

Othello

By William Shakespeare

English 12 Advanced

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- Characters -
- Scene summaries & analyses -
- Student Notes -
- Notable quotes -

From the Shakespeare quiz game, write 10 facts below: 5 that you did not already know about Shakespeare or the Elizabethan time period in England and 5 that you did know.

Didn't know:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Already knew:

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Othello Character List

Othello: A Moor, and an officer in the Venetian military. He falls in love with, and marries, the delicate Desdemona, though he is middle-aged, and she is still young. Othello is bold, a good warrior, and a decent person overall; however, he is undone by jealousy and pride, his two main failings. Although Othello is very eloquent, he believes his manners and words are both rough.

Desdemona: Othello's wife, a young Venetian woman of high birth and good breeding. Desdemona is almost overly virtuous, which causes her to feel that she must defend Cassio, and speak in a public sphere when necessary. She is stronger than Othello believes her to be, and is not the private, withdrawn, meek woman he would ideally like her to be.

Cassio: Othello's lieutenant, though he has little field experience. Cassio is a smooth-talking, very courteous Venetian courtier, the opposite of Othello in many respects, which is why Othello admires him, oddly enough. Othello is led to believe that Cassio has had an affair with Desdemona, though Cassio has only honorable intentions toward Desdemona.

Iago: Othello's ensign, and passed over for the lieutenant position in favor of Cassio. Iago is young and treacherous; he is a villain from the start, and though he cites his hurt pride over the lost promotion and Othello's alleged infidelity with Iago's wife Emilia as being reasons for his actions, he is without reasons. He is immoral, but very perceptive, keen, and able to manipulate people into falling for the traps he sets without them being aware.

Emilia: Iago's wife, and Desdemona's handmaiden. She is entrusted with bringing people into Desdemona's presence, staying with her at all times, etc. Emilia has no idea what her husband Iago is up to, nor of his darker qualities. She remains loyal to Desdemona above all others, although she unwittingly plays a key part in Iago's treachery.

Brabantio: Desdemona's father, a senator and renowned citizen of Venice. He is not at all pleased by Desdemona's union, and warns Othello that as Desdemona betrayed her father, she may betray her husband too.

Roderigo: Lusts after Desdemona, which Iago is of course aware of. Iago uses him to ruin Cassio's reputation, and in his other schemes. Iago promises Roderigo that he shall have Desdemona's love in return for his help; Roderigo actually receives nothing but a disgraced death.

Duke of Venice: Ruler of the city, and Othello's superior. He allows Othello and Desdemona to stay together despite her father's protests, and also sends Othello off to Cyprus to battle the Moors.

Senators: Other authority figures of Venice, and men of reason and order; they also support Othello and Desdemona's union, and Othello answers to them and the Duke in matters of war. (No speaking parts)

Bianca: A courtesan who Cassio visits frequently; Cassio asks her to make a copy of Desdemona's handkerchief, and the fact that the handkerchief is found in her place further incriminates Cassio. She is the only female in the play whom Cassio shows less than full respect to, probably because she is a prostitute.

Montano, Governor of Cyprus: Pronounces judgment on Iago at the end of the play, comments on the situation, and helps to wrap the play up. He is the main law and order figure of Cyprus, and serves as damage control after Othello dies, and Iago is proven unfit.

Lodovico and Gratiano: Two Venetian nobles, both of some relation to Desdemona; both play their biggest part after Desdemona has died, and must take the news of the tragedy back to Venice as officials of that city.

Narrative Summary Frame – Othello Act I Movie

The following questions will help you to write a summary of Act I in Othello, from what we view in the movie. Since we will not be reading Act I, it is important that you understand the background and how the play begins.

As you watch, answer the following questions:

Characters: Who are the main characters and what distinguishes them from others?	
Setting: When and where does the action take place? What are the circumstances?	
Initiating Events: What events have prompted some action in the story?	
Internal Response: How did the main characters express their feelings?	
Goal: What did the main characters decide to do? Have they set a goal, and if so, what is it?	
Consequence: How did the main characters try to accomplish their goals?	
Resolution: What do you foresee as the consequences of any characters' planned actions?	

Othello Summary and Notes – Acts I & II

As we read the play, students will be provided with a summary for each scene, as you see below. To increase your analysis and understanding, in the “Notes” section following each scene, write any ideas that may help you to remember and understanding of what you have read. These can include any or all of the following:

- Clarification of characters
- Important details of setting, plot, etc.
- Details explaining character motivation
- Foreshadowing: what do you think will happen next?
- Your interpretation of the text

Act I, Scene 1

In the streets of Venice, Iago tells Roderigo of his hatred for Othello, who has given Cassio the lieutenantcy that Iago wanted and has made Iago a mere ensign. At Iago’s suggestion, he and Roderigo, a former suitor to Desdemona, awake Desdemona’s father to tell him that Desdemona has eloped with Othello. This news enrages Brabantio, who organizes an armed band to search out Othello.

Notes:

Act I, Scene 2

Iago warns Othello about Brabantio’s anger, but Othello is confident in his own strength and in his love for Desdemona. Cassio arrives with orders from Othello: Othello is to meet with the duke and senators of Venice about about a Turkish invasion of the Venetian colony of Cyprus. Brabantio and his armed band come to seize Othello, who persuades Brabantio to accompany him to the duke, where Othello has been summoned and where Brabantio can present his case against Othello for his “theft” of Desdemona.

Notes:

Act I, Scene 3

The duke and the senators discuss the movements of the Turkish fleet and conclude that its target is, indeed, Cyprus. When Brabantio and Othello arrive, the duke insists on evidence to support the old man's charge that Othello has bewitched Desdemona. At Othello's suggestion, the duke sends for Desdemona. Othello describes his courtship of Desdemona, who, when she enters, tells her father and the senators that she has married Othello because she loves him. She thereby vindicates Othello before the senate. The duke orders Othello immediately to Cyprus and grants Desdemona her wish to join him there. Othello gives Iago the duty of conveying Desdemona to Cyprus. Alone with Iago, Roderigo, now in despair of winning Desdemona's love, threatens suicide, but Iago persuades him instead to sell his lands for ready cash and pursue Desdemona to Cyprus. Iago begins to plot to himself how he may use Othello's marriage to get back at Othello and to get Cassio's place as lieutenant.

Notes:

Act II, Scene 1

A terrible storm has struck Cyprus, just as the Turks were about to approach. This might mean that the Turkish attack will not happen; but it also bodes badly for Othello's ship. A messenger enters, and confirms that the Turkish fleet was broken apart by the storm, and that Cassio has arrived, though Othello is still at sea. They spot a ship coming forth; but Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia are on it, not Othello. Cassio greets them all, especially praising Desdemona; somehow, Iago and Desdemona enter into an argument about what women are, and Iago shows how little praise he believes women deserve. Othello arrives at last, and is very glad to see his wife arrived, much earlier than expected; he and Desdemona make public signs of their love, and then depart. Iago speaks to Roderigo, convincing him that Desdemona will stray from Othello, as she has already done with Cassio. He convinces Roderigo to attack Cassio that night, as he plans to visit mischief on both Othello and Cassio.

Notes:

Act II, Scene 2

Othello's herald enters, to proclaim that the Turks are not going to attack, all should be joyful, and Othello is celebrating the happiness of his recent marriage.

Notes:

Act II, Scene 3

Iago and Cassio are on the watch together; Iago gets Cassio to drink a bit, knowing that he cannot hold his liquor at all. Iago also tries to get Cassio's feelings about Desdemona, and make her seem tempting to him; but his intentions are innocent and friendly, so this approach fails. Cassio leaves for a bit, and Iago says that he intends to get Cassio drunk, that will hopefully cause a quarrel between Cassio and Roderigo, who has been stirred up against Cassio. Iago wants to see Cassio discredited through this, so that he might take Cassio's place. Montano and others come, and Iago entertains them with small talk and song; soon, Cassio is drunk, and Roderigo has approached. Cassio fights offstage with Roderigo, and comes forth, chasing him; Montano tries to hinder Cassio, but Cassio just ends up injuring him. All the noise wakes Othello, who comes down to figure out what has happened. Montano tells what he knows of it all, and Iago fills in the rest, making sure to fictionalize his part in it all too. Cassio is stripped of his rank, and all leave Cassio and Iago alone.

Cassio laments that he has lost his reputation, which is very dear to him. Iago tries to convince him that a reputation means little; and, if he talks to Desdemona, maybe he can get her to vouch for him with Othello. This will help Iago get the impression across that Desdemona and Cassio are together, which will make Othello very angry if it works. Iago then gives a soliloquy about knowing that Desdemona will speak for Cassio, and that he will be able to turn that against them both.

Notes:

Othello Summary and Notes – Act III

Act III, Scene 1

The third act begins with a little bit of comic relief; a clown is mincing words with a few musicians, then has a little wordplay with Cassio, who bids the clown to go and see if Desdemona will speak with him. Iago enters, and Cassio tells him that he means to speak to Desdemona, so that she may clear things up with Othello. Emilia comes out, and bids Cassio to come in and speak with Desdemona about his tarnished reputation.

Notes: _____

Act III, Scene 2

Othello gives Iago some letters that need to be delivered back to Venice, which Iago is in turn supposed to give to a ship's pilot who is sailing back to Venice.

Notes: _____

Act III, Scene 3

Desdemona decides that she wants to advocate for Cassio. She tells Emilia so, and that she believes Cassio is a good person, and has been wronged in this case; she pledges to do everything she can to persuade her husband to take Cassio back. Cassio speaks with her briefly, but leaves just as Othello enters because he does not wish for a confrontation. Iago seizes on this opportunity to play on Othello's insecurities, and make Cassio's exit seem guilty and incriminating. Othello then speaks to Desdemona, and Desdemona expresses her concern for Cassio; she is persistent in his suit, which Othello is not too pleased about. Othello says he will humor her, and the subject is dropped for a while.

Iago then plays on Othello's insecurities about Desdemona, and gets Othello to believe, through insinuation, that there is something going on between Desdemona and Cassio. Othello seizes on this, and then Iago works at building up his suspicions. Soon, Othello begins to doubt his wife, as Iago lets his insinuations gain the force of an accusation against her. Othello begins to voice his insecurities when it comes to Desdemona, and himself as well. Desdemona enters, and they have a brief conversation; Othello admits that he is troubled, though he will not state the cause.

Desdemona drops the handkerchief that Othello gave her on their honeymoon; Emilia knew that her husband had wanted it for something, so she doesn't feel too guilty about taking it. Emilia gives it to Iago, who decides to use the handkerchief for his own devices. Othello re-enters, and tells Iago that he now doubts his wife; Othello demands "ocular proof" of Desdemona's dishonesty, so Iago sets about making stories up about Cassio talking in his sleep, and says that Cassio has the handkerchief that Othello gave to Desdemona. Iago knows how important this handkerchief is to Othello; it was his first gift to Desdemona, and was given to him by his mother. Othello is incensed to hear that Desdemona would give away something so valuable, and is persuaded by Iago's insinuations and claims to believe that Desdemona is guilty. Othello then swears to have Cassio dead, and to be revenged upon Desdemona for the non-existent affair.

Notes: _____

Act III, Scene 4

Desdemona asks the clown where Cassio is; the clown goes off to fetch him. Desdemona is looking everywhere for the handkerchief, very sorry to have lost it; she knows that her losing it will upset Othello greatly, although she claims he is not so jealous that he will think ill of the loss. Othello enters, and asks for Desdemona's handkerchief; she admits that she does not have it, and then Othello tells her of its significance and alleged magical powers. Desdemona does not like Othello's tone; he seems obsessed with this object, and Desdemona is so frightened by him that she wishes she had nothing to do with it. She interrupts Othello's inquiry by bringing up Cassio's attempt to get back into Othello's favor; Othello becomes angry, and storms out. Desdemona and Emilia both note that Othello is much changed; he is unkind and seems jealous, and they are suspicious of the change in him.

Cassio then enters, with Iago; he laments that his suit is not successful, and that Othello does not seem likely to take him back. Desdemona is sorry for this, since she knows that Cassio is a man of worth; she tells Cassio and Iago that Othello has been acting strange, and is upset, and Iago goes to look for him, feigning concern. Emilia thinks that Othello's change has something to do with Desdemona, or Othello's jealous nature; they still cannot fathom what has happened, and exit, leaving Cassio.

Bianca comes in, and Cassio asks her to copy the handkerchief that he found in his room; it is Desdemona's handkerchief, though Cassio has no idea. He claims he does not love her, and gets angry at her for allegedly suspecting that the handkerchief is a gift of another woman. But, Bianca is not disturbed, and leaves with the handkerchief.

Notes: _____

Othello Summary and Notes – Act IV

Act IV, Scene 1

Othello is trying, even after swearing that Desdemona was unfaithful, not to condemn her too harshly. He is talking with Iago about the handkerchief still, and its significance in being found; but, soon, Iago whips Othello into an even greater fury through mere insinuation, and Othello takes the bait. Othello falls into a trance of rage, and Iago decides to hammer home his false ideas about his wife. Iago calls Cassio in, while Othello hides; Iago speaks to Cassio of Bianca, but Othello, in his disturbed state, believes that Cassio is talking of Desdemona, which is the last "proof" he needs before declaring his wife guilty. Bianca comes in, and gives the handkerchief back to Cassio, since she swears she will have nothing to do with it.

Othello is incensed by Cassio, still believing that he was speaking of Desdemona, rather than Bianca. Now, Othello is resolved to kill Desdemona himself, and charges Iago with murdering Cassio. Ludovico, a noble Venetian whom Desdemona knows, has recently landed; Desdemona and Othello welcome him there. But, when Desdemona mentions Cassio, Othello becomes very angry and slaps her in front of everyone; she rushes off, very upset. Ludovico especially is shocked at this change in Othello, and has no idea how such a noble man could act so cruelly.

Notes:

Act IV, Scene 2

Othello questions Emilia about Desdemona's guilt, or the chance she has had an affair with Cassio. Emilia admits to having seen nothing, though Othello does not believe her. Emilia swears that she has seen and heard all that has gone on between Cassio and Desdemona, and that Desdemona is pure and true. Othello believes that Emilia is in on all this too; he accuses Desdemona, and her insistence that she is innocent only infuriates him further. Othello leaves, and Desdemona and Emilia try to figure out what has happened to Othello, and what they can do; Desdemona feels especially helpless, and Emilia is very angry. Emilia thinks that someone has manipulated Othello into accusing Desdemona, and has poisoned his mind; however, Iago is there to dispel this opinion, so that Emilia does not inquire further into her theory. Upon leaving the women, Iago comes across Roderigo; he is not pleased with how Iago has handled things, and knows that although Iago is promising him Desdemona's favor, he has done nothing to indicate that he has worked to achieve this. Iago quiets him by making him believe that if he kills Cassio, then he will win Desdemona; Roderigo decides to go along with it, but Iago is coming dangerously close to being revealed.

Notes:

Act IV, Scene 3

Othello tells Desdemona to go to bed, and dismiss Emilia; Emilia regrets Desdemona's marriage, although Desdemona cannot say that she does not love Othello. Desdemona knows that she will die soon; she sings a song of sadness and resignation, and decides to give herself to her fate. Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would commit adultery to win her husband the world. Emilia, the more practical one, thinks that it is not too big a price for a small act; Desdemona is too good, and too devout, to say that she would do so.

Notes:

Othello Summary and Notes – Act V

Act V, Scene 1

Iago has Roderigo poised and ready to pounce on Cassio, and kill him; if either of them is killed, it is to Iago's benefit, although he would like to have both of them disposed of, so that his devices might not be discovered. Roderigo and Cassio fight, and both are injured; Othello hears the scuffle, is pleased, and then leaves to finish off Desdemona. Iago enters, pretending that he knows nothing of the scuffle; Gratiano and Ludovico also stumble upon the scene, having no idea what has happened. Roderigo is still alive, so Iago feigns a quarrel, and finishes him off. Bianca comes by, and sees Cassio wounded; Iago makes some remark to implicate her; Cassio is carried away, and Roderigo is already dead. Emilia also comes in, and pins more blame on Bianca; she has done nothing, but Iago has some quick work to do if he is to exonerate himself in this mess.

Notes:

Act V, Scene 2

Othello enters Desdemona's room while she is asleep; and though she is beautiful, and appears innocent, he still is determined to kill her. He justifies this with images, metaphors, and ideas of her rebirth after death, and though his rage is softened, he is still much mistaken about her. Desdemona awakens, and he tells her to repent of any sins before she dies; she believes there is nothing she can do to stop him from killing her, and continues to assert her innocence. Othello tells her that he found her handkerchief with Cassio, though Desdemona insists it must not be true; she pleads with Othello not to kill her right then, but he begins to smother her. Emilia knocks, curious about what is going on; Othello lets her in, but tries to conceal Desdemona, who he thinks is already dead. Emilia brings the news of Roderigo's death, and Cassio's wounding.

Emilia soon finds out that Desdemona is nearly dead, by Othello's hand; Desdemona speaks her last words, and then Emilia pounces on Othello for committing this horrible crime. Othello is not convinced of his folly until Iago confesses his part, and Cassio speaks of the use of the handkerchief; then, Othello is overcome with grief. Iago stabs Emilia for telling all about his plots, and then Emilia dies; the Venetian nobles reveal that Brabantio, Desdemona's father, is dead, and so cannot be grieved by this tragedy now. Othello stabs Iago when he is brought back in; Othello then tells all present to remember him how he is, and kills himself. Cassio becomes temporary leader of the troops at Cyprus, and Lodovico and Gratiano are supposed to carry the news of the tragedy back to Venice. Iago is taken into custody, and his crimes will be judged back in Venice.

Notes:









