



AT THE BEVERLEY CENTER FOR THE ARTS

2023 Shakespeare-in-the-Schools Tour

Othello

Classroom Study Guide

The content of this study guide, and the resources within it, were sourced by the Utah Shakespeare Festival Education Department. Special thanks to Liz Bazzoli for content creation. More detailed references are available upon request. This Study Guide is specifically designed to pair with the specific 75-minute cutting of the play performed on tour.

☆ TELL US WHAT YOU THINK! ☆

Post-show surveys



For teachers



For students

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Welcome!

Hello, and welcome to the 2023 Shakespeare in the Schools tour!

Thank you for inviting us into your schools and classrooms, whether for the first time or the thirtieth. We are so excited to be visiting schools with this production of Shakespeare's *Othello* – a story which offers endless opportunities for exploration, play, and discussion.

This Study Guide is designed for both teachers and students, and aims to encourage you to dive deeply into the play; not only into Shakespeare's text, but also into the play's history, themes, and how it connects to our lives today. This Study Guide includes contextual information about the play, discussion prompts, lesson plans, and more! With it, we invite teachers to structure students' experience both before and after the performance, and to provide some inspiration for creative ways to draw upon the Shakespeare in the Schools experience for extended learning beyond our one day in your school. For students, this Study Guide offers context, questions, and further resources to help you explore your curiosity.

Theatre is a necessarily collaborative artform – thank you for all that you contribute to this tour!



☆ Before the Performance ☆



Content Awareness

For teachers and students attending this play, please be aware that this production portrays domestic violence and the murder of two women by their husbands. USF strongly believes in the value of the play's strong condemnation of such acts, as well as Shakespeare's capacity to offer us expansive and complex language to help us process extreme human emotion. Concurrently, we encourage all our audience members to take care of themselves, and if this is not the story for you right now we'll look forward to seeing you at the next play.

For further safety and mental health resources, please see the final page of this Study Guide.



A Note from the Director

“Dull moor.”

“A cistern for foul toads to knot and gender in”

“Even now, a black ram is tupping your white ewe.”

Why does Shakespeare feel the need to use such provocative, and evocative language throughout the course of this entire piece? Is it necessary? Is it appropriate? These are questions that could certainly be asked by any reader of the play. My simple answer, perhaps lacking eloquence with the brevity; is yes, it's all necessary, every bit of it. In *Othello*, Shakespeare holds a mirror up to the ugliest part of society, and that hidden hate in anyone pretending it doesn't exist, and says “look at it, closely.” To me, this story is a lesson on communication. At ANY time in this tale, had hate been thrown aside just long enough to sit, express, and share, things could have perhaps turned out differently. Love and tenderness spiral away for seemingly nothing. I believe that's the point. When hate seeps so far into our bones that we stop looking for the truth (for lack of belief that anything good can possibly come from something we hate so passionately), danger follows. It is a violent lesson, one told achingly, through language full of dirt, grit, and pace. It all seems quite timely. Hate in communication's stead seems for the moment to be our country's truth; today, yesterday, and tomorrow if we do not learn from and address it.

-Director Cordell Cole



Cordell Cole is honored (and super nostalgic) to be directing with a company so near and dear to his heart. He toured previously with USF on the 2019 productions of *Macbeth* and *Every Brilliant Thing*. Previous USF productions include: *Ragtime*, *Julius Caesar*, *Pericles*, *Richard the Third*. Other favorite productions include: *Into The Woods* (Arvada Center), *Spamalot*, *Side by side by Sondheim* (Northern Stage), *Something Rotten* (Florida Studio Theatre), *Much Ado*, *The Seagull* (American Players Theatre), *Macbeth* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival), *Romeo and Juliet*, *Christmas Carol*, *Our Town*, *Two Gents*, (American Shakespeare Center), *As You Like it*, *Othello*, *Into The Woods* (Texas Shakespeare Festival) and others. Jeremiah 29:11.



What's this all about?

☆ Play Synopsis

The beginning of the play is triggered by two main events, both centered around Othello – a Moorish* general in the Venetian army: Othello's secret marriage to Desdemona, and his decision to promote Cassio to be his lieutenant. This upsets Iago, who believes he should have been promoted. Iago decides he will do whatever it takes to destroy Othello's happiness.

Iago teams up with Roderigo, a wealthy gentleman who wants Desdemona for himself. The two decide to visit Brabantio and tell him about his daughter's secret marriage to Othello. Brabantio is outraged and calls on the Duke of Venice to punish Othello for "tricking" his daughter. However, the group soon realizes Desdemona and Othello are truly in love.

They are then interrupted by urgent news of an approaching attack on Cyprus by the Turks. Othello leads his army to Cyprus to defend the city. Desdemona decides to join him, as well as Iago, Iago's wife Emilia, Cassio, and Roderigo. However, when they get there they discover a storm has scattered the Turkish army and Cyprus is no longer in danger! While the rest of the army celebrates, Iago continues with his plans to hurt Othello.

While on watch together, Iago gets Cassio drunk and orchestrates a fight between him and Roderigo. This forces Othello to dismiss the dishonored Cassio from his service and make Iago his lieutenant. Iago convinces Cassio to appeal to Desdemona, and ask her for help winning back Othello's respect. Iago then goes to Othello and suggests Cassio is talking to Desdemona because they are having an affair. To prove this to Othello, Iago convinces his wife Emilia to steal a special handkerchief from Desdemona, given to her by Othello. Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room to frame Cassio. Othello becomes more and more convinced of Desdemona's guilt, even accusing her of infidelity to her face. Distraught, Desdemona questions the source of this anger and seeks to reconcile with him.

Othello instructs Desdemona to wait for him alone in bed. As she, with the help of Emilia, prepares for sleep, she fears Othello's angry mood. Roderigo, whom Iago hires to assassinate Cassio, fails his ambush and is wounded by Cassio. Iago intervenes and kills Roderigo.

Othello, consumed by jealousy and suspicion, decides to kill Desdemona and smothers her in her sleep. A horrified Emilia enters and Othello justifies his actions, citing the handkerchief as proof. Recognizing the handkerchief as the one she stole for her husband, Emilia realizes and reveals what Iago has done. Iago enters and kills Emilia. Othello, now knowing the truth, attempts to kill Iago. Unsuccessful, he demands to know why Iago did this. Iago refuses to give an explanation, saying he will never speak again. Before Othello can be led away to face his justice, he stabs himself, and kisses Desdemona as he dies.

*The word 'Moor' was used at Shakespeare's time to mean anyone of African or Arabic origin. The word is used to describe Othello a lot, both in a negative way and by characters who respect and love him. As words shift meaning through the centuries, this is no longer an appropriate word to use in contemporary English.

Who's Who?

☆ Character List

Othello: A general in the Venetian Army, husband of Desdemona.

Iago: Othello's ensign.

Desdemona: The daughter of Brabantio and wife of Othello.

Cassio: Othello's lieutenant.

Emilia: The wife of Iago and maid of Desdemona.

Roderigo: A rich gentleman.

Brabantio: Desdemona's father.

Lodovico: Another noble Venetian and kinsman of Brabantio.

Montano: The governor of Cyprus and servant of the duke of Venice.

Duke of Venice

Bianca: Cassio's mistress.

Various Officers/Senators/Soldiers



☆ Central Character Analysis

Iago

“But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.”
(1.1.70-71)

Iago is the trusted confidant of Othello, a position he will repeatedly abuse throughout the course of the play. He is an unapologetic liar who uses the trust of others to get his way. Enraged that Othello would promote Michael Cassio instead of himself, Iago plants the conspiracy of Desdemona's infidelity in Othello's mind. Iago acts much like a playwright himself by constantly intervening in characters' lives– he reveals Othello's marriage to Desdemona, initiates the fight that demotes Cassio, plants Desdemona's handkerchief, and gives Othello the idea of strangling Desdemona. His cruelty seems to know no end, and his revenge plot sees the deaths of Roderigo, Desdemona, Othello, and his own wife Emilia. Iago is one of Shakespeare's most famous villains due to his sheer compulsion for evil that extends far beyond his initial aspiration for political advancement.

Othello

“By the world,
I think my wife be honest and think she is not.
I think that thou art just and think thou art not.”
(3.3.438-440)

Despite being the titular character, Othello is an Other among the people of Venice. His race is repeatedly used as a slight against him, or, at the most, something that can be excused. He is a respected general whose military prowess will help Venice, but he is not embraced as an equal among the Venetian court. Thus his closest ally and companion is Iago, who doesn't hesitate to spin Othello's insecurities into a story of infidelity and betrayal. Othello wants respect, and an unfaithful wife will ruin the social standing he is trying to build and maintain. This obsession with his reputation and an unshakeable trust in Iago will bring Othello's downfall.

Desdemona

“My love doth so approve him
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns...
Have grace and favor in them.”
(4.3.20-22)

Our introduction to Desdemona is a surprising moment of social defiance. Having married Othello without her father's approval, Desdemona defies the expectations of a noble Venetian daughter. She will continue this contentiousness, perhaps to her own detriment, by engaging in political quarrels and speaking to men other than her husband. She must wrestle her love and wifely devotion to Othello with her individual agency. Does she defend herself against the accusations levied against her, or does she prove her innocence through agreeability? Her conflict seems to symbolize a greater conflict between the women of Desdemona's time and the patriarchal system they were expected to embrace.

Cassio

“That we should
with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause transform
ourselves into beasts!”
(2.3.310-312)

Cassio is the honest and faithful, if not naïve, foil to Iago. He admires Othello and sings the man's praises, only to be devastated later by his demotion from Lieutenant. He is respectful and chivalrous to a fault. Iago takes advantage of Cassio's mostly good character to successfully paint him as a seducer. As a survivor, however, Cassio is left with the decision of Iago's fate, a fitting reversal of power.

Emilia

“‘Tis not a year or two shows us a man.
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food...”
(3.4.120-121)

Emilia is Iago's neglected and disrespected wife who seems all too well aware of her mistreatment. One of Desdemona's only confidants, Emilia encourages her to think critically of the power men wield over women. Nonetheless, Emilia is also unknowingly used by Iago to deceive Othello. By securing the handkerchief she arguably does the most to incriminate Desdemona and Cassio. She also defies the social expectations of women, but with far fewer reservations than Desdemona. Regardless, her outspokenness will unfortunately land her in a similar position.

☆ Setting and Context

Why Italy?

Venice as the Setting of *Othello*

Shakespeare set several of his plays in Italy (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, to name a few). His depictions of Italy are diverse in location and time. He goes as far back as the Roman Empire in *Julius Caesar* to a conflict as recent as the Ottoman-Venetian War in *Othello*, something that occurred during Shakespeare's lifetime. Shakespeare had ostensibly no connection to Italy—there is no record of him visiting Italy—so what was the cause for his fascination? The answer likely lies in the socio-political climate of his time.

The Renaissance

Shakespeare was writing in a period now called the English Renaissance. This was a period of flourishing art in England, specifically the literary arts. England was hardly the first country to undergo such an artistic transformation, however, and you're probably most familiar with the Italian Renaissance, embodied by artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. With the development of the printing press, the academic and artistic developments in Italy became widely distributed throughout Europe and attracted attention to and fascination with Italy. The city-states of Italy became the hallmarks of art and culture, even if Italy's Renaissance was itself inspired by ancient cultures.

Foreignness

None of this is to say that England had no biases against Italy. By the time Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558, England had severed ties with the Catholic Church and the Church of England became the state religion. Catholicism, though still quietly practiced by many English people, was shunned and disparaged. The city-states of Italy, staunchly Catholic, were therefore seen as spiritually corrupt and morally inferior to Protestant England.

Shakespeare used these biases to his advantage. To maintain his social standing and funding, he couldn't directly criticize the English crown in his plays. Setting his plays in another time period or location, especially one that his audience disliked, meant he could hide contemporary criticism behind a veil of Otherness. *Othello* may be set in Venice, but the attitudes of its characters are universal reflections of human cruelty.

Race in Renaissance England

It is a myth that William Shakespeare would have had no knowledge of people of color or that Renaissance England was entirely white. History shows us that England had global relationships and that there would have been people from all over the world visiting the royal court and living in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. Written records indicate English citizens of African descent living, working, and marrying native English citizens throughout this time period.

Racism was a present force in Renaissance England. Native English people alternated between attitudes of fascination and ridicule of their Black neighbors. To them, growing knowledge of Africa symbolized both a new and exciting global awareness, and an uncomfortable challenge to their cultural norms. By 1601, three years before *Othello*, there were enough Africans living in England to cause Queen Elizabeth I to issue an edict demanding their deportation.

Also during Elizabeth's reign, in 1600, was the visit of Abd al-Wahid bin Mas'ud bin Mohammed Anun to the English court. He was an ambassador from the Barbary region of North Africa visiting with his own convoys to discuss a potential alliance against the Spanish. His delegation would remain in England for six months, likely attending important state affairs and festivities. Some speculate that the ambassador – both respected for his class status and scrutinized for his ethnicity and religion – was an inspiration for *Othello*, but there is no direct evidence that Shakespeare ever met him.

On the Term “Moor”

The word “Moor” is a label that has a long, dynamic history that predates *Othello*. Originally, “Moor” was used in reference to people of Spanish, Arab, and Berber ancestry who lived in the Iberian Peninsula and in parts of North Africa. The term eventually became co-opted by Europeans to describe all Muslims and, later, any person of darker complexion or of African descent. In Elizabethan England, as evidenced by extant records and other literary works, “Moor” was synonymous with someone who was Black, regardless of religion or ancestry.

Before *Othello*, other “Moor” characters in English Renaissance literature (like Aaron in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*) were violent and cruel villains. People of color were depicted as caricatures rather than as characters, further perpetuating racial stereotypes among the English. It is perhaps notable then that *Othello* has a character of African descent as its protagonist and forces the audience to connect with him on a more complex level.



Image: *Portrait of a Moor* by Jan Mostaert (c. 1525-1530)

Possible Sources of Inspiration

Many of Shakespeare's works draw direct inspiration from other stories if they are not themselves based on real events. Most of this speculation is just that; without any written proof of Shakespeare's writing process, historians are left drawing connections and forming hypotheses based on observed trends and patterns. That being said, drawing connections between a text and other cultural phenomena gives potential insight into why a play was written or what Shakespeare was trying to achieve.

The most obvious source of inspiration for *Othello* is *Gli Hecatommithi*, a collection of Italian short stories written by Giovanni Battista Giraldi in the sixteenth century. There are over a hundred stories in *Gli Hecatommithi*, some of which may have inspired other Shakespearean works, but the most notable in this case is the seventh story in Decade Three of the book (III.VII). This story follows Disdemona and her marriage to a Moorish military officer, the ensign of which loves Disdemona and tries to sabotage the marriage. The ensign frames another captain as Disdemona's secret lover and convinces her husband of her infidelity, with handkerchief and all. The parallels to *Othello* are obvious with the most notable difference being that the ensign character is motivated by a romantic interest in Disdemona whereas Iago's motivations are more ambiguous. Shakespeare also places the work in a more definite political context by adding the character Brabantio and specifying the Ottoman-Venetian War as the military conflict.

Another possible inspiration for *Othello*, specifically the character of Othello, is Leo Africanus. Leo Africanus' *Geographical History of Africa* was translated into English in 1600. Africanus, a Moorish scholar, gave in this work a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical history of Africa's kingdoms from an African perspective. Even before its translation, the book was massively successful and it is not farfetched to assume Shakespeare was familiar with it.

Leo Africanus' life is shockingly similar to the brief history Othello gives himself at the beginning of the play. Originally from North Africa, Africanus came to Europe in bondage as a slave to Pope Leo X. He earned his freedom because of his intellect, much like how Othello committed himself to defending Venice. Leo Africanus traveled vast distances in his documentation of Africa, just like Othello's own professed pilgrimages. The *Geographical History of Africa* furthermore describes Moors as a valiant and brave people, but also trustworthy to a fault. This description by Africanus, and Africanus himself, seem to resonate in the text of *Othello* to the point that some speculate that he was an influence on Shakespeare's writing.



Discussion Question

- What are examples of other stories (books/movies/tv shows) that are adapted from earlier media or based on real-world events? Why do you think authors reuse stories?

Words Words Words

☆ Language of the Play

In Shakespeare's writing, **complexity is a feature, not a bug.**

Shakespeare's plays use the English language differently than we do today. The plays are filled with words that have changed usage and meaning over the centuries, with poetry, with complex figurative language, and more. Rather than thinking of this complexity as a barrier to overcome, let's approach complex language as an integral and beautiful feature of the plays!

Here are a few tools to get you started:

Shakespeare's Language: Prose vs. Verse

Prose

Prose is standard speech, adhering neither to rhythm nor meter. In Shakespeare's plays, prose is used for multiple purposes: it usually designates characters of lower class, but it can also be used for comedy or to show a psychological break in characters. Prose is the style of writing that Shakespeare uses the most sparingly. In *Othello*, prose is often used in moments of anger.

Blank Verse

Most of the language of *Othello* is in the style of *blank verse*, a style very popular among Shakespeare's contemporaries in English drama. Blank verse has a poetic rhythm and a meter, usually adhering to *iambic pentameter*, but does not rhyme.

Iambic Pentameter

Iambic pentameter is the meter, or the rhythm, of much of Shakespeare's verse.

Iambic:- An **iamb** is a group of two syllables. An iamb consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. It sounds like this: da-dum da-dum da-dum da-dum da-dum

-penta:- Five. This indicates that a line of verse consists of five **iamb**s (10 syllables total).

-meter:- The rhythm structure of a line of verse.

Example: So will I turn her virtue into pitch (Iago, II.3)
 so WILL i TURN her VIRtue INto PITCH

Rhymed Meter/Rhyming Couplets

In cases where Shakespeare does use rhyme, it is almost always through rhyming couplets. Rhyming couplets, also in the meter of iambic pentameter, are two lines with rhyming endings. Shakespeare often uses rhyming couplets to finish a thought or line of action—a ‘mic drop’ moment, if you will. Rhymes tell us that there is enormously heightened emotion. When two characters rhyme together, it reflects how in tune with each other they are.

Activities

Listen!

As you watch the performance, listen to the language! Even if we don’t understand every single word, we can figure out the meaning by the feel of the words. Listen for the heartbeat rhythm of blank verse - when is it strong, when is it interrupted? Listen for rhymes - what does the rhyme tell us about the importance of that moment of the story, or the relationship between the speakers?

Act!

Option 1: Monologue

Pick a speech from *Othello* of at least 10 lines. Figure out if the speech is in Blank Verse or Prose. Are there any rhymes? Does the 10-syllable foundation of iambic pentameter ever change (i.e. are there sometimes 11 syllables, or only 9)? Look up any words you don’t know. Practice speaking the text aloud, leaning into the sound and feel of the words and rhythm.

Option 2: Dialogue

Pick a bit of dialogue of at least 10 lines. With your scene partner, conduct the same analysis as above. How do their choices inform your interpretation of your own text? Switch roles - would you speak the text in the same way, or differently? Why?

When you watch the play, listen for your section. Do the actors make similar choices to yours, or different? Why do you think they made the choices they did?

☆ Words and Phrases Appearing First in *Othello*

Shakespeare used over 17,000 different words throughout his plays, epic poems, and sonnets. But even with this mastery of the English language, there were still times he couldn't find a word that fit his needs or his meter. In this case Shakespeare would invent the words instead! He is credited with inventing/popularizing over 1,700 words and phrases we still use today. When we say Shakespeare invented or popularized something, we mean that he is credited with being the first person to ever put that word in writing.

Here are just a few examples of words and phrases invented in *Othello*.

Green-Eyed Monster

“O, beware, my lord of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.” (Iago, 3.3)

Pomp and Circumstance

“The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!” (Othello, 3.3)

Foregone Conclusion

“But this denoted a foregone conclusion:
'Tis a shrewd doubt, though it be but a dream.” (Othello, 3.3)

Addiction

“Each man to what sport and
revels his addiction leads him. (Gentleman, 2.2)

Demonstrate

“For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart” (Iago, 1.1)



Discussion Questions

- What are some recent words or phrases that were newly created in our time period?
- Where do they come from, how do they disseminate?
- Are different ways of speaking used by different groups of people (i.e. - adults vs teenagers)? Why?

☆ **After the Performance** ☆

Bring on the Drama!

☆ Themes of the Play for Continued Discussion

Jealousy and Manipulation

Jealousy, and the manipulation that causes it, drives the entire conflict of the play. Iago reveals himself as a jealous character from the first moments of the story when he expresses his disdain for Cassio's promotion over him, "I am worth no worse a place" (1.1). Later in the scene he suggests that Othello is driven by jealousy as well. This relation gives Iago the idea to enact his revenge on Othello by making him insanely jealous. Iago manipulates Othello into the type of paranoid jealousy that keeps him constantly tormented. Iago might plant the seeds of jealousy, but they grow all on their own in Othello's head. As if Iago's plan is hurting Othello even when he isn't around. We also see how this dangerous jealousy is based on circumstantial evidence that Iago has manipulated into 'facts' for Othello. This type of intense jealousy grows and grows until it gets out of control, eventually leading to the demise of Desdemona and Othello.

Jealousy and Manipulation go hand in hand, as Iago is able to manipulate Othello into a rage of Jealousy, because he himself is driven by jealousy. In Iago's character description above, it's discussed that Iago is able to hurt Othello because he understands him. This aggressive jealousy and tendency towards paranoia is something that connects Iago and Othello, and therefore is fatally effective.

Men in the world of *Othello* are not held to the same marital expectations of their wives. A wife is bound to her husband and infidelity would tarnish both her name and that of her husband's. A husband can be cruel or unfaithful and be further affirmed for it. His quality as a husband is dictated by his wife's obedience. It is this double standard that permeates throughout the play and initiates the violence committed within it.



Discussion Questions

- Desdemona publicly challenges her father in the first act, but later blames herself for her own murder. Why doesn't Desdemona challenge Othello further? Are there ways that she does resist his behavior towards her?
- Think about the three women in the play, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. How are they the same? How are they different?
- Iago is jealous of Cassio's promotion and decides to get revenge. Have you ever become jealous of something someone else had? What did you do about it?
- Iago asks Emilia to try and get Desdemona's handkerchief. She suspects he might have bad intentions. What would you do if someone asked you to do something mean to someone you cared about?

Race and the Illusion of an ‘Outsider’

The extent to which *Othello* is a commentary on racism has been debated for centuries. Some critics have argued that the play is about universal human nature more than racial biases, others argue that *Othello* is a direct critique of racism, and some claim that *Othello* itself is a racist play. There will likely never be unanimous agreement as to the ‘true meaning’ of *Othello*, but the issue of racism is simply inseparable from the text and the play’s history.

Isolation allows for many of the play’s most intense conflicts. Iago purposely isolates himself as he keeps secrets, and speaks mostly in soliloquies. Desdemona and Emilia become isolated as they are cut off from their husbands. Cassio is isolated as his rank is taken from him. All of these action-based isolations are critical to the story.

More importantly however, is the forced isolation Othello feels because of his race. He is continually outcasted by the society he is in, no matter his military status or success. Even though Othello is a general with power and influence, he is still considered an outsider in Venetian society because of his ethnicity. He is exposed to intense racism by his wife’s father, and is called numerous racist names by the other characters.

Iago is master at intensifying Othello’s feeling of being an outsider. He forces Othello to only trust him, making him much easier to prey on. Othello begins to view his racial identity as undeserving of Desdemona. This isolation, tied up in years of racism, makes Othello so much of an outsider that he kills the person who wants to connect with him the most. Then he destroys himself, succumbing to the isolated position Iago wanted him in.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think *Othello*’s relevance is today? What can it comment on in today’s culture?
- Many modern adaptations, like this tour, include casts where Othello is not the only person of color. How might changing the race of the play’s characters impact the relationships and themes within it?
- Othello is referred to as ‘the Moor’ nearly 60 times in the play, but is called by his name only about 20 times. What might the effects of this labeling be on a person?
- Look at the textual references to Othello’s race to better determine the impact of racial relations within the tragedy. How might this play help us think about race and racism?

The Futility of Revenge

A thirst for revenge drives the plot of *Othello* and inevitably leads to the tragic climax. Fittingly, revenge leaves behind destruction but not a winner. Iago, though admittedly untrustworthy, claims that his entire scheme is in retaliation for Othello not promoting him to lieutenant. Iago is in many ways victim to the same jealousy that grips Othello. Iago is just as transfixed by control and reputation. He wants the upward mobility and respect that comes with being a lieutenant and he sees his low-rank position of ancient as a personal offense. Othello seems to have everything that Iago wants, but stands in the way of Iago obtaining it. That Othello would privilege the younger and less-experienced Cassio ignites an anger in Iago against them both.

Revenge becomes a tool for Iago to weaponize. Roderigo acts as Iago's initial pawn and he too wants revenge against Othello. As a failed suitor of Desdemona, Roderigo wants to sabotage Othello's marriage and see Othello humiliated. He wants this so badly that he blindly trusts Iago, a man who admits his own dishonesty. Iago also tempts Othello with revenge. Once he suspects Desdemona's unfaithfulness, Othello wants revenge against her and Cassio. This culminates in the failed assassination of Cassio and the murder of Desdemona, destroying any future Othello might have built for himself. Even Cassio, who is otherwise honorable, drunkenly attacks another man over petty insults. All of this is orchestrated by Iago. Iago sees his own desires in others and uses those same desires to manipulate them. Iago's success is still questionable, despite his plan's completion. He gets revenge on Othello, but fails to help himself or ruin Cassio in the process. Iago's revenge ends up ruining his own life as well as Othello's.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think is Iago's true intention and the extent of his plan? Is there a point in the play when his initial plan changes? What said by Iago can be trusted and what cannot?
- Who do you think is the main character of the play? Can anyone in the play be called a hero?
- What other actions might Othello have taken, when faced with Iago's story about Desdemona and Cassio? How might these different choices have played out?

What is Truth?

What makes Iago such a sinister character is his cunning ability to see into the minds of others. Part of his trickery is stirring the ideas that are already in people's heads—he doesn't necessarily tell people what they want to hear, but he validates their perceptions.

Iago is a liar, but he is perhaps an even better storyteller. His description of events, editorialization on his part, is what makes him so convincing. He manufactures real events to occur (Brabantio's outburst, Cassio's drunken attack, Desdemona losing her handkerchief, Bianca confronting Cassio, etc.) and then builds a narrative connecting these events together. Iago knows that Othello demands visual and tangible proof—"I'll see before I doubt"—and thus creates scenarios to plant paranoia into Othello's mind. Even when he does bring up the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity, he admits it to be mere speculation on his part. Iago lets Othello come to the conclusion himself. Othello, who may already have an underlying insecurity about his marriage and is at least aware of society's attitudes towards it, is already defensive over his relationship to Desdemona. Othello projects a fragility onto his marriage that Iago manipulates through his advice. Iago doesn't so much as lie as much as he warps Othello's perception of reality.

Iago's greatest lie is that he's Othello's friend. The reason Othello puts his faith into Iago is because Iago portrays himself as caring for Othello's well-being, something Iago blatantly confesses is untrue. Iago would have no power if Othello didn't willingly lend it to him. Ironically and tragically, trust begets distrust.

Discussion Questions

- *Othello* is a play where language is frequently manipulated to cloud the truth. What are literary devices that Shakespeare uses to create this duplicitous effect? What lines or passages in *Othello* exemplify this?
- Why do you think Othello so readily trusted Iago, but not Cassio or Desdemona?
- In your own life, how do you decide who to trust and believe?

☆ Famous Productions

A Note on Representation

It is impossible to discuss *Othello* without addressing the play's long and troubled history with blackface. *Othello* is a play that deals openly with racial prejudice and systemic racism, themes that are unfortunately perpetuated in the history of its performance. For centuries, it was common practice for white actors to perform the role of Othello in blackface. Some of the most infamous depictions of Othello, and those immortalized in film, come from white actors Orson Welles and Laurence Olivier in 1952 and 1965 respectively. Anthony Hopkins would perform the character in blackface as late as 1981. This is not an issue unique to *Othello* but it would be wrong to dismiss this practice as simply a product of its time. The decision to use blackface was inherently political; blackface made white audiences more comfortable seeing an interracial relationship on stage and, especially in the United States, it allowed for the introduction of motifs from the dehumanizing tradition of minstrel shows. Blackface deprived Othello's character of identity and personhood and reflected the racist attitudes held by those willing to partake in it.

Richard Burbage Originates the Role (1604)

Richard Burbage was one of the most famous actors of the original Globe Theatre and the first actor to play Othello when it premiered in 1604. He was a close friend of William Shakespeare and an important figure in the theatre scene at time.

Ira Aldridge is the first Black Actor in the Role

(1830s-1860s) One of the earliest and most famous Black actors to play Othello was Ira Aldridge. Aldridge was actually from New York, but began performing in England in 1825 due to the prevalence of racism and boiling tensions in the United States. He began playing Othello in 1833 and would tour throughout Europe for the rest of his life. Though still met with racism by some critics, Aldridge was widely respected as an acclaimed Shakespearean actor.



Paul Robeson plays Othello on Broadway (1943)



Paul Robeson was another African-American actor who had to begin his career in England due to America's segregation laws. He too would earn international acclaim while performing abroad. Unlike Aldridge, however, Robeson returned to the American stage as the first Black actor to play Othello in the United States.

The Theatre Guild production transferred to Broadway in 1943 and still holds the record for the longest-running Shakespeare play on Broadway at 296 performances. Notable to this production of *Othello* was that, when it went on a national tour, the troupe demanded that no venue segregate its audience.

Laurence Olivier Sparks Controversy (1965)

Laurence Olivier was for decades the definitive Shakespearean actor and made a name for himself depicting Shakespeare's most famous heroes on stage and screen. This respected image would take a hit in 1965 when Olivier decided to play Othello in the 1965 film adaptation. Robeson previously set a precedent of Black actors depicting the character, but Olivier chose to assume the part with exaggerated makeup and facial prosthetics that were criticized even at the time of the film's release. This film was received especially poorly in the United States which was undergoing a racial reckoning in response to the Civil Rights Movement.

***Othello* as a Commentary on Apartheid (1987)**

Othello is a play that necessarily comments on contemporary issues of race and discrimination each time it's performed. In Johannesburg in 1987, *Othello* was used to criticize South Africa's segregation laws. During a period of racial violence and unrest, the 1987 production's choice to cast a Black actor, John Kani, in the role of Othello was controversial and political. Nonetheless, it brought massive, mixed-race audiences and was a critical success.



The “Photo-Negative” *Othello* (1997)



In 1997 Patrick Stewart would become another white actor to play Othello, but not in the way you might expect. Patrick Stewart did not wear blackface and was in fact the only white actor in the cast. Director Jude Kelly sought to challenge audiences by forcing them to reevaluate the play's relationship with race.

The Royal Shakespeare Company Casts a Black Iago (2015)

In this production, Lucian Msamati was cast alongside Hugh Quarshie to become the first Black actor to play Iago at RSC. This decision brought a new perspective to the relationship and tension between Iago and Othello that many praised.



Double Casting



The roles of Othello and Iago are both so powerful and appealing that some productions choose to have two principal actors alternate playing the roles. Notable duos of this nature include William Charles Macready and Charles Mayne Young (1816), Edwin Booth and Henry Irving at London's Lyceum Theatre (1881), and Richard Burton and John Neville at the Old Vic (1956) (pictured to the left). It is disappointing that, rather than use this dual alternation to explore interesting dynamics of race and power

by employing actors of color, these productions' creativity ended at the decision to double-cast white actors.

➡ Discussion Questions

- Think of actors working now. Who would you cast to play Othello, Desdemona, and Iago? Why did you choose those actors? What do you think are the important qualities that they bring to the roles?
- Review the section above on double casting. Consider how the decision to double-cast implies an intense duality between Othello and Iago – How different are these characters? How similar? How do they impact each other? What power do they have over each other? How interconnected are they?

☆ Lesson Plan: Miscommunication/New Possibilities

Objective: Students will become familiar with the themes and characters of *Othello* by creating their own version of the play. Students will also see similarities and differences in how themes and character types from Shakespeare's era are used in modern media.

Materials needed: Clip from popular TV show, TV/projector, *Othello* character descriptions, writing materials optional.

Anticipatory Set: Show a short clip from a popular TV show that shows the problems of one theme dealt with in *Othello*, such as jealousy, infidelity, disobedience, racism, manipulation, misinterpretation etc.

Process:

1. Have students discuss what they saw. What conflict is presented by the clip? If possible, have someone explain how it resolves or could be resolved.
2. Give students a list of *Othello* characters with descriptions. Have students share any connections they see between these characters and those they saw in the TV show. This can lead into an explanation about how *Othello* contains well rounded and relatable characters.
3. Invite students to create (write it down for optional written assessment) a story containing all of the characters on the list involving a theme identified in the media clip you shared
4. Have students give a 3-5 minute performance of the action of their plays.
5. Hold on to these story ideas for further discussion and connection to the play

Tools for Assessment; Assessment occurs throughout this lesson as students:

- Actively watch and discuss the popular media clip
- Participate in the discussion of characters from the clip and *Othello*
- Work in a group to create an original story involving characters from *Othello*
- Actively participate in their group's performance of their story
- Support their peers during their performances

☆ Lesson Plan: Costume Design and Character

Length: 40-45 minutes

Materials:

- Paper and pencils
- Text of *Othello* or printed scenes
- Optional: dictionaries or access to the internet to look up unknown words

Learning Goals:

Students will be able to

- Apply textual evidence to generate and justify visual designs
- Convey an artistic vision with words and or/drawings
- Express how medium (i.e., text vs. costume) shapes the story being told

Lesson Plan:

Activity 1

- Invite a discussion of how we use clothes/fashion in our everyday lives to tell stories about who we are, or how we want to be perceived
 - Example discussion questions:
 - For better or worse, what sorts of assumptions do we make about people based on how they look?
 - Do you choose your clothes more based on practical needs, or aesthetics and fashion? Why?
 - Think of some of your favorite characters from movies, tv shows, or books: how does their visual appearance inform how you perceive them? How do costume designers use the medium of garments to tell stories?

Activity 2

- Invite students to choose a character from the play. Have them look through the text for clues about how this person might dress. How do they present themselves? How are they perceived? How do they want to be perceived?
- Give students 10-15 minutes to step into the role of costume designers using the following prompt. Encourage students to draw or write a description
 - “Using the text as evidence, how would you costume your character?”

Step 3

- Collect all the creations and lay them out on the floor or tables like a museum gallery
- Invite all students to view the gallery
- Discuss the similarities and differences; how did people interpret the text? What stories are being told through these designs? How did the text inform your choices? How do we tell stories through different media in theatre (ex: text, acting, costumes, lighting, sound, and so on).

I've Got to Know More!

☆ Further Reading

Othello's Black Handkerchief by Ian Smith

https://www.jstor.org/stable/24778431?seq=25#metadata_info_tab_contents

Racism, Misogyny and 'Motiveless Malignity' in *Othello* By Kiernan Ryan

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/racism-misogyny-and-motiveless-malignity-in-othello>

Universal and Persistent Emotions

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/universal-and-persistent-emotions/>

Wrestling With Form By Ace G. Pilkington

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/wrestling-with-form/>

Total Allegiance to Justice By Jerry L. Crawford

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/total-allegiance-to-justice/>

The Moral Geography of *Othello* By Michael Flachmann

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/the-moral-geography-of-othello/>

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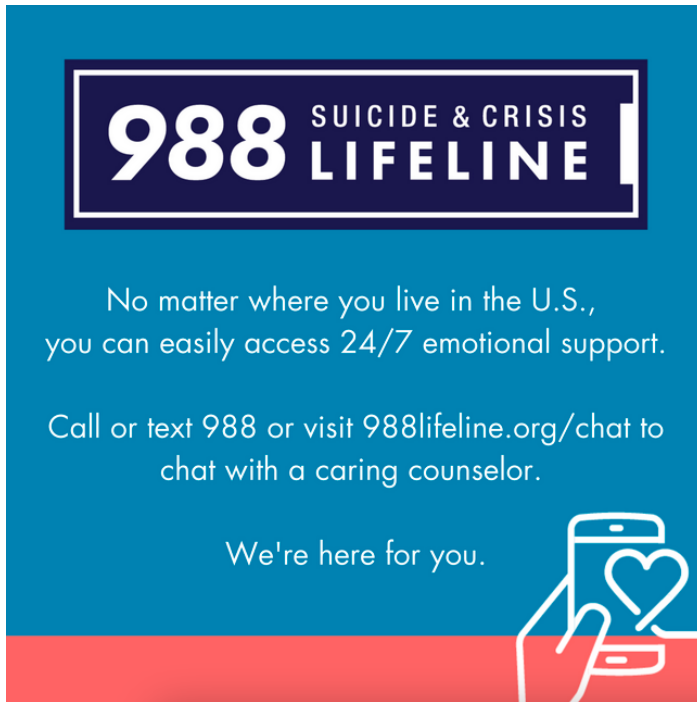
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☆ Safety and Mental Health Resources ☆

☆ National Mental Health Crisis Support ☆




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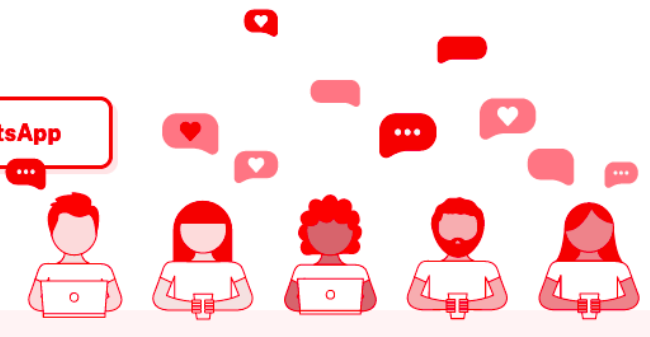
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[https://www.thehotline.org/get-help/
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