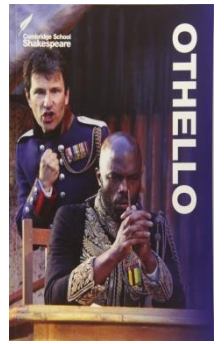


In 1606, Shakespeare wrote his dramatization of an episode of Scottish history in *Macbeth*

meanwhile, elsewhere

during the tragic period of his play writing, you will also find *Othello*.



KEY CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION LINKING YOUR STUDY OF *MACBETH* TO *OTHELLO*:

The representation of the English King, _____, in *Macbeth* written in _____, has been said to have a political purpose. Through the words of the character _____ in Act _____ Scene _____ of the play, Shakespeare could be said to be writing p _____ in faintly veiled praise of his own reigning monarch, _____, who was also the patron of Shakespeare's company, _____.

Whilst *Othello*, in _____ is written earlier his reign and was performed in his court, Shakespeare's praise of the King is less obvious. The setting of the play is in _____; an outpost of _____. The Jacobean would have known it to be 'a racial and religious melting pot' and they would have regarded it as a place associated with _____. James' 1st England would have been viewed as a model of civilised Christianity by comparison.



This painting *Othello and Desdemona* 1859, depicts the characters from play. What is significant about the eponymous character Othello and how do you think Shakespeare will depict him?

Useful sources of further contextual information:

[Use the context page of sparknotes, as a starting point to help you answer these questions.](#)

[Alternatively, the Advanced Level York Notes on Othello is the recommended study guide.](#)

The play's setting: There are two principal locations in *Othello*, Venice and Cyprus.

- 1. Venice** What evidence is there to suggest that Elizabethan / Jacobean society had a 'double image' of Italy and Venice – it was viewed as both a country of civilisation, as well as place of villainy and vice? Why might this be?
- 2. Cyprus** The action of the play takes place alongside the **Ottoman–Venetian War** or the **War of Cyprus 1570-1573**. What information can you find out about the war in Cyprus and its causes?



Othello The Moor: 'Moor' and 'blackamoor' (a contraction of 'black as a moor') were used very loosely in Elizabethan / Jacobean England to indicate any person of dark or black skin, including all people of African descent.

1. What is the correct origin of the term 'moor' and which group of people did the name apply to?
2. What was Queen Elizabeth's attitudes to moors in England at the time?
3. What type of 'moor' is the character Othello likely to have been based on? Who is this a painting of and what position did he hold in Elizabethan court?



Patriarchy and social hierarchy: Although questions were being asked about the social hierarchy, women remained in subordinate roles, their lives controlled by Patriarchy during the Renaissance.

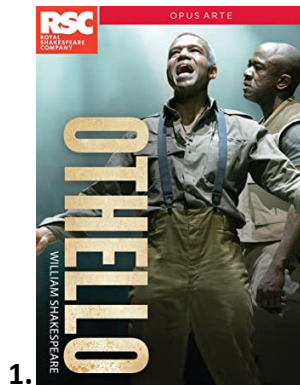
1. What legal rights did women have in Elizabethan and Jacobean England?
2. What education would a woman have usually received at this time?
3. How did the institution of marriage work at this time?
4. Assertive or argumentative women were seen as a threat to social order. Find and explain three different ways in which such women were punished?
5. Many social commentators argued though that women in Jacobean England had more freedom than in other European countries. Can you find evidence of this? Find out information about Elizabeth 1st herself, as well as Shakespeare's own wife.



Pre-teaching tasks

Before we study each scene in class you will need to read it at home and understand it the best that you can. You will also need to complete the following comprehension questions so that you are ready to engage with the scene in class. Read as much of the play as you can before September and keep a notebook of your answers to the following questions. You might find the following resources helpful:

1. Sparknotes website includes 'Shakespeare No Fear' translation
2. The following DVD versions of the play are recommended in this order:



Act One is set in Venice a highly civilised and commercially prosperous 'city state' ruled by an elected Duke or Doge. As you read Act One, consider Shakespeare's presentation of Venetian society and its values during the Renaissance era as the backdrop to the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.

Act 1 Scene 1

1. What is Iago's complaint against Othello?
2. What insight do you gain into the relationship between Othello and Iago from Iago's speech on lines 41 – 66?
3. What is the significance of the following quotation in revealing Iago's feelings towards Othello: "In following him I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end"?
4. What can you infer about Iago from the way that he speaks to Brabantio in this scene?
5. What is the significance of Iago's exit on line 158?
6. What do you learn of Roderigo's character from his words and actions in this scene?
7. The characters of Othello and Desdemona are introduced in this scene before we actually meet them. What do we know about them so far?

Act 1 Scene 2

1. Look closely at Othello's speeches to Iago. What is his response to Brabantio's complaint?
2. What do you learn about Desdemona's history from Brabantio's speech from line 62? How does this affect your view of their relationship?
3. What are Brabantio's main objections to the marriage of Desdemona and Othello?
4. What prevents Othello's arrest at the end of the scene?

Act 1 Scene 3

1. What do you learn about the political situation at this point in the play? Why do you think this might be significant?
2. Look closely at Othello's speeches in defence of his marriage:
 - a. What tone does he use when addressing the senate?
 - b. How do you respond to the phrase, "Rude am I in my speech"?
 - c. What do you learn about his background and experience?
 - d. Do you think there is a strong foundation for marriage based upon what Othello says?
3. What is your impression of Brabantio and his relationship with his daughter in this scene? What insights do you gain about the context of the play?
4. What do you learn about Desdemona's character when she defends her choice of husband to her father and the Duke?
5. How far does Desdemona's behaviour fit with Brabantio's account of her as "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself"?
6. Are you convinced by her actions and language that she genuinely loves Othello? Do you think that their relationship is based on hero-worship?
7. What do you find interesting about the comments made by the Duke in this scene?
8. Read the exchange between Iago and Roderigo from line 302:
 - a. Roderigo is suffering from unrequited love and it seems that his prospects with Desdemona are hopeless. What arguments does Iago use to convince Roderigo to continue his pursuit of Desdemona?
 - b. What sort of imagery and language does Iago use when describing love, in particular the relationship between Othello and Desdemona?
 - c. What does Iago say is his motivation for making Othello a cuckold? (This is the first reference to cuckoldry in the play, which is a widespread theme in medieval and Renaissance English literature.)
9. Read Iago's first soliloquy carefully. What does it reveal about his true character and the working out of his revenge plot against Othello?

In Act Two, the location shifts to Cyprus as a result of the impending threat of barbarism in the form of the Turkish fleet. This shift is significant in a number of ways and it is important to consider how the characterisation and plot development are affected by it. Note that Act Two begins with a storm; what might be the significance of this?

Act 2 Scene 1

1. What is the purpose of the discussion between Montano and the Gentleman?
2. How is tension created at the beginning of the scene?
3. What is Cassio's opinion of Desdemona? How is this likely to help Iago in his plan?
4. What is your impression of Iago from his conversation with Emilia and Desdemona from line 100? What is the purpose of this exchange between them?
5. Summarise Iago's attitude towards women as expressed in this scene.
6. Othello arrives on line 173. What state of mind is he in and how does his use of language and imagery reflect this?
7. Look closely at the exchange between Roderigo and Iago between lines 205 and 266.
 - a. How does Iago convince Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio? What is his view of the relationship between Desdemona and Othello?
 - b. How does he intend to use Roderigo in his plan?

- c. Why do you think that he is able to manipulate Roderigo so successfully?
8. Read Iago's soliloquy carefully. How has his revenge plot developed further by this point in the play?

Act 2 Scene 2

1. A herald proclaims "the celebration of [the] nuptial of Othello and Desdemona. What is your impression of Othello as Governor of Cyprus from the Herald's announcement?"

Act 2 Scene 3

1. Comment on the contrasting opinions of Desdemona expressed by Iago and Cassio.
2. How does this scene reveal the working out of Iago's plan?
3. What change do you notice in Othello's speech in lines 185 – 199?
4. Cassio shows how distraught he is at his demotion when he says, "I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." How is this imagery continued throughout the rest of the conversation?
5. How does Iago intend to use Desdemona in his plan?
6. Read Iago's speech on lines 303 – 328 and summarise the plan that has been conceived by the end of this speech.

In Act Three, Iago's manipulation of Othello begins to take a hold on him and we see a gradual breakdown in his character and language.

Act 3 Scene 1

1. What does Cassio do to try to appease Othello?
2. How does Othello react to Cassio's gesture?
3. What does Iago tell Cassio after the clown leaves?
4. What news does Emilia bring to Cassio?

Act 3 Scene 3: 'the temptation scene'

Lines 1 – 89

1. What promise does Desdemona make to Cassio? What is the significance of this promise?
2. How does Cassio unwittingly play into Iago's hands? How does Iago try to exploit his actions?
3. Comment on the conversation between Desdemona and Othello. How does she contribute to her own downfall?

Lines 90-195

1. How does Iago win Othello's trust and arouse his suspicion?
2. What is the significance of Iago's comments about reputation and how do they compare with his words to Cassio earlier in the play?
3. What is the significance of Iago's warning about "the green-eyed monster"?
4. What is Othello's response and how does this play into Iago's hands?

Lines 196 – 279

1. What do you think is the purpose of Iago's remark, "In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands"?
2. How does Iago convince Othello that he has his General's interests at heart?
3. Othello refers to Desdemona's marrying him as "nature erring from itself." What is the significance of the remark, taking into account the attitudes of the other characters?
4. Find a quotation which best sums up Othello's state of mind at this point in the play.

5. What do you notice about the timing of Iago's exit and return in this part of the scene?

Lines 280 – 333

1. What is the effect upon Othello of Desdemona's return on line 280? How does this fit with his earlier feelings?
2. Comment on the meeting between Othello and Desdemona. How have things changed between them?
3. What do you learn about the relationship between Iago and Emilia?
4. How does Iago intend to use Desdemona's handkerchief in his plan?

Lines 333 – 480

1. How has Othello changed by this point in the play?
2. How does Othello react towards Iago after this speech?
3. How does Iago turn the situation to his advantage?
4. What 'evidence' does Iago provide of Desdemona's supposed betrayal? What effect does this information have upon Othello and his language?
5. What is the effect of Othello kneeling during this scene?

Act 3 Scene 4

1. What do you think is Shakespeare's dramatic purpose in including the brief exchange between the Clown and Desdemona in this scene?
2. What is the dramatic effect on the audience of Othello's discussion with Desdemona?
3. How is the contrast between Desdemona's true innocence and Iago's version of her emphasised during this scene?
4. How does Emilia's perception of Othello contrast with Desdemona's?
5. How does what you learn of the relationship between Bianca and Cassio influence your opinion of Cassio's character?

Act 4 Scene 1

1. Find a quotation to support each of the following statements:
 - a. Iago taunts Othello and controls his imagination
 - b. Iago ironically plays devil's advocate
 - c. Iago revels in his power to torment Othello
 - d. Othello breaks down
 - e. Othello's language is 'Iagoised' (corrupted with the ensign's distinctive idiom)
 - f. Despite his apparent conviction to murder Desdemona, Othello is actually struggling to contradictory emotions for his wife
 - g. Othello is torn between opposites: love/hate; public/private; personal/professional
 - h. Iago feigns reluctance to speak ill of Ludovico
2. How does Desdemona react to the physical violence that she endures in this scene?
3. Why is it significant that Othello's actions towards her are witnessed by visitors from Venice?

Act 4 Scene 2

1. What effect does Othello's questioning of Emilia have on his behaviour?
2. How does Othello's treatment of Desdemona affect your view of their relationship at this point in the play?
3. Consider the language and imagery used by Othello in this scene. How has it changed?

4. What do you feel about Desdemona's language and actions towards Othello in this scene? How does she react to his false accusations and what do her reactions reveal about her character?
5. Look closely at the exchange between Desdemona, Emilia and Iago. What is the effect of irony in this scene?
6. What new information do you learn from the discussion between Roderigo and Iago at the end of this scene? How might this affect the rest of the play?
7. What dramatic function is served by this scene? How essential is Roderigo to the success of Iago's plot? What other function could he serve in the play?

Act 4 Scene 3: 'the willow scene'

1. How do Othello's actions at the beginning of the scene create a sense of foreboding?
 2. What do you learn about the willow song? How does the story that Desdemona tells about it foreshadow her fate?
 3. What is the dramatic effect of the speech between Desdemona and Emilia being broken by her singing?
 4. Desdemona and Emilia discuss male and female relationships and marriage. How does Emilia's view of the world contrast with Desdemona's? Think about:
 - a. Their views on marriage and adultery
 - b. Their response to Othello
 - c. Their use of language
-

Act 5 Scene 1

At the end of Act 4 Scene 2, Iago introduces the idea of killing Cassio to Roderigo. In this scene, things do not quite go to plan.

1. What attitude does Roderigo show towards killing Cassio?
2. What do we learn from Iago's asides?
3. What do Othello's words at lines 31 – 37 tell us about his state of mind?
4. Comment on Iago's words and actions as he re-enters the scene at lines 46
 - a. How does he fool Gratiano and Lodovico into believing him "a very valiant fellow"?
 - b. Why does he kill Roderigo?
 - c. How does he explain Roderigo's death to the others?
 - d. What is his attitude toward Bianca?
5. What does Iago's final aside in the scene tell us about his position at this point in the play? How would you expect him to deliver these lines?
6. How would you describe the dramatic impact of this scene?

Act 5 Scene 2

1. Explain Othello's conflicting emotions as they are revealed in his speech at the beginning of this scene.
2. Read the discussion between Othello and Desdemona after she wakes up on line 22:
 - a. What is the dramatic impact of this exchange?
 - b. How does she unwittingly reinforce Othello's conviction that she is guilty?
3. Look closely at Othello's speech on lines 89-99. How does Shakespeare convey the nature of his emotion through the language used?
4. Consider Emilia's words and actions in this scene:

- a. How does Emilia respond to Othello on discovering Desdemona?
 - b. How important is she in this scene?
 - c. How does her behaviour in this scene influence your view of her?
5. How is the truth of Iago's villainy revealed?
6. What is your impression of Othello from his final speeches in this scene? Consider his language in detail.
7. Consider the impact of the ending of the play:
 - a. Do you think the ending is successful? Why do you think the final words of the play are left to Lodovico?
 - b. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to leave the fate of the "hellish villain" Iago unresolved?