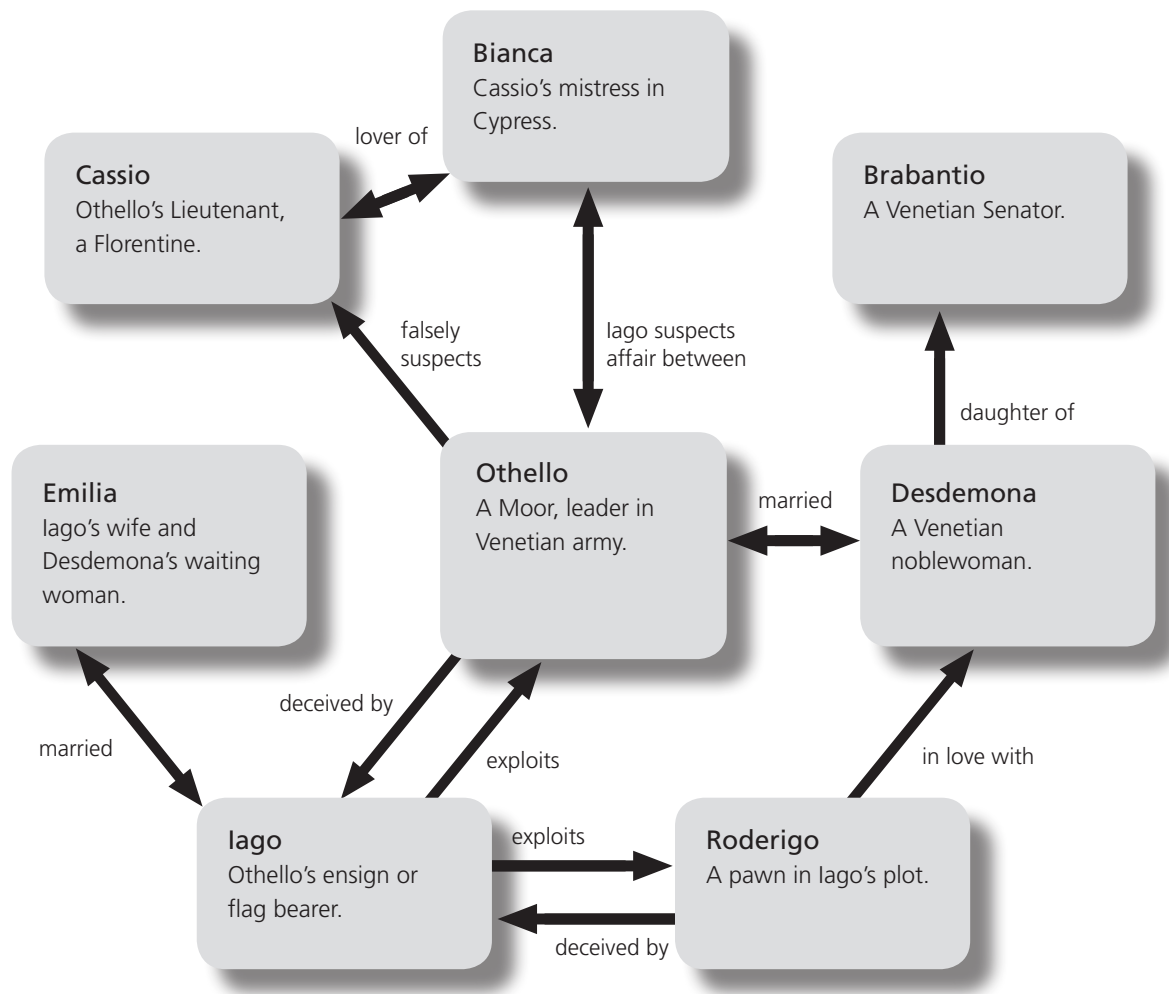


Contents

Character map	2
Introduction	3
Tips for writing essays	13
Essay 1: ‘“Who can control his fate?” Othello asks.’ Does Othello have any control over his own fate?	15
Essay 2: ‘Desdemona is no more than a passive victim of people who should care for her.’ Do you agree?	19
Essay 3: Should we feel any compassion for Iago?	24
Essay 4: ‘ <i>Othello</i> ’s main message is ‘Don’t trust outward appearances.’ Discuss.	28
Essay 5: ‘ <i>Othello</i> shows that innocence and trust are defeated by deception and dishonesty.’ Discuss.	32
Essay 6: ‘ <i>Othello</i> suggests the foolishness of entering a relationship at odds with the surrounding society’s standards.’ Discuss.	36
Essay 7: ‘Iago says, “The Moor is of a free and open nature”.’ Does this explain why Iago is able to deceive Othello so easily?	40
Essay 8: ‘ <i>Othello</i> is much more a story of jealousy than of love.’ Do you agree?	45
Essay 9: To what extent does the issue of race determine Othello’s downfall?	50
Essay 10: ‘Othello’s murder of Desdemona is the result of his weaknesses and circumstances rather than Iago’s malice.’ Discuss.	55
Practice topics	60

Character map



Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is considered the greatest English playwright. He wrote and produced a large number of plays, ranging from comedies and histories to tragedies. *Othello* was written in 1604 during a phase of other profound tragedies, such as *Hamlet* (1601) and *Macbeth* (1606). Shakespeare is appreciated for the ways in which he beautifully and poignantly expresses the dilemmas at the core of human existence.

Brief synopsis

The Moor, Othello, is a respected leader in the Venetian army. The play opens with news of his elopement with Desdemona, the daughter of Senator Brabantio. Othello is posted to Cyprus to fight the Turks. Whilst there, his flag bearer, Iago, hatches a plot to ruin his master's marriage and career. Among other motives, Iago is driven by jealousy that Cassio is appointed Othello's lieutenant ahead of him. Iago thus persuades Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair. Plagued by jealousy, Othello kills Desdemona, and then kills himself once it is revealed that she was innocent of the accusation of adultery.

Background & context

Venice

The play begins in the city-state of Venice, in what is now known as Italy. Venice was a powerful merchant republic ruled by nobles, rather than by royalty or a religious leader. From the point of view of Shakespeare's English audience, the Venetians were mistrusted due to what was perceived as their mercantile self-interest and lust for power. Iago's remark that Venetians are 'super-subtle' is not far from how Shakespeare's audience would have seen them. Cassio, who is so maliciously wronged by Iago, is a Florentine – a background which distances him from the manipulative ways of the Venetian Iago.

Cyprus

From Act II onwards, the play moves to Cyprus. It is significant that this Act begins with a violent storm at sea. The storm fortuitously devastates the Turkish fleet, but also symbolically signals the chaos and tragedy that is unleashed amongst the Venetians in Cyprus: Cassio gets drunk and fights, Desdemona is (falsely) thought to lose control of her own desires, and Othello's violent side comes to the fore.

Tips For Writing Essays

If you follow these simple tips, you'll be assured of an extra mark or two!

10 Do's



- Know the text really well and answer the question properly.
- Write a plan.
- Structure your essay using an introduction, several body paragraphs and a conclusion.
- Use paragraphs with clear topic sentences to mark the progression of your argument. Remember 'new paragraph = new point'. A good example of a clear topic sentence is: 'The consequences of racial prejudice are explored in *Othello*'.
- Use correct spelling and ensure you always spell book titles, characters' names or authors' names correctly; for example, 'Eli Wiesel's *Night*'.
- Put direct quotations in inverted commas; for example: 'Othello defends Desdemona's loyalty to Brabantio, swearing 'my life upon her faith'.
- Display your knowledge of the text by selecting relevant references to support your views. For example, if you choose to focus on the moments of Eli's life that shaped his personality in *Night*, you might analyse the scene featuring the death of his father.
- Work out your own point of view on key elements such as characters, narrators, plot, etc.
- Keep to topic.
- Acknowledge the difference between genres; for example, film, play. For example, when discussing a film, refer to 'shots', 'images', 'scenes', etc. When discussing a play, acknowledge the performance aspects, such as stage directions, the playwright's instructions for the setting, etc.

ESSAY 1

“Who can control his fate?” Othello asks.
Does Othello have any control over his own fate?

In order to ascertain Othello's own contribution to his demise, other forces must be taken into account. Firstly, there is the nature of a society that, in Iago's words, perceives him as an 'erring barbarian' and is quick to judge a man who is 'rude' in his speech and a 'Moor' besides. Secondly, Othello is inherently flawed, so that Iago's insidious words about Desdemona's preference for a match 'of her own clime, complexion, and degree' reinforce in Othello's mind the inferiority of his position in Cyprus or Venice, despite his status as a general. Ultimately a combination of Iago's intelligence in playing on Othello's insecurities ('look to your wife'), his inspired manipulation of events, Othello's own character and fate seem to work against Othello and bring about his downfall.

It could be construed that, rather than fate, the flaws in the characters around Othello lead to the play's terrible finale. Emilia's flaw is her misguided loyalty to Iago, demonstrated by her gift to Iago of the handkerchief that her 'wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed [her] to steal'. It is a trifle that causes Othello to yield to 'tyrannous hate' and perform an act that he atones for in suicide. In the same way, Desdemona's passivity and consequent failure to defend herself effectively against Othello's accusations perpetuate Othello's belief that she is a 'lewd minx'. Also, Othello's 'free and open nature' leads him to accept Iago's vile insinuations without much question. The seed of doubt planted in Othello's mind when Iago first voices his 'suspicions' bears fruit, as Othello soon laments 'the curse of marriage'.

The omen voiced by Brabantio in Venice could perhaps be seen as evidence of Othello's destiny; nothing he does will succeed

The first sentence implies that Othello's control over his own fate is a complex issue.

Reasons for his demise are outlined. A force outside Othello contributes to his demise.

Othello's own character flaws contribute to the outcome.

Demonstrates that Othello has little 'control over his own fate', thus answering the topic.

Topic sentence introduces the point that the characters surrounding Othello bring about his downfall.

Emilia's and Desdemona's character flaws provide a climate that leaves Othello open to Iago's machinations.

Othello, himself, is too trusting of others' opinions about Desdemona.

The bridging sentence provides a link to the next paragraph.

The topic sentence introduces the idea that Othello's has no 'control over his fate'.