

Copyright © Insight Publications

Copying for educational purposes

The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of the book, whichever is greater, to be copied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

For details of the CAL licence for educational institutions contact CAL,
19/157 Liverpool Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000

Telephone: (02) 9394 7600, Facsimile: (02) 9394 7601, E-mail info@copyright.com.au

Copying for other purposes

Except as permitted under the Act (for example, any fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review) no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission. All inquiries should be made to the publishers at the address below.

First published in 2001, reprinted 2002, 2003, 2004.

Insight Publications Pty Ltd

ACN 005 102 983

ABN 57 005 102 983

Suite 1, 128 Balcombe Road,

Mentone Vic 3194

Australia.

Tel.: 03 9583 5839

Fax: 03 9583 9573

Email: books@insightpublications.com.au

www.insightpublications.com.au

Cover Design: Graphic Partners

DTP: Geoffrey Heard & Associates (03) 9583 0788

Editing: Iris Breuer

Printing: Hyde Park Press, South Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Tweg, Sue

William Shakespeare's Othello: text guide

For secondary and tertiary students.

ISBN 1 875882 35 9

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Othello. I. Title.

(Series : Insight text guide).

822.33

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Context & Background	5
Italy and Italians – 5; Prejudiced views of Italians and Spaniards – 6; Machiavelli – 6; Italian Women in Shakespeare’s time – 7; Venice – 7; Othello’s background – 7; Shakespeare’s Theatre – 8.	
Genre, Style and Structure	9
Tragedy – 9; Shakespearean tragedy – 9; Language styles – 10; Tone – 11; Metaphor and poetry – 11; Structure – 12.	
Scene-by-Scene Analysis	13
Act I: I.1 – 13; I.2 – 14; I.3 – 14; Act II: II.1 – 17; II.2 – 18; II.3 – 18; Act III: III.1 – 19; III.2 – 19; III.3 – 20; III. 4 – 22; Act IV: IV.1 – 23; IV.2 – 26; IV.3 – 26; Act V: V.1 – 28; V.2 – 28.	
Characters & Relationships	31
Othello – 31: Outsider – 31, First impressions of Othello – 32, Positive qualities – 32, Frustration, Impatience and Rising Passion – 32, Significance of Language Patterns – 33, Othello’s Sexuality – 34; Iago – 35: Riddle of Iago’s character – 35, Interpretations of Iago – 35, Different Roles for Different Situations – 36, Is Iago psychopathic? – 38, A Paradoxical Trait – 37, Use of words – 38; Othello and Iago – 38: Othello’s trust of Iago – 39; Desdemona – 40: Interpretations of Desdemona – 40, Strengths – 41, Is Desdemona a Deceiver? – 41, How her Love for Othello is a Trap – 42; Othello and Desdemona – 42: Power of words – 43; Emilia – 44: Desdemona and Emilia – 45; Cassio – 45: Cassio’s personality – 45, How he plays into Iago’s hands – 46, Cassio and Bianca – 47; Roderigo – 47; Brabantio – 47.	
Themes & Issues	49
Appearance and reality – 49; Love – 50: The word ‘love’ and its meanings – 50, Love between couples in Othello – 50, Jealousy – 51, Trust – 52; Women and relationships – 53; Racism – 54; Xenophobia – fearing the outsider – 55; Reputation – 55.	
Questions & Answers	57
General questions – 57; Analysing a sample question – 58; Preparing an answer – 59; Sample Questions – 60.	
References & Reading	62
Text – 62; Further Reading – 62; Film Versions on video – 63; Animated text and video – 63; Websites – 63.	

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's *Othello*, like the other three great tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, was written in a cluster around 1600 to 1606 for the actors at the Globe. *Othello* too is named after the central tragic protagonist, a noble man who has lived honourably up to the moment in the play when everything he understands about life changes catastrophically. Should *Othello* really be called *Iago*, though? The sheer audacity and inventiveness of Othello's psychopathic tormenter threatens to steal the show from his master.

The story of *Othello* is a sad one, with a particularly contemporary ring. Iago opens the action with information about a mixed marriage that has been carried out in secret, at night, because of anticipated parental disapproval. Despite the bride's father's misgivings, loudly aired in public, society leaders tolerate this marriage because the husband is useful to the community and the well-respected bride is articulate and determined enough to insist on being accepted as his partner.

We are never in doubt that the couple has married for love but soon both Othello and Desdemona reveal that they are naive and idealistic. Naivete in love isn't necessarily something we should scorn. However, with malicious and more sophisticated characters like Iago in society, ever ready to exploit simple trust, naivete can leave a person dangerously vulnerable to attack. This is the crux of the tragedy in *Othello*.

Apart from the issue of Othello's and Desdemona's inter-racial marriage, the play raises other relevant questions. How is the 'outsider', the 'alien' in a dominant culture, to be understood? Tolerated or not? Have social relations between people changed since Shakespeare's time? The play encourages us to consider the nature of prejudice generally and a recent debate asks whether it makes any difference if the actor is white or black.

What views about life and love do they express? How do men relate to women in the world of the play? The corrosive effects of feelings like jealousy and personal responses to the crushing shame of dishonour are also part of the play's complex fabric.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Italy and Italians

Othello is set in two locations, Venice and the island of Cyprus, an important defensive outpost for the Venetian state at the time. Original playgoers would have been exposed to certain attitudes to Italy, which would have helped to colour their interpretation of this exotic story in performance. Cultural stereotypes still persist, as we know, and it is important to recognise their power to influence us, even when we know we are looking at fictional characters on a stage or onscreen.

Italy and Italian temperaments were known to ordinary English people in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries largely through stage representations, like the exotic bunch of characters they could see in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. Other plays were also set in different parts of a culturally and politically divided country. Some audience members would have already absorbed background information about the Catholic empires of Italy and Spain and the classical worlds of Greece and Rome in other ways, before they even set foot in the playhouse. Young men, for example, would have absorbed a combination of fact, recent and ancient history and classical myth through Latin texts and translations that formed the basis of their education in grammar schools. Comparatively few members of any audience would have had first-hand experience of European travel to go on, so already formed opinions and prejudices mattered.

People who could read in Shakespeare's time also began to acquire hot-off-the-press English or French translations of Italian prose *novellas* (these were literally 'new' short works of prose fiction, the beginnings of what we still call 'novels'). Here readers could find a rich descriptive mixture of corruption and vice, of love, lust, vendetta, rivalry, forced marriages, imprisonment, casual slaying, torture and every kind of cruelty and decadence, set in opulent palaces or places of religion. In just such an Italian *novella*, translated into French, Shakespeare found his source story for *Othello*, entitled *Disdemonia and the Moorish Captain*.



Find out more about Shakespeare's source for Othello by reading the Introduction to the New Penguin edition of the play carefully. The popular novella by Cinthio was printed in Venice in 1565, entitled 'Disdemona and the Moorish Captain'. Cinthio's story has been translated again recently by T.J.B.Spencer in Elizabethan Love Stories (Penguin) and is worth reading. Notice how Shakespeare made significant changes to Cinthio's story in plot details and characterisation.

Prejudiced Views of Italians and Spaniards

Prejudiced perceptions about the 'latin temperament' still exist, don't they? An important factor shaping English views in Shakespeare's time - basically, that Italians and Spaniards were generally dangerous political and moral enemies - stemmed from the recent religious upheaval known as the Reformation, when 'Protestant' England had formally withdrawn its religious allegiance to the Pope and 'Catholic' Rome, and named its own monarch, Henry VIII, head of the English Church and 'Defender of the Faith'.¹ When Henry's daughter, Queen Elizabeth, ruled during Shakespeare's lifetime, Italian and Spanish visitors to England were likely to be viewed with deep suspicion as both decadent heretics and potential assassins. And so plays featuring Italian and Spanish characters were viewed with particular interest - despite the presence of honourable Venetians in the story, Iago confirmed playgoers' worst expectations.

Machiavelli

Furthermore, the name of the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was widely known as a byword for cynicism and diabolical cunning. Knowing quite well that the theatre audience would understand what he meant, Shakespeare's character, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, soon to be the monstrous Richard III, alluded to Machiavelli when he claimed he could teach 'the murderous Machevil' a thing or two about being a villain (*3 Henry VI*, III.2,193).

¹ Henry VIII refused to accept the Catholic Church's authority when he was refused a divorce in order to remarry and produce a male heir. The Act of Supremacy (1534) ended the Pope's formal authority in England. Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I, became Supreme Governor of the Protestant church in England in 1559.



*Find out more about Machiavelli, especially his famous book of political advice called *The Prince*. Compare his thoughts about handling political situations and people with the way Iago manipulates events. Is Iago ‘machiavellian’...or worse?*

Italian Women in Shakespeare’s Time

If Italian men were viewed stereotypically in Shakespeare’s time as potentially dangerous schemers, Italian women - especially Venetian women - were notorious by repute as a pack of prostitutes. Storr (1989) quotes late sixteenth century estimates for types of women in Venice: 2,889 upper class ladies, 2,508 nuns, 1,936 burgher women, and 11,654 courtesans. Iago’s wife, Emilia, is certainly a freethinker about sex, in contrast to Desdemona’s chaste but playful erotic imagination, but there is no evidence to suggest that Shakespeare is portraying either of these women as whorish, whatever their husbands suspect about them. On the other hand, Cassio’s mistress, Bianca, is clearly a working girl selling sexual favours. The issue of how Shakespeare portrays female sexuality in the play, given contemporary popular ideas about Italian women, is discussed further. (See Themes & Issues, p.49.)

Venice

The Venetian State was known to the people of Shakespeare’s time as a great trading nation and sea power. It had been engaged in a battle with the Turkish Empire (Christian against Moslem) for control of Mediterranean territory and seaways since the early fifteenth century. Cyprus had been added to the Venetian State in 1489 and was an important garrison island, before passing finally into Turkey’s hands in 1573 as part of a peace settlement.

Othello’s Background

Othello is therefore set in the period before 1573, when Venice and Cyprus are under military threat: General Othello, Ancient [Ensign] Iago and Lieutenant Cassio are all veterans of campaigns against the Turks, so it is good policy to appoint Othello governor of Cyprus in the crisis. Othello himself is a Moor, and therefore Muslim, who has converted to Christianity after settling in Italy. How he got to Venice from his home in North Africa

is not certain, although he hints at the dangers and adventures he has known, including a period of slavery, in his long speech to the senators in Act I Scene 3, 127-169.

Shakespeare's Theatre

Othello was performed in 1604 before the new king, James I, at the Banqueting House, Whitehall, and again in 1612 for a royal wedding. This was an elegant indoor space, with candles to light the performance, a band of musicians and an invited courtly audience. But Shakespeare's plays, including *Othello*, were more frequently performed in the Globe, a public open-air theatre on the south bank of the Thames. Here conditions were different: all performances took place in broad daylight, scenery and props - like beds and candles for *Othello* - were minimal and the large stage jutted out into the audience, which was made up of a representative cross-section of London society of both sexes, from the wealthy to the relatively poor. Actors had to train their voices to be able to reach every audience member in the large wooden 'O' shape of the theatre, a space that could accommodate over three thousand people. Actors also knew that they had to rely on language to create the atmosphere for a scene, to help the audience imagine details of weather conditions, temperature and time of the day or night. There are a number of good websites which show the re-constructed Globe Theatre.



Othello is a story dominated by the sense of 'night', physically and metaphorically. Some scenes occur indoors, some outside, and in two different locations, Venice and Cyprus; darkness is common to many of them. Look carefully at the language in some scenes for evidence of this all-pervading darkness. Can you locate exceptions, the few scenes where 'daylight' dominates briefly?

GENRE, STYLE & STRUCTURE

Genre

Tragedy

The term 'tragedy', first applied to describe Classical Greek theatre, defines the kind of serious play that deliberately arouses, as Aristotle argued, our '*pleasure* of pity and fear' (my emphasis) for the tragic protagonist (See Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, pp.189-93). This protagonist is neither a complete villain nor a saint but a noble man or, much less often, a woman, with a mixture of faults and virtues. While we are led to pity him, we also experience fear because we recognise our life could just as easily be destroyed through similar faults as this noble example who is 'better than we are' to begin with. When the hero finally encounters the reversal of fortune (Greek *peripeteia*) followed by *catastrophe*, partly through his own pride (Greek *hubris*) or an error of judgement (Greek *hamartia*, the 'fatal flaw'), Aristotle argues that we experience a pleasurable release of tension, accompanied by a sense of relief that balance has somehow been restored to the world through a kind of cleansing, or purging, of the fault (Greek *catharsis*). This is Aristotle's basic idea of how tragedy works.

Shakespearean tragedies do seem to close by bringing to an end the disruptive elements that have led to the catastrophe, although there is sometimes a lingering sense that cosmic order has been restored only temporarily. *Othello* certainly ends with calm but at a terrible price: the final moments onstage reveal Othello, Desdemona and Emilia dead, Iago wounded, Cassio maimed and the Venetian lords shocked into silence.

Shakespearean Tragedy

Othello is a tragedy, which means that its noble protagonist is likely to be undermined by circumstances, combined with some 'fatal flaw' in his own personality. In Shakespeare's other great tragedies we could say that for Hamlet, the fatal flaw is hesitation, for Macbeth it is uncontrollable ambition, and for King Lear emotional blindness. Othello's fatal flaw is, as he realises too late, that he has been '*one that loved not wisely, but too well*' (V.2, 340), bringing horror into his own peaceful life by trusting the wrong person.

But this is too simplistic, isn't it? Shakespeare gives his great tragic characters much more complex motivations, so that what you've just read above reduces the psychological and emotional struggles of an intelligent person to a single character 'flaw'. What is Othello's 'flaw'? Is he too trusting? Yes, he is. Or is his ego too easily bruised, so that he becomes instantly offended when he thinks his honour has been attacked? Yes, again - but even this is only half true. Is he anxious about sex? We could certainly guess so, from his excited response to Iago's hints, but again he has good reason to feel anxious, as well. And worried about being black in a white society? Yes, he refers to this more than once - but again he has some justification.



We need to take time to work out a subtle reading of Othello's personality. He isn't a single-minded tragic hero who is cut down by events, nor a jealous wife-killer, but one who calls himself at the end an 'honourable murderer' (V.2, 291).

Shakespearean tragedy works on the principle that protagonists are unable to see the whole picture of their circumstances until the very end of their lives, although information is revealed to the audience throughout the play. We therefore feel frustrated sorrow because we can only watch as they keep making the wrong decisions or mistake the truth or, like Othello, are led deeper into confusion by the one person they listen to. Their collapse and demise is not just personal tragedy; it affects the people they love, their friends and their country. Tragedy, as Shakespeare writes it, is about the huge ripple effect of the individual's collapse. And as the Prince says at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, ultimately '*All are punish'd*' (V.3, 295) by the catastrophe that overwhelms the protagonist.

Style & Language

Language Styles - Blank Verse and Everyday Prose

The play is constructed in two main language styles. Mostly it reads as the familiar Shakespearean blank verse in unrhymed iambic pentameter lines, illustrated, for example, when you listen to the five stresses per line

and easy rhythm of formal English speech. Look at these few lines from Desdemona's speech to the Senate (I.3, 245-9):

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
 May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
 Even to the very quality of my lord.
 I saw Othello's visage in his mind...

I have underlined the five stresses I'd make in each line. Notice that they don't have to make a singsong regular pattern to keep the poetic line moving. Iambic pentameter verse still holds its basic structure when a conversation is going on that breaks up lines between speakers. This is an important cue for actors about the way characters are interacting. For instance, in the following example, lines fragment under the tension of a fraught moment between Iago and Othello (IV.1, 23):

Iago: Ay, what of that?

Othello: That's not so good now.

Iago: What

If I had said, I had seen him do you wrong...

Iago frequently switches to the vernacular - everyday prose speech - as you can see by the change in line patterns on the printed page, for example, when he is speaking to Roderigo about 'virtue' (I.3) or in his aside (II.1, 164-173). Breaking into prose adds a sense of urgency to Iago's words but also lets us recognise that he's stepped out of the poetic dramatic frame for a moment - he's talking like an ordinary person. Prose marks him as more 'common' than the characters who habitually speak in verse. Cassio speaks prose when he's drunk (II.3) and Bianca the prostitute speaks prose to Cassio (IV.1).

Tone

These stylistic shifts move the tone of the language through a wide range of possibilities from heroic-sounding to lyrical, from mystical to sordid, from noble perceptions to the banality of the everyday. Find some examples of these tonal differences in the iambic pentameter verse.

Metaphor and Poetry

Othello is often considered to be Shakespeare's most 'poetic' play and it