

Key themes in *Othello*

Appearance v reality	Deception	Identity (The Other)
Love	Jealousy	Revenge

Explain how **revenge** is explored through:

- Iago plotting against Othello
- Brabantio bringing Othello to the Duke
- Emilia and Desdemona's discussion
- Othello's decision to kill Desdemona
- Othello injuring Iago

In the end, how are the following people avenged?

- Othello
- Iago
- Roderigo

Other themes

Loyalty

- Explore the notion of loyalty through looking at the relationships between husband and wife, master and servant, man and country.

Public life v private life

- Does Othello's excessive reliance upon his own private experience lead him to condemn and kill Desdemona? Does his concern for his public image lead him to believe her guilt too easily?
- What would have occurred if Othello had relied on evidence from a public trial rather than Iago's evidence?

Jealousy

Find a quotation to support each of the following examples of jealousy:

- The play opens with a discussion of jealousy. Iago is upset because Othello selected Michael Cassio as his lieutenant. He is jealous of Cassio's position both in the military and with Othello's service. This initial jealousy is the catalyst for the play's sequential plot of mixed jealousy and destruction.
- Brabantio is partially jealous of the Moor for stealing his daughter's love. He no longer may be the most important man in Desdemona's life.
- The lovesick Roderigo has trouble with his hidden feelings for Desdemona and is jealous watching the two in love. He follows Iago's directions easily, perhaps partially because of his jealousy of Othello's relationship with Desdemona.

- Iago openly divulges his plan of destruction, which incorporates jealousy as the key factor. He intends to create a strong sense of jealousy in Othello by setting up the mirage of an affair between Desdemona and Cassio.
- Iago plants seeds of jealousy in Othello and then speaks of the 'green-eyed monster' as a force to be feared. Jealousy is personified as a monster.
- When Iago tells Othello of the handkerchief, he has the evidence necessary to prove Desdemona's unfaithfulness. It is now that the jealousy sinks deep into Othello's soul and starts to vividly destroy his psyche.
- Bianca, Cassio's lover, also becomes sick with jealousy. She sees the planted handkerchief in Cassio's room and believes him to also have taken another lover. Her jealousy exists on a much smaller scale, but illustrates that the sentiment is universal.
- As the play concludes, all causes of jealousy are proved false. Desdemona was never unfaithful, but Othello realises the truth too late. Jealousy is the source of pain and death for these tragic characters; the green-eyed monster has succeeded in killing them.

Essay questions

The first question here explicitly names a key theme; think carefully about how other themes are relevant to the rest of the questions. For example, the last question about Venice could include the theme of the public versus the private.

1. Explore the way Shakespeare examines the themes of jealousy and deception in *Othello*. Compare how your interpretation of the play differs from those of other critics.
2. Explore Shakespeare's presentation of the female characters in *Othello*.
3. Coleridge describes Iago as having a 'motiveless malignity'. Explore the character of Iago in the light of this comment.
4. 'A mysterious creature of unlimited cynicism'. Discuss this and other views of Iago.
5. 'A frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian'. To what extent is this a just description of Othello and Desdemona's marriage? Explore with reference to your own views and those of other critics.
6. Using Act 1 Scene 3 as a starting point, assess the importance of Venice in the tragedy of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Key quotations for themes

Find two quotations for each of the following themes. Include the scene, act and line number.

Appearance and reality	
Deception	
Identity (the Other)	
Love	
Jealousy	
Revenge	
Loyalty	
Public life verses private life	