

Othello study questions, characters and essays sparknotes

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



1.

To what extent does Othello's final speech affect our assessment of him?

What is the effect of his final anecdote about the Turk?

Certainly, Othello's final speech is not all that one might wish for—his claim to be “one not easily jealous” is open to question, and his claim that he “loved not wisely but too well” seems both an understatement and an exaggeration (V. ii. 354, 353). Further, Othello's invocation of his own military triumphs might be seen as another example of Othello dangerously misordering his priorities.

He seems to position his political reputation as his biggest concern, as he did in Act III, scene iii, lines 353-355, when, having decided that Desdemona does not love him, he exclaimed, “Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content, / Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars / That make ambition virtue.”

At the same time, however, Othello's final speech does seem to restore to him somewhat the nobility that characterized him at the beginning of the play.

From almost the first time he opens his mouth, Othello demonstrates—and the other characters confirm—his hypnotic eloquence when he speaks about his exploits in battle. Othello's final speech puts us in mind of his long speech in Act I, scene iii, so that we see him, even if only for a moment, as we saw him then. This process of conflating two different times and views of Othello is similar to the rhetorical effect achieved by Othello's dying words,

where he makes his suicide seem a noble and heroic deed by conflating it with the killing of a Turk in service of the state.

2.

What role does incoherent language play in Othello? How does Othello's language change over the course of the play? Pay particular attention to the handkerchief scene in Act III, scene iii, and Othello's fit in Act IV, scene i.

At the beginning of the play, Othello has such confidence in his skill with language that he can claim that he is "rude" in speech, knowing that no one will possibly believe him (I. iii. 81). He then dazzles his audience with a forty-line speech that effortlessly weaves words such as "hair-breadth" and "Anthropophagi" into blank verse lines. But in the moments when the pressure applied by Iago is particularly extreme, Othello's language deteriorates into fragmented, hesitant, and incoherent syntax. Throughout Act III, scene iii, Othello speaks in short, clipped exclamations and half-sentences such as "Ha!" (III. iii. 169), "O misery!" (III. iii. 175), and "Dost thou say so?" (III. iii. 209). There is also notable repetition, as in "Not a jot, not a jot" (III. iii. 219), "O, monstrous, monstrous!" (III. iii. 431), "O, blood, blood, blood!" (III. iii. 455), and "Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!" (III. iii. 478).

Such moments, when Othello shifts from his typical seemingly effortless verse to near inarticulateness, demonstrate the extent to which Othello's passion has broken down his self-control. In Act III, scene iii, he is still speaking in mostly coherent sentences or phrases; but this is no longer the case in Act IV, scene i. This scene begins with Iago saying, "Will you think

so?” and Othello can only helplessly and automatically echo, “ Think so, Iago?” (IV. i. 1-2). Iago then introduces the word “ lie” into the conversation, which sends Othello into a frenzy as he attempts to sort out the semantic differences between Cassio “ lying on” (that is, lying about) Desdemona and “ lying with” (that is, having sex with) her (IV. i. 33-35). The various words and images Iago has planted in Othello’s mind over the course of the play are transformed into impressionistic, sporadic eruptions out of Othello’s mouth: “ Lie with her? ‘ Swounds, that’s fulsome! Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief” (IV. i. 35-36). These eruptions culminate in the nonsense of “ Pish! Noses, ears, and lips!” (IV. i. 40). Ultimately, Othello’s inability to articulate seems to overcome him physically, as he collapses “ in a trance” (IV. i. 41, stage direction).

3.

Analyze Desdemona’s role. To what extent is she merely a passive victim of Othello’s brutality? How does her character change when she is not with Othello?

At the end of Othello, Desdemona seems to be the most passive kind of victim. Smothered, deprived of breath and of words by her husband, she is totally overwhelmed by Othello’s insane jealousy and physical strength. But before her murder, Desdemona is remarkable for showing more passivity when her husband is not around and more assertiveness when he is.

Desdemona’s first speech, in which she defends her recent marriage, is confident and forthright. When she gives it, she is the only female character onstage, surrounded by powerful men who include the duke, her husband,

and her father, but she is not ashamed to assert her belief in the validity of her desires and actions. Unfortunately, Iago recognizes Desdemona's forthrightness and uses it against her. He exploits her willingness to demand and justify what she wants by making Cassio her cause and, simultaneously, Othello's enemy. In Act III, scene iii, Desdemona asks Othello to forgive Cassio and persists, in spite of Othello's rising consternation, until her husband declares, "I will deny thee nothing" (III. iii. 41-84). Her courage is apparent in her refusal to search for the missing handkerchief in Act III, scene iv; in her willingness to shout back at Othello as he abuses her in Act IV, scene i; and in her insistence upon her innocence in Act V, scene ii. Her audacity seems to infuriate Othello all the more, as what he takes to be shameless lies convince him that she is unremorseful in what he believes to be her sin.

The terrible effect of Othello's brutality is most obvious in Desdemona's scenes with Emilia. Emilia is cynical and bawdy, and she gives Desdemona every possible opportunity to bad-mouth Othello. Men, she says in Act III, scene iv, "are all but stomachs, and we all but food. / They eat us hungrily, and when they are full, / They belch us" (III. iv. 100-102). Later, she insults Othello: "He called her *****. A beggar in his drink / Could not have laid such terms upon his callet [*****]" (IV. ii. 124-125). And, at the end of Act IV, scene iii, she gives a lengthy discourse about the virtues of infidelity. Desdemona, however, never says anything worse than "Heaven keep the monster [jealousy] from Othello's mind" (III. iv. 158). With her closest confidante, Desdemona does not speak ill of her husband, even as she shows the strain of his terrible abuse.

ESSAY TOPICS

Notes to help with essays

1. Discuss the role that race plays in Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello. How do the other characters react to Othello's skin color or to the fact that he is a Moor? How does Othello see himself?

Is race a factor or is it religion? Is the violence of the Moors a factor?

2. Discuss the importance of setting in the play, paying close attention to physical details that differentiate Venice from Cyprus and that define the particular character of each location as it pertains to the plot of the play.

Venice and Cyprus

3. Discuss the role of Emilia. How does her character change during the course of the play? Pay particular attention to moments when Emilia decides to be silent and when she decides to speak. What is the effect of her silence about the handkerchief? Do we forgive this silence when she insists on speaking in spite of Iago's threats in the final scene?

She is the property of Iago and has very few rights as a woman during the Renaissance Period. Do you cheer for her?

4. Do a close reading of one of Iago's soliloquies. Point to moments in the language where Iago most gains an audience's sympathy and moments where he most repels it. Pay close attention to the way in which Iago develops arguments about what he must and/or will do. To what extent are these arguments convincing? If they are convincing and an audience's perception of Iago is sympathetic, what happens to its perception of Othello?

Soliloquies in Act II

5. Analyze one or more of the play's bizarre comic scenes: the banter between Iago and Desdemona in Act II, scene i; the drinking song in Act II, scene iii; the clown scenes (Act III, scenes i and iv). How do these scenes echo, reflect, distort, or comment on the more serious matter of the play?

The banter between Iago and Desdemona in Act II, scene i; the drinking song in Act II, scene iii; the clown scenes (Act III, scenes i and iv).

Othello –

The play's protagonist and hero. A Christian Moor and general of the armies of Venice, Othello is an eloquent and physically powerful figure, respected by all those around him. In spite of his elevated status, he is nevertheless easy prey to insecurities because of his age, his life as a soldier, and his race. He possesses a "free and open nature," which his ensign Iago uses to twist his love for his wife, Desdemona, into a powerful and destructive jealousy (I. iii. 381).

Desdemona –

The daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio. Desdemona and Othello are secretly married before the play begins. While in many ways stereotypically pure and meek, Desdemona is also determined and self-possessed. She is equally capable of defending her marriage, jesting bawdily with Iago, and responding with dignity to Othello's incomprehensible jealousy.

Iago -

Othello's ensign (a job also known as an ancient or standard-bearer), and the villain of the play. Iago is twenty-eight years old. While his ostensible reason for desiring Othello's demise is that he has been passed over for promotion to lieutenant, Iago's motivations are never very clearly expressed and seem to originate in an obsessive, almost aesthetic delight in manipulation and destruction.

Michael Cassio -

Othello's lieutenant. Cassio is a young and inexperienced soldier, whose high position is much resented by Iago. Truly devoted to Othello, Cassio is extremely ashamed after being implicated in a drunken brawl on Cyprus and losing his place as lieutenant. Iago uses Cassio's youth, good looks, and friendship with Desdemona to play on Othello's insecurities about Desdemona's fidelity.

Roderigo -

A jealous suitor of Desdemona. Young, rich, and foolish, Roderigo is convinced that if he gives Iago all of his money, Iago will help him win Desdemona's hand. Repeatedly frustrated as Othello marries Desdemona and then takes her to Cyprus, Roderigo is ultimately desperate enough to agree to help Iago kill Cassio after Iago points out that Cassio is another potential rival for Desdemona.

Bianca - A courtesan, or prostitute, in Cyprus. Bianca's favorite customer is Cassio, who teases her with promises of marriage.

Emilia -

Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant. A cynical, worldly woman, she is deeply attached to her mistress and distrustful of her husband.

Brabantio -

Desdemona's father, a somewhat blustering and self-important Venetian senator. As a friend of Othello, Brabantio feels betrayed when the general marries his daughter in secret.

Duke of Venice - The official authority in Venice, the duke has great respect for Othello as a public and military servant. His primary role within the play is to reconcile Othello and Brabantio in Act I, scene iii, and then to send Othello to Cyprus

Montano -

The governor of Cyprus before Othello. We see him first in Act II, as he recounts the status of the war and awaits the Venetian ships

Lodovico -

One of Brabantio's kinsmen, Lodovico acts as a messenger from Venice to Cyprus. He arrives in Cyprus in Act IV with letters announcing that Othello has been replaced by Cassio as governor.

Graziano -

Brabantio's kinsman who accompanies Lodovico to Cyprus. Amidst the chaos of the final scene, Graziano mentions that Desdemona's father has died.

Clown -

Othello's servant. Although the clown appears only in two short scenes, his appearances reflect and distort the action and words of the main plots: his puns on the word "lie" in Act III, scene iv, for example, anticipate Othello's confusion of two meanings of that word in Act IV, scene i.