Introduction

William Shakespeare from Stratford-Upon-Avon, England, lived from 1564 to 1616. *Othello* was first published in the year 1622 but is first mentioned in 1604, so scholars generally date it between 1601 and 1603, the middle of Shakespeare’s career. The complexity of character, plot, and verse structure supports that placement.

Shakespeare’s Sources

The plot of Othello comes from the short story “Un Capitano Moro,” which was part of *Gli Hecatommithi*, written in 1565 by the Italian author, Cinthio. An additional minor source was Leo Africanus’ *A Geographical History of Africa*

Read “Un Capitano Moro” here: [http://opera.stanford.edu/Verdi/Otello/source.html](http://opera.stanford.edu/Verdi/Otello/source.html), and Africanus’ work can be downloaded here: [https://archive.org/details/historyanddescr01porygoog](https://archive.org/details/historyanddescr01porygoog)

Notable Film and Television Versions/Adaptations

1952 *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice* directed by and starring Orson Welles. View whole movie here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09NWcKA7JKw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09NWcKA7JKw)


1981 *Othello*, prod. Jonathan Miller, starring Anthony Hopkins, Bob Hoskins and Penelope Wilton, part of *BBC Television Shakespeare*. View a scene here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry5tPr1fJqo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry5tPr1fJqo)

1990 *Othello*, dir. Trevor Nunn, starring Willard White, Ian McKellan, and Imogen Stubbs—shockingly, this is the first televised version featuring a Black actor in the role of Othello, but it is merely a filming of the RSC’s stage production made for television. View a scene here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUBc8ydhbSM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUBc8ydhbSM)

1995 *Othello*, dir. Oliver Parker, starring Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh—the first film production to star a Black actor in the title role. Watch whole film here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOG_Cc-DKZI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOG_Cc-DKZI)

2001, *Othello*, British television adaptation by Andrew Davies, set in a British police department that is trying to crack down on racism. dir by Geoffrey Sax, starring Eamonn Walker, Christopher Eccleston, and Keeley Hawes. Watch whole episode here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIcCE3s_rFc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIcCE3s_rFc)


The play has also inspired an opera version (*Otello*, by Verdi) and a Ballet.
The Importance of Setting

Scholars believe Othello was written some time between 1601 and 1604. Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, but for years before her death, Shakespeare’s contemporaries had worried about what would come of their government upon her death, since she had no heirs. This fear threads through the themes of many of Shakespeare’s plays: What is good governance? What is proper succession? And given that Elizabeth’s father Henry VIII had created a whole new religion, the Protestant Church of England, which might fall if a Catholic came to power, what do we do if a foreigner comes to rule us?

Though England was always expected to remain a monarchy, Shakespeare did take the liberty of setting two of his plays in Venice, a proto-democratic Republic at the time known for its tolerance of different cultures, religions, and creeds. But if he was imagining a Republic as a possible alternative to monarchy, he doesn’t seem to have thought highly of it—though the Venice of Othello and Merchant of Venice is bustling, lively, and apparently rich, Shakespeare’s two Venetian plays are his only plays to focus on the corrosive nature of prejudice and bigotry, which tear apart those who dwell there.

**Venice in 1604**

Italy only became a unified set of states in the mid-1800s and an official republic after WWI. In the first years of the 17th century, when Shakespeare wrote Othello, Venice was its own Republic, a place where multiculturalism thrived. Venice’s geographical placement encouraged its growth as the world’s major crossroads for international trade and fellowship—and its laws prioritized equality and fairness in business dealings. Citizens of Venice would be used to encountering people, products, and customs from all across the East and were known for their relative tolerance of different cultures, religions, and creeds, as long as everyone obeyed their laws. Venice was also a colonial power, and Cyprus was one of its key strategic holdings for almost 100 years.

**Cyprus in 1604**

Shakespeare describes the island of Cyprus in Othello’s time as being under Venetian control, but subject to occasional incursions by the Turks. The Republic of Venice had in fact controlled Cyprus from 1489 – 1571. During that time, the island was subject to repeated conquests by the Ottoman Turks—conquests that finally succeeded, meaning that when Shakespeare was in school, by the time Shakespeare wrote Othello, the enemy Othello is fighting in the play had won. Due to its geographic location in the Mediterranean, between Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East, Cyprus always has been and remains strategically important far beyond its size and personal power. Culturally it is considered European, but it is split between Greek and Turkish, Christian and Muslim to this day. Even 400 years later it remains a fertile place to set a play about racial and religious concerns and violence.

Within the play, Venice and Cyprus are posited almost as opposites—the former charming, stylish, metropolitan, peaceful, safe, and orderly, except when someone breaks the laws of propriety by stealing a patrician’s daughter. Even then, the trouble is apparently smoothed over fairly easily, with hard feelings, but no lasting damage. Cyprus, on the other hand, home of solicitous prostitutes and plenty of wine, is a wild, unpredictable and apparently uncivilized place defined by storms, strife, deception, disorder, and death, a place where it makes sense for a General to go mad.
The People of *Othello*

**Othello**
A General of Moorish descent; Christian but apparently converted from Islam; in love with Desdemona

**Desdemona**
A young noblewoman; in love with Othello

**Iago**
Ensign to Othello; seemingly honest, but inside a jealous, bitter man

**Emilia**
Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s lady-in-waiting

**Roderigo**
A hapless rich fellow; in love with Desdemona

**Cassio**
Lieutenant to Othello; seeing Bianca

**Antonio**
Duke of Venice

**Brabantio**
A Venetian senator; father of Desdemona

**Lodovico**
A Venetian senator

**Montano**
Governor of Cyprus

**Bianca**
A working woman; Cypriot

**Citizens, Senators, and Soldiers**
The Story of the Play

Act I
The scene opens in Venice. Roderigo, a rich Venetian gentleman, has been paying Iago handsomely to win the love of Brabantio’s daughter Desdemona, and he is angry that Iago has not warned him that the Moorish general Othello has married Desdemona. Iago urges Roderigo to reveal the secret marriage to Brabantio, Desdemona’s senator father. He does, and Brabantio vows to have his revenge on Othello. Iago professes his resentment that he has been passed over for the prestigious position of Othello’s lieutenant, an appointment that has gone to Michael Cassio. Iago claims he hates Othello and only follows him for what he can gain. Meanwhile, Othello has been charged with advising the senators about news that the Turks are planning to attack Cyprus, a strategic holding of the Venetians since 1423. Thus Brabantio and Othello both appear before the Duke of Venice, who hears Brabantio’s claim that Othello has bewitched Desdemona, Othello’s protestation that she fell for him after hearing stories of his adventures, and Desdemona’s confirmation of her love. The Duke charges Othello with a campaign to Cyprus to put down the Turks, and Desdemona begs to follow him. Brabantio disowns his daughter, and Othello tasks Iago with bringing her safely to Cyprus. Roderigo is heartbroken and wants to drown himself, but Iago tells him the marriage can not last and urges him to travel to Cyprus as well. Iago vows to the audience to wreak havoc.

Act II
In Cyprus, Governor Montano learns the Turkish fleet has been destroyed in a storm. Desdemona, Iago and his wife Emilia arrive in Cyprus where Desdemona and Othello are reunited and Othello decrees a night of celebration in honor of his marriage. Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, then pressures Cassio into drinking too much and provokes Roderigo to challenge Cassio. In the ensuing brawl, Montano gets injured. Othello, angry at being roused on his wedding night, strips Cassio of his lieutenancy. Cassio bemoans the loss of his reputation and Iago urges him to seek Desdemona’s help to regain Othello’s good grace.

Act III
Iago plants a seed of suspicion with Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful with Cassio. Emilia delivers a handkerchief of Desdemona’s to Iago upon his request. Othello demands from Iago proof of Desdemona’s guilt and says he wants to kill her. He makes Iago his new lieutenant.

Act IV
Iago plants the handkerchief in the lodgings of Cassio, who gives it to the courtesan Bianca. Both Desdemona and Othello are distraught at the loss of her handkerchief—Othello’s first love-gift to her—and she tries to change the subject by asking him to forgive Cassio. Iago arranges for Othello to spy on Cassio and Othello sees Cassio and Bianca with the handkerchief. Iago urges Othello to kill Desdemona. Senator Lodovico arrives from Venice with letters commanding Othello home; he sees Othello acting strangely. Othello accuses Desdemona of being false and a whore. Desdemona is distraught and seeks help from Emilia and Iago. Roderigo, getting nowhere with Desdemona, tells Iago he will go to her and request the return of his jewels, which he has been paying Iago to give Desdemona. Iago convinces Roderigo to try to kill Cassio. A sad Desdemona seeks comfort from Emilia as she prepares for bed.

Act V
That night, Roderigo attacks Cassio in the street, but Cassio wounds Roderigo. Iago, who has been hiding, wounds Cassio and kills Roderigo. Othello finds Desdemona asleep; she wakes and claims her innocence and love, but he kills her anyway. Emilia arrives with news of the street fight and finds Desdemona dying. When Othello tells her Iago knew all about Desdemona’s infidelity, Emilia reveals the truth. Iago kills her and is placed under arrest. Realizing he has been duped, Othello forgives Cassio, and kills himself. Iago is silent as the rest pay tribute to their fallen leader and his wife.
The Questions Everyone Has

What is a Moor anyway?
Is a Moor a Black person from Northern Africa? A Berber from the Middle East? A Spaniard? This question may never be settled.
Some scholars claim the name “Moor” comes from the era of the Holy Roman Empire, when the “Mauri” were from Mauretania, what is now Morocco and Algeria but that “Moor” also refers to a group of Muslim of mixed Arab, Spanish and Berber descent originally from Spain and Portugal who eventually emigrated to Northern Africa. Others claim that Mauri is just the Latin version of an even more ancient Greek term for Black Africans. So the word could have several different meanings.

And… an Ancient or Ensign? why is Iago so annoyed to be one?
The Ensign is the Flag bearer, literally the sign that the General is still standing, so it’s a symbolically important position, though not high in rank—merely the lowest level of commissioned officer. It is also the person who is—again literally—the closest physically to the General the majority of the time. Iago, at 28 years old, could easily be highly trusted, battle-worn, and yet also fairly low-ranking in the official sense, particularly because commissions at the time were often purchased rather than earned. Lieutenant, on the other hand—the rank Iago seeks and Cassio gets—is (literally, yet again) the “Tenant in Lieu of” the General, the person who steps in for him when he’s “not at home” symbolically or in fact, the person you leave in charge of the conquered territory. Though the ambitious and capable Iago has the battle history, he is temperamentally not tactful, and therefore perhaps not a great choice for lieutenancy—but the very bluntness and bluster that disqualify him for that job make him a great fit, on the other hand, to stay by the General’s side. Iago may be ambitious, but it may be his very renown as “honest” that kept him from that promotion, whereas the untested but well-educated and personally charming Florentine, Cassio, is a natural for lieutenancy. Scholars have made much of Othello’s tragic flaw of jealousy, but it is Iago’s trio of tragic flaws—jealousy, blind ambition, and lack of self-knowledge—that really sets the play’s action in motion.

What’s the Real Reason Iago Goes on this Awful Tear?
This is the key question of the play. Iago gives us several reasons:
- he hates Othello because he is a Moor
- he hates Othello for making Cassio, not Iago, his Lieutenant
- he thinks Othello has slept with his wife Emilia

Which of these reasons do YOU think are most important to Iago? Are there other reasons as well? What reasons can you find in the text of the play? What reasons can you intuit from understanding Iago’s psychology?
**OTHELLO THEMES & DISCUSSION POINTS**

**Themes**

**A Warrior’s Place in War and Peace**
- In Shakespeare’s plays—as in life sometimes—people’s true natures reveal themselves under conditions of extreme difficulty, including war. Notice what the characters of *Othello* reveal.
- Some people’s skills are particularly suited to wartime, so they may be more comfortable during conflict than in times of peace, and may even desire conflict and thrive within it. Soldiers are often young men with no families and sometimes little other experience besides fighting. Which characters can turn off the violence? Is this violence inherent to their nature or has been trained into them to make them effective soldiers?
- What happens when there are (non-combatant) women in this traditionally masculine sphere? How does it affect the soldiers’ behavior? Comfort level?
- What differences are there between Venice and Cyprus? How might those differences affect individuals when they are in each environment?

**Love, Jealousy, and Betrayal (coupled with Honor and Reputation)**
If there are any themes widely experienced by teens, love, jealousy and betrayal top the list.
- How do our feelings of love and attraction affect our behavior towards friends? When in conflict, who takes precedence: the friend or the love interest?
- What is the fine line between love and hatred, and how do we maintain our integrity when we feel scorned or betrayed by someone who matters to us?
- How is betrayal different when it involves romantic love vs. friendship?
- Can reputations be repaired?
- Under which circumstances, or for what personality types, does betrayal prompt revenge?

**Multiculturalism, Religious Suspicion, and Racism**
- The Venetian Republic was known across the world as a culturally tolerant society that welcomed a wide range of cultural traditions. So why are the two plays Shakespeare set in Venice (*Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*) both about racism and xenophobia? What comment might Shakespeare have been making about his own society with these plays? What relevance do his observations have in our current time and place? How far have we come in over 400 years?
- What are the unspoken rules for cultural outsiders? As a respected (and needed) General, are any of the rules different for *Othello*?
- *Othello* is a Moor, a traditionally Muslim group, yet he has been appointed General of the Christian Venetian army that regularly goes to war against the Islamic Turks. What does this say about the Venetian Republic or about *Othello* himself?
- Some characters in the play express their racism openly, whereas others (such as Brabantio) seem to reveal their underlying racism only when *Othello* weds a wealthy white woman. In some cases, those responses appear to arise from disappointments that are not inherently racial in nature (ie, Roderigo losing the opportunity to marry Desdemona or Iago’s loss of the job he wanted)—when and why do people in the dominant culture resort to racism in these moments instead of dealing with their underlying issues, the “real” reasons for these disappointment? What can change this pattern?
Questions for Discussion

**Middle School**

**On the Plot of the Play**
1. What does Iago say are his reasons for behaving villainously? Which, if any, do you believe?
2. How does Othello change over the course of the play? Does Iago change?
3. Why are Othello’s stories so compelling to Desdemona?
4. Why is it so easy for Iago to trick so many people?
5. Emilia says that men and women’s interests and actions are more alike than they think. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. How do people’s expectations about others (men vs. women, Black people vs. White people, Muslims vs. Christians, soldiers vs senators, Venetians vs. Florentines vs. Cypriots) affect the outcome of the play?
7. Why does Iago stop talking at the end of the play?

**Bringing the Play’s Themes to Real Life**
1. In the play, there are taboos around a Black man marrying a White woman. Why did that taboo exist then and there? How does it still show up here and now?
2. Iago says he is taking revenge because he feels betrayed by Othello. What are some reasonable ways of dealing with betrayal?
3. Rumors are a big part of school life. How can you tell what is the truth about someone?
4. What are the most important personal qualities in a good friend? in a leader? Are those top qualities the same for both?

**High School**

1. Iago states from page one that he intends to be a villain. What effect did it have on you to watch a play knowing he was plotting against the hero? Why might an author want an audience to identify with or root for the villain?
2. Why is Othello so easily tricked into believing Iago over the woman he loves? Is this an issue of him not trusting that he himself is lovable, perhaps even internalized racism? privileging male experience over female experience? something else? And is there anything within himself that could have tipped the balance the other way, to allow him to maintain his belief in Desdemona?
3. Iago states varying reasons for his betrayal. Why do those reasons change? Which, if any, do you believe? and are there any you think he is trying to keep us from discovering? What does he need us to believe about him in order to feel successful?
4. A charismatic leader like Iago exploits flaws in others to gain power. What personal weaknesses does Iago reveal in the other characters? What personal flaws does he reveal in himself along the way? How can we use what we see in the play to make better choices when choosing whom to trust?
5. How does the military milieu and the threat of physical danger in Cyprus affect the plot? How does the existence of non-combatant women on the front affect the soldiers?
6. What are the benefits and dangers of a country or region considering itself multicultural? How is tolerance threatened when racism and other perversions of privilege go unexamined? What strategies can people take to overcome these threats to individuals and the region?
7. Why does Iago stop talking at the end of the play?
OTHELLO ACTIVITY IDEAS

Before Reading the Play

STUDYING GENRE: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRAGEDY Preliminary Discussion:

1. Shakespeare wrote in three main genres: Comedy, Tragedy, and History. What might be the characteristics of each, ie, how will we recognize whether we are seeing a comedy, a tragedy or a history play?

2. Discuss with students the rules of tragedy and the concept of a tragic flaw—elicit examples from other plays that the students may already know, or use the Seven Deadly Sins as jumping off points

Activity:
Guide students to creatively express images of tragic flaws in whatever way suits your students best: by creating “statue” frozen images with their own bodies (it can work well to pair students together to pose each other, as they will generally pose their partner much more expressively than they would pose themselves), through drawings, or by making collages of existing pop culture characters or other images that represent those flaws.

BUILDING CURIOSITY

Activity: PROP BOX
Bring to class a box of props that might be used in Othello:
skull or some other symbol of death
bridal veil
white candle
plastic dagger
handkerchief with specific identifying marks (ideally a strawberry)

1. Lay props out in a clearly visible spot in the room and encourage students to interact with the props, including touching them and playing with them in whatever way seems fitting to them. Allow this interaction for at least 5 minutes into class time, encouraging students to discuss the props with each other.

2. Once time is up, ask students to reflect on the objects, considering the symbolism of each item and give them time to create a graphic organizer for the props as items related to Othello.

3. Ask each student to create a short scenario that includes all the props

4. Then put students in groups to share their scenes and either choose one or create a new scene in which the props are all employed. Emphasize at this point that the scene is to contain no words.

5. Students then rehearse and share their scenes before the class.

6. If time, discuss the scenes—how alike were they? What themes arose the most often? What might we have intuited about Othello just from these props?
ACCESSING AND EMPLOYING POETIC LANGUAGE, PART I: Introduction to Iambic Pentameter

Teacher’s Instructions
Students should know that Shakespeare invented over 1700 words that his audiences had never heard before. Further, he was writing in verse (poetry), which is deliberately more complicated than regular conversation. His plays were performed for people of all ages and education levels, and there were food sellers (like at ballgames) yelling all around during the shows—in other words, even when the plays were new, no audience member heard and understood every word. Coach students not to worry if they miss an idea here and there; just keep watching and you’ll get all you need to understand.

Here’s a primer:
• Shakespeare writes in iambic pentameter.
• An iamb is the same rhythm as your heart—Lub-DUB—because that is the first sound we ever hear in our lives.
• Pentameter means there are 5 (penta-) heartbeat rhythms per line: Lub-DUB, Lub-DUB, Lub-DUB, Lub-DUB
• Why five? Because that’s as many heartbeats as you usually have per breath, and each line is about one breath long.

See? It’s not a giant mystery—verse is just natural body rhythms.

Sometimes, especially when a character is feeling very emotional—sad, happy, in love, scared—their heart will beat faster or skip beat, and Shakespeare’s line rhythm will change, too, off of that regular rhythm. That’s a note for the actors that their character is out of sorts, and the change in rhythm actually helps the actor make that mood change.

Activity 1: Elicit from students the sound they first heard before birth—the heart beat—and why that might be the rhythm of choice for performative poetry. Perhaps relate to the rhythm of music, which helps create its mood. Then asking students to count how many iambic there are per one full breath (answers will probably range from 4 – 6. German classical verse tends to be quadrameters and the French “Alexandrine” line is hexameter).

Activity 2: Read a few lines from Othello to note whether they follow the regular iambic rhythm or if they follow another rhythm. DO NOT try to make a line fit the rhythm—just read it in the natural emphasis of the words and note where it matches or diverges from the heartbeat rhythm.

Regular Lines
(Stressed syllables are in CAPS—minimally stressed “stressed” syllables in parentheses)
She LOV’D me (FOR) the DANgers I had PASS’D,
And I lov’d HER that SHE did PIty THEM”

But O, what DAMNèd MInutes TELLS he O’ER
Who DOTES, yet DOUBTS, susPECTS, yet STRONGly LOVES!

This LOOK of THINE will HURL my SOUL from HEAV’N.
(Here—and usually—”heaven” is one syllable.)

DeMAND me NOthing: WHAT you KNOW, you KNOW.

Irregular Lines
(Irregular sections are BOLDED)
I KISSed thee (ERE) I KILLED thee. NO way but THIS,
KILLing mySELF, to DIE upON a KISS.
Also note Iago’s pattern of speech—the “honest” Iago usually speaks to others in prose and to us in verse, though his use of verse grows as his plot grows. Further, a large percentage of his lines end in so-called “feminine” endings—unstressed syllables (indicated by italics in the text)—which Shakespeare often uses to indicate uncertainty. Is Iago’s uncertainty feigned, to make himself seem more honest?

I FOLLOW HIM to SERVE my TURN upON **him**:
We CANnot ALL be MASTers, NOR all MASTers
CannNOT 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, THROW’NG but SHOWs of SERvice (ON) their LORDs,
Do WELL THRIVE by THEM and WHEN they’ve LINED their COATS
**DO** themselves HOMAGE: these FELLows HAVE some SOUL;
And SUCH a ONE do I proFEss mySELF. For, SIR,
It (IS) as SURE as YOU are RodeRiGO,
Were I the MOOR, I WOULD not BE IAGO:
In FOLL’wing him, I FOLLow BUT mySELF;
HEAV’N is my JUDGE, not I for LOVE and DUty,
But SEEMIng SO, for (MY) peCUliar END:

And check out this speech in which Desdemona is very upset. What is happening to her heartbeat in this moment? Where is Desdemona trying to will herself to calmness and rationality, to calm her heart long enough to make sense? Where does she have so much emotion that her lines run too long?

Desdemona

**WHAT** shall I DO to WIN my LORD aGAIN?
Good FRIEND, **GO** to **him**; for, BY this LIGHT of HEAV’N,
I KNOW not HOW I LOST him. HERE I KNEEL:
If E’ER my WILL did TRESpass (‘GAINST) his LOVE,
EITher in DIscourse of THOUGHT or ACTual DEED,
Or (THAT) mine EYES, mine EARS, or Any SENSE,
DeLIGHTed (THEM) in Any Other FORM;
Or (THAT) I DO not YET, and Ever DID.
And Ever WILL—THOUGH he do SHAKE me OFF
To BEGgar(LY) diVORCEment—LOVE him DEARly,
COMfort forSWEAR me! UnKINDness MAY do MUCH;
And HIS unKINDness MAY deFEAT my LIFE,
But NEVer TAINT my LOVE. I CANN’T SAY ‘WHORE:’
It (DOES) abHOR me NOW I SPEAK the WORD;
To DO the ACT that MIGHT th’ adDITion EARN
**Not the WORLD’S** MASS of VANit(Y) could MAKE **me**.
And see how Othello wrestles with his feelings and overcomes them with reason at the very end of this speech:

Othello

THINK' ST thou I'ld MAKE a LIE of JEAlousY,
To FOLLow STILL the CHANges (OF) the MOON
With FRESH susPICions? NO; to be ONCE in DOUBT
Is ONCE to BE reSOLVED: exCHANGE me (FOR) a GOAT,
When I shall TURN the BUSiness (OF) my SOUL
To SUCH exSUFFliCATE and BLOWn surMISes,
MATCHing thy infeRENCE. 'Tis (NOT) to MAKE me JEAlous
To SAY my WIFE is FAIR, FEEDs well, LOVES COMpany.
Is FREE of SPEECH,SINGS, PLAYS and DANces WELL;
Where VIRtue IS, THESE are MORE VIRtuOUS:
NOR from mine OWN weak MERits WILL I DRAW
The SMALLeST FEAR or DOUBT of (HER) reVOLT;
For SHE had EYES, and CHOSE me. NO, IAGo;
I'll SEE beFORE I DOUBT; WHEN I DOUBT, PROVE;
And (ON) the PROOF, there (IS) no MORE but THIS,—
ACCESSING AND EMPLOYING POETIC LANGUAGE, PART II: Employing Language to Discover Character

Teacher’s Instructions
Students should know that actors performing in Shakespeare’s plays received only their own character’s lines, not the whole script, so they created their character using only those lines, no other information. How much can you tell about a character by the words they choose, and particularly by what they choose to say about themselves? This lesson will provide an opportunity to define and delineate Character Arcs—the journeys on which characters go over the course of the play, which represents the ways they change or remain the same from beginning to end.

Activity: Character Arc Statue Garden
1. Prepare and lay out the lines in Appendix A randomly at different points in the room (Note: if you have more than one classroom performing this exercise, you may want to print the lines on index cards or even laminate them, as students are prone to rolling them up, folding them, etc. If printing on regular paper, print one set for each classroom)
2. Allow students to wander the room, reading all the lines for a minute or two, instructing them to read as many as they can.
3. Ask students to choose a line that speaks to them in some way—it’s okay if they are not sure what the line means. Not all lines will be chosen, and that is okay.
4. Instruct students to find a partner and tell them you will all be creating a sculpture garden of these lines, and that they will have to tell the story of their line using nothing but a strong, silent and still physical image. Give pairs 2 minutes each to pose their partners as a statue for which their own line would be a good caption. (Use the two minutes to travel the room privately asking who wants assistance interpreting the meaning of their line.)
5. If you have abundant time, allow students to read their line while their partner performs the statue image. (This step may be omitted.)
6. Tell students that, now that they have seen the strong image they wanted, they will be performing their own statue images, not the ones created for them, ie they will get to represent their own chosen line.
7. Instruct actors to note the letter and number combination on their line and line up on two sides of the room, O 1 – 23 on one side, and on the other side of the room, I 1 – 22. Reveal that these lines represent the character arcs of Othello and Iago, the protagonist and antagonist of the play.
8. Have students “perform” their statue and read their line in numerical order—first all the Othello lines and then all the Iago lines, to demonstrate the characters’ arcs.

Discussion
Which character changed the most? Why? Did Iago change at all? Why or why not?
APPENDIX A — Character Arc Lines for Statue Garden Exercise, p 1 of 2

My services which I have done the signiory shall out-tongue his complaints. (O1)

My parts, my title and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly. (O2)

Rude am I in my speech, and little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace (O3)

My life upon her faith! (O4)

Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee! (O5)

I’ll see before I doubt (O6)

Fear not my government. (O7)

I am abused (O8)

I am to blame. (O9)

Avaunt! be gone! thou hast set me on the rack (O10)

I saw’t not, thought it not, it harm’d not me: (O11)

O, now, for ever, farewell the tranquil mind! (O12)

All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. ’Tis gone. (O13)

It is not words that shake me thus. (O14)

I will be found most cunning in my patience; but—dost thou hear?—most bloody. (O15)

my heart is turned to stone (O16)

I must weep, but they are cruel tears (O17)

I that am cruel am yet merciful (O18)

Here is my journey’s end (O19)

Whip me, ye devils, from the possession of this heavenly sight! (O20)

in my sense, ’tis happiness to die. (O21)

nought I did in hate, but all in honour. (O22)

Speak of me as I am; then must you speak of one that loved not wisely but too well (O23)
APPENDIX A — Character Arc Lines for Statue Garden Exercise, p 2 of 2

I know my price, I am worth no worse a place (I.1)

I follow him to serve my turn upon him (I.2)

I am not what I am. (I.3)

I do hate him as I do hell-pains. (I.4)

I must show out a flag and sign of love, which is indeed but sign. (I.5)

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse (I.6)

I, for mere suspicion... will do as if for surety. (I.7)

with as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly (I.8)

I stand accountant for as great a sin, the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards. (I.9)

nothing can or shall content my soul till I am even’d with him (I.10)

And what’s he then that says I play the villain, when this advice is free I give and honest? (I.11)

When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
as I do now (I.12)

I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear (I.13)

Take note, take note, O world, to be direct and honest is not safe. (I.14)

I do repent me that I put it to you. (I.15)

Let him command, and to obey shall be in me remorse, what bloody business ever. (I.16)

It is not honesty in me to speak what I have seen and known. (I.17)

I have rubb’d this youngquat almost to the sense, and he grows angry. (I.18)

stand I in much peril. (I.19)

nay, guiltiness will speak, though tongues were out of use. (I.20)

This is the night that either makes me or fordoes me quite. (I.21)

From this time forth I never will speak word. (I.22)
After Seeing the Play

ACCESSING AND EMPLOYING POETIC LANGUAGE, PART III: Learning More about Character through Language and Relationship

Part I: Word choice, rhythm, momentum, and sound as character indicators

Preliminary discussion
Poets like Shakespeare choose their words carefully—looking for words of maximum impact, not just in complex meaning, but also based on the rhythm they create, and the momentum of the words in combination, and even the sounds they make. For example, in Shakespeare’s day the word “war” rhymed with “car” and when drawn out (“WARRRRRR!!!”) really sounded like a battle cry. Curse words and insults, too, rely on their consonant sounds as well as their meanings to make their impact, and the violence-filled Othello features some world-class insults, at least aimed at him. But all the language has impact, both on the actor and the audience. Let’s look at the Othello’s monologue over the sleeping Desdemona.

Activity
1. Give students Appendix B—a monologue of Othello’s from late in the play.
2. Go over it quickly to make sure they know the meaning of the speech.
3. Ask students to read the speech aloud several times, with a different emphasis each time, but looking for meaning in rhythm and momentum:
   a. Walking the Walk: Read the speech while walking through the room. Change direction at the end of each line (not sentence). Repeat, changing at the end of punctuation (ie, at periods, exclamation marks and question marks, but not commas, colons, or semicolons). What does the structure of the piece tell you about Othello’s mental state?
   b. An Inner Conflict: find a partner, and read one line at a time, switching readers at the end of each line, even if the thought seems to continue. Then change readers each time you reach any punctuation at all. What does this add to your understanding of how a soliloquy works? Of whether he really wants to kill her or not?
4. Ask them to notice the momentum of the piece—where does it seem to be moving quickly? Where slowly? What do the sounds, the momentum and the choppiness of thought tell us about Othello’s readiness to kill her?
5. Working alone again, whisper the whole speech as if trying not to wake a sleeping loved one. What extra detail do you find?
6. If students are advanced, help them identify and interpret moments of sound repetition in the piece (see Appendix C—Othello’s speech with Teacher Notes). Otherwise, skip this step.

Discussion
How can you emphasize, shape or use the sounds in them to make them sound even more violent? More loving? Can you roar them? Growl them? Hiss them? Spit them? Shriek them?
APPENDIX B—OTHELLO’S SPEECH

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—
It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood;
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me: but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning’st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have pluck’d the rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again.
It must needs wither: I’ll smell it on the tree.
Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. One more, and this the last:
So sweet was ne’er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears: this sorrow’s heavenly;
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.
APPENDIX B—OTHELLO'S SPEECH (TEACHER’S SOUND GUIDE)

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood;
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me: but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light resume. When I have pluck'd the rose,
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Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
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So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears: this sorrow's heavenly;
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.

(repetition of hard k and z sounds feel violent)
(“ch” “st” = spitting sounds; but long vowels sound pleading)
(“f” and “d” sounds clip the feelings in those earlier vowels)
(more spitting sounds contrasted with pleading vowels)
(sustained vowels here slow this line way down—he's admiring her)
(first clause is all clipped consonants; second is all pleading vowels)
(clipped and decisive)

(complex enough to slow him down again)
(more long vowels—luxuriating in her)
(“pluck’d the rose”—back to clipped, violent sounds)
(…followed by more pleading, slow, long vowels)
(wither is barely more than an exhale—no power or violence)
 stil long, slow vowels—love is overcoming hatred)

(last = back to clipped language)
(more clipped “i” sounds alternate with keening long “e” and groaning long “o” sounds)
(return to hard k and z sound “cruel tears”; then breathy 2nd clause)
(“She wakes” is breathy, powerless again.)

The effect is of Othello alternately trying to rev himself up to violence and being seduced into gentleness by her loveliness. This is a hard scene to act, but the verse makes it easier by doing the heavy lifting for the actor.
Part II: Creating the Story with a Scene Partner

Preliminary Discussion
Actors can make many character discoveries by themselves, but theater is a team sport, so we can not complete our character development without working with partners. Here we take a pivotal scene and examine it as actors do in rehearsal.

Activity:
Plays Five Ways—work with a pivotal scene to help students practice parsing verse and notice clues that Shakespeare has left for performers in that text.
1. Ask students to create two lines at far opposite sides of the room and looking at each other such that each student has a partner facing him/her across the room.
2. Assign one side of the room to be Othello and the other Desdemona.
3. Give students Appendix D—Desdemona’s bedchamber scene.
4. Run through a quick summary of the scene to make sure students understand it.
5. Guide students to read the scene several times with a different detail moving each time as follows:
   a. Walk towards scene partner each time you repeat a word either of you have said before (you can skip connector words like if, and, the… etc.). Take very small steps. What do you notice?
   b. Now start very close together and step apart on each repetition. How does this change the dynamic?
   c. On each line, either step forward (confront), side-step (avoid), or step back (run away) from your scene partner. Each pair will make different choices, and that is great.
6. Now ask students to adjust their lines so they are about 6 feet from each other—whatever distance feels comfortable for the group, and do the scene a few more times in place as follows:
   a. Hit the paper you’re holding every time you get to any punctuation
   b. Repeat one key word from partner’s previous speech before saying one’s own lines
7. Other variations include dinging a bell (the kind at customer service desks) each time you feel your character scores a point on the other, making a non-judgmental statement about your scene partner before each speech.

Discussion
What did you discover about spacing/distance on stage? About making points? About listening to your scene partner? How does this help bring additional complexity to your understanding of these two characters?
APPENDIX D—ACT V, scene ii
Desdemona’s bedchamber. Night.

DESIDEMONA
Who’s there? Othello?

OTHELLO
Ay, Desdemona.

DESIDEMONA
Will you come to bed, my lord?

OTHELLO
Have you pray’d to-night, Desdemona?

DESIDEMONA
Ay, my lord.

OTHELLO
If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.

DESIDEMONA
Alas, my lord, what do you mean by that?

OTHELLO
Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by:
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit;
No; heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul.

DESIDEMONA
Talk you of killing?

OTHELLO
Ay, I do.

DESIDEMONA
Then heaven
Have mercy on me!

OTHELLO
Amen, with all my heart!

DESIDEMONA
If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.

OTHELLO
Hum!

DESIDEMONA
And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then
When your eyes roll so: why I should fear I know not,
Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear.

OTHELLO
Think on thy sins.

DESIDEMONA
They are loves I bear to you.

OTHELLO
Ay, and for that thou diest.

DESIDEMONA
That death’s unnatural that kills for loving.
Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame:
These are portents; but yet I hope, I hope,
They do not point on me.

OTHELLO
Peace, and be still!

DESIDEMONA
I will so. What’s the matter?

OTHELLO
That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio.

DESIDEMONA
No, by my life and soul!
Send for the man, and ask him.

OTHELLO
Sweet soul, take heed,
Take heed of perjury; thou art on thy deathbed.
DIGGING DEEPER INTO CHARACTER AND SETTING

**Activity 1:** Write a journal entry for Othello or Desdemona on the night before their elopement. How does your character feel? How does s/he imagine others’ responses to the news? What truths will they reveal in a diary that they would never reveal in public, even to a confidant? Have students read them aloud.

**Activity 2:** Hotseat! Interview another student who poses as a character in the play, for example, question Iago on why he undertook this terrible plot, whether it turned out how he expected it, and what he would do differently if he were to do it again; or Emilia on how she feels about her unwitting role in the plot, about her initial expectations about her marriage and how and why she thinks her husband became such a dangerous man. Keep in mind that people do lie in interviews and note that it is acceptable to interview someone who has already died.

**Activity 3:** Missing Soliloquy! At the end of the play, Iago chooses to remain silent, but what if he hadn’t? Write a final soliloquy for Iago—whether it be a diary entry, a confession received due to torture or plain regret, or a final appeal to judge, jury, or audience (or even to Emilia’s ghost). Have students rehearse and perform their soliloquies.

**Activity 4:** Create scenic designs for the two environments—Venice and Cyprus—to explore the stark contrasts between the two places. Look at how to represent peace and prosperity in the city-state of Venice and violence and instability on Cyprus.

UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL POINT OF VIEW

**Activity 1:** Assign characters or sides and debate whether or not Venice should go to war with the Turks in Cyprus. What is important about Cyprus as a colonial holding? What does Venice have to lose in the fight? gain?

**Activity 2:** Create a scene or video newscast (is it a battlefield report? a gossip show scoop? a newscast on Turkish or Cypriot television?) talking about the tragic events of the play, framing Othello’s death in relation to his importance to Venice and/or his “otherness,” and framing Desdemona’s death in relation to her place in society. First report the news as unbiasedly as possible, and then do an additional version in which you take a point of view. Watch real newscasts and political commentary for ideas.

General Shakespeare Sources for Teachers

For more scenes and lines, we recommend the Norton Edition of Shakespeare’s Collected Works
Alexander Schmidt’s Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary
and the online site [http://shakespeare.mit.edu](http://shakespeare.mit.edu), which holds the entire searchable texts of all the plays

Sources for this Guide

In addition to those cited within the text, we used:
[http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/othello/othellosources.htm](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/othello/othellosources.htm)


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NY: JH Magonigle, 1888