Work pack

Othello by William Shakespeare

NB All quotes and page references are taken from the 2001 Arden Shakespeare publication.

Act One is set in Venice, a highly civilised and commercially prosperous ‘city state’ ruled by an elected Duke or Doge. As you read Act One, consider Shakespeare’s presentation of Venetian society and its values during the Renaissance era as the backdrop to the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.

Act 1 Scene 1

1. What is Iago’s complaint against Othello? (lines 8 - 33)
2. What insight do you gain into the relationship between Othello and Iago from his speech on lines 41 - 64?
3. What is the significance of the following quotation in revealing Iago’s feelings towards Othello: ‘In following him I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end’?
4. What can you infer about Iago from the way that he speaks to Brabantio in this scene?
5. What is the significance of Iago’s exit on line 157?
6. What do you learn of Roderigo’s character from his words and actions in this scene?
7. The characters of Othello and Desdemona are introduced in this scene before we actually meet them.
8. What is suggested by the following quotations?
   Consider:
   - The status of women in Renaissance society
   - The status of men in Renaissance society
   - Attitudes towards race in Renaissance society

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Connotations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Look to your house, your daughter and your bags!’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘an old black ram / is tupping your white ewe’</td>
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### Act 1 Scene 2

1. Look closely at Othello’s speeches to Iago. What is his response to Brabantio’s complaint?
2. What do you learn about Desdemona’s history from Brabantio’s speech from line 62? How does this affect your view of the relationship?
3. What are Brabantio’s main objections to the marriage of Desdemona and Othello?
4. What prevents Othello’s arrest at the end of the scene?

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<tr>
<td>‘Awake the snorting citizens with the bell, / Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.’</td>
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<td>‘you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse.’</td>
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<td>‘I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.’</td>
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<td>‘Your daughter ... hath made a gross revolt / Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes / In an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘O heaven! How she got out? O treason of the blood! / Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds / By what you see them act.’</td>
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Act 1 Scene 3

1. What do you learn of the political situation at this point in the play? Why do you think this might be significant?

2. Look closely at Othello’s speeches in defence of his marriage on lines 77 - 94 and 129 to 171:
   - What tone does he use when addressing the Senate?
   - How do you respond to the phrase, ‘Rude am I in my speech’?
   - What do you learn about his background and experiences?
   - Do you think that there is a strong foundation for marriage based upon what Othello says? Why?

3. What is your impression of Brabantio and his relationship with his daughter in this scene? What insights do you gain about the context of the play?

4. What do you learn about Desdemona’s character when she defends her choice of husband to her father and the Duke?

5. How far does Desdemona’s behaviour fit with Brabantio’s account of her as ‘A maiden never bold, /Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself’?

6. Are you convinced by her actions and language that she genuinely loves Othello? Do you think that the relationship is based on hero-worship?

7. What do you find interesting about the comments made by the Duke in this scene?

8. Read the exchange between Iago and Roderigo from line 302:
   - Roderigo is suffering from unrequited love and it seems that his prospects with Desdemona are hopeless. What arguments does Iago use to convince Roderigo to continue his pursuit of Desdemona?
   - What sort of language and imagery does Iago use when describing love, in particular the relationship between Othello and Desdemona?
   - What does Iago say is his motivation for making Othello into a cuckold? (This is the first reference in the play to cuckoldry which is a widespread theme in medieval and Renaissance English literature. Trace the development of this idea in the play, noting down key references and how the fear of this affects Othello’s actions in the play.)

9. Read Iago’s first soliloquy carefully. What does it reveal about his true character and the working out of his revenge plot against Othello?

In Act Two, the location shifts to Cyprus as a result of the impending threat of barbarism in the form of the Turkish fleet. This shift is significant in a number of ways and it is important to consider how the characterisation and plot development are affected by it. Note that Act Two begins with a storm; what might be the significance of this?
Act 2 Scene 1

1. What is the purpose of the discussion between Montano and the Gentlemen?
2. How is tension created at the beginning of the scene?
3. What is Cassio’s opinion of Desdemona? How is this likely to help Iago in his plan?
4. What is your impression of Iago from his conversation with Emilia and Desdemona from line 100? What is the point of the exchange between them?
5. Summarise Iago’s attitude towards women, as expressed in this scene.
6. Othello arrives on line 179. What state of mind is he in and how does his use of language and imagery reflect this?
7. Look closely at the exchange between Iago and Roderigo between lines 212 to 283:
   - How does Iago convince Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio? What is his view of the relationship between Desdemona and Othello?
   - How does he intend to use Roderigo in his plan?
   - Why do you think that he is able to manipulate Roderigo so successfully?
8. Read Iago’s second soliloquy carefully. How has his revenge plot developed further by this point in the play?

Act 2 Scene 2

1. A herald proclaims ‘the celebration of [the] nuptial’ of Othello and Desdemona. What is your impression of Othello as Governor of Cyprus from the Herald’s announcement?

Act 2 Scene 3

1. Comment on the contrasting opinions of Desdemona expressed by Iago and Cassio.
2. How does this scene reveal the working out of Iago’s plan?
3. What change do you notice in Othello’s speech in lines 186 to 192?
4. Cassio shows how distraught he is at his demotion when he says:
   
   ‘I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.’

   How is this imagery continued throughout the rest of the conversation?
5. How does Iago intend to use Desdemona in his plan?
6. Read Iago’s speech on lines 308 to 320 and summarise the plan that has been conceived by the end of this speech.
Imagery

Iago’s language is full of recurring images. Key images include references to:

- animals
- lust and sex as appetite
- black and white
- entrapment
- poison and torture
- hell and the devil
- appearance and reality.

Find key images used by Iago and analyse the effect of the image and what it reveals about his state of mind. Here’s an example:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>‘an old black ram is tupping your white ewe.’</td>
<td>In this image Iago describes sex as a bestial act. He uses the image of black and white animals copulating in order to highlight the ‘unnatural’ choice that Desdemona has made in Othello. The fact that a white ewe is used to represent Desdemona highlights her innocence and implies that it has now been lost as a result of this animalistic act. He uses this image in order to incite Brabantio to anger and his use of the plosive ‘t’ and ‘p’ sounds in the word ‘tupping’ highlights his contempt. (Note that Othello and Desdemona have not consummated their marriage before their arrival in Cyprus and that Iago shows an unnatural interest in their sex life.)</td>
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In Act Three, Iago’s manipulation of Othello begins to take a hold on him and we see a gradual breakdown in his character and language.

Act 3 Scene 3: ‘The temptation scene’

Group work

You have been allocated a section of text to analyse in depth. Use the prompt questions to get you started and give detailed feedback to rest of the class.

Group one - lines 1 - 89

1. What promise does Desdemona make to Cassio around line 23? What is the significance of this promise?
2. How does Cassio unwittingly play into Iago’s hands? How does Iago try to exploit his actions?
3. Comment on the conversation between Desdemona and Othello from line 40. How does she contribute to her own downfall in this scene?
### Group two - lines 90 - 195

1. How does Iago win Othello’s trust and arouse his suspicion?
2. What is the significance of Iago’s comments about reputation and how do they compare with his words to Cassio earlier in the play?
3. What is the significance of Iago’s warning about ‘the green-eyed monster’?
4. What is Othello’s response and how does this play into Iago’s hands?

### Group three - lines 196 - 279

1. What do you think is the purpose of Iago’s remark, ‘In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands’?
2. How does Iago convince Othello that he has his General’s interests at heart?
3. Othello refers to Desdemona’s marrying him as ‘nature erring from itself.’ What is the significance of the remark, taking into account the attitudes of other characters?
4. Find a quotation which best sums up Othello’s state of mind at this point in the play.
5. What do you notice about the timing of Iago’s exit and return in this part of the scene?

### Group four - lines 280 - 332

1. What is the effect upon Othello of Desdemona’s return on line 280? How does this fit with his earlier feelings?
2. Comment on the meeting between Othello and Desdemona. How have things changed between them?
3. What do you learn about the relationship between Iago and Emilia?
4. How does Iago intend to use Desdemona’s handkerchief in his plan?

### Group five - lines 332 - 480

1. How has Othello changed by this point in the play? Consider the speech that he makes on lines 348-360.
2. How does Othello react towards Iago after this speech?
3. How does Iago turn the situation to his advantage?
4. What ‘evidence’ does Iago provide of Desdemona’s supposed betrayal? What effect does this information have upon Othello and his language?
5. What is the effect of Othello kneeling during this scene?
Whole class discussion:

- What decisions has Othello reached by the end of the scene?
- How convincing do you find Othello’s sudden submission to Iago’s plot? What reasons are there to justify his view of Desdemona as a ‘fair devil’?

**Act 3 Scene 4**

1. What do you think is Shakespeare’s dramatic purpose in including the brief exchange between the Clown and Desdemona in this scene?
2. What is the dramatic effect on the audience of Othello’s discussion with Desdemona (line 32 onwards)?
3. How is the contrast between Desdemona’s true innocence and Iago’s version of her emphasised during this scene?
4. How does Emilia’s perception of Othello contrast with Desdemona’s?
5. How does what you learn of the relationship between Bianca and Cassio influence your opinion of Cassio’s character?

**Act 4 Scene 1**

Working with a partner, find a quotation to support each of the following statements. For each one, set it in context and comment on what it reveals about character and plot. Here is an example:

‘Do but encave yourself
And mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns
That dwell in every region of his face.’ (79 - 81)

Iago says this when he instructs Othello to hide and observe a conversation between Iago and Cassio which has been purposely set up for Othello to interpret as a lewd discussion about Desdemona, providing evidence of her supposed infidelity. Iago’s use of the imperative verbs ‘encave’ and ‘mark’ indicate that it is the ensign, and not the once authoritative General, who is in command of the situation.

- Iago taunts Othello and controls his imagination.
- Iago ironically plays devil’s advocate.
- Iago revels in his power to torment Othello.
- Othello breaks down.
- Othello’s language is ‘lagoised’ (corrupted with the ensign’s distinctive idiom).
- Despite his apparent conviction to murder Desdemona, Othello is actually struggling with contradictory emotions for his wife.
- Othello is torn between opposites: love/hate; public/private; personal/professional.
- Iago feigns reluctance to speak ill of Othello to Ludovico.
1. How does Desdemona react to the physical violence that she endures in this scene?

2. Why is it significant that Othello’s actions towards her are witnessed by visitors from Venice?

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**Act 4 Scene 2**

1. What effect does Othello’s questioning of Emilia have on his behaviour?

2. How does Othello’s treatment of Desdemona affect your view of their relationship at this point in the play?

3. Consider the language and imagery used by Othello in this scene. How has it changed?

4. What do you feel about Desdemona’s language and actions towards Othello in this scene? How does she react to his false accusations and what do her reactions reveal about her character?

5. Look closely at the exchange between Desdemona, Emilia and Iago. What is the effect of irony in this scene?

6. What new information do you learn from the discussion between Roderigo and Iago at the end of this scene? How might this affect the rest of the play?

7. What dramatic function is served by this scene? How essential is Roderigo to the success of Iago’s plot? What other functions could he serve in the play?

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**Act 4 Scene 3: ‘The willow scene’**

1. How do Othello’s actions at the beginning of the scene create a sense of foreboding?

2. What do you learn about the willow song? How does the story that Desdemona tells about it foreshadow her fate?

3. What is the dramatic effect of the speech between Desdemona and Emilia being broken by her singing?

4. Desdemona and Emilia discuss male and female relationships and marriage. How does Emilia’s view of the world contrast with Desdemona’s? Think about:
   - their views of marriage and adultery
   - their response to Othello
   - their use of language.

5. What do you think of Desdemona in this scene and Act 4 Scene 2? Debate the following views:
   a. Desdemona should be admired for her innocence and unwavering love for Othello.
   b. Desdemona is too passive in her acceptance of the role of victim.

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In Act Five, Iago’s plot comes to fruition with tragic consequences.
Act 5 Scene 1

At the end of Act 4 Scene 2, Iago introduces the idea of killing Cassio to Roderigo. In this scene, things do not quite go to plan.

1. What attitude does Roderigo show towards killing Cassio?
2. What do we learn from Iago’s aside in lines 11 to 22?
3. What do Othello’s words in lines 31 to 37 tell us about his state of mind?
4. Comment on Iago’s words and actions as he re-enters the scene on line 46:
   - How does he fool Gratiano and Lodovico into believing him ‘a very valiant fellow’?
   - Why does he kill Roderigo?
   - How does he explain Roderigo’s death to the others?
   - What is his attitude towards Bianca?
5. What does Iago’s final aside in the scene tell us about his position at this point in the play? How would you expect him to deliver these lines?
6. How would you describe the dramatic impact of this scene? What problems does the scene pose for a director and actors?

Act 5 Scene 2

1. Explain Othello’s conflicting emotions as they are revealed in his speech at the beginning of the scene.
2. Read the discussion between Othello and Desdemona after she wakes on line 22:
   - What is the dramatic impact of this exchange?
   - How does she unwittingly reinforce Othello’s conviction that she is guilty?
3. Look closely at Othello’s speech on lines 89 to 99. How does Shakespeare convey the nature of his emotion through the language used?
4. Consider Emilia’s words and actions in this scene:
   - How does Emilia respond to Othello on discovering Desdemona?
   - How important is she in this scene?
   - How does her behaviour in this scene influence your view of her?
5. How is the truth of Iago’s villainy revealed?
6. What is your impression of Othello from his final speeches in this scene? Consider his language in detail.
7. Consider the impact of the ending of the play:
   - Do you think the ending is successful?
   - Why do you think the final words of the play are left to Lodovico?
   - Why do you think Shakespeare chose to leave the fate of the ‘hellish villain’ Iago unresolved?
Work pack

_Othello_ by William Shakespeare

Planning for the AS exam

In the exam you will be asked to re-read an extract from the text and respond to two bullet points. The first will be:

- How does Shakespeare present aspects of love in this passage?

Here you are being asked to address the following assessment objectives: highlight and respond to the different aspects of love presented (A01); address how they are presented (A02); consider the contexts of gender, power, morality and society in the play and the contexts of when the text was written and how it has been received (A03); the connections between this text and other texts which present a similar aspect of love (A04).

Secondly, you will be given a viewpoint or critical perspective on the extract and you will be asked to discuss and argue about its validity, broadening your answer to include the play as a whole. For example:

- Examine the view that, in this passage and elsewhere in the play, Othello’s behaviour causes the audience to see him as no more than ‘a jealous tyrant.’

Here you are being asked to explore literary texts informed by different interpretations. (A05) You are free to agree or disagree with the perspective given but must establish a valid line of argument which shows understanding of wider aspects of the play.

Tips

Examiners are not looking for a slavish plodding through the extract from start to finish, but a sharply focused response to the key words in the question.

AQA have made it clear that the bullet points can be dealt with in order or addressed together as part of a whole answer.

It is important that you make sure that all of the objectives are addressed and that you respond to the extract in detail and refer to other aspects of the play with support - this is a challenge in a closed book exam, but you are expected to be able to quote from the text.
Practice question one:

Q1. How does Shakespeare present aspects of love in this passage?

Q2. Examine the view that, in this passage and elsewhere in the play, Othello is presented as a man who ‘lov’d not wisely but too well.’

Othello: How shall I murder him, Iago?
Iago: Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice?
Othello: O Iago!
Iago: And did you see the handkerchief?
Othello: Was that mine?
Iago: Yours, by this hand: and to see how he prizes the foolish woman your wife! She gave it him, and he hath given it his whore.
Othello: I would have him nine years a-killing. A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!
Iago: Nay, you must forget that.
Othello: Ay, let her rot, and perish and be damned tonight, for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone: I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the world hath not a sweeter creature: she might lie by an emperor’s side and command him tasks.
Iago: Nay, that’s not your way.
Othello: Hang her, I do but say what she is: so delicate with her needle: an admirable musician. O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear! of so high and plenteous wit and invention!
Iago: She’s the worse for all this.
Othello: O, a thousand, a thousand times: and then, of so gentle a condition.
Iago: Ay, too gentle.
Othello: Nay, that’s certain: but yet the pity of it, Iago — O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!
Iago: If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend, for if it touch not you, it comes near nobody.
Othello: I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!
Iago: O, ‘tis foul in her.
Othello: With mine officer!
Iago: That’s fouler.
Othello: Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I’ll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago.
Iago: Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed - even the bed she hath contaminated.
Othello: Good, good, the justice of it pleases; very good!
Iago: And for Cassio, let me be his undertaker. You shall hear more by midnight.
Practice question two:

Q1. How does Shakespeare present aspects of love in this passage?

Q2. Examine the view that Desdemona, as presented in this passage and elsewhere in the play, is a typically weak and submissive wife.

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Othello: Will you walk, sir?
Desdemona: My lord?
Othello: Get you to bed On th' instant, I will be returned forthwith.
Dismiss your attendant there: look't be done.
Desdemona: I will, my lord.

[Exeunt OTHELLO, LODOVICO, and Attendants.]

Emilia: How goes it now? He looks gentler than he did.
Desdemona: He says he will return incontinent,
And hath commanded me to go to bed,
And bade me to dismiss you.
Emilia: Dismiss me?
Desdemona: It was his bidding; therefore, good Emilia,
Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu.
We must not now displease him.
Emilia: Ay. - Would you had never seen him!
Desdemona: So would not I: my love doth so approve him
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns
- Prityee, unpin me - have grace and favour.
Emilia: I have laid those sheets you bade me on the bed.
Desdemona: All's one. Good faith, how foolish are our minds!
If I do die before thee, prityee shroud me
In one of those same sheets.
Emilia: Come, come, you talk.
Desdemona: My mother had a maid called Barbary,
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad
And did forsake her. She had a song of 'willow',
An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune
And she died singing it. That song tonight
Will not go from my mind. I have much to do
But to go hang my head all at one side
And sing it like poor Barbary. Prityee, dispatch.
Emilia: Shall I go fetch your night-gown?
Desdemona: No, unpín me here.
Emilia: This Lodovico is a proper man. A very handsome man.
Desdemona: He speaks well.
Emilia: I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.
Desdemona: [Sings] The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,

[Sing all a green willow:] 

Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
The fresh streams ran by her and murmur’d her moans,
Sing willow, willow, willow:
Her salt tears fell from her and softened the stones,
Sing willow, willow, willow;
[Speaks] Lay by these.
Willow, willow -
[Speaks] Prithee hie thee: he’ll come anon.
Sing all a green willow must be my garland.
Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve -
[Speaks] Nay, that’s not next. Hark, who is’t that knocks?