

Othello: Questions for Study and Discussion

Act 1: Scene 1

1. Why might Shakespeare choose to begin the play in the middle of a conversation between Iago and Roderigo? What effect does it have on you as a reader?
2. What are the two of them discussing?
3. What reasons does Iago give for being angry with Othello?
4. What might Iago mean when he says “I am not what I am.”(line 66)?
5. What other words/phrases does he use in his short speech (lines 42–66) that also relate to the idea that appearances are deceiving?
6. What are your first impressions of Iago and Roderigo?
7. Why do Iago and Roderigo go to wake up Brabantio, and how would you describe the way in which they deliver the news to Brabantio?
8. What evidence of racism do you find in the first scene?

Act 1: Scene 2

1. How does Iago present himself to Othello? In other words, what appearance does he present?
2. What news does Cassio bring to Othello?
3. Describe the confrontation between Brabantio and Othello?
4. What is your impression of Othello? Choose three lines (or more) of his which you feel convey his character.
5. How is the conflict resolved in the scene?

Act 1: Scene 3

1. What do we learn about the relationship between Othello and Desdemona?
2. Describe your first impressions of Desdemona. Again, use several phrases from her speech to support your views.
3. What decisions are made regarding traveling to Cyprus?
4. What plans do Iago and Roderigo make at the end of the scene, and what do such plans reveal about their characters?

Act 2

1. What sort of person is Cassio? What happens to him, and how does Iago plan to use the situation in his plan against Othello?
2. What more do we learn about the nature of Iago in act 2? What is the effect of having him share his thoughts and plans with us through his soliloquies? Pay attention to the language used in Iago's soliloquies. What sorts of descriptive language does he use? How does it contribute to the picture of Iago that Shakespeare is drawing?

Act 3

1. At the beginning of 3.3 Othello is completely in love with Desdemona. By the end of that scene, 480 lines later, Othello is ready to murder her for having an affair with Cassio. How have we gone from the first position to the second position so quickly? How does Iago plant the idea of Desdemona's infidelity in Othello's mind, and how does he make it grow?
2. What sort of person is Emilia, and what seems to be the nature of her relationship with her husband Iago? How does Desdemona's handkerchief come into play within that relationship between Emilia and Iago?

Act 4

1. How does the handkerchief function in act 4? Keep track of its movements from here to the end of the play. Why is the handkerchief so important to Othello?
2. How is Othello changing in act 4? What is the effect of his public humiliation of Desdemona by slapping her?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between Emilia and Desdemona? What especially is the effect of 4.3, in which we get an extended scene between these two women alone? How effective is Shakespeare in portraying this private world of women?

Act 5

1. How does Othello approach the killing of Desdemona? What does he think he is doing, and why?
2. What is the effect of having Emilia play such an important role after the murder? Why is she now standing up to Othello and her husband? What is her reward?
3. Does Othello justify his killing of Desdemona? What is he doing in his last long speech?
4. Why is this play a tragedy?