

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Othello**

by William Shakespeare

Written by Michelle Ryan

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# Othello

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the techniques Shakespeare uses to convey character and character relationships to his audience.
2. analyze the characters of Emilia, Desdemona, Othello, Iago, and Cassio and their relationships to each other.
3. analyze the importance of literary elements like dramatic irony and foreshadowing on the development of the play.
4. trace and discuss recurring imagery: animals, darkness, evil/devil.
5. define by example the terms *tragedy* and *tragic hero*.
6. identify and discuss the following themes in the play:
  - jealousy and its destructive effect;
  - the alienation of the outsider;
  - appearance versus reality;
  - loyalty and friendship.
7. discuss the dramatic development of the play in terms of exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution.
8. understand the Renaissance theory about chaos and the order of the Universe and apply it to the text.
9. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
11. offer a close reading of *Othello* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.
12. demonstrate a literal, personal, interpretive, and critical understanding of the text.

# Othello

## Lecture Notes

### SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England during the English Renaissance of 1500 – 1650, a period of vast and rapid change throughout Europe. The average person's view of the universe, of God and the relationship of God and humanity, of the Church and the role of religion in everyday life, of the government and the rights and obligations of the monarchy were all ideas that were evolving. Much of the philosophical, political, and economic transformation in England was due to the growing number of large cities, particularly in the port areas; a shift from a feudalism to nationalism that allowed Elizabethan men to develop their own heroic qualities and gentlemanly characteristics; and a break with the power of the Roman Catholic Church that, in turn, allowed for the secularization of education and the arts. However, in spite of the changes in England, many social conventions persisted:

- Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth;
- Women had a lower social status than men;
- Social position was a natural consequence of birth;
- There was a proper order within all things. People were concerned with the order of things and believed that in life there was a “great chain of being.” When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony. When the order was broken, everything was upset and everyone suffered;
- The Crusades and explorations of Columbus, etc., exposed the relatively isolated English to races they did not know exactly how to interact with.

While a large part of William Shakespeare's life would mirror many middle-class Englishmen in the late 1500s, Shakespeare's life as an actor, director, and writer in the theater districts of London makes him one of literary history's most famous men. Shakespeare is responsible for 37 plays and hundreds of poems in his short 20-year writing career.

### SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Shakespeare's plays are generally categorized in one of the three areas: tragedies, comedies, and histories. While his plays follow a five-act format, the dramatic structure of each type of play differs slightly. Because *Othello* is a tragedy, we will focus on the dramatic structure of Shakespeare's tragedies.

# Othello

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the dramatic function the handkerchief has in this play. How does it function as a symbol of Desdemona's fidelity?
2. Complete a detailed character analysis for each of the following characters. Indicate both their actions and their motives. Also, point out their state of mind and what significant actions of their own, or others, affected them.
  - Othello
  - Iago
  - Roderigo
  - Bianca
  - Cassio
  - Desdemona
  - Emilia
3. To what extent is Othello a good example of Aristotle's tragic hero? In your argument, anticipate both sides of the question.
4. Identify some of the racial remarks directed by Iago and the other characters toward Othello. Do these remarks make the play racist? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast Iago's and Othello's language throughout the play. How does each character's language illustrate his character? At what point do the characters begin to speak alike? What is the implication in that change?
6. Explore the way in which Shakespeare presents the female characters in *Othello*.
7. Discuss the use of the word *honest* throughout the play. Explain the effect it had on the audience at specific times.
8. Discuss Othello's relationship with Desdemona. How does his love for her change throughout the play? Do you believe he ever truly loves her?
9. Explore Iago's motives in the play? What are they? Are they justified? How does he determine the action in the play?

# Othello

## Act I, Scene I

1. Often in plays, the setting is not just “where the story happens,” but includes the geographical, historical, social, economic, or philosophical setting. Explain the type of setting that Shakespeare establishes at the beginning of the play. What does the setting convey to the audience?

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2. How does Iago believe that people are promoted within the ranks? What effect does his commentary have on the audience?

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3. What does the audience learn about the relationship between Roderigo and Iago? How does Iago manipulate Roderigo?

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## Act II, Scene I

1. Explain the purpose of the descriptions at the beginning of the act.

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2. Describe the nature of the weather as the scene opens. What might the weather indicate about the “nature of things”?

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3. What do we learn about Othello’s character from the trouble at sea?

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4. Using your understanding of the imagery in the following passage, characterize the relationship between Cassio and Othello.

CASSIO:           His bark is stoutly timber’d, and his pilot  
                           Of very expert and approved allowance;  
                           Therefore my hopes, not surfeited to death,  
                           Stand in bold cure. (lines 53 – 56)

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5. Early in Scene I, as Iago and Desdemona’s ship approaches, Cassio describes Desdemona to the Gentlemen with whom he is speaking:

CASSIO:           Most fortunately: he hath achieved a maid  
                           That paragon<sup>1</sup>’s description and wild fame;  
                           One that excels the quirks<sup>2</sup> of blazoning pens,  
                           And in the essential vesture<sup>3</sup> of creation  
                           Does tire the ingener.<sup>4</sup>

and later refers to Desdemona as “the riches of the ship” (line 91).

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<sup>1</sup>outdoes <sup>2</sup>figures of speech <sup>3</sup>clothing (i.e., her natural traits) <sup>4</sup>one who might describe her

**Act III, Scene I**

1. Explain the action and purpose at the beginning of the scene.

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2. How is the concept of honesty contrasted in the conversation between Iago and Cassio?

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3. What request does Cassio make of Emilia?

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**Act III, Scene II**

1. Summarize the events in this scene.

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### Act IV, Scene I

1. How does the scene begin? Explain the significance of the following conversation between Iago and Othello. Explain the symbolism of the handkerchief.

IAGO:                So they do nothing, 'tis a venial<sup>30</sup> slip:  
                              But if I give my wife a handkerchief

OTHELLO:            What then?

IAGO:                Why, then, 'tis hers, my lord, and being hers,  
                              She may, I think, bestow't on any man.

OTHELLO:            She is protectress of her honour too:  
                              May she give that?

IAGO:                Her honour is an essence that's not seen;  
                              They have it very oft that have it not:  
                              But, for the handkerchief—

OTHELLO:            By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it:  
                              Thou said'st—it comes o'er my memory,  
                              As doth the raven<sup>31</sup> o'er the infected house,  
                              Boding to all—he had my handkerchief.

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2. What physical reactions does Othello have to the news about Desdemona and Cassio? How might the audience interpret this response?

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<sup>30</sup> fleshly <sup>31</sup> the raven is thought to bring disease



## Act V, Scene I

1. Explain what the following speech illustrates about Iago's character.

IAGO: I have rubb'd this young quat<sup>37</sup> almost to the sense,<sup>38</sup>  
 And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio,  
 Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,  
 Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,  
 He calls me to a restitution<sup>39</sup> large  
 Of gold and jewels that I bobb'd<sup>40</sup> from him,  
 As gifts to Desdemona;  
 It must not be. If Cassio do remain,  
 He hath a daily beauty in his life  
 That makes me ugly; and besides, the Moor  
 May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril:  
 No, he must die. But so: I hear him coming. (Act V, Scene I, lines 11 – 21)

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2. For what two reasons does Iago say he wants Cassio dead?

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3. In the battle, who is responsible for the wounds?

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4. Explain Othello's reaction to Roderigo's and Casio's injuries. With what does he give Iago credit? Explain the irony in Othello's words.

OTHELLO: 'Tis he. O brave Iago, honest and just,  
 That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!  
 Thou teachest me. Minion, your dear lies dead,  
 And your unblest fate hies. Strumpet, I come!  
 Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted;  
 Thy bed, lust-stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted. (Act V, Scene I, lines 32 – 37)

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<sup>37</sup>pimple <sup>38</sup>quick <sup>39</sup>repayment <sup>40</sup>stolen