

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Othello

by William Shakespeare

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Objectives

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

1. define the term “tragic hero” and relate it to Othello and the progression he undergoes in the course of the play.
2. identify and discuss the following themes and motifs in the play:
 - A. jealousy and its destructive effect
 - B. the alienation of the outsider
 - C. the conflict between appearances and the real nature of things (reality)
 - D. loyalty and friendship.
 - E. honor and reputation
 - F. hatred
 - G. poor choices
3. trace and discuss some recurring aspects of animal imagery.
4. write a character description of each of the following characters and comment on how believable their motives and actions are to a modern audience:
 - A. Othello D. Roderigo
 - B. Iago E. Desdemona
 - C. Cassio F. Emilia
5. compare and contrast the two female characters, Desdemona and Emilia.
6. define these terms and give examples from the play:
 - A. aside
 - B. soliloquy
 - C. irony
7. write a paper to prove or disprove this thesis:
Othello, although not an excessively jealous person, is led to ruin because he is not able to comprehend the true nature of, nor ascertain Iago’s manipulations.
8. discuss how the handkerchief functions as a vital piece of stage business.
9. point out instances of racial prejudice in the play.
10. discuss the actual reasons that Iago has for hating Othello, citing quotations from the text.
11. compare the characters Iago influences both in how he manipulates them and how they respond.
12. analyze Desdemona’s reasons for her love of Othello. What are they? Are they valid and strong enough for Desdemona to risk becoming an outsider in society?

Notes

THE TRAGIC HERO

Aristotle envisioned the tragic hero as a man (or, very rarely, a woman) of high station whose downfall occurs through a flaw in character. Except for that one flaw, the hero is, if not a noble, at least someone of above-average sensibilities, most likely, a person for whom we can feel pity, fear, or concern as we watch the events transpire which will lead to an inevitable downfall and, in the case of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, death. By the end of the work, however, the tragic hero must recognize that any downfall was the result of personal errors in judgment, understanding, or behavior. In accepting this responsibility for his fate, the hero regains the spiritual equilibrium possessed at the beginning of the play. As a result of the tragic hero's understanding and acceptance (Othello says, "Speak of one that loved not wisely, but too well, of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, perplexed in an extreme"), the audience, which has had its emotions purged, feels uplifted by the experience, rather than defeated or depressed.

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF TIME

Critics have pointed out, and some students might notice, that Shakespeare is operating on two different time schedules in this play. While all the action in *Othello* takes place over three or four days, there is mention of things that happened earlier. For example, although they have been in Cyprus only a few days, Bianca tells Cassio he has not been to her house to see her in seven or eight days. While this is an interesting observation, it in no way affects Othello's essential struggle and may be seen as only one more stage convention. As the critic Granville Barker points out, "Shakespeare is not essentially concerned with time and the calendar at all."

Questions For Essay and Discussion

1. Consider carefully the dramatic function the handkerchief has in this play. In an essay, discuss this function and be sure to state what it proves and or disproves.
2. Discuss what it was that motivated Iago's actions. Try to discuss all his motives and then reach a conclusion. Since not all critics reach the same conclusion, there is no right or wrong answer. However, your conclusion should be logical and consistent with the facts of the play.
3. Othello, a reasonable man, is newly married to a woman he loves very much. Explain how he is turned into a jealous murderer.
4. Critics have called this play Shakespeare's most exciting play. Identify those aspects of the play that would prompt this comment.
5. Define the term "tragic hero" and identify the tragic hero in *Othello*. Describe his mood and behavior at the opening of the play, throughout the rising action, at the climax, and during the resolution.
6. Some critics see Othello as an outsider who is valuable to the Venetian state because of his skills, but who is not truly accepted as a Venetian. Discuss this point and consider if Othello views himself as someone outside Venetian society.
7. Compare and contrast Desdemona with Emilia.
8. Discuss how Desdemona would have been seen by the Elizabethan audience and how she might be judged by today's audience.
9. Consider the concepts of loyalty and friendship; point out examples of both.
10. Point out instances in *Othello* of the conflict between the reality of what appears to be and what actually is.
11. Comment on Shakespeare's use of animal imagery in this play.
12. *Othello* is built around the emotion of jealousy. Identify the places where it is mentioned or occurs.
13. Define and give examples of the following:
 - A. aside
 - B. soliloquy
 - C. irony

Othello

Act I, Scene i

VOCABULARY

'Sblood – an oath (originally “God’s blood!”)

Certes – for certain

complement – a form

daws – crows

Forsooth – indeed

knave – a rascal; wretched fellow

lascivious – sexually overactive

naught – nothing

obsequious – full of flattery

ruffians – hoodlums

saucy – showing a lack of respect

suit – an appeal

Tush – an expression of contempt

wheeling – freewheeling, rootless

Zounds – an oath (“God’s wounds!”)

1. From Roderigo’s first speech it appears that he paid Iago for something. Can you tell what it was?

2. Iago says he hates Othello. For what reason?

3. What does Iago say of Cassio? Does this make sense to you?

Act II, Scene i

VOCABULARY

allowance – the ability
bark – a boat
citadel – a fort
contention – a battle
disclose – to make known
ensteep'd – submerged
expectancy – an expectation
fie – an exclamation of contempt
footing – arrival
list – to listen
pate – a head
peradventure – perhaps
prologue – the beginning
voluble – talkative
wight – a person

1. What news do we get of the Turkish fleet?

2. At this point what is Cassio's hope?

3. Although they all seem to be enjoying themselves on the dock with Iago's cynical comments on women, we see that Iago's fierce mood has not abated. What does he observe, and what does he conclude?

Act III, Scene iv

VOCABULARY

edified – instructed
crusadoes – gold coins
unhatched – developing
arraigning – putting on trial
suborn'd – corrupted
indicted – charged

1. Why does Desdemona not wish to admit to Othello that she lost the handkerchief he had given her?

2. Why does he demand to see the handkerchief when he already knows that Desdemona does not have it?

3. When Cassio asks Desdemona about his request, what does she tell him?

4. What does Desdemona think is the cause of Othello's anger? What point does Emilia raise?

5. State the two reasons Bianca is upset with Cassio.

