

Studying
Othello

English
& Media
Centre

Credits

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Images

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Acknowledgements – video

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Footage from *Othello* directed by Orson Welles (1952), starring Orson Welles, Susanne Cloutier and Micheal MacLiammoir, provided by Castle Hill Productions Inc, New York.

The following versions of *Othello*, referred to in the pack, are available on video or DVD from www.amazon.co.uk and www.blackstar.co.uk:

Othello (1952, d. Orson Welles, starring Orson Welles) VHS ASIN: B00004R6QE

Othello (1964, d. Stuart Burge, starring Laurence Olivier) DVD

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Introduction

Studying Othello is intended for students studying the play for AS or A2 for either coursework or examination. Although ideal for the English Literature specifications, there is also plenty of useful material for Lang/Lit students.

Studying Othello provides a carefully sequenced route through the text, taking students from pre-reading activities and close reading approaches on each act, to after reading work. The pack is divided into four sections:

- Before reading
- Ongoing activities
- During reading
- After reading

Focused scene-by-scene activities are balanced by work encouraging an overview of the play as a whole. Throughout the material the play is treated as a drama text, exploiting opportunities to visualise it as theatre, rather than just words on the page. Classroom approaches to reading the play and to recording responses (for example conscience alley, role-play, innovative group work, role on the wall and ripple charts) allow students to engage with the play both intellectually and actively. New ideas for focusing on language in accessible ways ensure that students have a solid basis for exploring themes, structure and character.

Short ‘soundbites’ from critics are integrated into ‘During reading’ activities, encouraging students to engage with and evaluate other interpretations and to gain the confidence to develop their own reading. Contextual material on Venice, Cyprus, women, magic, race, stage and film productions is introduced, embedded in activities on the play itself.

‘After reading’ activities explore bigger issues, picking up and developing ideas introduced in the ‘During reading’ sections: race, women, character, tragedy, the play in performance, contexts and critical readings. In addition to giving students the opportunity to read and explore contextual and critical material, there is advice both on how to use this knowledge to refresh and deepen a personal response to the play and to integrate it into written work.

Using the material

Studying Othello is a photocopiable resource. The black and white paintings on pages 10-12 are available as colour pdfs at www.englishandmedia.co.uk/teaching/html We suggest that grids and charts are enlarged to A3 to give students more space for note-making. Line references are to the Arden edition of the play.

The video

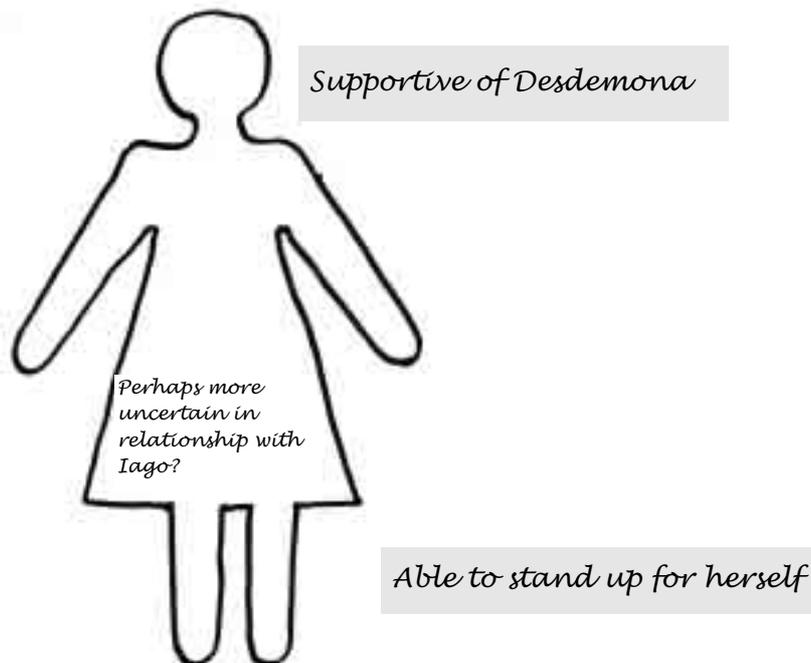
A 90 minute video *Studying Othello* is also available to complement and extend the print material. Material on the video has fully integrated activities in the pack. The video includes clips from three versions of *Othello* (Orson Welles, 1952; National Theatre stage production starring Laurence Olivier, 1964; Andrew Davies’ modern adaptation for television, 2001); an interview with director Jude Kelly about her ‘photo-negative’ production for The Shakespeare Theater, Washington D.C; critics Sean McEvoy, Ato Quayson, Margaret Reynolds and students talking about key aspects of the play, and a workshop with RSC actor Ray Fearon.

Ongoing activities

The activities listed here will help you keep track of your developing response to, and appreciation of the play.

Role on the wall

- Draw an outline character shape to represent each character in the play. Put these up on the wall.
- Outside the shape write comments on how the character behaves in public. Choose short quotations to illustrate the points you make. Inside the shape write comments and quotations showing what the character is really like.
- You could use different colours to highlight what is learned in different acts to reveal how an impression of a character is built up throughout the play. You could also use this template to record what is learned from the character's behaviour, what they say in public, in private, what others say about them and so on. Here's one that has been started on Emilia:



Word tracing/frequency exercises

- Take responsibility for tracing a single word through the play, pulling out all its meanings and implications. For example, 'jealousy', 'honesty' and 'seeming'. These could be recorded as spider webs. Use the following questions to focus your analysis.
 - Why is the word repeated so often?
 - What's interesting about the way different characters use the word?
 - How is it used by different characters in different ways?
 - What is the cumulative effect?

You might find it useful to consult a concordance when working on this activity. A concordance is an alphabetical list of the important words in a text and the places in which they occur. Web-based concordances allow you easily to explore all the occurrences of your word in the context in which it appears in the text.

Image charting

In *Othello* Shakespeare uses particular image clusters, for example images of light and dark.

- Use the chart below to record the ways in which images have been used. You could photocopy it on to A3 to give you more space. Some of the image clusters have been listed for you; as you notice other patterns in the imagery you should add these too.

Image cluster	Quotation	Used by whom?	In what context?	Significance
Light and dark				
Animals/birds				
Poison/ medicine				
Money				
Birth				
Plants				
Insiders/ outsiders				
The universe				

***Othello* as a play text**

As you read and study *Othello* it is important to remember that this is a play, written to be performed on a stage. Lack of time means it is not always possible to experiment with performing or staging a scene.

- To help you visualise what a scene might look like on stage and to reflect on how this alters your interpretation, keep the following questions in mind as you read.
 - Who is on stage at the beginning of the scene?
 - Who leaves? Who enters? At what point?
 - Who is central to the action? Who else is on stage and why are they there, if they are only marginal to the action?
 - Who initiates the action/conversation?
 - Who responds?
 - Does the scene (or section of the scene) take place in public or private? What is the significance of this?

Reading a speech – some linguistic approaches

- Use the approaches in the box on page 21 on one or more of the key speeches in the play. Make sure you connect the language features you notice to the meaning. Experiment with one of these approaches to help you prepare:
 - a dramatic reading of the speech, which highlights the most significant language features you've noticed
 - a short presentation about the speech, in which you explain what you've noticed about the way the language contributes to the meaning.

You could do this activity in pairs or threes, with each group taking responsibility for one of *Othello*'s key speeches (listed below), in order to explore what's revealed about *Othello* through his changing uses of language at different stages in the play.

- 1 'Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors ... I won his daughter' 1.3.76-94
- 2 'Her father lov'd me ... let her witness it.' 1.3.128-170
- 3 'Why, why is this? ... Away at once with love or jealousy!' 3.3.180-196
- 4 'This fellow's of exceeding honesty, ... I'll not believe it' 3.3.262-283
- 5 'I had been happy if the general camp ... Farewell, *Othello*'s occupation's gone!' 3.3.351-363
- 6 'Lie with her, lie on her? ... O devil!' 4.1.35-43
- 7 'Ay, you did wish that I would make her turn ... Goats and monkeys!' 4.1.248-259
- 8 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul ... It strikes when it does love: she wakes.' 5.2.1-22
- 9 'Soft you, a word or two: ... And smote him thus.' 5.2.339-357

Reading a speech – some linguistic approaches

- **Punctuation, pace, rhythm, structure.** Try reading every sentence of the speech with one breath per sentence. Then read it again, this time pausing for 1 count for a comma, 2 for a semi-colon or a dash, 3 for a colon and 4 for a full stop, an exclamation mark or a question mark.

- **Mood: statement, exclamation, question, command.** Go through the speech and annotate it to show the mood of each sentence, with an 'S', 'E', 'Q' or 'C'. Then read the speech emphasising that mood in your voice and facial expressions.

- **Line rhythms.** Clap out the iambic rhythm (*de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum*). Force the speech into the rhythm. Where does it want to break out? How does this relate to the meaning?

- **Monosyllabic and polysyllabic words.** What's the balance? What difference does this make to your reading of the speech?

- **Sounds of words.** Try whispering the speech to each other and spot the 'plosives' ('p', 'd', 'k', 't', 'b') – often hard, or ugly, or powerful – or the soft sibilant 's' sounds which can be menacing. Listen for other soft sounds, or humming sounds ('l', 'm'). Listen for any consonant clusters. What is the effect of these sounds on meaning?

- **Rhetoric: repetition, antithesis, questions, heightened language.** Start with repetition – any repeated words or patterns. Read the speech and get your partner to echo any repeated words. Move on to the other rhetorical techniques. Find ways of emphasising them in reading the speech out loud.

- **Patterns of words or images.** Link up all the words with a similar meaning or with deliberately contrasted meanings. Read the speech with your partner echoing these words for emphasis.

- **Use of rhyme.** Is rhyme used anywhere in the speech? If so, when? What is the effect as you read? Try emphasising the rhymed words to see what ideas stand out.

- **Blank verse or prose?** What difference does this make to the way you read and to the impact of the words? Try reading the verse as if it were prose and the prose as if it were verse. What is the effect of this?

Reading Act 1

Scene 1

Roderigo and Iago talk

Shakespeare makes us feel as if we're eavesdropping on a conversation.

■ Read the opening exchange between Roderigo and Iago and decide:

- who they are talking about
- what he's like
- what they feel about him
- what you feel about them, and about him, as an eavesdropper on their conversation.

■ Talk about why you think Shakespeare chose to open the play with this conversation.

Iago's first two speeches

■ Identify as many themes and issues as you can in Iago's first speech, printed below. For instance, money is one preoccupation ('I know my price'). Find others. Draw lines to connect words and phrases.

Despise me if I do not: three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Oft capp'd to him, and by the faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them, with a bombast circumstance,
Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war:
And in conclusion,
Nonsuits my mediators: for 'Certes,' says he,
'I have already chosen my officer,'
And what was he?
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife,
That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the division of a battle knows,
More than a spinster, unless the bookish theoric,
Wherein the toged counsuls can propose
As masterly as he: mere prattle without practice
Is all his soldiership: but he, sir, had the election,
And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof,
At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds,
Christian and heathen, must be lee'd and calm'd,
By debtor and creditor, this counter-caster:
He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,
And I, God bless the mark, his worship's ancient.

- Experiment with reading Iago's second speech aloud, stopping at each punctuation point to re-read that section in different ways. For example, you could put emphasis on a different word, to make it stand out more strongly. Decide which is the most helpful way of bringing out what's important. Use this as a way of exploring what is being revealed about Iago. For instance:

We cannot *all* be masters.

We *cannot* all be masters.

We cannot all be *masters*.

Putting the emphasis on 'masters' strengthens the idea of Iago's obsession with his poor status and his strong ambition.

O, sir, content you.
 I follow him to serve my turn upon him:
 We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
 Cannot be truly follow'd. You shall mark
 Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave,
 That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
 Wears out his time much like his master's ass
 For nought but provender, and when he's old, cashier'd,
 Whip me such honest knaves: others there are,
 Who, trimm'd in forms, and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
 And throwing but shows of service on their lords,
 Do well thrive by 'em, and when they have lin'd their coats,
 Do themselves homage, those fellows have some soul,
 And such a one I do profess myself, ... for sir,
 It is as sure as you are Roderigo,
 Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
 In following him, I follow but myself.
 Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
 But seeming so, for my peculiar end.
 For when my outward action does demonstrate
 The native act, and figure of my heart,
 In complement extern, 'tis not long after,
 But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve,
 For doves to peck at: I am not what I am.

- Having experimented with the reading in this way, talk about your view of Iago at this stage in the play.

The waking of Brabantio

In the second half of the scene (from line 81, *BRABANTIO at a window*), Iago and Roderigo tell Brabantio that his daughter has eloped with Othello.

- Before reading this part of the scene, improvise the conversation that you think they might have. Different groups could try each of these ways of doing it.
 - Iago and Roderigo break the news gently but Brabantio is furious with Othello and Desdemona.
 - Iago and Roderigo deliberately wind Brabantio up, to whip up his emotions and his anger.
 - Iago and Roderigo break the news gently – Brabantio is full of grief.

- Now read the scene itself. How do the characters behave in Shakespeare's scene? What approach do Iago and Roderigo take to breaking the news to Brabantio? What do you find striking about their language and behaviour?

Usually, in a typical polite exchange, there are set patterns that people follow. For instance, a question is usually followed by an answer, a greeting is followed by a greeting, a call is followed by a response and so on. These are called **adjacency pairs**. Printed below are the first few exchanges in the second part of Scene 1.

- Look closely at these exchanges and explore what is happening here, in terms of the expected pattern of adjacency pairs. What effect does this have? What does it reveal about the relationships and the situation?

Brabantio: What is the reason of this terrible summons?
What is the matter there?

Roderigo: Signior, is all your family within?

Iago: Are all doors lock'd?

Brabantio: Why, wherefore ask you this?

Iago: Zounds, sir, you are robb'd, for shame put on your gown, ...

