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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Othello

by William Shakespeare

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Note to the Teacher

THE TRAGIC HERO

Aristotle envisioned the tragic hero as a man (or, very rarely, a woman) of high station whose downfall occurs through a flaw in character. Except for that one flaw, the hero is, if not a noble, at least someone of above-average sensibilities, most likely a person for whom we can feel pity, fear, or concern as we watch the events transpire which will lead to an inevitable downfall and, in the case of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, death. By the end of the work, however, the tragic hero must recognize that any downfall was the result of personal errors in judgment, understanding, or behavior. In accepting this responsibility for his fate, the hero regains the spiritual equilibrium possessed at the beginning of the play. As a result of the tragic hero's understanding and acceptance (Othello says, [S]peak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well; / Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplex'd in the extreme...."), the audience, which has had its emotions purged, feels uplifted by the experience, rather than defeated or depressed.

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF TIME

Critics have pointed out, and some students might notice, that Shakespeare is operating on two different time schedules in this play. While all the action in *Othello* takes place over three or four days, there is mention of things that happened earlier. For example, although they have been in Cyprus only a few days, Bianca tells Cassio he has not been to her house to see her in seven or eight days. While this is an interesting observation, it in no way affects Othello's essential struggle and may be seen as only one more stage convention. As the critic Granville Barker points out, "Shakespeare is not essentially concerned with time and the calendar at all."

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define the term “tragic hero” and relate it to Othello and the progression he undergoes throughout the course of the play.
2. identify and discuss the following themes and motifs in the play:
 - A. jealousy and its destructive effect
 - B. the alienation of the outsider
 - C. the conflict between appearances and the real nature of things (reality)
 - D. loyalty and friendship.
 - E. honor and reputation
 - F. hatred
 - G. poor choices
3. trace and discuss some recurring aspects of animal imagery.
4. write a character description of each of the following characters and comment on how believable their motives and actions are to a modern audience:
 - A. Othello D. Roderigo
 - B. Iago E. Desdemona
 - C. Cassio F. Emilia
5. compare and contrast the two female characters, Desdemona and Emilia.
6. define these terms and give examples from the play:
 - A. aside
 - B. soliloquy
 - C. irony
7. write a paper to prove or disprove this thesis:
Othello, although not an excessively jealous person, is led to ruin because he is not able to comprehend the true nature of, nor ascertain Iago’s manipulations.
8. discuss how the handkerchief functions as a vital piece of stage business.
9. point out instances of racial prejudice in the play.
10. discuss the actual reasons that Iago has for hating Othello, citing quotations from the text.
11. compare the characters Iago influences both in how he manipulates them and how they respond.
12. analyze Desdemona’s reasons for her love of Othello. What are they? Are they valid and strong enough for Desdemona to risk becoming an outsider in society?

Questions For Essay and Discussion

1. Consider carefully the dramatic function the handkerchief has in this play. In an essay, discuss this function and be sure to state what it proves and/or disproves.
2. Discuss what it was that motivated Iago's actions. Try to discuss all his motives and then reach a conclusion. Since not all critics reach the same conclusion, there is no right or wrong answer. However, your conclusion should be logical and consistent with the facts of the play.
3. Othello, a reasonable man, is newly married to a woman he loves very much. Explain how he is turned into a jealous murderer.
4. Critics have called this play Shakespeare's most exciting play. Identify those aspects of the play that would prompt this comment.
5. Define the term "tragic hero" and identify the tragic hero in *Othello*. Describe his mood and behavior at the opening of the play, throughout the rising action, at the climax, and during the resolution.
6. Some critics see Othello as an outsider who is valuable to the Venetian state because of his skills, but who is not truly accepted as a Venetian. Discuss this point and consider if Othello views himself as someone outside Venetian society.
7. Compare and contrast Desdemona with Emilia.
8. Discuss how Desdemona would have been seen by the Elizabethan audience and how she might be judged by today's audience.
9. Consider the concepts of loyalty and friendship; point out examples of both.
10. Point out instances in *Othello* of the conflict between the reality of what appears to be and what actually is.
11. Comment on Shakespeare's use of animal imagery in this play.
12. *Othello* is built around the emotion of jealousy. Identify the places where it is mentioned or occurs.
13. Define and give examples of the following:
 - A. aside
 - B. soliloquy
 - C. irony

Act I, Scene iii

VOCABULARY

affects – impulses
aught – anything
beguile – to rob
betimes – early
bootless – useless
breach – a space between safe places
comply – to satisfy
conjunction – a spell
consecrate – to dedicate to
dearest – most valuable
defunct – extinguished
direction – instructions
disports – entertainments
disproportion'd – inconsistent
equivocal – the same
fond – stupid
frank – obvious
hitherto – therefore
imminent – about to be
incontinently – immediately
knavery – mischief
overt – obvious
pith – strength
preposterously – ridiculously
prithee – I pray thee
scant – to give little attention to
visage – the face
vouch – to swear
withal – with
wrought – made a change

1. About what are the Duke and Senators concerned?

4. What is Iago referring to when he says, "Ha! I like not that."

5. Desdemona pleads Cassio's case, and Othello agrees to reinstate him. What happens next?

6. Iago says, "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on." What is Othello's response? What two literary devices are used in this quotation?

7. What does Iago say about the women of Venice?

8. Why might Othello be inclined to believe Iago's insinuation or, at least, not dismiss it immediately?

9. What echo of Brabantio's earlier warning does Iago give Othello?

Act IV, Scene iii

VOCABULARY

exhibition – a small display of wealth

hie – hurry

lawn – a fine linen

price – a prize

vantage – enough besides

1. Othello seems much calmer since he has made up his mind. What is revealed about Desdemona's thoughts?

2. Desdemona asks Emilia if she thinks that there are women who are unfaithful to their husbands. Does Desdemona seem naive with this question?

3. What is Emilia's response? What does she say about females who commit adultery?

4. Desdemona has been abused, slapped and humiliated by her husband, yet she loves him and hopes to convince him of the purity of their marriage. Does she seem weak or foolish because of her unconditional love for Othello?
