

Othello Knowledge Organiser

Characters	<p>Othello: a general in the Venetian army and the tragic hero. Despite his elevated status, he is insecure due to his race and age. He is consumed by jealousy as the play progresses, eventually murdering his wife due to believing she has had an affair.</p>	<p>Iago: Othello's ensign and the Machiavellian tragic villain. He delights in manipulation. Desdemona: Othello's wife, Brabantio's daughter, and the tragic victim. She is initially determined and outspoken, but becomes increasingly passive.</p>	<p>Emilia: Iago's wife and Desdemona's servant. Whilst she is initially submissive, she becomes more outspoken. Cassio: despite his inexperience, he becomes Othello's lieutenant just before the play begins. Iago convinces Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair.</p>	<p>Roderigo: a gentleman of Venice who is infatuated with Desdemona. Iago uses him as a pawn in his plans, and eventually kills him. Duke of Venice: allows Othello's marriage to Desdemona because he needs Othello to lead the army.</p>	<p>Brabantio: Desdemona's father and a Venetian senator. Montano: original governor of Cyprus. Lodovico: related to Brabantio and the voice of reason in the play. Gratiano: related to Brabantio. Bianca: Cypriot courtesan. Loves Cassio.</p>
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Aspects of Tragedy – as set out in Aristotle's "Poetics"

<p>The tragic hero is noble, but with hamartia (fatal flaw) that leads to peripeteia (reversal of fortune). This flaw may be hubris (excessive pride) or blindness to the truth, and leads to the hero's isolation, emptiness, and sense of loss. The hero has a moment of anagnorisis (realisation) before his downfall. This tragic trajectory evokes pathos (pity and fear) for the hero, which is eventually purged in a moment of catharsis (release) at the play's denouement (resolution). There is often a sense that the hero is fated to meet his inevitable downfall.</p>	<p>The tragic villain exerts external pressure on the tragic hero. He is often Machiavellian (cunning, scheming).</p>	<p>The tragic victim suffers and is killed. In <i>Othello</i>, this suffering is linked to society's treatment of women. This evokes pathos (pity) and misery in the audience.</p>
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Historical Context

<p>Race in Renaissance England: at a time when global exploration and slavery were in their infancy, racism was rife in England (Elizabeth I ordered that black people should be exiled). There was a belief in the Great Chain of Being, which placed God at the top, followed by angels, white people, black people, and animals. Thus, Iago's animalistic descriptions of Othello reflect contemporary xenophobia. Post-colonial literary theory explores the impact of colonialism on literature. Post-colonial critics argue that in literature people of different races are presented as the "other" – as different, and possibly to be feared. Whilst Shakespeare communicates these racist ideas in 1.1, in 1.2 he presents Othello as the antithesis of such stereotypes, thus exposing the baselessness of racism. However, Othello internalises the racist ideology of those around him, and this leads to the insecurity he feels in his marriage. Thus the external pressures on Othello become internal pressures.</p>	<p>Gender and the patriarchy: Renaissance women were expected to be subservient to men and did not have many rights. Many were consigned to the domestic sphere and were expected to provide a stable point of morality and innocence in a chaotic, corrupt world. Othello does not challenge this – rather the fact that he "won" Desdemona shows that he confirms this ideology. A time of change: despite traditional beliefs regarding race and gender, the 17th century was a moment time of change from traditional to modern ideas. E.g., Queen Elizabeth had shown that women could hold power. Similarly, emerging sciences challenged belief in the supernatural. Shakespeare's characters are caught in the midst of this change, and whilst they often hope for a different, better world, they find themselves entrapped by the expectations of traditional society.</p>
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Scene	Plot	Symbols	Quotations	Vocabulary	
Act 1: Exposition – establishing Othello's nobility against a background of xenophobia	1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roderigo and Iago inform Brabantio of Desdemona's secret marriage to Othello. Enraged, Brabantio sets out in search of his daughter. 	<p>Venice: a bastion of cosmopolitan civilisation and commerce, protecting the boundaries of Europe from the Ottoman Empire. Also corrupted by debauchery. Animal imagery and failure to name Othello: racism and continual dehumanisation of Othello.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> I: Cassio is an "arithmetician" and like a "spinster". I: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." I: "I am not what I am." I: "Poison [Brabantio's] delight...plague him with flies." I: "An old black ram is tugging your white ewe." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Meritocracy: a society based on personal achievement, not wealth. Duplicitous: deceptive, Machiavellian. Debased value system: lacking integrity. Prejudiced / xenophobic: racist.
	1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iago warns Othello about Brabantio. The Duke calls for Othello. Brabantio accuses Othello of abduction. 	<p>Disease: uncontrollable spread of evil; one person's evil can infect another; destruction. Misogynistic language is used to objectify Desdemona, suggesting that she is "owned" by her father/ husband. She is diminished to a sexual symbol.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> O: "Tis better as it is." O: "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints." O: "I love the gentle Desdemona" "I won his daughter." I: Othello "hath boarded a land carrack." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Rational: thinking clearly and logically. Noble: possessing outstanding moral virtues; of high rank. Integrity: soundness of moral character. Misogynistic: hatred of women.
	1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The court hears of the Turkish threat to Cyprus. Othello and Brabantio enter. Brabantio accuses Othello. Des. is called to assert her love. The Duke agrees to the marriage. He orders Othello to lead the fleet to Cyprus. Des. will accompany him. Iago plots to destroy Othello. 	<p>Council chamber: Othello is welcomed into a place of power at the heart of Venetian society. His elevated place in the social hierarchy is confirmed – and political imperatives (war) are judged to be more important in deciding this than personal conflict (his illicit marriage). Marriage: in a world of war, Othello's marriage appears to be an oasis of calm. It offers a possible escape from conflict, and potential reconciliation between different groups.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> O: "most potent, grave, and revered signiors". O: "A round, unvarnished tale will I deliver." O: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them." D: "I do perceive here a divided duty." B: "She has deceived her father, and may thee." I: "The Moor is of a free and open nature." I: "I have it, it is engendered! Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Sprezzatura: concealing one's skills. Self-possessed: confident, assertive. Precarious foundations of the marriage: unstable basis for marriage. Embittered: filled with resentment. Malevolent: evil, immoral. Complicit: helping to do wrong. By confiding in the audience, Iago makes them complicit in his actions.
Act 2: Rising Action – destabilising the precarious balance of love and society	2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Storm destroys the Turkish fleet. Des, Iago, Emilia and Cassio arrive at Cyprus. They jest bawdily while waiting for Othello. Emilia is teased and berated by her husband, Iago. Iago hints that Des loves Cassio 	<p>Storm: increasing chaos; the magnitude of natural forces that dominate mankind; foreshadows the murder of Des. Cyprus: this "warlike isle" on the edge of civilisation symbolises chaos and society's precarious balance. It was also Aphrodite's birthplace (she was accused in infidelity). The sea symbolises the vastness of Othello's love, and suggests that the marriage is natural (in contrast to racist beliefs). Yet mankind is at the mercy of the sea's currents.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> C: "Our great Captain's captain." O: "My soul's joy". "My fair warrior." O: "If it were now to die, /Twere now to be most happy" I: "You are well tuned now: but I'll set down / The pegs". I: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Jesting bawdily: risqué joking Courteous: polite Laudatory: celebratory Infatuated: overwhelmed by passion Amorous: loving Marginalised: silenced, ignored, subservient
	2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There will be free drinks for all, in celebration of the marriage and the victory. 		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Herald: "Our noble and valiant General." 	
	2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iago makes Cassio drunk, and he fights. Othello fires Cassio. Cassio is distraught. Iago suggests that Des. could plead with Othello to have him reinstated. Iago outlines his plan. 	<p>The drunken brawl symbolises the shift from political and social order to chaos, just as the natural world has already had a moment of chaos in the storm at the start of Act 2. This shift from blank verse to prose signals increasing disorder. Previously, we have heard Iago speaking in prose and so it is associated with his malevolence and destructive impulses. Later, Othello will also begin to speak in this way.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> O: "my blood begins my safer guides to rule / And passion... Assays to lead the way." O: "never more be officer of mine" D: "What's the matter?" O: "All's well now, sweeting." C: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! ... I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." I: "Divinity of hell" I: "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear." I: "the net...that shall enmesh them all" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Dissipated / debauched: drunk, hedonistic. Opportunistic: taking opportunities. Base instinct: acting on immoral desires. Stage manager of chaos: Iago seizes control. Voice of order: Othello restores control. Diminutive: making someone feel small. Dishonoured: made to appear immoral.

Scene	Plot	Symbols	Quotations	Vocabulary	
Act 3: Climax – the destructive power of jealous becomes clear	3	3.1: Cassio brings musicians to serenade Desdemona and asks Emilia to let him see Desdemona.		3.2: Othello leaves his quarters to inspect the island's fortifications.	
	3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Des. pleads for Cassio, and Othello listens, but Iago causes Othello to doubt. Des. loses her handkerchief. Emilia gives it to Iago. Iago fans Othello's suspicions further, claiming to have seen Cassio with the handkerchief. 	The handkerchief is a traditional love token and symbolises Othello and Desdemona's passion. It was also a family heirloom, suggesting Desdemona's acceptance of Othello's different background. It becomes a representation of Othello's jealousy and suspicions of his wife. In some ways, it could represent Desdemona's body, which Othello believes has been handled by Cassio.	<p>30. D: "Whatever you be, I am obedient"</p> <p>31. I: "Beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on."</p> <p>32. O: "when I love thee not / Chaos is come again."</p> <p>33. O: "I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapour of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses."</p> <p>34. O: "I'll tear her all to pieces!"</p>	<p>28. Aesthetic delight in destruction: Iago seems to enjoy causing misery.</p> <p>29. Credulous: unquestioning</p> <p>30. Myopic: blind to the truth</p> <p>31. Conciliatory: attempting to end a disagreement</p> <p>32. Misconstrued: misinterpreted</p> <p>33. Disorder: disintegration into chaos</p>
	3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Othello is enraged when he asks Des. for the handkerchief, but she talks about Cassio. Emilia suggests that Othello is jealous; Des. rejects this idea. Cassio finds the handkerchief. 	Monstrous imagery: the concept of being monstrous refers to unnatural, deviant or immoral behaviour in the play. Iago refers to his plot as a "monstrous birth" and Othello calls Desdemona's alleged infidelity "monstrous". This demonic imagery alludes to complete, unstoppable and almost unspeakable destruction.	<p>35. D: "My noble Moor / Is of true mind, and made of no baseness / As jealous creatures are."</p> <p>36. O: D's hand is "A young and sweating devil, here / That commonly rebels"</p> <p>37. E: "They are all but stomachs, and we are all but food."</p> <p>38. E: Jealousy "is a monster begot upon itself."</p>	<p>34. Cynical: distrusting, disparaging of others</p> <p>35. Ensnared: entrapped, caught</p> <p>36. Accusatory: applying blame</p> <p>37. Accident of birth: one's circumstances are determined by the class one is born into</p>
Act 4: Falling Action – Othello's increasing debasement plunges society into chaos	4.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iago continues to provoke Othello's jealousy. Lodovico is horrified when he seeks Othello strike Des. 	Epileptic fit: this "savage madness" emphasises the tragic hero's lack of power and agency, and his vulnerability to Iago. Othello appears unfit to lead. Striking Desdemona shows the progression from passionate infatuation, to verbal violence, to physical violence. It is a key turning point in their relationship.	<p>39. O: "The raven over the infectious house."</p> <p>40. O: "Lie with her? Lie on her? [...] Zounds [...] Noses, ears and lips. [...] Confess! Handkerchief!"</p> <p>41. O: "Let her rot and perish and be damned tonight, for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone."</p> <p>42. Lodovico: "Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?"</p>	<p>38. Moral commentary: Lodovico explains the rights and wrongs of the situation</p> <p>39. Descent into irrationality: disintegration of Othello's psychological state</p> <p>40. Brutality: violence, callousness</p>
	4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Othello questions Emilia, but refuses to believe her. He confronts Des. Des. turns to Iago for reassurance, and Roderigo reproaches Iago for unfair dealing; Iago reassures both. 	Water symbolises purity and innocence, but is also connected to trade and therefore is a symbol of affluence and cosmopolitan culture. The free-flowing water at the start of the play has now become a foul trickle, showing how Othello and Desdemona's love has been corrupted. Othello's attitude to love had been debased and he is obsessed with obscene physicality.	<p>43. E: "I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest, /"</p> <p>44. D: "My lord, what is your will?"</p> <p>45. O: "the cunning whore of Venice."</p> <p>46. O: "The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up ... / Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in."</p>	<p>41. Isolated: alone</p> <p>42. Callous: unfeeling</p> <p>43. Inhumane: lacking in compassion</p> <p>44. Contemptuous: disgusted, scathing, dismissive</p> <p>45. Relentless: unstoppable</p>
	4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Des. prepares for bed, singing an old song from her youth. 	The wedding sheets symbolise the failure of the marriage, and have become a shroud, foreshadowing Des's death. The willow song heightens pathos for Des.	<p>47. E: "The world's a huge thing: it is a great price for a small vice."</p>	<p>46. Melancholic: unhappy, depressed</p> <p>47. Disillusioned: losing faith in something</p> <p>48. Pragmatic: practical</p>
Act 5: Denouement – Othello's downfall, and an attempt to restore order	5.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roderigo and Iago wait for Cassio; Roderigo injures Cassio. Roderigo is killed by Iago. 	Darkness: the play's circular structure indicates Iago's role as stage-manager, and the inescapability of immorality and chaos. The characters are unable to see (the truth?).	<p>48. I: Cassio "hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly."</p>	<p>49. Mastery: total control</p> <p>50. Triumphant: victorious</p>
	5.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Othello is strongly affected by the sight of a sleeping Desdemona, but kills her. Emilia discovers the murder and proclaims Desdemona's innocence. She reveals what Iago has done. Iago kills Emilia, and Othello is arrested by Lodovico. Othello stabs himself. Iago is arrested. 	White objects symbolise unchanging innocence – indicating that Othello desires a wife who can be controlled and will not alter with time or mood. The references to white also indicate how Othello has internalised racist ideas and is preoccupied with Desdemona's whiteness; he believes that she will not love him because of the ethnic differences. Light: hope, innocence, purity, heavenliness, life.	<p>51. O: "I'll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster."</p> <p>52. O: "I know not where is that Promethean heat / That can thy light relume."</p> <p>53. D: "Some bloody passion / Shakes your very frame."</p> <p>54. E: "May his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day."</p> <p>55. E: "I'll speak."</p> <p>56. I: "From this time forth I never will speak a word."</p> <p>57. O: "I have done the state some service, and they know it."</p> <p>58. O: "Of one that loved not wisely, but too well. / Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme."</p>	<p>51. Passive: unresponsive</p> <p>52. Seeking retribution: looking for revenge</p> <p>53. Automaton: robotic, following instructions</p> <p>54. Self-aggrandising: increasing one's power</p> <p>55. Tormented by remorse: guilty</p> <p>56. Heinous: horrific, reprehensible, unforgivable</p> <p>57. Irrefutable, righteous anger: justified anger that cannot be denied</p> <p>58. Evasive: avoiding responding to questions</p>

Big ideas

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ultimately, the tragedy is that Othello and Desdemona's optimistic desire for a world in which all races and genders can achieve autonomy is destroyed by forces that wish to maintain the status quo. This is a play about racism and misogyny; but it is also about the failure of the individual to combat oppression. Othello's assertion of nobility and integrity during the exposition is admirable; through his eloquent speeches, Shakespeare challenges contemporary racist stereotypes. However, Shakespeare also uses Othello to demonstrate the power of such ideologies; Othello's racial identity makes him vulnerable to Iago's schemes, and as he internalises preconceptions of his identity he is shaped into the very stereotype he refuted in Act 1. Iago is the quintessence of prejudice and discontent; not only does he rail against anyone who is an outsider, but he also attempts to manipulate them to their downfall. His character is used to demonstrate mankind's capacity for evil, something made all the more unsettling when it is set in the context of Iago's apparent amorality. Initially Desdemona provides a glimmer of hope for women; her outspoken nature and her determination to make her own choices shows that women can have agency. However, ultimately the play suggests that female empowerment is not possible within Renaissance society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emilia's development as a character is the mirror image of Desdemona's trajectory; as Desdemona becomes increasingly passive, Emilia finds her voice. Yet both women face the same fate: death at the hands of their husbands. Within the patriarchal world of the play, women who attempt to assert their views find themselves literally silenced. The parallels between Bianca and Desdemona suggest that an individual's fate is purely an accident of birth. Shakespeare also uses Bianca's character to suggest that survival is dependent on treading a fine line between maintaining one's integrity and being worldly-wise. Cassio's character demonstrates that it is possible to maintain one's integrity and morality, even in the face of being reduced to a debased pawn. He becomes a voice of reason and order at the play's denouement. Lodovico is a voice of reason, and also provides a moral commentary, highlighting the dramatic shifts in Othello's character. Brabantio symbolises the traditional values of Venice, and is therefore an embodiment of reprehensible racism and prejudice, as well as of the patriarchy. Roderigo symbolises the myopic materialism and lust of Venice.
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