

REVISION GUIDE + WORKSHEET

Othello / Characters

William Shakespeare

HOW DO I ANALYSE SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS?

Shakespeare's characters are renowned for their complexity and depth, often reflecting the human condition in ways that resonate across time and culture. When analysing characterisation in Shakespeare's works, you must acknowledge that it is a multifaceted and intricate process that involves the construction and development of characters through **dialogue, actions, and interactions with other figures** onstage. In academic essays, analysing these characters also requires an understanding of the social, psychological, and thematic contexts in which they operate. Effective analysis additionally includes examining how Shakespeare uses **language, metaphor, and dramatic structure** to shape and reveal the characters' inner lives and motivations.

OTHELLO

- Othello is a Christian Moor and the general of the Venetian army. As the play's leading character, he is portrayed as honest, powerful, and brave. However, as a **tragic hero**, he harbours significant character flaws which undermine his virtues.
- Othello's early life is characterised by hardship and adventure, elements he recounts in his narratives to the Venetian court and Desdemona. He speaks of being taken as a slave, which led to his exposure to various cultures and experiences, and his eventual rise to prominence: "The battles, sieges, fortunes that I have passed" (**Act 1, Scene 3**).
- His African heritage and experience with slavery are crucial to understanding his character. His journey from a life of slavery to becoming a respected general in the Venetian army highlights his resilience, intelligence, and strategic prowess. This background also makes his achievements more remarkable, underscoring his exceptional qualities.
- Despite his esteemed position, his African background makes him a convenient target for rich, powerful native Venetians. Othello often regards himself as a foreigner, especially with derogatory references such as "an old black ram" directed at him, which sometimes makes him insecure about his differences from the natives.

- As a valiant and fierce warrior, Othello is respected by his men and makes intelligent decisions shaped by a life of hardship - he is a very successful war general, and is appointed to lead a Venetian army in Cyprus against the Ottoman Empire.
- Othello's relationship with Desdemona begins with mutual admiration and love. Desdemona is captivated by Othello's tales of bravery and hardship, which she finds deeply romantic and inspiring. Othello, in turn, is drawn to Desdemona's purity, compassion, and the validation she provides him as a worthy and heroic figure despite his racial difference. Their marriage, however, is fraught with societal tensions due to Othello's race and outsider status.
- Othello's **tragic flaw** is debatable, but many critics view it as his insecurity, which leads directly to jealousy. His status as a Moor in a predominantly white society makes him susceptible to feelings of inferiority and alienation. These insecurities are exacerbated by Iago's manipulations. Othello's belief in his own unworthiness compared to Desdemona, coupled with societal prejudices, makes him quick to doubt her fidelity: "Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (**Act 3, Scene 3**).
- Othello's transformation from a noble general to a man consumed by irrational jealousy is the core of his tragic arc. His descent into rage and suspicion leads him to murder Desdemona, believing he is enacting justice. This act, driven by manipulated perceptions and deep-seated insecurities, marks the ultimate realisation of his tragic flaw: "Then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well; / Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (**Act 5, Scene 2**).
- It is also possible to debate whether Othello is driven mad by Iago, or whether Iago's manipulative tactics simply unleash Othello's latent primitive side, which he always harboured within. From a Jacobean perspective in particular, many spectators would view Othello as merely pretending to be civilised and Christian, and ultimately unable to escape his Islamic and tribal roots - which from an English perspective would have been perceived as savage and barbaric.

TASK: Research and make notes on Moorish culture and its historical and political roots. How does this knowledge help you to better understand Othello's character?

- As Othello's wife, she represents purity and loyalty. Her character highlights the vulnerabilities and constraints placed on women in a patriarchal society. Desdemona's love for Othello is unwavering and pure, and her loyalty remains steadfast despite Othello's growing mistrust and abuse. Her passive acceptance of Othello's accusations and her tragic fate underscore the limited agency afforded to women in her society.
- Desdemona's relationship with Othello is rooted in mutual admiration and a deep emotional connection. She is captivated by Othello's tales of bravery and hardship, which she finds deeply romantic and inspiring. Othello, in turn, is drawn to Desdemona's purity, compassion, and unwavering support. Their marriage, however, is met with resistance and prejudice from Venetian society, particularly from her father, Brabantio. Speaking to Othello, he states: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (**Act 1, Scene 3**).
- Desdemona embodies the ideal of virtuous womanhood in Renaissance culture. Her love for Othello is steadfast and sincere, and she remains loyal to him even when faced with his unjust accusations. Desdemona's virtuous nature is evident in her interactions with other characters, particularly in her defence of Cassio and her efforts to reconcile him with Othello: "I will do / All my abilities in thy behalf" (**Act 3, Scene 3**). Her loyalty and virtue, however, make her vulnerable to Othello's jealousy and Iago's machinations. Desdemona's innocence and trust in Othello ultimately lead to her tragic end.
- Desdemona's innocence and naivety are central to her character. She is unaware of the full extent of Iago's deceit and cannot comprehend the depth of Othello's jealousy. Her passive acceptance of her fate and her inability to defend herself against Othello's accusations highlight her vulnerability in a patriarchal society: "His unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love" (**Act 4, Scene 2**).
- Desdemona's tragic fate underscores the destructive power of jealousy and the limitations placed on women. Her murder by Othello is the culmination of Iago's manipulative schemes and Othello's insecurities. In her final moments, Desdemona remains loyal to Othello, even as she acknowledges the injustice of her death: "A guiltless death I die" (**Act 5, Scene 2**).
- We could also view Desdemona as a more complex character who defiantly resists patriarchal constraints. While she appears passive, her elopement with Othello and her assertive defence of their marriage before the Senate demonstrate her agency and strength. Desdemona's relationship with Emilia also offers a counterpoint to her perceived passivity, as their conversations reveal her awareness of and dissatisfaction with gender inequalities. This interpretation

IAGO

- Iago is Othello's 'ancient' (the modern equivalent military rank being 'ensign'), a position that places him in close proximity to Othello but also highlights his relatively low rank compared to Cassio, who is promoted to lieutenant over Iago. This perceived slight is a significant factor in Iago's resentment and subsequent actions: "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (**Act 1, Scene 1**).
- Iago's professional ambitions and frustrations are central to his motivations. His cunning and manipulative skills contrast with his lack of formal power, making his pursuit of revenge against those he feels have wronged him even more intense.
- Iago is one of Shakespeare's most infamous villains, embodying deceit, treachery, and amorality. He is a master manipulator, adept at uncovering and exploiting the vulnerabilities of those around him. His ability to sway Othello and others showcases his cunning and strategic mind. Iago's motivations are complex and multifaceted - many critics debate his motivations for precipitating Othello's downfall, giving reasons such as professional jealousy, racism, and suspicion of his wife Emilia's fidelity. Iago's duplicity is driven by deep-seated resentment and a desire for revenge.
- Iago often **symbolises** pure evil, with his actions lacking a clear moral compass. He takes delight in the suffering of others and skillfully gains Othello's trust, reflecting his malevolent nature. His famous line, "I am not what I am," (**Act 1, Scene 1**) encapsulates his duplicitous and sinister character. Iago's schemes lead to the tragic downfall of several characters, revealing the destructive power of deceit and malice.
- Iago's talent for deception and treachery is at the heart of his character. He skillfully orchestrates the downfall of Othello and Desdemona by exploiting their insecurities and weaknesses. Iago's ability to present himself as honest and trustworthy while secretly plotting against those around him underscores his duplicitous nature.
- His manipulation of Othello's jealousy is particularly insidious. By planting the seed of doubt regarding Desdemona's fidelity, Iago exploits Othello's insecurities and drives him to murderous rage. Iago's actions are driven by a combination of personal grievances and a general delight in the suffering of others.
- Iago's motivations are complex and often ambiguous. While professional jealousy and a desire for revenge against Othello and Cassio are clear drivers, Iago also hints at deeper, more personal insecurities and resentments. His

suspicion of Emilia's fidelity and his racist disdain for Othello add layers to his character's malevolence: "I hate the Moor: / And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office" (**Act 1, Scene 3**). Iago's motivations are not always fully articulated, which adds to his character's complexity and the enduring fascination with his villainy. His actions seem to be driven by an intrinsic delight in manipulation and destruction.

- Iago is often seen as the embodiment of pure evil in Shakespeare's works. His amorality and lack of remorse for his actions set him apart from other characters in the play. Iago's delight in the suffering of others and his skillful manipulation of their weaknesses highlight the destructive power of deceit and malice. Iago's lack of a clear moral compass and his enjoyment of chaos and destruction underscore his role as a villain. His actions are driven by a desire to dominate and control, regardless of the cost to others.
- Iago can also be seen as a representative of the dominant culture's resistance to outsiders like Othello. In some ways, he simply amplifies the inherent racist and xenophobic attitudes which are already prevalent within Renaissance Venetian society. His actions and racist language reflect a deep-seated fear and resentment of the racial and cultural other. Iago's plot against Othello can thus be interpreted as an attempt to reassert the status quo and eliminate the perceived threat posed by Othello's rise to power. Interestingly, Iago's hatred and resentment toward Cassio may also be due to the fact that he is a 'Florentine' rather than a true Venetian.
- Iago's treatment of women is deeply rooted in misogyny. He exhibits a dismissive and derogatory attitude towards women, viewing them as inferior and untrustworthy. His interactions with his wife, Emilia, and his manipulation of Desdemona highlight his contempt for women and his belief in their inherent duplicity. Iago's misogyny is evident in several instances throughout the play, such as when he crudely jokes about women's promiscuity: "You rise to play and go to bed to work" (**Act 2, Scene 1**). This line reflects Iago's perception of women as deceitful and lascivious, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire. Iago's language and behaviour often reduce women to objects of sexual desire. His crude jokes and insinuations reveal his tendency to objectify women and view them through a lens of sexuality. This objectification is evident in his comments about Desdemona and Emilia, as well as in his interactions with Bianca, whom he dismisses as a mere courtesan: "It is a creature / That dotes on Cassio—as 'tis the strumpet's plague / To beguile many and be beguiled by one" (**Act 4, Scene 1**). Iago's objectification of women reflects a broader societal attitude towards gender and sexuality, reinforcing his misogynistic worldview.

TASK: Read about and make notes on the figures of 'The Machievel' and 'The Malcontent' in Jacobean drama. In what ways could Iago be considered as relating to these two stock characters?

CASSIO

- Cassio is Othello's loyal and honourable lieutenant. He is depicted as a courteous and gallant soldier, highly esteemed by Othello for his military expertise and genteel manners. Cassio's character represents the ideal of Renaissance chivalry, combining martial prowess with refined conduct. However, his trusting nature and naivety make him vulnerable to Iago's schemes. Despite his good intentions, Cassio's downfall is precipitated by his weaknesses, such as his inability to handle alcohol and his implicit trust in Iago.
- Cassio often symbolises the theme of reputation and honour in the play. His concern for his good name and his devastation at the loss of his reputation highlight the importance of social standing and the fragility of human virtue. Cassio's downfall and subsequent restoration reflect the play's exploration of integrity and redemption.
- Cassio is a Florentine by birth, a factor that distinguishes him from the Venetian characters and adds to Iago's resentment. His appointment as Othello's lieutenant over Iago stirs jealousy and animosity in Iago, who believes that Cassio's scholarly background is less deserving than his own battlefield experience: "Forsooth, a great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, / A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife" (**Act 1, Scene 1**). Cassio's education and refined manners contrast with Iago's rough, experienced soldier persona, highlighting the tension between different types of merit.
- Cassio's loyalty to Othello is unwavering. He holds Othello in high regard and is deeply affected by the loss of his position as lieutenant. Cassio's integrity is evident in his remorse after the drunken brawl that leads to his demotion. His earnest desire to regain Othello's trust and restore his honour underscores his commitment to his principles: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial" (**Act 2, Scene 3**). Cassio's lamentation over his tarnished reputation highlights his profound sense of honour and the importance he places on his moral and social standing.
- Cassio's trusting nature and naivety are significant weaknesses that Iago exploits. He fails to see through Iago's deceit and considers him a friend and confidant. Cassio's vulnerability is further exposed when he is manipulated into a drunken state, leading to the altercation that costs him his position.
- Cassio's relationships with women, particularly Bianca and Desdemona, are marked by respect and affection. His courteous treatment of Desdemona contrasts sharply with Iago's crude objectification. However, his association with Bianca, a courtesan, is used by Iago to tarnish his reputation and fuel Othello's jealousy.

- Cassio's eventual restoration to his position at the end of the play **symbolises** redemption and the possibility of moral recovery. His reinstatement by Othello, albeit posthumously, and his appointment as the new governor of Cyprus suggest a return to order and justice after the chaos sown by Iago. Cassio's redemption underscores the play's **themes of honour, reputation, and the enduring nature of integrity**.
- Cassio's character can be examined in terms of his struggle with guilt and self-worth. His intense reaction to losing his reputation suggests deep-seated insecurities about his identity and value. Cassio's reliance on external validation for his sense of self-worth makes him particularly vulnerable to Iago's manipulations. This interpretation emphasises the psychological complexity of Cassio's character and his internal conflicts.

BRABANTIO

- Brabantio is a Venetian senator and the father of Desdemona. He is portrayed as a respected and dignified figure in Venetian society, deeply concerned with his family's honour and reputation.
- Brabantio expresses shock and anger when he learns from Iago and Roderigo of Othello and Desdemona's secret marriage. Brabantio's reaction reflects his patriarchal attitudes and his belief in his authority over his daughter's choices.
- Brabantio's role as a protective father is central to his character. He views Desdemona as his property, whose marriage should be decided with his consent. His reaction to Desdemona's marriage to Othello reflects his patriarchal authority and his sense of betrayal.
- As a senator, Brabantio occupies a position of authority and influence within the city-state. His social status is reflected in his interactions with other characters, including Othello and the Duke of Venice. Brabantio's standing in Venetian society shapes his expectations for his daughter's marriage and his reaction to her defiance of his wishes: "She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" (**Act 1, Scene 3**). This quotation illustrates Brabantio's belief that Desdemona has been deceived and manipulated into marrying Othello, as he cannot bring himself to believe that she would actively choose to marry a Moor of her own free will.
- It's important to understand Brabantio within the context of his own time – Jacobean, living in a patriarchal society under King James I, would have interpreted Brabantio as a representation of paternal authority and familial honour. His vehement opposition to Desdemona's marriage to Othello reflects their societal norms, where fathers were expected to control their daughters' marital choices to preserve family reputation. Brabantio's racial biases against Othello as a Moor would have also resonated with Jacobean views influenced by

colonial encounters and exoticism. His appeal to the Duke of Venice underscores reliance on legal and institutional authority. In the context of Jacobean England's Protestantism, Brabantio's accusations of witchcraft also highlight moral concerns about allowing outsiders to dilute or directly undermine Christian traditions.

TASK: Brabantio foreshadows many of the issues Othello will face later in the play. Create a table, with quotes that foreshadow events later in the play on one side and the linked events on the other side.

EMILIA

- Emilia is a contrasting figure in *Othello*, depicted as Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant. She serves as a foil to Desdemona, embodying a more pragmatic and worldly view of marriage and relationships.
- Emilia initially appears as a loyal attendant to Desdemona, fulfilling her duties as a lady-in-waiting without question. Her relationship with Desdemona is characterised by genuine care and support, demonstrating her loyalty to her mistress. Emilia's willingness to serve Desdemona contrasts sharply with her tumultuous relationship with Iago, revealing her capacity for compassion and dedication despite her own marital struggles.
- Emilia's marriage to Iago serves as a contrast to Desdemona's relationship with Othello. While Desdemona embodies idealised femininity and fidelity, Emilia's marriage exposes the harsh realities of gender inequality and marital discord. She is jaded in matters of love, and keenly aware of Iago's manipulative nature and the injustices within their relationship, yet remains bound by societal expectations of wifely obedience.
- Emilia's character evolves throughout the play, initially appearing subservient to her husband but later demonstrating resilience and moral complexity. Her loyalty to Desdemona is unwavering, despite her awareness of Iago's manipulative nature. Emilia's pivotal role in revealing Iago's deception and transitioning from one of his puppets into a truth-teller underscores her bravery and sense of justice, challenging societal norms of feminine obedience. Emilia's outspokenness and eventual defiance highlight Shakespeare's exploration of gender roles and power dynamics.

RODERIGO

- Roderigo is portrayed in *Othello* as a wealthy Venetian gentleman who is hopelessly in love with Desdemona. He serves as a gullible and easily manipulated character throughout the play, primarily by Iago. Roderigo's infatuation with Desdemona blinds him to Iago's deceitful schemes, making him a

willing pawn in Iago's plot against Othello. His naivety and desperation for Desdemona's love lead him to squander his wealth and follow Iago's misguided advice, illustrating his vulnerability and lack of discernment.

- Iago exploits Roderigo's wealth for his own gain, promising him that his efforts will win Desdemona's love and lead to their union. Roderigo's willingness to finance Iago's schemes underscores his desperation and misguided belief that material wealth can secure Desdemona's affections. His financial exploitation by Iago highlights the **themes of greed and manipulation** in the play, portraying Roderigo as a tragic figure whose fortunes are squandered in pursuit of an unattainable love.
- Roderigo **symbolises** the futility of unrequited love and the consequences of blind trust. His character serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of obsession and the vulnerability of those who lack self-awareness. Roderigo's ultimate demise in the play reflects Shakespeare's exploration of human frailty and the tragic consequences of being deceived by others and one's own desires.
- From a psychological standpoint, Roderigo can be seen as a character driven by insecurity and low self-esteem. His willingness to believe in Iago's promises and disregard rational judgement may stem from a deep-seated need for validation and acceptance, particularly in relation to Desdemona. As a wealthy Venetian, he also harbours a sense of entitlement - he feels as though he deserves Desdemona, that it is part of his birthright to acquire a true Venetian wife who is a paragon of Christian virtues.

BIANCA

- Bianca is a courtesan in Cyprus, who becomes involved romantically with Cassio. Her character represents the marginalised status of women in Renaissance society, particularly those engaged in the sex trade. Despite her profession, Bianca displays genuine affection for Cassio and desires a deeper, more committed relationship with him. However, her association with Cassio exposes her to societal judgement and scorn, reflecting the double standards and moral hypocrisy prevalent in the play.
- Bianca's character serves as a contrast to Desdemona's idealised femininity and moral purity. While Desdemona embodies virtue and fidelity, Bianca challenges societal expectations of women's behaviour and relationships. Her outspokenness and assertiveness in asserting her rights and desires stand in stark contrast to Desdemona's more traditional role as a devoted wife.

MINOR CHARACTERS

THE DUKE OF VENICE

- The head of the state of Venice, who appoints Othello to lead Venetian troops against the Ottomans in Cyprus.
- He helps to show how, when Othello is in Venice, he is protected by the laws of Venice. Hence why, when he leaves the safety of Venice, he is vulnerable. For example, the Duke calls Othello “valiant Othello” (**Act 1, Scene 3**) showing Othello as a respected figure.
- This protection from Venice, even extends to Othello being guarded against the prejudices of some of the native Venetians. For instance, it is the Duke who guards Othello from Brabantio’s wrath, stating “I think this tale would win my daughter too. Good Brabantio” (**Act 1, Scene 3**).

MONTANO

- The governor of Cyprus, a loyal friend to Othello.
- Initially, like the Duke, he helps show Othello as a figure worthy of respect, stating “And 'tis great pity that the noble Moor. Should hazard such a place as his own second” (**Act 2, Scene 3**). This also seems to **foreshadow** the dangers Othello will encounter in Cyprus.
- He acts as the catalyst for Cassio’s downfall, being representative of the government on Cyprus which Cassio disturbs by assaulting Montano. In this scene Montano states “Worthy Othello, I am hurt to danger: Your officer, Iago, can inform you” (Act 2, Scene 3), placing Othello further in Iago’s control as Cassio is dismissed for Montano’s assault.

GRATIANO

- Brabantio’s brother.
- He acts as a tragic figure attached to Desdemona’s father, as he witnesses the death of Desdemona. This is encapsulated in the line “Poor Desdemona! I am glad thy father's dead: Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief” (**Act 5, Scene 2**).
- In the end, he functions as an unfiltered expression of familial grief, attached to the loss of the innocent Desdemona.

LODOVICO

- Desdemona’s cousin.
- Lodovico acts as a representative of the authority of Venice, similarly to the Duke in Act 1. Due to this, he helps to show a stark contrast in the government's views

of who Othello began the play as, and who he has become. This is plainly shown when he states, “Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate. Call all in all sufficient?” **(Act 4, Scene 1)**.

- Due to this contrast, Lodovico is perfect at showing how far Othello has fallen, with various statements such as “What, strike his wife!” **(Act 4, Scene 1)**. These help to express his confusion at Othello’s aggressive acts towards Desdemona.
- Finally, when the plays tragic actions come to pass, it is Lodovico who pushes Venetian justice to return things to the status quo. To this end, he punishes Iago calling him “O Spartan dog, More fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea!” **(Act 5, Scene 2)**, and attempts to imprison Othello before he kills himself “You must forsake this room, and go with us: Your power and your command is taken off” **(Act 5, Scene 2)**.

SAILOR

- A man who reports that the Turkish fleet is heading to Rhodes and not Cyprus. Stating “The Turkish preparation makes for Rhodes; So was I bid report here to the state” **(Act 1, Scene 3)**.
- His function is entirely narrative.

HERALD

- A messenger who announces the triumph over the Turks and the upcoming celebrations.
- Once again, we see the collective respect for Othello that appears to be common among the Venetians in the earlier parts of the play. “It is Othello's pleasure, our noble and valiant general” **(Act 2, Scene 2)**.
- Interestingly, we see that Othello’s status is reliant on his ability to make war, his usefulness and respect intrinsically linked to his talent for violent actions. “the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet, every man put himself into triumph” **(Act 2, Scene 2)**.

FIRST MESSENGER

- The First Messenger brings the news to the war council that the two Turkish fleets are headed for Cyprus.

SECOND MESSENGER

- The Second Messenger informs Montano that Othello’s men have gathered onto Cyprus by the shore.

TASK: There are many minor characters within *Othello*, what is their primary function and how else do they add to the overall narrative of the play? Read through the play, and make notes on what these minor characters' roles may be.
