***Othello* Study Guide Questions**

**ACT I**

1. What is Othello’s position in society? How is he regarded by those who know him? By his own words, when we meet in Scene ii, what traits of character does he manifest?

2. How do you account for Brabantio’s dismay on learning of his daughter’s marriage, despite the fact that Desdemona has married a man so generally honored and admired?

3. What was Iago’s view of human nature? In his fondness for likening men to animals (as in I, i, 49-50; I, i, 90-91; and I, iii, 380-381), what does he tell us about himself?  
4. What reasons does Iago give for his hatred of Othello?

5. In Othello’s defense before the senators (Scene iii), how does he explain Desdemona’s gradual falling in love with him?

6. Is Brabantio’s warning to Othello (I, iii, 293-294) an accurate or an inaccurate prophecy?

7. By what strategy does Iago enlist Roderigo in his plot against the Moor? In what lines do we learn Iago’s true feelings toward Roderigo?

**ACT II**  
1. What do the Cypriots think of Othello? Do their words (in Scene i) make him seem to us a lesser man or a larger one?

2. What cruelty does Iago display toward Emilia? How well founded is his distrust of his wife’s fidelity?

3. In II, iii, 221, Othello speaks of Iago’s “honesty and love.” How do you account for Othello’s being so totally deceived?

4. For what major events does the merrymaking (proclaimed in Scene ii) give opportunity?

**ACT III**  
1. In III, 49-98, Emilia knows of Desdemona’s distress over the lost handkerchief. At this moment, how do you explain her failure to relieve Desdemona’s mind? Is Emilia aware of her husband’s villainy?

ACT III, Sc iii

1. Were you surprised by Desdemona’s statement in scene iii, lines 7585?

2. How will Desdemona’s statement in lines 20-27 affect the outcome of the play?

3. Trace the steps by which Iago rouses Othello to suspicion. Is there anything in Othello’s character or circumstances that renders him particularly susceptible to Iago’s wiles?

How is Othello manipulated by Iago in the following lines:

a. 92-123

b.193-213

c. 371-423.

d. 424-476

Can you explain why Othello is so easily manipulated?

4. Identify the point in the play when Iago knows he has successfully tricked Othello? Explain.

5. Why does Othello believe Desdemona betrayed him? What does he decide to do about it?

6. Where did Iago’s dream (lines 407-423) come from? Why does Iago focus on certain details?

7. Reread the last thirty lines of scene iii. How does the relationship between Othello and Iago change? How does Shakespeare physically show the shift in power?

**ACT IV**  
1. In this act, what circumstantial evidence is added to Othello’s case against Desdemona?

2. Who is Bianca? What is her problem? What similarities does she share with Othello?

3. How plausible do you find Bianca’s flinging the handkerchief at Cassio just when Othello is looking on? How important is the handkerchief in this play? What does it represent? What suggestions or hints do you find in it?

4. What prevents Othello from being moved by Desdemona’s appeal (IV, ii, 33-92)?

5. When Roderigo grows impatient with Iago (IV, ii, 181-202), how does Iago make use of his fellow plotter’s discontent?

6. What does the conversation between Emilia and Desdemona (Scene iii) tell us about the nature of each?

7. In this act, what scenes (or speeches) contain memorable dramatic irony?

**ACT V**

1. Summarize the events that lead to Iago’s unmasking.

2. How does Othello’s mistaken belief that Cassio is slain (V, i, 27-34) affect the outcome of the play?

3. What is Iago’s motive in stabbing Roderigo?

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1. In what way is Othello's race relevant to the events of the play?
2. Compare and contrast Desdemona and Emilia's views on love, sex, marriage, and men. Do either Desdemona or Emilia change their viewpoints as a result of their conversations with each other?
3. Why does Iago want to destroy Othello?
4. Iago is constantly talking about women in derogatory ways, from his joking assessment of women for the amusement of Desdemona in the second act to his put-downs of Emilia to his assumption that Desdemona will probably cheat on Othello eventually. Does the play support Iago's opinion of women, or refute it?
5. Check out Iago and Desdemona's views on love and sex. Are they similar? Different? Does Iago believe in love at all? What relationship might Desdemona draw between love and sex? Does the play ultimately endorse either of their views?
6. In what ways are the marriages of Desdemona/Othello and Emilia/Iago similar? In what ways are they different?
7. Who is a more jealous person, Othello or Iago?
8. Who does Othello ultimately care about more – Desdemona or himself? Some critics have argued that Othello's love of Desdemona is ultimately self-centered. Would you agree? Does this mean that, without Iago, they would have lived happily ever after?
9. "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.167-168). This is how Othello describes how he and Desdemona fell for each other. What does this tell you about their relationship? Check out the lines 1.3.128-170 carefully. How do you envision their interactions? What kind of relationship is portrayed in this passage?
10. In Othello, most of the action takes place between only two characters: Iago and Othello, and this "action" is basically intense conversation and plotting. What effect does this produce on us as a reader? What challenges does this pose for directors and actors? Is Othello a domestic drama? Does it feel claustrophobic? How does the scale and focus of the play reflect the themes of jealousy, hatred and obsession?
11. In 1998, Patrick Stewart, a white actor, played the role of Othello surrounded by an all-black cast. Do you think this way of performing Othello would be effective? Would it substantially change any of the themes or dynamics of the play? Which ones?
12. There are only three women in the play: Desdemona, Emilia (both wives), and Bianca (a prostitute in love with one of her clients). What insight does the play provide into women's lives? How does the addition of Bianca, a prostitute, to the play emphasize or contradict different characters' ways of thinking about women? Compare and contrast Bianca's relationship to Cassio with Desdemona and Emilia's relationships with their husbands.
13. Desdemona's love for Othello is unconditional. Even when he hits her and calls her a whore, she still says she loves him. At the end, she says she killed herself rather than tell the truth and implicate Othello. Is Desdemona's overwhelming love admirable? Should we pity Desdemona rather than admiring her? What would your advice to Desdemona be?
14. The plot of the play hinges on the loss of a handkerchief Othello gave to Desdemona. Two little deceptions – Emilia's stealing of the handkerchief and Desdemona's lie to Othello that it is not lost – cement Desdemona's doom. What does it mean that such a little object has such a huge impact on Othello's mind? What dramatic effect does this produce? Do you think that, in a situation of jealousy, even a handkerchief could sway someone's opinion one way or another? Is the importance of the handkerchief in the play believable?

15. What makes Othello a tragic figure? Is his tragedy self-inflicted of is it beyond his control? What is his tragic flaw?

16. . Compare Othello’s speeches from the beginning, middle, and the end of the play (Act I, III, and IV). Explain the significance of their differences I style and tone.

17. Iago us a resourceful and clever character who knows how to manipulate people. Explain how he manipulates Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello.

18. What reason does Iago give for seeking Othello’s destruction? Does this seem an adequate or a credible motive?

19. Othello had a duel setting ---Venice and Cyprus. With what values and ideas is each place associated, and how are these related to the action and themes of the play?

20. What ideas about love are expressed by Othello kills Desdemona (Act V, Scene II). Read his speech beginning, “It is the cause” (lines 1-22) Explain how Othello sees himself at this point, and describe his state of mind.

21. Examine the scene in which Othello secretly watches Cassio talking to Bianca (Act IV, Scene I). Explain how Iago controls Othello’s perception, leading him to misinterpret what he sees. In what other scenes does Iago direct other characters to misinterpret one another’s actions and speech?

22.What judgment does Shakespeare’s Othello make about jealousy? About the power of evil over goodness?

23. Compare Iago as a villain with Claudius in Hamlet. Who is smarter? Who is better? Who is more hated?

24. At the end of the play, Iago says that he will never speak again. Offer at least two explanations for the refusal to never speak again.

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**Discussion Questions**

1. Trace Iago’s manipulation of the other characters throughout the play. Discuss his soliloquies and explain how they reveal his character and meaning of the work as a whole. What imagery does he use? Why? Why does he do what he does? How does he succeed? When does he switch from verse to prose? Why? How does Othello do the same?

2. Is Othello a tragic hero? Analyze his character and elaborate on his strengths and weaknesses. Explain using the criteria of tragedy and tragic heroes from your notes as well as Aristotle’s definition. What is his flaw? Do you sympathize with him? How is Shakespeare’s portrayal of tragedy different from the Greeks view of tragedy?

**Essay Questions**

**See the free response questions attached and choose 2 questions. Write an outline with quotes from the text for both essays.**

***Othello* Free Response Questions**

1. The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Choose a novel or play and write a well-organized essay in which you show how a specific death scene helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.
2. A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning. Select a novel or play and, focusing on one symbol, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.
3. In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of a minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil for the main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.
4. Select a line or so of poetry, or a moment or scene in a novel, epic poem, or play that you find especially memorable. Write an essay in which you identify the line or the passage, explain its relationship to the work in which it is found, and analyze the reasons for its effectiveness.
5. From a novel or play of literary merit, select an important character who is a villain. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the nature of the character's villainy and show how it enhances meaning in the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.
6. A recurring theme in literature is the classic war between a passion and responsibility. For instance, a personal cause, a love, a desire for revenge, a determination to redress a wrong, or some other emotion or drive may conflict with moral duty. Choose a literary work in which a character confronts the demands of a private passion that conflicts with his or her responsibilities. In a well-written essay show clearly the nature of the conflict, its effects upon the character, and its significance to the work.
7. In some novels and plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot.
8. According to critic Northrop Frye, "Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divisive lightning." Select a novel or play in which a tragic figure functions as an instrument of the suffering of others. Then write an essay in which you explain how the suffering brought upon others by that figure contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole.
9. In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life “is a search for justice. Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.
10. Novels and plays often depict characters caught between colliding cultures -- national, regional, ethnic, religious, institutional. Such collisions can call a character’s sense of identity into question. Select a novel or play in which a character responds to such a cultural collision. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character’s response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole.
11. Many plays and novels use contrasting places (for example, two countries, two cities or towns, two houses, or the land and the sea) to represent opposed forces or ideas that are central to the meaning of the work. Choose a novel or play that contrasts two such places. Write an essay explaining how the places differ, what each place represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work.