

Othello

by William Shakespeare

*A Shakespeare In The Ruins
Study Guide*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Leading Characters, Synopsis, & Commentary
3. Before the Play...
4. Reading the Play...
5. After the Play...
6. Extension for only the truest Shakespeare lovers!
7. Pete Levin's "Ye Olde Official Shakespearean Insult Kit"
8. Lesson Plans and Web Links from *NCTE*inbox

Introduction

Another Spring, another great offering from *Shakespeare In The Ruins*. Life is good!

I have enjoyed reading and discussing *Othello* with high school students for many years. The story is compelling, and they identify strongly with – or they at least understand and/or are interested in – the major motifs of jealousy, guilt, parent-child relationships, honesty and deception, male/female relationships, and appearance vs. reality. However, there are also, of course, two troubling matters: racism and misogyny.

Othello is a Moor – a dark skinned man whose Negroid features are commented upon and disparaged by a number of characters in the play. According to Michael Wood, there were a number of dramas written

about Moors in the last years of Elizabeth. The fascination with the exotic 'other' was shared by the groundling and the court – where soon, in a 'masque of Blackness', the Queen and her ladies would wear black make-up to appear as 'Ethiopes'. A play about racism towards black people, then, was touching on a current preoccupation on the streets of London (251).

The history of black people in London during Shakespeare's time is interesting reading and offers some context for what most citizens of Winnipeg in 2009 will consider blatant racism. To make the play more specifically Winnipeg-centric, director Christopher Brauer has cast Michael Lawrenchuk, an actor who is Aboriginal, in the title role. Brauer comments that the centre of racism in Winnipeg is around Aboriginals, so it makes sense to have an Aboriginal Othello. According to Brauer, "racism feels bad to us because we're more sensitive to it". But this play is not about race, it's about "men who have lost their compass", which we clearly see in Othello, Iago, Cassio and Roderigo.

Some context is also important for understanding the treatment of and language around the three women characters. Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are all, at some point in the play, considered whores. Addressing the topic of "Sex, Guilt and Male Anxiety", Michael Wood says that Shakespeare was "a sensitive, imaginative and supremely intelligent man [who] lived in a patriarchal society that shaped him and his attitudes...he seems to have believed in the possibility of true friendship and companionship between men and women, an equality articulated many times in his plays, as in Emilia's famous speech [IV.iii.82-101] in *Othello*" (191). Does Shakespeare, in this play as in some of his others, suggest that "most couples...are mismatched, even couples marrying for love; you should never marry in haste..." (Greenblatt 140)? His own marriage to Anne Hathaway was quite an "escape" from his life at the time. She was of a different religion and she was independent, "free to make her own decisions" (Greenblatt 119). And only six months after the marriage, their daughter Susanna was born. According

to the history books, Shakespeare seems to have longed for marital intimacy, but without much luck.

Director Christopher Brauer puts his own mark on this production. It begins with Othello stabbing himself, then moves to the beginning of the story. In the minute or so it takes him to die, life flashes before his eyes and he gains perspective. Othello sees Iago at his worst; he is a man discovering his own stupidity and blindness, and we see him making these discoveries. The setting is outside time and space. We see Iago and Desdemona the way Othello sees them: Desdemona is perfect; Iago is dangerous and impetuous. Rather than create a particular historical period set and costumes, Brauer uses more abstract space and plays with theatricality and magic. For the school shows, the script is shortened to fit into 90 minutes.

As is so often the case, Shakespeare forces us to ask many questions, but gives us few, if any, answers. Yet, what fun it is to explore the terrain he brings to us!

*My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful;
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man. She thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
And I lov'd her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have us'd.*

I.iii.157 – 168.

Enjoy the show!

Pamela Lockman for *Shakespeare In The Ruins*, April 2009

Works Cited:

Brauer, Christopher. Telephone interview, March 28, 2009.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will In The World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2004.

Wood, Michael. *Shakespeare*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Leading Characters, Synopsis & Commentary

(Adapted from Oxford School *Shakespeare, Othello*, edited by Roma Gill, OBE M.A. *Cantab.*, B. Litt. Oxon. Oxford University Press. Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, UK, 2002.)

Othello The 'Moor': a black African prince living in a European, colour-prejudiced society where he holds high rank in the Venetian military forces. As a professional soldier he has had little experience of women.

Cassio Othello's lieutenant: an honourable Florentine with a weakness for women and drink.

Iago Othello's ensign (standard-bearer): a Venetian and a professional soldier, he conceals his real nature under an appearance of 'honesty'.

Roderigo A Venetian gentleman: he is in love with Desdemona, but is being systematically cheated by Iago.

Desdemona Othello's wife: the daughter of Brabantio, she has married Othello secretly and unknown to her father.

Emilia Desdemona's lady-in-waiting and Iago's wife: loyal to both her husband and her mistress, she shows an attitude to men that is completely different from Desdemona's.

Brabantio Desdemona's father and a member of the Venetian senate: outraged when his daughter makes a secret marriage with Othello.

ACT I

1. Iago complains to Roderigo that even though he is the more suitable, Othello promoted Cassio to be his lieutenant, leaving Iago as his "ancient" (ensign). As part of the earliest stage of Iago's plan to hurt Othello, he and Roderigo wake Brabantio to inform him of Desdemona's secret marriage to Othello. Enraged, Brabantio sets out in search of his daughter.

2. There is a new military threat to Venice. Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is searching for him. Cassio brings a summons from the duke demanding Othello's presence at court on a matter of urgent state business. Brabantio is interested only in his daughter's disposition and demands Othello's arrest for abducting her. But the duke's command must be answered first.

3. Othello and Brabantio are welcomed by the duke as he is hearing about the threatened Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Brabantio accuses Othello, who defends himself. The duke sends for Desdemona to testify to her love. He tries to pacify Brabantio, then returns his attention to the Turkish threat. Othello welcomes the order to go to Cyprus, and Desdemona's request to go along is

granted. Roderigo now despairs of ever winning Desdemona's love, but Iago has a scheme that excites fresh hope in him.

ACT II

1. There is a storm at sea and the Turkish fleet is scattered, no longer a threat. While Othello's arrival is anxiously awaited, Cassio arrives safely, followed by Iago, Emilia and Desdemona. Iago makes jokes (many of them rude!) until Othello arrives. Iago begins to broaden his plan of 'entrapment', and suggests to Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio.

2. Othello proclaims a public holiday until evening, and the Herald announces free drinks for all in celebration of Othello's marriage.

3. Devious Iago gets both Roderigo and Cassio drunk, and encourages a quarrel between them. Cassio strikes Roderigo, and Iago sounds the alarm, which brings Othello onto the scene. When Othello hears Iago's account of the fighting, he immediately dismisses Cassio from his office as lieutenant. Othello retires with Desdemona. Cassio grieves over the loss of his position, but Iago comforts him by suggesting that Desdemona will plead with Othello to have him reinstated. Alone on stage, Iago outlines his plan of action, and then he assures Roderigo that everything is under control.

ACT III

1. Following Iago's advice, Cassio asks Emilia to help him get access to Desdemona.

2. Othello goes to inspect the island's fortifications.

3. Desdemona promises Cassio that she will intercede for him. When Othello returns with Iago, Desdemona pleads for Cassio and Othello is sympathetic. But when she has gone, Iago begins his insinuations, causing Othello to doubt Desdemona and her friendship with Cassio. Desdemona comes to call Othello for dinner and as the two leave the stage, she drops her handkerchief. Othello tells her to leave it. Soon after, Emilia picks it up and recognizes it as the handkerchief Iago has previously mentioned and requested from her. She gives it to him. Iago is delighted and still pretending to be acting in Othello's best interests, he fans Othello's suspicions that Desdemona has been false to him by claiming to have seen her handkerchief in Cassio's hands. Othello swears that he will be revenged, and orders Iago to kill Cassio.

4. Knowing that she doesn't have it, Othello asks Desdemona for the handkerchief that she has lost. She tries to talk to him about Cassio, and he leaves in a rage. When Cassio comes in with Iago, Desdemona tells them that her husband is behaving strangely, and Iago goes to check up on him. Emilia

suggests that Othello may be jealous, but Desdemona declares that he has absolutely no cause for jealousy. As the two women leave, Bianca, Cassio's mistress, comes searching for him. He shows her a handkerchief that he has found in his room and asks her to copy its embroidery.

ACT IV

1. Iago continues to provoke Othello's jealousy. Anguished at the thought that Desdemona might be unfaithful to him, he falls into an epileptic convulsion. When he recovers consciousness, Iago promises to get proof of what he has been saying. Othello conceals himself and listens while Iago and Cassio talk about Bianca. Misguided by Iago, Othello assumes they are discussing Desdemona and is now convinced of her guilt. When letters recalling him to Venice are brought by Lodovico, Othello strikes and insults his wife in his presence. Lodovico is horrified and stunned!

2. Othello questions Emilia about his wife's conduct. Although she praises Desdemona as honest and faithful, Othello does not believe her. He sends for Desdemona and accuses her of adultery. She is very distressed and Emilia tries to comfort her. When she cannot, she brings Iago back to help. His devious plan continues as he tries to comfort her, and then proceeds to set up Roderigo to attack (and try to kill) Cassio.

3. Desdemona prepares for bed, talking to Emilia about unfaithful wives and singing an old song from her childhood.

ACT V

1. Roderigo (instructed by Iago) lies in wait for Cassio as he comes from Bianca's house. There is a quick skirmish and both are wounded. The cries arouse Othello, who assumes that Iago has murdered Cassio (as he promised to do in III.3). Lodovico and Gratiano come to see what is going on. Iago also shows up and 'takes control' of the situation, murdering Roderigo, threatening Bianca, and sending Emilia back to Othello and Desdemona.

2. Othello is strongly affected by the sight of Desdemona sleeping in their bed. She awakens and pleads her innocence as he accuses her of committing adultery with Cassio. He is determined to kill her and covers her head with a pillow to suffocate her. Emilia arrives, sees the murdered Desdemona, hears Othello's accusation, then raises the alarm which fetches Iago, Gratiano, and Montano into the room. Hearing from Othello that it was Iago who told him all the stories of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, she denounces her husband who then draws his sword on her and escapes from the scene. She dies, Iago and Cassio are both brought back, and the truth is revealed. Othello, convinced of his own guilt, stabs himself and dies. Iago's plan finally has nowhere left to go. He is arrested and taken away to be tortured.

Before the Play...

1. Here are some questions to talk about in pairs or small groups, or to write about in a journal, and then to share in class if you're comfortable:

- How would you feel if your parents didn't approve of your boyfriend or girlfriend? What would you do?

- What would it take for someone who is very different from yourself to win you over?

- What makes you jealous? How do you respond to jealousy?

- How do you feel when someone disappoints you? How do you let the person know he or she has disappointed you?

- In what ways are men and women different in their ideas about love? Their approaches to it? Their ideas about and approaches to the opposite sex?

- How is it possible for racism to become ingrained, or even "normal", within a society?

- Is it possible to notice racial characteristics without being racist?

- Can a human be all good or all evil?

2. Othello claims to have won Desdemona with his stories of great adventure. Read and discuss one or more of these great narrative poems:

- "The Highwayman" (Alfred Noyes)

- "Kubla Khan" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

- "The Lady of Shalott" (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

- "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

- "Ulysses" (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

Reading the Play...

1. Nothing takes the place of actually reading the play, and the best way for students to do this is to get up on their feet! In some classes (my own included), students are assigned to one of five groups, and each group is assigned one complete act of the play. Students read the act and scene summaries to put their assigned section in context of the whole play, and then have several days in class to prepare their specific act. We start with Act I and read all the way through, stopping at the end of each scene for questions (often in the form of “hot seat”, explained below) and discussion. Some teachers also like to give a variety of quizzes during the reading to check comprehension.

2. Hot Seat: At the end of a scene, several students are assigned the role of a character within that scene. Teacher and other students ask questions to the selected students about what’s going on in the scene just read. These students must answer the questions in the persona of whichever character they have been assigned. In other words, the students must speak “in the shoes” of the selected character.

For example, at the end of I.i.: Roderigo, do you really think you can win Desdemona’s love by ratting on her to her father? What do you think of his initial hostility to you? Do you really think you can win him over?

Hotseat is an excellent technique for delving into the characters and plot, and it is also a way to deal with specific lines and to explore varying interpretations. For example, I.i.66: Iago, what do you mean when you say to Roderigo, *I am not what I am*? How much do you actually want Roderigo to know? At this point, how much do *you* actually know of your plan and how it will unfold?

3. Images and Motifs

As you read, look for these recurring images and motifs:

- spiders, webs, ensnaring
- honesty and loyalty
- what *seems* versus what *is*
- jealousy
- proof versus suspicion
- women as whores
- men as users

4. Compare and Contrast

1. Read the poem “My Last Dutchess” by Robert Browning. Compare and contrast the description with Iago’s lines to Cassio from II.iii.294-305.

Our general’s wife is now the

General. I may say so in this respect, for that he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces. Confess yourself freely to her, importune her help to put you in your place again. She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blest a disposition, that she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested. This broken joint between you and her husband entreat her to splinter; and my fortunes against any lay worth naming, this crack of your love shall grow stronger than it was before.

2. Re-read the exchange between Othello and Desdemona in IV.ii, and compare it to their earlier exchanges in III.iii.41 – 92 and III.iv.34 – 40. How has the tone changed?

3. Re-read the exchange between Desdemona and Emilia in III.iv.134 – 158. Contrast Desdemona's view of Othello with Emilia's view of men in III.iv. 97 – 100 (*'Tis not a year or two shows us a man./They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,/They belch us.*)

5. Some scene-by-scene study questions from my colleague, Ray Grynol:

Act 1

1.1.

1. What, precisely, are Iago's complaints against Othello? (8-32).
2. How does he characterize his own soldiership and service against that of Cassio?
3. Look carefully at ll. 41-58. Iago describes two sorts of followers. What types of followers are they? Paraphrase lines 61-65. What do these indicate about Iago's type of "service"? What do they suggest about Iago's character and about a possible theme for the play?
4. Iago is "determined" to play the villain; when Brabantio calls him a villain, Iago does not deny the name (119). What seems to be his primary motivation to play the villain?
5. The directly racist slurs against Othello begin at line 66. List them and their speakers and analyze what they signify about each character's racial concerns and anxieties. How do racial stereotypes relate to stereotypes

based on class? (135-137, 166-174). How does Iago arouse Brabantio emotionally and physically?

6. What, according to Iago, will be the Senate's reaction to this elopement (148-154)? What would they like to do? What will they feel obliged to do?

7. Cite four images that Iago uses. What do they tell us about his character?

1.2.

1. How does Iago put into effect his plans of scene 1 in lines 1 – 17 of this scene? What does he say to Othello concerning Brabantio?

2. What is Othello's estimation of himself? (20-24, 30-32). What characteristics of Othello are evident in his first speeches? Note especially lines 59 – 60.

3. What motivations does Iago attribute to Othello? (50-51)

4. On exactly what charge does Brabantio try to arrest Othello (78-80)? Why does he cite this charge? What does such a charge imply about his daughter and her motivations?

1.3.

1. The Turks and Ottomites, it seems, are bound for Cyprus. Jews, Moors, Turks, and Tartars - all are "strangers" by race and religion to the Venetians. According to the racist assumptions of Venice, "Valiant Othello" should be more allied to Ottomites and Turks than to the Venetian "signory." Yet Othello calls them his "good masters" (77). Why?

2. Like a "brother" of the state, the Duke was ready to decide in Brabantio's favor before he knew the accused was Othello (65-69). Why does the Duke change his mind? Why is his estimation of Othello's race different than Brabantio's? Brabantio, it seems, "loved" Othello, and encouraged his rhetorical "sorceries" (127-144). What did he love about Othello?

3. What is the precise nature of Desdemona's affection for Othello (according to his account, 144-168)? What did she find attractive?

4. What is the Duke's attitude towards the marriage? Explain what Desdemona means by divided "duty" (180). Look closely at the Duke's list of proverbs in 201-208. How is he going to allow the marriage? What does Brabantio imply about the Duke's attitude?

5. Why does Desdemona want to go with Othello to war? What does she acknowledge about her behavior in this affair? (247-248). Why does Othello say he is no longer troubled by the sexual appetites of youth? (260-63) Why is that an issue? How does Othello prioritize marriage and career? (265-274)

6. What is Brabantio's opinion of Desdemona's departure? How do his parting words prove ominous?

7. Why does he put Iago in charge of his new wife? What do his actions suggest about his character and his ability to judge others? What does he mean by lines 297-299?

8. Pay careful attention to all the details of Iago's speeches to Roderigo (316-375).

Explain what the following speeches indicate about Iago's character. Indicate the importance of any imagery Iago uses.

- a) ll. 313-322
- b) ll. 346-351
- c) ll. 359-380

What are his assumptions? What is his analysis of human desire (both male and female)? What motivates this speech? What reasons does he give for his revenge on Othello?

9. What further reasons does Iago give in his soliloquy for his revenge on Othello? What, in general, is his plan? What weaknesses has he identified in Othello? Cite specific lines.

General Questions on Act 1

1. Act One provides an effective introduction to the play in many respects. What does it show about each of the main characters, Othello and Iago? Give specific evidence to support the dominant characteristics of each that the act develops. What are the possible weaknesses suggested in Othello's character?

2. What is the significance of each of the following characters in this act – Roderigo, Desdemona, Brabantio?

3. What are the main sources of conflict established between Iago and Othello? In view of what has happened to Iago are his motives for action valid? Is the extent of his plans against Othello suited to his motives? That is, does he have just cause for revenge or is he simply doing evil for the sake of doing evil?

4. What is the importance of the setting in Venice in relation to the action in Act One and in relation to Iago's attempts to get back at Othello?

5. Explain how the act suggests importance of each of the following: love, jealousy, honour, trust.

Act 2

2.1.

1. How do the Cypriots differ from the Venetians? At line 202, Othello says he has found much love amongst the Cypriots. What is the significance of this statement in relation to Othello's previous experiences in Venice?

2. What does Iago's conversation with Desdemona and Emilia tell us about his character? What does he feel about his wife? (103-11). About women in general? (112-115) About Desdemona? (128-33). About various sorts of women? (135-161) How is Iago's character developed even further through the imagery he uses and through his justification for his plans? Is he simply evil and searching for motives or does he have valid reasons for his plans? Look at these speeches:

a) his aside (164-74)

b) his conversation with Roderigo (211 - 276)

c) his soliloquy (278-304). In his soliloquy, Iago confesses to jealousy that he likens to "a poisonous mineral" (284). Why this image for jealousy? Why does it recall the charges Brabantio brought against Othello? Is there any coordinating logic between sexual jealousy, career jealousy, and racism?

3. What is the significance of the speech in which Othello is reunified with Desdemona? (180-210). Note the imagery Othello uses.

4. Look carefully at the conversation between Iago and Roderigo (211-276). Explain specifically at least four of the arguments that Iago uses to convince Roderigo that Desdemona will soon leave Othello and that Desdemona may be having an affair with Cassio. What plan does Iago suggest to convince Roderigo that will help him (Roderigo) to win the hand of Desdemona?

2.3.

1. Iago's cleverness and deceit and his use of masks are developed in this scene. Discuss each of his "masks" he uses to deceive and manipulate people. That is, what role does he pretend to assume in each conversation listed below. Look at the masks in each of these sub-scenes:

a) Iago with Cassio (12-105)

b) Iago with Montano (106-149)

- c) Iago with Othello (150-242)
- d) Iago with Cassio (243-313)
- e) Iago with Roderigo (341-365)

Explain how each of the five masks contributes to the plot, characterization, and theme(s) of the play. Contrast his public appearance with what we see in his soliloquy (ll. 313-40). Use specific references.

2. In this act Othello's strengths are developed even further. With specific references, identify those strengths. What may be some possible weaknesses that are suggested? What changes does he show from Act One?

Act 3

3.1.

1. Emilia tells Cassio that Othello still likes him and is only waiting for a safe "occasion" to restore him to his office. What would a safe occasion be? What does brave Othello fear? Why did he punish Cassio so severely? Consider his motivations in terms of the Cypriots and his concern for reputation.

2. What is ironic about Cassio's request of Emilia even after she has told him of Othello's plan?

3.3.

1. What does Desdemona promise to Cassio? (20-28) How does she fulfill her promise in her conversation with Othello? (40-90) Why does Othello not listen to her? How do her solicitations take on more importance later in the scene? What is the significance of these episodes in relation to her character and to other characters in the play?

2. Since Iago has managed to instill the poison of jealousy, the dialogues in this scene are now fraught with unintended double meanings (9, 22-28, 71-76). Desdemona stakes the credit of her "judgment in an honest face" (50) upon her suit for Cassio. How might this sound to Othello? What is the dramatic irony of Othello's utterance, "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee; and when I love thee not / Chaos is come again."? (90-92)

3. Look carefully at Iago's manipulation of Othello starting at line 34. Explain how Iago is able to win Othello's confidence and to poison the Moor's mind to convince him that Desdemona is unfaithful. Cite examples where Iago uses blatantly racist remarks, appeals to reputation, misogynistic views, references to jealousy and sexual suggestion. How and where does Othello show his self-doubts and self-loathing? Does he begin to agree with the Venetians that Desdemona's love for him was a kind of violent unnaturalness? (232-43).

4. How does Othello begin to change in the language he uses? Cite examples. What is the importance of Othello's demand for "ocular proof"? (361) How does Iago establish his control of Othello even further after this? What is the symbolism of the references to devils and lieutenants and of Othello's kneeling before Iago at the end of the scene?

5. What is the importance of Emilia's finding the handkerchief and of Iago's plan for it?

3.4.

1. What is the irony of Desdemona's comments on Othello's character? (24-30). How has Othello changed when he talks to her? Why does he tell the elaborate story of the handkerchief? (53-73)

2. How and why does Desdemona continue to defend Othello even after his bizarre behaviour? What does she say about his changes (120-155)? What does her reaction tell us about her character? By contrast, what significant observation does Emilia make about his behaviour? (157-160). Note the imagery she uses.

3. In view of the preceding events, what is the significance of Bianca's appearance?

4. Othello loved being a bachelor soldier (1.2.25-28). He says he married not to please his lust but because Desdemona seemed worth losing his "free condition." Cassio does not want to appear "womaned" in his general's presence (189). Why not? What is the relation of his feelings to his life as a soldier and to the play's emphasis on reputation?

Act 4

4.1.

1. How is Iago able to poison Othello even further? What suggestions does Iago make? Why does Iago mock Othello's manhood (58, 63, 87) repeatedly? Paraphrase Iago's speech in lines 65-73. Analyze how Iago is able to drive Othello into a fit of jealousy. How does Iago appeal to Othello's misogyny or his ignorance of love? Compare this with Emilia's knowledge of men in 3.4.100-103.

2. What is Iago's plan to convince Othello even further of Cassio's affair with Desdemona? How does the scene with Cassio and Bianca confirm Othello's suspicions? How do Othello's reactions show his concern more for reputation and "justice" than for love and harmony?

3. Why do the letter calling Othello home and the appearance of Desdemona coincide here? (211-235). Why is it significant about Cassio's

replacement of Othello in Cyprus? Consider what Othello already believes about Cassio. How is Othello's physical brutality a manifestation of his frustration, jealousy and descent from nobility? What is the importance of Lodovico's surprise at Othello's behaviour here? (237, 261-64). How does this reaction relate to the racist attitudes of both Brabantio and the Duke in Act 1?

4.2.

1. How does Othello's physical brutality turn into a psychological one in this scene? Explain his speech (46-63). What seem to be his main concerns about Desdemona's "infidelity" here and throughout the scene?
2. What does Desdemona mean by lines 110-112? Why does she re-examine her own behavior looking for some fault? Why is she so certain she is to blame? What do her views show about her character? Emilia points out that there has hardly been time or place for any affair (138), a point that Othello seems to have missed. What other ironic comments does she make about the knavery that has undone Othello?
3. What is ironic about Desdemona's pleas to Iago for help? What is the significance of her "Comfort forswear me" speech? (159-64)
4. Explain Iago's plan to rid of Cassio and the ways in which he is able to manipulate Roderigo once again. What story does he tell Roderigo?

4.3.

1. Explain the contrasts between Emilia's views of marriage and Desdemona's. What arguments does Emilia make about the nature of revenge and infidelity in 84-101?

Act 5

5.1

1. What reasons does Iago give to justify his desires for Cassio and / or Roderigo to die?
2. Why does Othello ignore the cries for help? How does his attitude contrast with his character at the beginning of the play?
3. Explain how Iago takes advantage of his opportunities to appear helpful and honest, to shift the blame to others, and to get rid of potential danger for himself later.

5.2.

1. When Othello comes to kill Desdemona, he refers to her in exalted Petrarchan imagery describing her skin as white as "snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster" (4-5)? What is the significance of his constant references to putting out the light? Why does he want her to pray and why he refuse to kill her "unprepared spirit"? (31). How does he rationalize killing Desdemona?
2. Why does Desdemona blame herself even for her own death? What is Emilia's attitude to Othello and his actions? Explain how Othello finally learns the truth of what has happened between Desdemona and Cassio.
3. Why does Emilia defy Iago's attempts to silence her? What is the significance of Iago's killing of her?
4. What other information does Gratiano bring from Venice? Lodovico produces a couple of letters found in Roderigo's pocket. What does each of them say?
5. Explain Othello's speech (258-281). How does Othello attempt to regain his nobility? Why is he unable to kill Iago? How does Iago remain evil until the end? What images does Othello insist represent him best? "The base Indian" who cannot tell the worth of a pearl? (356) An "Arabian tree"? A man who killed a Turk for beating a Venetian, or the "circumcised dog" who beat the Venetian?

After the Play...

1. Reflect on the experience of the theatre production. Was it what you expected? Were the characters as you imagined they would be? What are some of the changes you noticed between the performance and the text you read? Why do you think the director might have made these changes? If you had a chance to act in this production, which character(s) would you have liked to play? Why? If you were directing, would you have done anything differently?

2. Some general topics for discussion:

- Explain fully the initial situation with which Shakespeare confronts his audience.
- What elements in this situation seem bound to lead to trouble? Why?
- What are the main themes in the play?
- Compare and contrast Iago and Othello. Show how they are similar in their psychology and philosophy as well as how they mirror one another in personality.
- Compare and contrast Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca.
- What are the successive stages in Iago's growing revenge-taking?
- What are the successive stages in Othello's change in attitude from total love and devotion for Desdemona to suspicion and hatred?
- What are the points from which Iago and Othello cannot turn back?
- What part does racism play in the main plot?
- Explain the dominant patterns of imagery and their significance within the play. Major images are animal or bestial (including lower forms of life), poison, heaven, blood, war, sea, black and white.

3. Critical Views

Read and discuss what some of the critics have said:

1. There is in this play some burlesque, some humour and ramble of comical wit, some show and some mimicry to divert the spectators; but the tragical part is none other than a bloody farce, without salt or savour.

-Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy*,
1693

2. The beauties of this play impress themselves so strongly upon the attention of the reader, that they can draw no aid from critical illustration. The fiery openness of Othello, magnanimous, artless and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge, subtle in his designs, and studious at once of his interest and his vengeance; the soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit, and conscious of innocence, her artless perseverance in her suit, and her slowness to

suspect that she can be suspected, are such proofs of Shakespeare's skill in human nature, as, I suppose, it is vain to seek in any modern writer.

-Samuel Johnson, General Remarks on
Othello, 1765

3. ...the motive hunting of motiveless malignity – how awful! In itself fiendish; while yet he [Iago] was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady view. A being next to devil, only *not* quite devil – and this Shakespeare has attempted – and executed – without disgust, without scandal.

-S. T. Coleridge, Marginalia on *Othello*, 1900

4. Othello is, in one sense of the word, by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes; and he is so partly from the strange life of war and adventure which he has lived from childhood. He does not belong to our world, and he seems to enter it we do not know whence – almost as if from wonderland. There is something mysterious in his descent from men of royal siege; in his wanderings in vast deserts and among marvellous peoples; in his tales of magic handkerchiefs and prophetic sibyls; in the sudden vague glimpses we get of numberless battles and sieges in which he has played the hero and has borne a charmed life; even in chance references to his baptism, his being sold to slavery, his journey in Aleppo.

-A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904

(Critical views from Gill, Roma, Editor. Oxford School Shakespeare: *Othello*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1989.)

4. Extension for only the truest Shakespeare lovers!

- Compare Brabantio and Desdemona's conversation (I.iii.173-196) with Capulet and Juliet's conversation (*Romeo and Juliet*. III.v.126-195) and with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i.20-127).
- Compare Iago's speech at the end of Act I with speeches by Macbeth (II.i.33-64) and Hamlet (III.ii.419-432).
- Compare the description of the storm in *Othello* (II.i) with the description of the storm in *The Tempest* (I.i).
- Compare the last lines of Iago's speech in Act II with speeches by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (I.vii) and by Hamlet (II.ii.576-634).

- Compare Bianca's speech (III.iv.166-170) with the opening lines of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (I.i.1-10).
- Compare Othello's speech (IV.i.250-259) with Hamlet's speeches to Ophelia (the "Nunnery scene", III.i) and to his mother (the "Queen's closet" scene, III.iv).
- Compare Iago's speech (V.i.124-129) with Macbeth's speech (V.v.39 – 52).
- Compare Othello's speech (V.ii.7-22) with Macbeth's speech (V.v.17-28).

Ye Olde Official Shakespearean Insult Kit

(Editor's Note: Copy & paste this website into your browser to make this work. This website is *loads* of silly fun and I've spent way too much time here when I should have been marking student papers!)

<http://www.petetelevin.com/shakespeare.htm>

Hello friends.

Are you weary of giving voice to the same tired old invectives
when boorish rubes intrude upon your serenity?
Don't you wish you could inveigh your enemy
with a genuinely classic put-down?

Well, now you can.

With this handy-dandy SHAKESPEAREAN INSULT KIT,
you can have the spleen of The Bard at your disposal!

The next time someone cuts you off in traffic,
or a clerk behaves rudely,
stun them with your lexicographical command of vituperation.

Combine one selection from each of the four pull-down
lists below, and impale your unsuspecting foe.

Grow unsightly warts	▼	thou			
gleeking	▼	knotty-pated	▼	jolthead	▼

Now gentlemen, with your best Richard Burton imitation,
(ladies, Glenda Jackson will do nicely) ...
read it out loud. LOUD!

Feels good, doesn't it?

Lesson Plans & Web Links from NCTEinbox
<inbox@ncte.org>

Lesson Plans

Choosing, Chatting, and Collecting: Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=296

This lesson for grades 6–8 uses an online Shakespeare text to model a vocabulary self-selection strategy.

Analyzing Advice as an Introduction to Shakespeare

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=372

Students in grades 6–8 explore Polonius' advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*, and write advice poems.

Star-Crossed Lovers Online: Romeo and Juliet for a Digital Age

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=857

In this lesson for grades 9–12, students examine classic literary works through a modern lens.

Introducing Shakespeare: The Bard's English

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1031

Middle school students are introduced to language change and dialect through the differences between Elizabethan and Modern English. In two related lessons, ***Introducing Shakespeare: Exploring Persona and Character Motivations***

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1032

and ***Introducing Shakespeare: Character Journals and Point of View***

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1033

students explore characters and point of view.

Web Links

Shakespeare is Elementary

<http://www.cps.ednet.ns.ca/pageone.htm>

This award-winning website for younger students was created by elementary students at Crichton Park School in Nova Scotia. It contains a collection of materials related to Shakespeare, including resources for teachers.

Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>

This site is both an annotated guide to Shakespeare resources available on the Internet and a collection of original resources, including a comprehensive timeline of Shakespeare's life and work.

William Shakespeare

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/122>

The Academy of American Poets provides this Shakespeare exhibit. Included are selected writings, biographical information, and links to related resources.

Folger Shakespeare Library

<http://www.folger.edu/index.cfm>

This website for the world's largest collection of Shakespeare's printed works contains authoritative articles on his life and work, as well as continually updated links to other related resources.