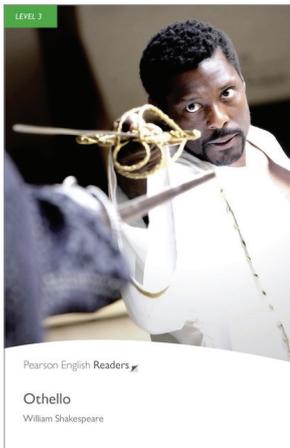


Othello

William Shakespeare



About the author

Though we know little for certain about the life of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) modern scholarship enables us to reconstruct his career with some accuracy. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England, he was educated at the local grammar school. At 18, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years older than himself, and they had three children. Some time later he joined a company of actors, and by 1589 was probably in London, acting and writing plays. In 1594, he joined forces with the brilliant young actor Richard Burbage, and became one of the shareholders in what later became the King's Men, the foremost acting company of the time. For over twenty years, Shakespeare wrote two plays a year on average, experimenting with and creating new dramatic forms, excelling in tragedy, comedy, history and romance. He became rich and successful, and retired to Stratford in about 1610, while still maintaining his interest in the London theatre. He died in 1616, and the first collected edition of his works was published in 1623. *Othello* (1604) is one of his tragedies. His other famous plays include *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594), *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), *Much Ado about Nothing* (1599), *Hamlet* (1601), *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1605) and *The Tempest* (1611).

Summary

Othello is a black general in the Venetian army. He secretly marries Desdemona, the daughter of a rich Venetian, Brabantio.

Act 1

Scene 1: The play starts with Roderigo, a young Venetian who is in love with Desdemona, arguing with Iago,

Othello's ensign. Iago has promised Roderigo that, in exchange for money, he would get Desdemona to accept his offer of marriage but he hasn't told him that she and Othello have just got married. Iago talks about his hatred of Othello for choosing Cassio as his lieutenant instead of him. To regain Roderigo's trust, Iago and Roderigo inform Brabantio, Desdemona's father, of her relationship with Othello. When Brabantio asks his men to bring lights, Iago cunningly leaves Roderigo, telling him that he can't safely speak against Othello yet. **Scene 2:** Iago tells a lie to Othello. He says that Roderigo is responsible for angering Brabantio by telling him about the marriage, and Iago tells Othello to watch out for Brabantio. Cassio comes to tell Othello that he is summoned to the Duke's palace as news of war has come: the Turks have attacked the island of Cyprus. **Scene 3:** Brabantio accuses Othello of using magic to get his daughter to marry him. Othello defends himself successfully in front of the Duke. By order of the Duke, Othello soon has to leave Venice to command the Venetian armies in Cyprus. It is decided that he will be accompanied by Desdemona, Cassio, Iago and Iago's wife Emilia, who is Desdemona's maid. Alone, Iago reveals his intention of continuing to use Roderigo for money and his hatred of Othello. Iago explains that his plan is to suggest to Othello that Cassio is sleeping with Desdemona.

Act 2

Scene 1: In Cyprus, everyone is waiting for Othello's arrival. A terrible storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet, and there's no more threat to Cyprus. Iago tells Roderigo that he still has a chance with Desdemona by making trouble for Cassio. **Scene 2:** Iago tempts Cassio into drinking too much, and Cassio ends up being in a fight. Othello has no choice but to demote Cassio from his position as his lieutenant. Next, Iago comforts Cassio by suggesting he speak with Desdemona and persuade her to put his case to Othello. Iago has a plan to use his wife Emilia to make sure that Desdemona and Cassio meet so that Othello can see Desdemona talking with Cassio, thus allowing Iago to convince Othello that Desdemona is being unfaithful.

Act 3

Scene 1: Cassio asks Iago and Emilia to help him so that he can speak to Desdemona. **Scene 2:** Desdemona assures Cassio that she will keep putting in a good word for him until he is again Othello's lieutenant. At a distance, Iago plants the seeds of doubt in Othello's mind about

Othello

Desdemona and Cassio. Othello now complains of a headache to Desdemona, which results in her dropping her handkerchief, Othello's first gift to her. Emilia picks this up and gives it to Iago without knowing that he would place it in Cassio's room. Othello demands proof from Iago of Desdemona's infidelity, and Iago tells Othello he saw Cassio using Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello is enraged and hurt, and he tells Iago to kill Cassio. Othello will deal with Desdemona. **Scene 3:** Desdemona worries about her missing handkerchief. Othello asks her for the handkerchief and stresses the value the handkerchief has for him. Desdemona tells Cassio that her attempts to help him are not going well. Iago claims total ignorance of the cause of Othello's fury. Cassio finds the handkerchief in his room but doesn't know whose it is and gives it to his lover, Bianca.

Act 4

Scene 1: Iago tells Othello that Desdemona has given the handkerchief to Cassio. Later, Iago cunningly talks to Cassio about his lover, Bianca, and a hidden Othello thinks Cassio is talking about sleeping with Desdemona. Then Bianca arrives, angrily giving back the handkerchief. This convinces Othello. He decides to kill Desdemona in her bed, which is Iago's idea. Lodovico arrives, announcing that Othello is to return to Venice and Cassio is to replace him in Cyprus. Desdemona is pleased for Cassio and this makes Othello hit her across the face in front of Lodovico. Lodovico is surprised to see how much Othello seems to have changed. **Scene 2:** Othello questions Emilia as to whether Desdemona was unfaithful to him. Emilia says that nothing has happened between Desdemona and Cassio, but Othello dismisses her comments as those of a simple woman. Othello eventually reveals to Desdemona that her infidelity is the source of his anger, and Desdemona pleads her innocence. Emilia is certain that some evil person has told Othello to believe Desdemona has been unfaithful, not realising that this evil man is her husband. Iago urges Roderigo to kill Cassio. **Scene 4:** After dinner with Lodovico, Othello orders Desdemona to go to bed to await him. Emilia makes Desdemona's bed with her wedding sheets as requested. Desdemona recalls the song of a maid who was similarly abused, and sings it.

Act 5

Scene 1: Roderigo and Iago wait in a street to ambush Cassio. Roderigo attacks Cassio as Iago suggested, but Cassio wounds Roderigo instead. Iago stabs Cassio,

wounding him in the leg, and hides in the dark. Lodovico and Gratiano arrive, and Iago claims total innocence of Cassio's injuries. Then Iago stabs and kills Roderigo 'in revenge' for his 'friend' Cassio. **Scene 2:** Othello enters the bedroom. He kisses his wife one last time. And then kills Desdemona. Emilia is let in, revealing that Roderigo has been killed, and Desdemona murmurs her last words. Desdemona dies in front of Emilia. Othello tells Emilia that Iago has told him about Desdemona and Cassio. Montano, Gratiano and Iago come in. Emilia tells Othello the truth about the handkerchief. Iago is now in trouble, and stabs his wife. Emilia dies, singing the same song that Desdemona sang. Lodovico, Montano, Cassio arrive, and Othello wounds Iago, but doesn't kill him. Othello, realising what he has done, kills himself and dies next to Desdemona.

Background and themes

It is said that the primary source for *Othello* is a short story from *Gli Hecatommithi*, a collection of tales published in 1565 by Gherardo Cinthio. The earliest recorded performance was on 1 November, 1604, at the Banqueting House in Whitehall, before the court of King James I.

Love and jealousy: Desdemona truly loves Othello faithfully, but Othello swiftly descends into jealousy because Iago persuades him to be suspicious of Desdemona and Cassio. Othello's jealousy and rage change him completely, and destroy him at the end.

Honest or dishonest? The villain Iago manipulates everyone diabolically, while everyone calls him 'honest' Iago.

Appearance vs. reality: The gap between appearance and reality is very clear to readers (or audience), but Othello, blinded by jealousy, trusts evil Iago because of what things seem to be.

Discussion activities

Act 1

Before reading

- Discuss:** Put students into pairs. Have them look at the front cover. Ask them to describe the picture.
- Research:** Bring in a map of Europe. Ask students to find Venice and Cyprus. Then, put students into small groups to look up some information about Venice and Cyprus. Students can use reference books and the Internet. Later ask groups to report what information they have got.

Othello

After reading

- 3 Read carefully:** Write the following names on the board: Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, Othello, Cassio and Desdemona. In pairs, students describe how they are related to each other. Later ask some pairs to share their answers with the rest of the class.
- 4 Discuss:** Have a whole-class discussion by asking the following question: *Iago says, 'Desdemona won't love the Moor forever, and he won't love her. It started quickly, and it will end quickly.' Do you think it's true? Do you think love doesn't last forever if it starts quickly?*

Act 2

Before reading

- 5 Predict:** Put students into pairs. Have them discuss the following question: *Now Iago plans to tell Othello that Cassio is a little too friendly with Desdemona. What will Othello say? How does he react? What do you think?*

After reading

- 6 Discuss:** Have students work in small groups to discuss the following question: *At the beginning of Scene 2 Othello calls Cassio 'Good Michael', but after the fight he calls him 'Cassio'. Why do you think he does so?*
- 7 Read carefully:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to go over what exactly Iago says and does to other characters. Encourage them to think of the reasons why Iago does so. Have them discuss what Iago's real intentions are.
- 8 Discuss:** Put students into small groups, and have them talk about Roderigo. *What do you think of him? Why do you think he listens to Iago? What kind of person do you think he is?*

Act 3

Before reading

- 9 Predict:** Have students look at the title *A Jealous Man*. Ask them the following questions: *Who is jealous? Why? What will happen in Act 3?*

After reading

- 10 Read carefully and act out:** Have students work in pairs. Have them read the conversation between Othello and Iago in Scene 2 (pages 21–23). Ask them to find out how Iago makes himself look good to in Othello's eyes. Have them list the corresponding lines that Iago says. Then, have pairs discuss how to act out the scene. Encourage them to think about facial expression, tone of the voice, body language, etc. Give them sufficient time to practise acting out the scene. When they are ready, ask some pairs to perform a part of the dialogue in sequence. Elicit some positive comments on the performances from the rest of the class.

- 11 Read carefully:** Have students work in pairs. *Iago says, 'She fell in love with you and married you. And her own father knew nothing about it.' He clearly remembers what Desdemona's father has said in Act 1. Go back to Act 1, and find what exactly Brabantio said.*
- 12 Discuss:** Iago mentions racial differences. Have a whole-class discussion on marrying someone from a different country. Elicit opinions for and against.
- 13 Describe:** Put students into small groups. Ask them to think of adjectives to describe Othello at the beginning of the play. Then have them think of other adjectives to describe Othello after Iago tells him about Desdemona and Cassio.

Act 4

Before reading

- 14 Predict:** Put students into small groups. Taking into account the previous act and the title *The End of Love*, have students guess how the love (between Othello and Desdemona) ends.

After reading

- 15 Discuss:** Have students work in pairs to discuss the following questions: *How important is the handkerchief? Why is it important? Imagine that Desdemona didn't drop the handkerchief. Would Othello still be jealous, do you think?*
- 16 Discuss:** Have students work in small groups. Ask them to explain the change or differences in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona compared with when they first arrived in Cyprus. Students can write a list, and then later they can share their lists with the rest of the class.

Act 5

Before reading

- 17 Discuss:** The title of Act 5 is *Death*. Write the following names on the board: Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Cassio, Roderigo, Emilia and Bianca. Ask students to raise their hands to vote on who they want to be dead at the end of the play. Encourage them to give reasons.

After reading

- 18 Read carefully:** Have students work in pairs. Ask them if they were surprised to see Othello kill himself. Ask them if they knew he would do that. In Act 3, Othello says something to foreshadow his action. Have students go back to Act 3, and find out what he says exactly.
- 19 Discuss:** Have students work in pairs and discuss what happens to Iago later. Ask some pairs to share their ideas with the rest of the class.