

Character Studies - Checklists

We learn about characters by noting what they **say**, what they **do**, what **others say** about them and **how others act** in their presence.

In *Othello* the soliloquies are an essential part of learning about the characters, particularly Iago.

When you are studying characters in *Othello*, it can be helpful to think in terms of the following checklists.

ROLE

- ✓ What is this character's role in the play?
- ✓ In which scenes does the character appear?
- ✓ Do the character's actions – or inaction – affect the plot outcome?
- ✓ Does the character have a dramatic function within the play?
- ✓ Is the character a hero, heroine or villain?
- ✓ Does the character act as a foil to another character?
- ✓ Is the character fully-developed or one-dimensional?

QUALITIES

- ✓ Make a list of the character's qualities
- ✓ Divide the list into positive and negative qualities
- ✓ Do these qualities make the character appealing to an audience? Why/Why not?
- ✓ Is the character fully-fleshed out and not one-dimensional?
- ✓ Do we relate to the character because they are not perfect?
- ✓ Do the characters qualities / attitudes / values make them vulnerable to manipulation by others?
- ✓ Do the characters values change as the play progresses?

RELATIONSHIPS

- ✓ With which characters does this character have a relationship?
- ✓ List the types of relationship: husband / wife / subject / friend etc.
- ✓ Are these relationships functional or dysfunctional?
- ✓ Are the relationships equal or unequal?
- ✓ Who has the power in the relationship?
- ✓ Are the characters bettered by being in the relationship?
- ✓ Does the relationship face challenges?
- ✓ What threatens the relationship? Is it external forces or something within the character's personality that causes difficulties?
- ✓ Does the relationship undergo change?
- ✓ What are the key scenes where we see changes in the relationship?

When structuring an answer on a character, you should think of the following five questions:

1. How the character introduced and what is our first impression of him or her?
2. Does the character have to face any **challenges**, and if so, how does he or she react to them?
3. Does the character have to deal with a **major crisis** at a turning point in the play?
4. How is the crisis **resolved** and what role (if any) does the character play in the resolution?
5. What is our **final impression** of the character and is it different from our initial impression? Has the character **undergone change**?

Note Bene



- ✓ Any point you make must be supported by evidence from the text.
- ✓ Think in terms of key moments.
- ✓ Learning quotes out of context is of little use.
- ✓ As you study each character, you should highlight quotes that give you an insight into his or her character.
- ✓

Othello



Othello

Otherness / Doubt and Insecurities

Before we meet Othello, we hear a most unflattering account of him. Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio refer to him only as 'the Moor', highlighting the difference between him and the citizens of Venice. Iago indicates that he is not worthy of respect by saying sarcastically that as he has not been promoted he must remain 'his Moorship's ancient'. The play on words here – 'worship' and 'Moor' is clearly meant to show us that Othello is not worthy of the respect that a title such as 'His worship' would indicate, as he is a foreigner and an outsider in Venetian society.

When Iago and Roderigo are attempting to enrage Brabantio with news of his daughter's elopement, Iago highlights his race, saying, 'your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs'. Roderigo paints a picture of Desdemona in the 'gross clasps of the lascivious Moor' and says that 'the devil' will make 'a grandsire' of him. Brabantio, who up to now had thought little of Roderigo, laments the fact that Desdemona has eloped with Othello rather than with Roderigo.

Othello is not ignorant of these opinions. Brabantio, when he catches up with Othello, accuses him of having used magic or drugs on Desdemona to make her shun the 'wealthy curled darlings of our nation' and tie herself to 'the sooty bosom' of 'such a thing' as Othello.

Othello's defence wins over the Duke and the senators, but also emphasises the differences between him and them. He has been a soldier since he was a child and explains that the exotic and dangerous life he has led is what first attracted Desdemona to him. Othello is proud of his achievements but is also unsure of his ability to express himself sufficiently

eloquently in such august company. Of course, he is more than able to do so and his persuasive speech beginning, 'Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace', proves this beyond doubt. Everyone present – bar Brabantio, Iago and Roderigo – is won over.

In an effort to stir up Othello's jealousy, Iago warns him to keep an eye on Desdemona and Cassio because he, Iago, knows what Venetian women are like. Othello, being an outsider, could not have any idea of 'the pranks / They dare not show their husbands'. Othello is upset to hear this but bows to Iago's insider knowledge and merely says 'Dost thou say so?' Iago moves on to say that it is strange Desdemona turned down 'many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion and degree'. More than that, he says such behaviour is 'foul' and 'unnatural', and implying that Desdemona must come to regret her mistake. He says that although Othello's exotic appeal may have won her over, she will probably soon tire of him and begin comparing him unfavourably with Venetian men: 'I may fear / Her will, recoiling to her better judgment, / May fall to match you with her country forms / And happily repent'. Iago is cleverly appealing to the fear that lives at the heart of jealousy, the fear that we are not attractive, not really good enough to deserve the love that makes us happy. Because he is so different from Desdemona, Othello is particularly susceptible to this fear.

Othello sends Iago away and begins to think about what he has been told. He wonders if his age: 'I am declined / Into the vale of years', and his lack of 'those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have' are likely to make him unattractive to Desdemona sooner or later. Iago has done his job well and by playing on Othello's insecurities he has made him wonder if the very reasons Desdemona first fell for him are now to be the reasons she will tire of him.



Iago continues to play on Othello's insecurities until the Moor becomes irrational and deeply suspicious of Desdemona: 'Now, by heaven, My blood begins my safer guides to rule'.

Not everyone sees Othello's 'otherness' as a problem. Desdemona, always willing to see the best in her husband, tells Emilia that Othello can't be jealous and because he came from a different place, he has a different nature. She says, 'Who, he? I think the sun where he was

born / Drew all such humours from him'. Emilia is not convinced and when Othello begins to berate Desdemona for not producing the handkerchief, Emilia is quick to point out to him that Desdemona could have made a better match if she had wanted: 'Hath she forsook so many noble matches, / Her father and her country and her friends, / To be call'd whore? would it not make one weep?' The indignant Emilia cannot countenance why Desdemona should have tied her fortunes to such a man as Othello when she could have married a courteous, noble Venetian.

Soldier

Othello is a respected leader and military man. Even Iago admits as much, saying that the Venetian senators won't punish Othello for eloping with Desdemona because they need him too much: "Another of his fathom they have none, / To lead their business".

Othello is confident when faced with straightforward physical threats. Brabantio, enraged that Desdemona has married Othello without his consent, is ready to start a fight. He and his entourage draw their swords but Othello takes control of the situation, saying calmly, He "Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it / Without a prompter". However, Iago is not a straightforward enemy, so when he begins his subtle and diabolical manipulation of Othello's insecurities, the other not only does not recognise the danger for what it is but also has no way of coping with the situation. The enemy without is far easier to fight than the enemy within.

Othello's tales of battle are what won Desdemona over. He explains to the senators that "Her father loved me; oft invited me; / Still question'd me the story of my life, / From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes, / That I have passed", and when Desdemona heard these stories she was won over. Othello is presented as a brave and exciting man who has travelled extensively and coped with difficulties that few men would have experienced.

Later, when the Duke tells Othello that he is needed in Cyprus, Othello shows himself willing and indeed eager to go. He claims that 'the flinty and steel couch of war' is his bed and that he relishes the hardships that are part and parcel of war.

Othello's lack of self-awareness is another contributing factor to the tragedy. He is overly confident in his soldierly ability to control his emotions and assures the senators that if Desdemona travels with him to Cyprus he will not neglect his duties: 'And heaven defend your good souls that you think. I will your serious and great business scant / For she is with me.' However, no sooner does he arrive in Cyprus than he acts rashly because his private

time with Desdemona is disturbed. Iago arranges matters so that Cassio becomes embroiled in a brawl with the disguised Roderigo and then with Montano, seriously wounding the latter. Othello, roused from his marital bed, is ruled by his passion: 'My blood begins my safer guides to rule,' and immediately dismisses Cassio on learning of his part in the fight without stopping to find out all the facts. Othello may believe he has self-control but we see here that he can be goaded into acting impulsively and unwisely. In dismissing Cassio, Othello shows a serious character flaw in that he is rash and impatient in the face of perceived disloyalty and embarrassment, but still believes himself to be simply acting as a good soldier should: 'to be once in doubt is once to be resolved'.

Othello is a fine military leader, but when there is no war he finds himself on strange territory. Used to dealing quickly and decisively with the relatively straightforward matter of fighting, he tries to apply his usual methods to the difficulties he encounters in Cyprus, with disastrous results. Iago uses Othello's need for clarity and swift decision-making against him, ensuring that when he believes Desdemona is unfaithful, Othello will not flinch from doing whatever needs to be done to remedy the situation.

Othello is proud to be a soldier, but even this aspect of his life is undermined by Iago's plotting. In Act 4, Scene 1, Iago sends Othello into a jealous rage by hinting about what Desdemona and Cassio might be doing in bed. Othello falls into a fit, and when he comes to, Iago's first words are, "How is it, general? Have you not hurt your head?" Iago calls Othello 'general' deliberately. The implication is that a leader of his calibre should not allow himself to lose control to the extent he has. At the end of the scene, Lodovico also wonders aloud what has happened to Othello and asks if he is still 'the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake?'"

Gullible

One of the main weaknesses of Othello's character is his assumption that others are as straightforward as he is. His only real experience of people comes from his time in the army and admits that he can speak 'little of this great world' except that which 'pertains to feats of broil and battle'. He has no idea that there are some people so devious that they would happily twist the truth to suit themselves, as he would not dream of doing so. This would not be a fault in normal circumstances, but it does render Othello vulnerable to deceit and manipulation by Iago, a man who has already told Roderigo that 'In following [Othello], I follow but myself'.

Proud

Iago first introduces the idea that Othello is overly proud, particularly of his prowess as a military leader. He tells Roderigo that when Iago's supporters asked Othello to promote him, he answered in language full of 'bombast circumstance' and 'Horribly stuffed with epithets of war'. Iago accuses Othello of 'loving his own pride and purposes'.

When we meet Othello, Iago's description rings true. He tells Iago that he has no need to worry about Brabantio's anger at his elopement because he, Othello, is descended from 'men of royal siege'. Although he makes an excellent impression on the Duke and senators when he explains how he and Desdemona fell in love, there is also a hint of pride in the way he tells the tale: 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them'. Here it seems that Othello was attracted by Desdemona's admiration for him rather than any attributes of her own!

Othello's pride is deeply wounded by the belief that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. So injured is he that he sees her infidelity as the end of his military career. He laments that his 'occupation's gone' and bids farewell to all that he held dear.

Othello's pride is closely tied to his reputation. He bemoans the loss of his military career because he feels that if he cannot lead his armies if his wife has been unfaithful. Of course, there is no rationality behind this, but Othello's pride has been so damaged that he feels he is worth nothing any more. In an attempt to regain his honour, Othello decides he will kill Desdemona for her 'crime'. He sees himself as a good man who is sparing others the betrayal he has been through. Desdemona 'must die, else she'll betray more men'. When Desdemona protests her innocence, Othello is enraged. After all, if she is innocent, then he is a murderer: 'O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart / And make me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice'.

After Othello learns the truth about Iago, attacks Iago, and has his sword taken from him, he says, "I am not valiant neither, / But every puny whipster gets my sword: / But why should honour outlive honesty? / Let it go all". He believes he deserves to lose his sword because he has lost his honour and his reputation.

The pride which gave Othello the self-confidence to defend himself against Brabantio in the first act has now proved to be his undoing.