

Shakespeare's *OTHELLO*

GOAL: to write 500 words per week. They can be written in response to general comprehension questions, to deeper questions, essay questions, or they can be written as personal reflections on the text. Some short answer questions can lead to longer answers. Feel free. The goal is not to answer all the questions but to respond with thoughtful content and to improve your writing by practicing every week—in the most painless way possible.

Short Answer Questions

NOTE: whenever the question uses a quotation, find it in the *original* text. Whenever necessary, study the original text for your answer.

Keywords:

Classism	Deception	Cronyism
Racism	Elope	Prostitution
Sexism	Rebellion	Brothel
Discrimination	Philosophy	Demonize
Greed	Alcohol	Villainize
Vindictive	Conspire	Gullible
Stereotyping	Arrogance	
Manipulation	Betrayal	

Scene-by-Scene Questions

1.1

1. What is Roderigo complaining about in the opening scene?
2. Why does Iago say he hates Othello so much, and what does he mean when he says: "In following him, I follow but myself"?
3. What do Iago and Roderigo hope to accomplish by shouting insulting remarks about Othello and Desdemona under Brabantio's window?

1.2

1. What are Othello and Iago talking about at the opening of this scene?
2. When Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is "much-loved" and may try to separate him and Desdemona, what is Othello's answer and what does it suggest about what Othello values?

3. What does Othello mean when he says: "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly."
4. According to Brabantio, how has Othello seduced his daughter?

1.3

1. In response to Brabantio's accusation that Othello has bewitched his daughter, Othello explains how she originally fell in love with him. How did it happen and why has Othello's description been called "the Othello music"?
2. What is the point of Iago's "Virtue, a fig" speech and what is the "new" Elizabethan philosophy behind it?
3. How would you characterize the difference between the way Othello and Iago talk, both in their subject matter and their style?
4. At the end of this scene, Iago gives a second reason for hating Othello; what is this reason?
5. What did the city of Venice symbolize to members of the Elizabethan audience? What was the reputation of Venetian women?

2.1

1. In lines 167-178 of this scene, what does Iago notice and what does he plan to do as a result?
2. What does Iago's advice (lines 220-276) to the lovesick Roderigo reveal about what he thinks of Desdemona's love for Othello?
3. What does Iago's last speech in the scene reveal about his attitude toward Othello?

2.2 Do you think Othello might be taking liberties with the rules and wealth of Cyprus?

2.3 How does Iago dishonour Cassio in this scene and what does he advise Cassio to do in order to be reinstated?

3.1 We learn that Othello is not in the mood for more music. Give reasons.

3.2 How is the class difference or difference of status emphasized and illustrated by this important little scene? Might Iago feel demeaned? How would Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience view this scene?

3.3 As Cassio pleads his case to Desdemona, Othello and Iago approach: Why does Iago comment: "Ha, I like not that"?

1. What is the principal strategy that Iago uses (over and over in this scene) to convince Othello that his wife has betrayed him with Cassio?
2. Which of the following is the best example of Iago's technique? 3.3.35-42; 3.3.95ff; 3.3.160ff; 3.3.170ff; 3.3.205ff; 3.3.232ff; Explain.
3. As suggested in lines 267-270, why was Othello so suspicious of himself and therefore so trusting of Iago?

4. By lines 3.3.344ff, what is Othello's state of mind?
5. What is the primary thing Othello has lost through Desdemona's betrayal?
6. What kind of proof does Othello ask for in line 370?
7. According to the editor's stage directions, what do Othello and Iago both do at the end of this scene and how might this be significant?

3.4

1. Why is the handkerchief that Desdemona has lost so important to Othello and how does its importance to him diminish his intelligence, at least in the eyes of a Christian audience?
2. What does Cassio do with the handkerchief he found?

4.1

1. What does Othello's language in 35ff suggest about his state of mind? How is his language now much more like that of Iago than it was?
2. How does Iago go about providing the visual proof of Desdemona's infidelity that Othello had earlier asked for?

4.2

Why doesn't Desdemona react more strongly when Othello accuses her of infidelity?

4.3

As Emilia prepares her mistress's wedding bed, Desdemona talks of her mother's servant Barbary who was forsaken by a mad lover, 4.3.25ff; then she and Emilia talk about whether they would be unfaithful to their husbands or not (4.3.60ff). What is the significance of this conversation?

5.1. How did Iago profit from Roderigo? How many times has Iago played the messenger or deliverer?

5.2

1. As he enters Desdemona's bedchamber in order to kill her, Othello mutters: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul." What is he talking about? In what way might he be rationalizing Desdemona's murder?
2. Explain why Desdemona's *dying* is not tragic. How did Shakespeare make it absurdly comical?
3. Often at the end of a play, Shakespeare's tragic heroes have a moment of insight: According to what he says in lines 340ff, what is Othello's insight into himself?

Extra Questions

(1) Brabantio protests the marriage of his daughter, Desdemona, to Othello, claiming Othello used "spells and medicines" to dull her senses so that she would marry "against all rules of nature." Do you think the real reason for Brabantio's protest is the color of Othello's skin? Use passages from the play to support your answer.

- (2) What was the attitude of Europeans toward blacks during Shakespeare's time?
- (3) In what ways are Othello and Desdemona similar to Romeo and Juliet? In what ways are they dissimilar?
- (4) Do you believe Iago despises Othello because Othello is black?
- Would you marry a person of opposite color? Explain your answer.
- (5) What do you believe was Shakespeare's attitude toward blacks?
- (6) Did any blacks live in London during Shakespeare's time?
- (7) If Othello was such a great general, a man who could read the mind of his enemy, why was he so easily deceived by Iago?

How is Othello's view of the handkerchief different from Desdemona's

Compare the short story "The Cask of Amontillado" to *Othello* (the play). Discuss **two** major similarities.

Iago, even Cassio and *all men* are beasts toward women in the play. Agree, disagree, or qualify (a middle ground) your answer, using examples from the play.

Discuss the role of Emilia in the play. What kind of woman is she? What does she think of men? How does she compare to Desdemona and Bianca? Use terms and notes from class as well as examples from the play to support your answer.

To what extent does Othello's final speech affect our assessment of him? What is the effect of his final anecdote about the Turk?

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?

Extra-Extra Questions

- 1) Should Iago be executed in the end? Explain.
- 2) Where did Iago go wrong in his plan?
- 3) Why doesn't Emilia speak up sooner about the handkerchief and why doesn't Desdemona stand up to Othello?
- 5) Why doesn't Othello believe Desdemona? Consider our key words.
- 6) Brabantio protests the marriage of his daughter, Desdemona, to Othello, claiming Othello used "spells and medicines" to dull her senses so that she would marry "against all rules of nature." Do you think the

real reason for Brabantio's protest is the color of Othello's skin? Use passages from the play to support your answer.

2) Research the attitude of Europeans toward blacks during Shakespeare's time.

Essay Topics:

1. A Comedy of Idiocy: white, wealthy and powerful men are ruined by a black man and, even more, by the poor, lower class Iago. Consider the Duke and Brabantio's decision to trust Othello and not let the white and wealthy Roderigo marry Desdemona; Cassio's incompetence as a man and military officer; Roderigo's willingness to trust Iago
2. Humanism in Iago's character and beliefs. Shakespeare and his audience reject this new philosophy, which is why he associated it the villain, Iago, specifically in Act 1, scene 3 lines (307-320). Explain how this speech expresses humanist ideas. You might need to research humanism -- <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism/>
3. *Othello*, like all of Shakespeare's plays, seems deliberately written to *not* elicit sympathy for anyone, especially not Othello. Here are some points to explore:
 - a) In not one scene does Othello express love for Desdemona. To demonstrate this, you might have to argue that encouraging Desdemona to join him on the warship is not an expression of love.
 - b) He is foolish, gullible, arrogant, over-confident, etc.
 - c) Othello makes too many bad decisions with regards to hiring; he only wins a battle because a lucky storm sunk the enemy fleet; and—despite being a general—he is not able to kill anyone with skill.
4. Conformity and Rebellion in *Othello* (Iago, Desdemona, Emilia)
5. Discrimination in *Othello* (Racism, Sexism, Classism)
6. Iago, or Demonizing the Poor (Greed, Hatred, Deceit)
7. Heresy and Infidelity in *Othello*
8. Irony in *Othello*: Iago, Supreme Commander and Strategist
Or -- A Pattern of Irony: Othello's String of Bad Decisions

Historical Context of the War

The Duke and his military intelligence officers seem hopelessly confused about the size and target and direction of the Turkish/Ottoman fleet. Are they going to Cyprus or ... ?

Shakespeare's intent was to allude to the Ottoman and Venetian War fought just 30 years earlier in 1570-73, which the Venetians lost. Of course, in the play, the Venetians claim that the Turkish fleet was sunk in a storm, but this is clearly a lie. Is Shakespeare suggesting that the Venetians are liars, militarily weak, and possibly compromised by their extremely strange decision to make Othello, a Moor, their general? Doesn't this suggest that the Venetians hired the enemy to defend them?

For more on the war, see

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman%E2%80%93Venetian_War_\(1570%E2%80%931573\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman%E2%80%93Venetian_War_(1570%E2%80%931573))