

Classroom Connections

Before the performance...



Time Is On My Side

Othello takes place in a very short amount of time. Iago's manipulations work so well on Othello that he is able to descend from a loving, trusting relationship with his wife into jealousy and madness in a matter of hours. Ask students to make a timeline of events in the play. How much time do you think passes between scenes? How long have Othello and Desdemona actually been married? Be sure to include the details of the lost & found handkerchief on your timeline. What discoveries do you make about the events in the play by mapping it out? What do you discover about Othello? About Iago?



The Psychology of Iago

At the end of the play, when asked why he has committed his heinous crimes, Iago simply answers, "What you know, you know" and is led offstage to be tortured into confession. The audience never learns the outcome. Ask students to imagine that they are Iago's psychologist. What might his diagnosis be? Ask students to find support in the text for specific symptoms. Consult a website like nmha.org for basic mental health information.



Black & White

In *Othello* Shakespeare examines themes of Black and White, both metaphorically and in terms of racial relationships. Have students go on a scavenger hunt through their text of *Othello* for any images or references to either Black or White. Challenge them to find at least ten of each color. Then create two lists on the board, one of each color, of every reference students found. How many of these are racial images? How many are images of nature, emotions or time? What does Shakespeare seem to be saying about Black and White in *Othello* and how does our modern perspective affect our view of the play and how Othello is treated? Do students see any correlations between Shakespeare's world and our own and why? What is the traditional role of White or Black in literature and why? How might the themes of Black and White be highlighted in the production they are about to see?



Lie, Lie, Lie

Reality becomes twisted for Othello because he listens to what Iago tells him and believes what appears to be true instead of investigating the truth for himself. Have students divide into groups of three. Each group should choose a storyteller who should share a brief true story about something they experienced. The other two members of the group must learn their story and prepare to tell it to the class. After about five minutes of rehearsal, the class should come back together. Each three-person group stands in front of the class. One at a time, each person in a group tells the same story. Each group member's objective is to convince the class that they are the true storyteller. After each trio performs, the class must vote on who they believe is telling the truth. Why did the class think the person they chose was being truthful? After revealing the actual storyteller, discuss why or why not the class may have guessed correctly. What kind of physical or vocal communication reveals the true storyteller and the false ones? Discuss how Iago might appear to be telling the truth when lying, and the differences between reality and what appears to be reality to Othello.



Symbolism in *Othello*

What are some of the major symbols in *Othello*? Common objects come to hold great meaning as the story unfolds. Lead students in a discussion of symbols in the play, including the handkerchief, Desdemona's bed sheets and the "green-ey'd monster." Ask students to design a poster for a production of *Othello*, choosing one symbol to focus on that they feel represents the story. Ask students to present their work, explaining why they chose the symbol they did, and how they feel it communicates the meaning of the play to a prospective audience member. Please send examples of your students' work to The Shakespeare Theatre!

Classroom Connections

...After the performance

The Pen vs. the Sword

Iago explains to Roderigo that he is angry at being passed over for a promotion primarily because Cassio is an “arithmetician,” that is, he has studied the art of battle in books but does not have experience on the field. Brainstorm two lists of occupations with the class: one that benefits from more scholarly book knowledge, the other from real-world experience. What differences can you find between the two lists? Where does the occupation of “Lieutenant” belong?

Racism

A director cannot approach a production of *Othello* without encountering issues of race and racism. Lead students in a discussion about what racial issues were brought up in the production. What decisions did the director make that may have challenged or reinforced students’ expectations of the play? Ask students to break out into small groups and discuss. Then ask students to interview each other about their own encounters with racism or a time when they were asked to confront racial issues in their own lives. Students can write monologues about their own or each others’ experiences and, if desired, present them to the group.

Deception & Truth—Rewriting the Ending

Even in the face of torture, Iago refuses to delve into his reasons for the great deceptions that he orchestrated. Ask students to imagine what Iago’s motives may have been. Have them rewrite the ending as if Iago told his side of the story to the group. How would the others react to his narrative? Is there anything Iago could say that would make him a more sympathetic character?

Othello on Film

In 1995, Laurence Fishburne became the first African American to play Othello onscreen. Previous movie Othellos included great actors such as Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, and Anthony Hopkins; all in make-up. Why did it take so long for Othello to be portrayed by a black actor on film? How does our history affect the art we create?

Tragic Hero

Who is the hero in *Othello*? In early Greek plays such as *Oedipus*, tragedies were about the tragic hero who caused his own downfall. The tragic hero had the potential for greatness but was doomed by fate to fail. Despite his failure, the tragic hero wins a moral victory in the end. Is any of this true for *Othello*? Was he doomed or unlucky?

Reputation & Social Status

In *Othello*, characters depend upon their social status and reputation for their happiness. Indeed, the happiness of Iago, Cassio and Othello depends upon how they are perceived by others. Iago covets Cassio’s advancement and uses his reputation as an honest man to deceive Othello, Cassio’s reputation is tarnished and his social status is lost by Iago’s insinuations, and Othello’s fear of being seen as weak fuels his rage against Desdemona. Why is reputation such a big factor for these characters? Do you think the story would have been different if Othello had a lower social status? How does reputation affect your life? Is our happiness dependent upon our social status and reputation?

Loyalty & Jealousy in Relationships

As *Othello* is manipulated by Iago’s lies, he becomes more and more jealous of Desdemona. Even though he begins to treat her cruelly, she remains loyal. Imagine you are Emilia, Desdemona’s close friend, in Act IV Scene 3. What advice would you give her about her relationship? What if you were Othello’s close friend, what advice would you give him when you observed his behavior? Write a scene in which one of the major characters of *Othello* approaches you about their relationship problems and you give them advice. How would the outcome of the story change if they followed your advice?