of a word which are generally agreed.

DIALOGUE

The part of literary works, particularly plays, written as conversation.

DOUBLE ENTENDRE

A phrase with two meanings, one of which is usually indecent.

Examine the clown's dialogue for examples of this.

DRAMATIC IRONY

A situation in drama where the audience knows more than the characters on stage, often as the result of a soliloquy.

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

A first-person narrative account in verse or prose. Compare this to 'soliloquy'.

ENJAMBMENT

The running-on of one line of verse into another without a grammatical break.



FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Language which contains figures of speech, for example, similes and metaphors.

HAMARTIA

The flaw or defect in a tragic hero that leads to his downfall.

e.g. Othello's insecurity

IRONY

Present in writing or speech when the real meaning is concealed in words suggesting the opposite meaning, often as a means of criticism.

METAPHOR

An implied or compressed comparison when one thing is said to take on the qualities of another.

SIBILANCE

A series of words with a hissing sound such as 's' and 'sh'.

SIMILE (note spelling!)

A figure of speech using 'as' or 'like' in which there is a comparison used for clarity or vividness.





SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. 'Othello' is a play about jealousy; the innate jealousy of Iago and the imposed jealousy of Othello. Discuss.
2. 'For he was great of heart'. By what means, and how far, does Shakespeare awaken and sustain our sympathy for Othello?
3. Outline the part played in 'Othello' by Cassio and show in some detail what he contributes to the dramatic interest of the work.
4. Do you think that 'Othello' is a well-constructed play? Give full reasons for your opinion.
5. 'The poetry of great adventure thrills through his words'. With some close illustration, discuss this comment on Othello's manner of speech.
6. Dr Johnson speaks of 'the cool malignity of Iago.' What are some of the ways in which this is manifested?
7. 'But yet the pity of it.' Discuss some of the means by which Shakespeare awakens our feelings of pity in 'Othello'.
8. Outline the part played in 'Othello' by Emilia and show what she contributes to the dramatic interest of the work.
9. How well do you feel Othello is fitted for the role of a Shakespearean tragic hero?
10. Desdemona has been described as 'a mere passive victim of evil forces which she does not understand'. How far do you think this is a fair description of her?