

## Race in Shakespeare's 'Othello'

### Topic

Race in Shakespeare's play 'Othello'

### Learning outcomes

- Describe key events in the relationships between Iago, Othello, Desdemona and Brabantio
- Develop ability to read and analyse Shakespearean language
- Summarise an argument and use persuasive language in spoken form
- Identify and discuss issues of race and racism in the play 'Othello'.

### Age and level

Adults (C1+)

### Time

60 minutes + optional 40-minute activity

### Materials

- Student worksheet
- Additional worksheet for Task 2
- Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU> (optional)

### Introduction

This lesson uses Shakespeare's play 'Othello' to explore early modern and contemporary attitudes to race, and gives students supported practice in analysing and interpreting extracts of the play. Students will be introduced to four key characters, will engage in role play and will have the opportunity to use persuasive language to act out a mock court case.

**Procedure**

<b>Guidance</b>	<p>The themes covered in this lesson should be dealt with in a sensitive way:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be sensitive to the different cultural/ethnic backgrounds of your students.</li> <li>• Start the class by reminding students that they may feel uncomfortable talking about race, and that is OK - they are free to give their opinions, but they must be respectful of everyone in the class.</li> <li>• Ensure that you are monitoring discussions and activities.</li> <li>• If you feel unable to deal with any issues that come up, say that you will address them in a future class, and steer the lesson back on track. This will give you an opportunity to plan how to address potentially difficult issues more effectively with appropriate support and resources.</li> </ul>
<b>1. Lead-in: Introduction to 'Othello' (10 mins)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write the full title of the play on the board: 'The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice'. Ask students to say what information this gives the audience about the play, focusing on the words: tragedy, Moor, Venice. Give the following information:       <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A 'tragedy' in Shakespearean drama is a story in which the principal character – usually a man of importance or outstanding personal qualities – falls to disaster through a combination of personal failing and outside circumstances. Note: it is distinguished from 'tragedy' as simply a sad or shocking event.</li> <li>○ 'Moor' would have meant 'Muslim' for an early modern audience; a general term for someone who is 'not one of us', by implication from Africa or Asia.</li> <li>○ 'Venice', which provides the setting for the opening of the play, suggests western wealth and sophistication. The pairing of 'Moor' with 'Venice' invites an unusual contrast between eastern exoticism and western civilisation.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Ask students to say if they know – or can guess – what the play is about. Play the first 43 seconds of this video or read the transcript below:  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU</a> </li> </ul>

Othello is a military general who works for the state of Venice. He's not from Venice though. He's a Moor, meaning he's from North Africa, so he's in a very unusual position. He's one of the most important people in Venice but he's perceived as an outsider. The plot of 'Othello' is pretty simple. Othello marries a young Venetian woman named Desdemona. One of Othello's officers named Iago secretly hates Othello, so he convinces Othello that Desdemona is cheating on him. Othello becomes so jealous that he kills Desdemona. Iago gets caught but the damage is already done, and Othello kills himself.

- Ask questions to check everyone has understood the main events of the plot e.g. What is Othello's position in Venice? Who is he married to? Who is Iago? What does he do? Why? What happens to Desdemona? Why does Othello kill Desdemona? What happens to Iago? What happens to Othello?
- Some students may know the story. If so, allow them to briefly give more details about these events.

**2. Task 1:  
A secret  
marriage  
(15 mins)**

- Refer students to **Task 1A** in the student worksheet. Explain that they will read some lines from Act 1, Scene 1.
- Students read about the scene, then the lines with the help of the glossary. Explain that Shakespearean language is challenging for most people, and they are not expected to understand every word. If necessary, help your students to understand or provide a modern translation (see below).

Sir, you're being robbed and shamed. Put on your coat. Your heart is broken and you have lost half your soul. At this very moment, an old black ram is having sex with your white ewe. Get up! Ring the bell and wake all the snoring citizens. If not, that devil will make you a grandfather. Get up!

- Refer students to **Task 1B** in the student worksheet. In pairs or small groups, students discuss questions 1-4. Invite some pairs / groups to share their answers and thoughts. Answers / suggestions are below:
  1. The 'old black ram' and 'devil' are Othello. The 'white ewe' is Desdemona (Brabantio's daughter).
  2. Iago wants Brabantio to wake up, get dressed – and to act before it's too late.

	<p>3. Iago uses crude sexual and racist language. He wants to shock Brabantio, and he wants to damage Othello. Students may feel uncomfortable at these language choices. If it's appropriate, discuss the effect of using this kind of language in literature.</p> <p>4. Brabantio may feel shocked, ashamed, angry, afraid, worried. It's the middle of the night and he has just learned that his daughter has been secretly married. Iago's language and imagery may also make him feel offended or disgusted.</p> <p>5. These lines could suggest that Othello is a predatory, abusive character. At this stage, we don't know if the marriage is consensual. However, we know that Iago hates Othello, and it's possible that the violence of his language is due to this.</p>
<p><b>3. Task 2:</b>  <b>Is the marriage legitimate?</b>  <b>Discussion</b>  <b>(20 mins)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refer students to <b>Task 2</b> in the student worksheet. Students read about Act 1, Scenes 2-3. You could continue to show the video summary of the play from 0.43-2:00: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU</a></li> <li>• Ask questions to check that all students understand the plot so far e.g. Why does Brabantio want to find Othello? Why does he want to arrest Othello? (To see if the marriage is legitimate) What will the Duke do? What does Brabantio believe? And Othello? And Desdemona?</li> <li>• Explain that students will have the role of one of these characters: Brabantio; Desdemona; Othello. Organise the class into small groups. Give a third of the groups the <b>additional sheet for Task 2: Group Brabantio</b>; give a third of the groups the <b>additional sheet for Task 2: Group Desdemona</b>; and a third of the groups the <b>additional sheet for Task 2: Group Othello</b>.</li> <li>• In their groups, students read their speeches with the aid of the glossary and dictionaries if available. If you think your students will struggle with the lines, find and provide modern translations. There are many online.</li> <li>• Walk around the groups as they discuss their questions and help if necessary. Encourage students to find examples to back up their answers. Use one of these options to check answers / share ideas:</li> </ul>

	<p>Option 1: If you have more than one group for each character, put characters together (i.e. all Brabantio groups together; all Desdemona groups together; all Othello groups together). In these larger groups, they share answers / ideas.</p> <p>Option 2: Invite some students from each character group to share answers / ideas with the whole class.</p> <p>Option 3: Copy feedback below and distribute to relevant groups for them to check their answers / ideas.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> See <b>Appendix</b> for feedback.</p>
<p><b>4. Task 3:</b>  <b>Is the marriage legitimate?</b>  <b>Role play</b>  <b>(15 mins)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students stay in the same character groups representing Brabantio, Desdemona and Othello. Explain that they should now prepare their argument for why the marriage is not legitimate (Brabantio), or for why it is legitimate (Desdemona / Othello).</li> <li>Give groups 5 minutes to prepare. They can use ideas from the lines they read or others. Walk around and help. Groups could consider the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Brabantio:</b> Explain why the marriage is not legitimate; accuse Othello of witchcraft; persuade Desdemona to leave Othello.</li> <li><b>Desdemona:</b> Persuade Brabantio that you love Othello; explain how you fell in love.</li> <li><b>Othello:</b> Remind Brabantio of your old relationship; persuade him that you love Desdemona and why.</li> </ul> </li> <li>After a few minutes of preparation, organise students into new groups. Each new group should have at least one representative of each character (Brabantio, Desdemona and Othello).</li> <li>In their new groups, students represent their characters. They give their opinions and try to persuade others. They may quote from the text and use their own words.</li> <li>Walk around groups as they carry out their role plays. You may like to note examples of good persuasive language or examples of language mistakes. You could review these at the end of the role plays / lesson.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End the role plays. Ask groups to say what the outcomes were. Was the marriage allowed or not? Why?</li> <li>• Explain that in the play the Duke allows the marriage. He is won over by Othello's account. He says that such tales of bravery would win his daughter too. He encourages Brabantio to make peace with Othello and Desdemona. Brabantio does, grudgingly, accept the marriage.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Task 4: Putting Brabantio on trial (40 mins) (optional)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you have time, and if appropriate for your students, use this activity to explore the theme of racism with your students. It will help them to consider how contemporary attitudes towards race interact with those in the play.</li> <li>• Remind students that although Brabantio does eventually accept the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, he has accused Othello of using witchcraft to make Desdemona fall in love with him. He doesn't understand how his daughter could fall in love with a black man given the choice of Venetian men she is surrounded by, so suspects Othello of foul play. In today's society, Brabantio's views would be considered highly racist.</li> <li>• Explain that the class will imagine that Brabantio is on trial for racist behaviour. They will act out the trial. First, ask the class to elect a judge. Students should agree that this person will make a fair decision. You could ask for nominations and take a vote.</li> <li>• Explain the motion (the application made to the judge) is: Brabantio is a racist. Divide the remaining students into small groups. Half the groups will form the prosecution; half will form the defence. In groups, students write key reasons why they believe that Brabantio is / isn't a racist. Their reasons should be convincing enough to persuade the judge.</li> <li>• As students discuss reasons, walk around the room and help where necessary. The student acting as judge could also circulate and listen, as hearing the discussion will help them to make a final decision. If students are struggling, prompt them to consider the following:   <b>Prosecution:</b> The language Brabantio uses is racist and dehumanising; he used to love Othello but his opinion changed when Othello married his </li> </ul>

	<p>daughter; he accuses Othello of using witchcraft, implying that Desdemona could not love a black man of her own free will.</p> <p><b>Defence:</b> Brabantio is in a state of emotional distress over the secrecy of the marriage, and he is not responsible for his words; Iago is the racist – he put ideas into Brabantio’s head when he was vulnerable; Brabantio loves Othello; he is acting as any father would if he believed his daughter had been kidnapped.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put the smaller prosecution groups into one big prosecution group; and put the smaller defence groups together into one big defence group. Each large prosecution / defence group should appoint a chairperson. The chairperson will lead a discussion to choose three main points to argue that Brabantio is / is not a racist.</li> <li>• Set up the mock court. Write the motion on the board: Brabantio is a racist. Ask the judge to sit at the front. Ask each chairperson to put forward the case for the prosecution / defence to the judge.</li> <li>• The judge decides which group presented the most convincing argument. Make sure students are clear that this is not part of the plot of ‘Othello’.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Round-up / Homework</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask students to share their reactions to what they have learned about the play ‘Othello’. Would they like to see it? Why / Why not?</li> <li>• Students could watch the rest of the video summary:  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU</a></li> <li>• Students could watch scenes from Othello. There are several available online.</li> </ul>

## Appendix: Task 2 Answers



### Group Brabantio

1. Brabantio is very angry. This is seen in the insulting language he uses to address Othello: 'O thou foul thief' (l.75) and 'Damned as thou art' (in other words – 'you devil' (l.76). See also the accusatory repetition of 'thou' ('you') and the use of questions and exclamation marks. The run-on lines suggest that the pace of the speech is quick and breathless. Violent and pejorative verbs such as 'stowed' (l.75), 'bound' (l.78), 'shunned' (l.80), 'abused' (l.87) suggest feelings of aggression. His language is also persuasive; he uses hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration used for effect) to prove that Othello is a villain (e.g. 'devil', 'thing').
2. He accuses Othello of hiding his daughter (l.75), of using witchcraft to make her fall in love with him (l.76-78) and of tricking, drugging or kidnapping her (l.86-88).
3. He expected her to marry one of the 'wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation' (l.81) - a handsome young Venetian man, as befitted her social status.
- 4-5. Note the contrast of light/dark and angelic/demonic language and imagery. Desdemona is 'a maid so tender, fair, and happy' (l.79) - young, beautiful/white. The colour white connotes moral purity and innocence. By contrast, Othello is dehumanised, cast as the devil ('Damned' l.76) and a 'thing' (l.84) that should be feared (l.84). His 'sooty bosom' (l.83) – which contrasts with Desdemona's 'fair' skin – suggests dark motives as well as skin.



### Group Desdemona

1. Desdemona is clearly deeply in love with Othello, enough to express her feelings so openly before the entire senate. Her language is dramatic and persuasive. She describes the 'downright violence' (l. 264) of her feelings and her willingness to 'trumpet to the world' (l.265) how she has left her old privileged life to be with him. Her heart is wholly conquered ('subdued' l.265) by him, and everything about him (l.266). She has given her whole life to him ('Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate' l.269) because of 'his honours and valiant parts' (bravery) (l.268). The fact that she pleads for him ('dear lords' l.270) demonstrates her affections.
2. Desdemona uses dramatic imagery and metaphors to make her point. 'Storm of fortunes' (p.264) connotes the strength of natural disasters. 'Trumpet to the world' (l.265) suggests a joyful shameless celebration of their love. Her desire to 'consecrate' her 'soul' (l.269) to Othello has religious associations, suggesting that he has assumed god-like status to her. If he goes away to war and leaves her, she will be 'a moth of peace' (l.271), a metaphor that implies that she is insignificant without him.
3. She wants to go to war with him, as she would be miserable without him.
4. See answers 1-2. Desdemona's language provides a direct contrast to Iago's in **Task 2 – A secret marriage**. In Iago's description, Othello is a sinister, sexually predatory character; a 'devil' (l.95) who has taken an old man's daughter against her will. By contrast, Desdemona's description of Othello shows that she feels the very opposite, and has gladly faced the consequences of an unconventional elopement because of her love for him.



### Group Othello

1. Brabantio 'loved' Othello and often asked him to recount his life story (l.142). Othello's narrative – which is long even in summary – conjures up an image of father and daughter fascinated and intrigued by tales told, possibly over many nights, by a family friend.
2. Othello has had an eventful life: 'battles, sieges, fortunes' (l.144); 'moving accidents by flood and field' (l.149); 'hair-breadth 'scapes\* i' th' imminent deadly breach' (hair-raising military adventures l.150); being captured by 'the insolent foe' (l.151) and 'sold to slavery' (l.152); travels through large caves and empty wildernesses, over quarries, rocks and mountains (l.154-155). It's no wonder that Brabantio invited him often!
3. Desdemona falls in love with Othello. She 'would seriously incline' (l.160) to hearing his stories – that is, she was drawn in emotionally and physically. She gives him, in response, 'a world of kisses' (l.173) and loves him 'for the dangers' (l.174) he has survived. Othello's language is eloquent and moving, and gives us some sense of the gentle, wise and fearless man who has captured Desdemona's heart.
4. You may respond in a variety of ways. Your opinion of Othello may be different after hearing his own account of his relationship with Brabantio, his courtship of Desdemona and the things that he has been through. You should notice a sharp contrast between the way Iago describes him in **Task 2 – A secret marriage** and the way he presents himself.