

2008 Study Guide for *Othello* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Historically, who were the Moors? With what geographic region were they associated? What part did they play in European history? What skin color predominated among Moors of Shakespeare's time? To what extent were dark-skinned persons known to the Elizabethans? What prejudices against them existed? What preconceptions? What stereotypes? What part did they play in Elizabethan society? What moral and aesthetic beliefs did the Elizabethans hold about the colors black and white? These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moors>

<http://www.chicagoshakes.com/main.taf?p=2,17,9,1,2>

<http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/plays/articles.aspx?&id=83>

2. Research the history and relationship of Venice, Cyprus and the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire in the 15th and 16th Centuries. To Elizabethan minds and prejudices, what characteristics distinguished each? What would the Elizabethans have admired and/or envied about each? What would they have feared, scorned, rejected and/or felt superior to? These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_Empire

<http://www.allempires.com/empires/venice/venice2.htm>

<http://www.historytoday.com/bernard-lewis/europe-and-turks-civilization-ottoman-empire>

<https://sites.google.com/site/apethello/elizabethan-attitudes-toward-venice>

3. Research the behavior called "Machiavellian." What does a Machiavel wish to accomplish? How does he or she go about accomplishing it? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.ctbw.com/lubman.htm>

<http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/macv.htm>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machiavellianism>

4. What is a cuckold? What is the meaning of horns in relationship to being a cuckold? This and other websites provide information:
http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/448058

5. What is the importance of honor in Elizabethan society? What does honor mean in regards to a man? A woman? A family? How can one's honor be lost or tainted? How can one's honor be regained? This and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor>
<http://web.uvic.ca/~mbest1/ISShakespeare/Resources/Honour/Honour.html>

6. Research the great Othellos of the last two centuries. What influence did each have on the way Othello is portrayed? When and where did it become acceptable for black actors to play the role? What controversies surrounded this casting choice, and how were they resolved? These and other websites provide information:

Othello in general:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Othello>

Ira Aldridge:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ira_Aldridge

<http://www.shakespeareinamericanlife.org/stage/onstage/yesterday/starringroles/aldridge.cfm>

Edwin Booth:

http://www.theatredatabase.com/19th_century/edwin_booth_001.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Booth

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/american/booth001.html>

Paul Robeson:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Robeson

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/robeson/>

Robeson performs Othello's final speech (audio):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSBWCkEj3No>

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

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

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. *Othello* is a play of extreme contrasts—black and white, war and peace, light and dark, soldiers and civilians, truth and lies, illusion and reality. Find examples of each of these contrasts in the text. In what ways do the set, lighting and costume designs for the OSF production explore these contrasts? How do the contrasts contribute to the tragic outcome? Find examples of a middle ground between the extremes. Who is able to recognize that the middle ground exists, and in what circumstances?
2. List the complaints against Othello that Iago and Roderigo mention in Act One, scene i. List their insulting descriptions of Othello. According to Iago and Roderigo, of what offenses is Othello guilty?
3. Compare Iago's descriptions of Othello in the first scene with how Othello presents himself in words and actions when he appears in the second scene. Find other instances when Iago misrepresents something or someone. With that in mind, find instances when Iago's interpretation of events is immediately accepted. Interpret each of those events differently. In each instance, what might have happened had anyone bothered to confirm Iago's statements?
4. Find passages in the text of the many ways Othello is described in the play including as mysterious foreigner, romantic adventurer, warrior, potential savior, celebrity, and so on. Which of these aspects attract Desdemona? What qualities does she see in Othello? When is Othello described in terms that refer to his race? Which characters

exhibit racial prejudice against Othello and why? How does Othello regard his blackness? How do his feelings change? What causes the changes?

5. Describe Othello the soldier. For what qualities and deeds is he admired? How does he feel about his life as a soldier? How are his military virtues transformed in peacetime? What peacetime occupation, if any, is he suited for?
6. How does Brabantio describe his daughter, Desdemona? How does her behavior before the Senate show him accurate in his assessment of her? How does her behavior contradict his image of her?
7. Describe how Othello and Desdemona wooed each other. Who courted whom? How? Identify when each spoke indirectly and when directly. How well did they know each other before their marriage? What items of significance do they *not* know? What new things do they learn about each other after the wedding?
8. Which characters do we see both in Venice and in Cyprus? How does each change with the change of location? Of the characters who go to Cyprus, who knew whom in Venice and what were their relationships? What changes take place in Cyprus? What actions take place in Cyprus that could not happen in Venice? Vice versa?
9. What are Desdemona's core beliefs about Othello? To what extent is she correct in her assessment of him? Incorrect? How might she have prevented his loss of faith in her?
10. How is honor defined in the world of the play? What is the importance of honor to each character? Whose honor is called into question? Which characters act honorably?
11. Some form of the word "honest" appears 42 times in the play. Iago is usually described as "trustworthy" and "honest." How does he manage to convince each of the other principal characters that this is so? To what extent do they convince themselves, and why? Who else is described as "honest" and in what circumstances? Within the context of the play, what effect does the word have on you? How does its meaning change?

12. Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes Iago's villainy as "motiveless malignity." What does that mean? To what extent do you find it to be the case with Iago? According to Iago, what motivates him? How persuasive do you find these motivations? What other feelings and character traits might cause his actions?
13. How does Iago regard each of the characters he deceives? To what extent is his assessment accurate? To what extent does he over- or underestimate them?
14. Iago is the only character who addresses the audience directly. How does this make you feel about him? How willing are you to laugh at his jokes and actions? How do your feelings about him and his jokes and actions change? When does he lie to the audience? What fate do you think he deserves?
15. Iago has a good reason for each of his murders and attempted murders (at least by his own standards). Which deaths does he cause or attempt? What is his reason in each case? On whom does he throw the blame?
16. What is Iago's plan—what does he wish to accomplish and how does he intend to do so? How does the plan change? What prompts the changes? What factors cause Iago's plan to fail? How might he have prevented his failure?
17. Refer to your research on the Machiavellian character. Which Machiavellian traits does Iago possess? How does he use them to further his plot? What weaknesses does he identify in each of the individuals he manipulates? How does he make use of these weaknesses? What might any of them have done to thwart Iago's plot?
18. Describe the history of the strawberry handkerchief, how it was made, the powers it possesses, how it has been passed down. What does it mean to Othello? Desdemona? Emilia? Iago? Cassio? Bianca? Chart the progress of the handkerchief from person to person and relate what events it precipitates at each point. Who could end the misunderstandings? How? Why do he and/or she fail to speak up?
19. Shakespeare's women talk differently when alone together than when men are present. Compare the quality of Desdemona and Emilia's private conversations with

their discourse with men. Pay attention to their subject matter, their directness and indirectness, the balance between intellect and emotion, and the way they reveal their feelings.

20. At the time of the play, what were the expectations of men regarding their treatment of women? What responsibilities did men have to protect women? Provide for women? Be faithful to women? Compare the way Brabantio, Othello, Iago and Cassio treat Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. How do the men fail to protect the women? How does their treatment of the women change? What causes the change?
21. Compare the three women in the play: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? What expectations are placed on each woman by the men in their lives? What expectations does each woman have of the men? To which men is each woman in *Othello* subject? Under what circumstances do the women submit to male authority? When and how do they defy male authority? What are the results? How is each falsely accused? How is each betrayed by her partner?
22. Regarding another of Shakespeare's jealous husbands (Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*), Stephen Matturo in *Shakespeare and Sex* wrote: "Jealousy is the direct opposite of faith, but both are in essence based on the unseen...just as no evidence can substantiate faith, likewise, there need be no evidence to call faith into doubt." Make cases for and against this statement. What evidence does Othello have for believing in Desdemona's fidelity? What evidence does he have for doubting her? In each case, how does he obtain the evidence? What or who influences his belief?
23. Traditionally, tragic figures such as Othello are said to have a tragic flaw. What—other than his obvious jealousy—is Othello's tragic flaw? How does it lead to his downfall?
24. How does Iago prey on Othello through his ears? How does he prey on him through his eyes? Why is he able to dupe Othello in this manner?
25. Othello the Moor and Cassio the Florentine are the play's two outsiders. Compare the features that make them "other." What seem to be Shakespeare's feelings for the outsiders?

26. From the text, what do we know objectively about Cassio? What can we infer from the opinions of others? What incites Iago's dislike of him? Describe Cassio's "drinking problem." How does he manage it? Which of his character traits allow Iago to manipulate him into drinking? How serious do you find this character flaw?
27. In Act III, scene iii, Othello falls into a "trance." What does Iago tell Cassio has happened? How does this affect Cassio's behavior? Taking into account that Iago rarely tells the truth, what other interpretation could you put on the "trance?" How would the Elizabethan audience have interpreted it?
28. Storms in the plays of Shakespeare usually reflect the inner turmoil of the principal character(s) and announce the coming of rebirth and/or renewal. What does the *Othello* storm reflect and what changes does it announce? How does the storm in *Othello* compare with other Shakespearean storms—such as those in *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*, for example?
29. Consider Act V, scene i. What individuals and actions are hidden by darkness? When do they become visible? How do they behave when they can't be seen?
30. If you are seeing *Coriolanus* as well as *Othello*, compare the Machiavellian manipulations of the Tribunes with that of Iago. Who is more devious? Who is more successful? Contrast their plotting with the plain dealing of Coriolanus and Othello. Why are the heroes unable to counter trickery?

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