



AT THE BEVERLEY CENTER FOR THE ARTS

2023 Shakespeare-in-the-Schools Tour

Othello

Classroom Study Guide

The content of this study guide, and the resources within it, were sourced by the Utah Shakespeare Festival Education Department. More detailed references are available upon request.

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Who's Who?

☆ Character List

Othello: A general in the Venetian Army, husband of Desdemona.

Iago: Othello's ensign.

Desdemona: The daughter of Brabantio and wife of Othello.

Cassio: Othello's lieutenant.

Emilia: The wife of Iago and maid of Desdemona.

Roderigo: A rich gentleman.

Brabantio: Desdemona's father.

Lodovico: Another noble Venetian and kinsman of Brabantio.

Montano: The governor of Cyprus and servant of the duke of Venice.

Duke of Venice

Bianca: Cassio's mistress.

Various Officers/Senators/Soldiers



What's this all about?

☆ Play Synopsis

The beginning of the play is triggered by two main events, both centered around Othello, a general in the Venetian army and a *moor. First, is Othello's secret marriage to Desdemona, the daughter of an important Senator named Brabantio. The other is Othello's decision to promote Cassio to be his lieutenant. This upsets Iago, who believes he should have been promoted. Partly to get back at Othello for this, and partly because of his dark nature, Iago decides he will do whatever it takes to destroy Othello's happiness.

Iago has teamed up with Roderigo, a wealthy gentleman who wants Desdemona for himself. The two decide to visit Brabantio and tell him about his daughter's secret marriage to Othello. Brabantio is outraged and calls on the Duke of Venice to punish Othello for "tricking" his daughter. However, the group soon realizes Desdemona and Othello are truly in love. They are then interrupted by urgent news of an approaching attack on Cyprus by the Turks. Othello leads his army to Cyprus to defend the city. Desdemona decides to join him, as well as Iago, Iago's wife Emilia, Cassio, and Roderigo. However, when they get there they discover a storm has scattered the Turkish army and Cyprus is no longer in danger! While the rest of the army celebrates, Iago continues with his plans to hurt Othello.

While on watch together, Iago gets Cassio drunk and orchestrates a fight between him and Roderigo. This forces Othello to dismiss the dishonored Cassio from his service and make Iago his lieutenant. Iago then convinces Cassio to appeal to Desdemona, and ask her for help winning back Othello's respect. Iago then goes to Othello and suggests Cassio is talking to Desdemona because they are having an affair. To prove this to Othello, Iago convinces his wife Emilia to steal a special handkerchief from Desdemona. This handkerchief is an heirloom from Othello's dead mother, and was given to Desdemona as a symbol of his undying love. Iago then plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room for his lover Bianca to find. This, along with a few other of Iago's schemes and lies, solidifies Othello's belief that his wife is cheating. He then swears an oath of vengeance on Desdemona and Cassio.

Desdemona has been instructed by Othello to wait for him alone in bed. As she, with the help of Emilia, prepares for sleep, she fears Othello's angry mood. She sings "Willow," a wistful song taught to her about a maid who was forsaken by her lover. Meanwhile, Iago tells Roderigo to kill Cassio. Roderigo attempts to stab Cassio, but fails and gets stabbed himself. Iago then sneaks up and stabs Cassio in the leg. When two gentlemen run in to see what's going on, Iago pretends to have just gotten there and declares that Roderigo is to blame. Iago then stabs Roderigo to death before he can defend himself. Later that night in Desdemona's bedchamber, Othello gazes down at his sleeping wife. She awakens, and despite her pleas for life, Othello smothers her with a pillow. A horrified Emilia enters, and Othello justifies his actions, citing the handkerchief as proof. Recognizing the handkerchief as the one she stole for her husband, she puts two and two together and reveals what Iago has done. Iago enters the scene and kills Emilia. Othello, now knowing the truth, attempts to kill Iago. Unsuccessful, he demands to know why Iago did this. Iago refuses to give an explanation, saying he will never speak again. Before Othello can be led away to face his justice, he stabs himself, and kisses Desdemona as he dies.

*The word 'Moor' was used by Shakespeare's audiences to mean anyone of African or Arabic origin. The word is used to describe Othello a lot, both in a negative way and by characters who respect and love him. This is not a suitable word to use in our modern language.

Let's Get to Know Them Better

☆ Central Character Analysis

Othello

Othello is the first great black protagonist in Western Literature, as such he is extremely important to history and obviously to the story.

Othello has an incredible way with words. Even though his eloquence declines throughout the play as a result of Iago's tricks, we may still classify him as one of Shakespeare's great love poets. In the last moment of the play, despite everything that is happening, Othello finds his composure enough to give us a few evocative lines. "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee: no way but this; killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

The play is focused on his fall. A highly respected general in the Army, he begins the play as an integral part of Venetian society. He is deeply trusted by the duke, as seen when he is put in full command of Cyprus. By the end of the play however, Othello has become irrational, jealous, obsessive and violent. His mental and physical health have declined, and he eventually kills the one person he loves the most.

Let us discuss how he might have gotten there...

Othello is categorized as an outsider and an insider. This status, and the constant changing of it, could be a reason Othello is such easy prey for Iago. Othello's skill as a leader and a soldier is very valuable. Nonetheless being a black man from North Africa and a foreigner in Venice, Othello is exposed to disturbingly overt racism. From Desdemona's father believing the only way his daughter could have married Othello was through spells and tricks, to the unmistakably racist names people call him (i.e. "old black ram" 1.1), Othello is often treated as an outsider. Although Othello is the subject of Act 1 Scene 1 and appears in Act 1 Scene 2, no character even refers to Othello by his real name until well into Act 1 Scene 3. It is possible this struggle between being an insider and outsider contributed to Othello's demise.

Probably Othello's greatest downfall is his suspicion and jealousy. Even with the taboo of their interracial marriage, at the beginning of the play Othello and Desdemona are very happy and in love. Iago is mostly to blame for manipulating Othello, but it is important to note that Iago never actually produces any concrete evidence of Desdemona's 'affair.' So why is Othello so quick to believe the worst in his wife? It could be because of his natural trust of men over women. At one point he mentions all men are destined to be cuckolded by their wives, insinuating a large generalization about the promiscuity of women. Perhaps more likely, is the internalized racism telling him he is not worthy of Desdemona because he is black. As portrayed in these lines in 3.3, "Her name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face." Othello's constant exposure to racism has obviously taken a toll on his self image. Othello jumps to so many conclusions about his wife, eventually costing him his own life and hers as well.



Iago

Iago is a soldier in the Venetian army with an impeccable reputation. He is Othello's 'ancient' or 'ensign' meaning an officer of junior rank. In practice he is sort of like Othello's assistant and is married to Emilia.

Iago is one of the most mysterious and cruel villains in all of Shakespeare's work. Harold Bloom (Shakespeare Scholar, Yale Professor) said it perfectly when he described Iago as "an artist of evil." In the same way we each have and love our hobbies, Iago enjoys ruining people's lives. Just like a true artist, Iago sets each plan with a shocking level of elegance and craftsmanship. Additionally, he takes time after each scheme to muse to the audience and show off his work. Such as in Act 1 Scene 3 when Iago proclaims, "Virtue! A fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners." Iago sees true beauty in his deceptions, and he wants the audience to see it too.

Iago might be a junior officer, but he is nobody's sidekick. He is focused completely on himself and his advancement, with no regard for others. Possibly the scariest part of Iago's character, is his lack of a convincing motivation for his manipulation. Iago provides a handful of possible but incompatible reasons for his destruction of Othello; the passing of him for a promotion is one. He even insinuates he believes Othello had an affair with his wife Emilia. He might spew these suspicions outwardly, but he is completely straight forward in one fact, "I hate the moor" (1.3).

No matter his motive, we know he is plain evil. At the end of the play, when Iago's crimes are found out, he uses this final opportunity to manipulate by proclaiming he will never speak again. Even when facing justice, he is unwilling to give any true reason for his brutality. Quite the chilling and manipulative final move on our villains' part.

Another fascinating aspect of Iago is his instinct to keep his enemies closer. Most villains feel distant or disconnected from the people they hurt. On the contrary, Iago uses how well he understands Othello to hurt him even more. As the story goes on, Iago grows closer to those he is hurting, all the while using everything they say and do against them. It almost feels as if Iago is inside the heads of his victims, predicting their every move.

His ability to come off as caring, understanding, and even funny to the other characters, combined with his decisions to mercilessly hurt them, truly classifies Iago as a compelling and vicious antagonist.



Desdemona

Desdemona is a beautiful, young, and white noblewoman of Venice. She refuses to marry any of the rich Venetian men that are surely being placed for her, and instead secretly elopes with Othello. This is a fierce introduction to Desdemona as a character. Not only is she disobeying the wishes of her father, she is outwardly defying her society who undoubtedly disapproves of interracial marriage.

Her straight-forward, brave, and eloquent style is characteristic of her throughout most of the story. She deserves high credit for her zeal and independence in the face of societal pressure.

Just like her husband, Desdemona changes drastically through the course of the play. She begins our story strong, adventurous, and in love. We see this in her decision to follow Othello to war in Cyprus. On the contrary, by the end of the play she is anxious, alone, and unsafe. Unfortunately, our once outspoken heroine is only able to watch as her husband declines, and as we near the end of the play, it seems Desdemona is aware of her impending death. She asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on her bed, and bury her in them if she dies. By the conclusion of the play, she is smothered by a pillow on top of her (extremely symbolic) wedding bed. She is literally suffocated under the demands of her marriage and fidelity.

Obviously both Iago and Othello are responsible for the death of Desdemona, but not just the death of her body, the complete death of her spirit. Keeping true to some part of herself however, she never wavers in her love and dedication to Othello. A fact that makes her death truly heartbreaking.



Bring on the Drama!

☆ Themes of the Play

Jealousy and Manipulation

While Othello is naively unable to see that Iago is deceiving him every step of the way, he is also stubbornly convinced that Desdemona is deceiving him even when she is being totally honest. Once Othello makes up his mind that Desdemona is guilty, all her claims of innocence only enrage him further because he is convinced that “this is a subtle whore / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets” (4.2.). Everything Desdemona does to prove her innocence comes across to Othello as further proof of her guilt. Othello’s inability to correctly identify who is and is not deceiving him makes him act rashly and ultimately lead to violence and tragedy.

Jealousy and the manipulation that causes it, drives the entire conflict of the play. Iago reveals himself as a jealous character from the first moments of the story when he expresses his disdain for Cassio’s promotion over him, “I am worth no worse a place”⁴ (1.1). Later in the scene he suggests that Othello is driven by jealousy as well. This relation gives Iago the idea to enact his revenge on Othello by making him insanely jealous. Iago manipulates Othello into the type of paranoid jealousy that keeps him constantly tormented. Iago might plant the seeds of jealousy, but they grow all on their own in Othello’s head. As if Iago’s plan is hurting Othello even when he isn’t around. We also see how this dangerous jealousy is based on circumstantial evidence that Iago has manipulated into ‘facts’ for Othello. This type of intense jealousy grows and grows until it gets out of control, eventually leading to the demise of Desdemona and Othello.

Jealousy and Manipulation go hand in hand, as Iago is able to manipulate Othello into a rage of Jealousy, because he himself is driven by jealousy. In Iago’s character description above, it’s discussed that Iago is able to hurt Othello because he understands him. This aggressive jealousy and tendency towards paranoia is something that connects Iago and Othello, and therefore is fatally effective.

Race and the Illusion of an ‘Outsider’

Isolation allows for many of the play’s most intense conflicts. Iago purposely isolates himself as he keeps secrets, and speaks mostly in soliloquies. Desdemona and Emilia become isolated as they are cut off from their husbands. Cassio is isolated as his rank is taken from him. All of these action-based isolations are critical to the story.

More importantly however, is the forced isolation Othello feels because of his race. He is continually outcasted by the society he is in, no matter his military status or success. Even though Othello is a general with power and influence, he is still considered an outsider in Venetian society because of his ethnicity. He is exposed to intense racism by his wife’s father, and is called numerous racist names by the other characters.

Iago is master at intensifying Othello's feeling of being an outsider. He forces Othello to only trust him, making him much easier to prey on. Othello begins to view his racial identity as undeserving of Desdemona. This isolation, tied up in years of racism, makes Othello so much of an outsider that he kills the person who wants to connect with him the most. Then he destroys himself, succumbing to the isolated position Iago wanted him in.

Marriage and Loyalty

Considering both wives (Desdemona and Emilia) end up murdered by their husbands, it's clear Shakespeare's portrayal of marriage in *Othello* is dismal. Additionally, every single relationship in the play is accused of or questioned about infidelity. These marriages and the distrust between them, represent the central relationship arch of the story. The largest changes in characters can be seen in the way they grow into or apart from their romantic relationships.

For the early half of the story, Emilia has a strong sense of loyalty towards Iago and an ingrained respect for the wedding bond. She exhibits this as she brings Desdemona's handkerchief to Iago without any explanation from him. Love isn't necessarily mentioned between the two, but their marriage definitely has a sense of partnership. This of course is shattered when Emilia realizes she is just another pawn in Iago's schemes. Considering Emilia's loyalty makes her revelation of Iago's deceit all the more powerful. In the end she betrays her husband, not in the adulterous way he insinuates early in the play, but in a noble way that regains her independence.

Desdemona on the other hand, doesn't ever outwardly forsake her husband. As his jealousy grows, so does her loyal concern for him. Even in the moments leading up to her death, when her anxiety about her safety is evident, she only speaks of her worry for Othello. Unfortunately, Shakespeare does not reward her for her loyalty. Her marriage still falls apart, and she is met with an untimely death. No mercy is given to any marriage in this play, no matter their amount of true love or their dedication to loyalty.

It is also important to note how interracial marriage is portrayed in the play. The image of a black man and a white woman so deep in love, but surrounded by disdain is powerful. It gives Shakespeare the ability to explore thoughts and actions about race and gender inside a marriage. In a way he doesn't in any other play. It also gives the audience a chance to examine their own biases on the subject, and how things have or haven't changed over the centuries.

It seems in *Othello*, Shakespeare is insulting that marriage is equivalent to death. Perhaps in his theatrical way Shakespeare is suggesting that as long as marriages are full of doubt and lacking in honest communication, they are doomed to fail. We start the play with a newlywed who spouts poetry and defies racial constructs. We end the play with each marriage vow broken, and no trust left.

Words Words Words

☆ Language of the Play

Evolving English

The English language is in constant change. Just as today we use words such as ‘sick’ in a way that was never considered just fifty years ago. Similarly, the meanings of words from Shakespeare’s time can be unfamiliar to us. Here are some examples of how we might phrase some of Shakespeare’s words today:

“I never knew A Florentine more kind and honest.”

(Cassio, 3.1)

I have never met anyone so nice, even if he is a New Yorker.

“I am about it; but indeed my invention
Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frize”

(Iago, 2.1)

I’m trying to think, but my ideas come slowly, like bird crap on a statue.

“You have known him long, and be you well assured
He shall in strangeness stand no farther off
Than in a polite distance.”

(Desdemona, 3.3)

You two are such old friends that I’m sure he will only keep his distance as long as he has to.

Figurative Language

Shakespeare uses many types of figurative language tools like metaphor, simile, and personification to paint pictures with his words. Recognizing when his characters are speaking figuratively helps to understand what they are saying. Othello’s soliloquy before he murders Desdemona (5.2) is overflowing with figurative language.

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—

personification

It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood;
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.

Put out the light, and then put out the light:

juxtaposition

[Kisses her.]

Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.

alliteration

personification

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. I must weep,

But they are cruel tears: this sorrow’s heavenly;

contrast

It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.



Other example of figurative language from the text:

Metaphor

“They [men] are all but stomachs, and we all but food:
They eat us hungrily, and when they are full,
They belch us.”
(Emilia, 3.4)

Imagery

“I see sir, you are eaten up with passion.”
(Iago, 3.3)

Simile

Othello: “She was false as water.”
Emelia: “Thou are rash as fire”

Shakespeare’s Language: Prose vs. Verse

When we understand more about Shakespeare’s language, it is easier to comprehend. One idea that may help is to remember that his plays are written in two forms: prose and verse. In *Othello* prose is less common than verse.

Prose is the form of speech used by common, and often comic, people in Shakespearean drama. There is no rhythm or meter in the line. It is everyday language. Shakespeare’s audiences would recognize the speech as their language. Normally, when a character in a play speaks in prose, you know that he is a lower class member of society. These are characters such as criminals, servants, and pages. However, sometimes important characters can speak in prose. In *Othello*, Iago makes remarkable use of prose and verse as he manipulates those around him. Whether wishing to be seen as a respectable advisor, humble servant, or a common soldier Iago is a master chameleon of speech. His snakelike sliding in and out of speech patterns mirrors his ability to camouflage his nature to best suit his purpose.

At the close of Act I, Iago uses prose to convince Rodrigo not to kill himself. Instead, he tells Rodrigo to use all his money to win Desdemona from Othello and Cassio. By speaking in prose he sounds frank, open, and his plan simple. Later he tells the audience of his true plans. With his seamless transition into elegant verse, ending with subtle rhymes, we can feel and hear his clever and devious nature through his words. (Iago 1.2.364-404)

Later, after having sorted out his whole plan to destroy Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio’s lives, Iago once again revels in his wickedness to the audience in verse:

“for whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.”

Iago 2.3

Here Iago speaks in blank verse. Blank verse contains no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern. The pattern most favored by Shakespeare is iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is defined as a ten-syllable line with the accent on every other syllable, beginning with the second one. The rhythm of this pattern of speech is often compared to a beating heart. Examine one of the lines from the above speech and count the syllables it contains.

So will I turn her virtue into pitch.
Replace the words with syllabic count:
1-2 3-4 5-6 7-8 9-10

Replace the word with a ‘da’ sound to hear the heartbeat:
da-DA da-DA da-DA da-DA da-DA

Now put the emphasis on the words themselves:
so-WILL i-TURN her-VIR tue-IN to-PITCH

The *Othello* Dictionary

☆ Word Glossary

Affined: Bound, obligated. “I in any just term am *affined* To love the Moor” (Iago, 1.1)

Antres: A cavern. “Wherein of *antres* vast” (Othello, 1.3)

Avaunt: Hence, away. “*Avaunt!* Be gone!” (Othello, 3.3)

Barbary: A coastal region in Africa, and a pirate stronghold. “A *Barbary* horse” (Iago, 1.1)

Caitiff: Cowardly, despicable person. “Alas poor *caitiff!*” (Cassio, 4.1)

Crusadoes: Portuguese silver or gold coins. “I had rather lost my purse full of *crusadoes.*”
(Desdemona, 3.4)

Daws: A jackdaw, bird. “For *daws* to peck at” (Iago, 1.1)

Mazzard: Head. “I’ll knock you o’er the *mazzard.*” (Cassio, 2.3)

Procreants: Procreators, lovers. “Leave *procreants* alone,” (Othello, 4.2)

Quillets: Subtlety, nicety, quibble. “keep up thy *quillets.*” (Cassio, 3.1)

Sagittary: The arsenal of Venice, called so because of the figure of Sagittarius over the door.
“Lead to the *Sagittary.*” (Iago, 1.1)

'Sblood: Exclamation, God’s Blood! “‘*Sblood*, but you will not hear me” (Iago, 1.1)

Sibyl: A prophetess or witch. “A *sibyl*...sewed the work.” (Othello, 3.4)

Zounds: Exclamation, God’s wounds! “*Zounds*, sir, you’re robb’d” (Iago, 1.1)

☆ Words and Phrases Invented in *Othello*

Shakespeare used over 17,000 different words throughout his plays, epic poems, and sonnets. But even with this mastery of the English language, there were still times he couldn't find a word that fit his needs or his meter. In this case Shakespeare would invent the words instead! He is credited with inventing/popularizing over 1,700 words and phrases we still use today. When we say Shakespeare invented or popularized something, we mean that he is credited with being the first person to ever put that word in writing.

Here are just a few examples of words and phrases invented in *Othello*. I'm sure you will recognize them!

Green-Eyed Monster

“O, beware, my lord of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.” (Iago, 3.3)

Pomp and Circumstance

“The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!” (Othello, 3.3)

Foregone Conclusion

“But this denoted a foregone conclusion:
'Tis a shrewd doubt, though it be but a dream.” (Othello, 3.3)

Addiction

“Each man to what sport and
revels his addiction leads him. (Gentleman, 2.2)

Demonstrate

“For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart” (Iago, 1.1)

Take it to the Classroom

☆ In Class Activities

You're the Writer

Rewrite Emilia's 'Let Husbands Know' speech in 4.3 in modern language. Try to include several idioms, allusions, and other examples of figurative language.

You're the Actor

Option 1: Monologue

Pick a speech of at least 10 lines. Repeat the speech using several different techniques. Try it dramatically, angrily, humorously, sarcastically. Try emphasizing different words to change the meaning.

Option 2: Dialogue

Pick a bit of dialogue of at least 10 lines. Play the scene using several different techniques. Trying it dramatically, angrily, humorously, and sarcastically. Try emphasizing different words and swapping roles to change the meaning of the words.

You're the Designer

Create costume designs that illustrate the story line behind one of the main characters. Pay attention to the feelings that can be created by color and line. Consider what era you want to set the play in and what impact that will have on the play.

The Green-eyed monster

Draw Jealousy: the green-eyed monster. Art may include text and symbols. Write a paragraph explaining your picture.

Character Garden

If as Iago says, "Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners:" (1.3) Draw a picture of the character gardens of Othello, Iago, Emilia and Desdemona. Items in the garden should represent the character's ideals and thoughts. Then consider what you want to plant in yourself? Draw your own garden with items representing characteristics you would like to grow in your own life.

Father to Daughter

Write a scene between Desdemona and her father the night before her secret wedding. Imagine he has discovered her feelings for Othello. What happens between them? Consider plot questions not answered in the play already such as, what happened to Desdemona's mother? What was her first impression of Othello? What is their home life like?

New Ending

Choose one detail of action from the play and change it. Imagine Rodrigo gives up on Desdemona and leaves Cyprus without telling Iago, or that Desdemona never dropped her handkerchief, etc. How does this affect the ending of the play?

Hidden Motives

Write a speech or journal entry by Iago giving a full explanation of why he hates Othello so much. Include reasoning for his actions against all the other characters as well. Think about reasons mentioned in the play, and then consider options not considered in the text already.

Life Story

Othello wooed Desdemona by telling her 'the story of my life. From year to year.' Write out one of Othello's stories. In it, include a reference to at least one of the things mentioned in his explanation speech in 1.3. Think about what his story could be, and also how it makes him feel. Consider Othello's eloquence, see if you can emulate that.

☆ Example Lesson Plan

Title: Miscommunication/Possibilities

Age level: Middle or High School

Objective: Students will become familiar with the themes and characters of *Othello* by creating their own version of the play. Students will also see similarities and differences in how themes and character types from Shakespeare's era are used in modern media.

Materials needed: Clip from popular TV show, TV/projector, *Othello* character descriptions, writing materials optional.

Anticipatory Set/Hook: Show a short clip from a popular TV show that shows the problems of one theme dealt with in *Othello*, such as jealousy, infidelity, disobedience, racism, manipulation, misinterpretation etc.

Process:

1. Have students discuss what they saw. What conflict is presented by the clip? If possible, have someone explain how it resolves or could be resolved.
2. Give students a list of *Othello* characters with descriptions. Have students share any connections they see between these characters and those they saw in the TV show. This can lead into an explanation about how *Othello* contains well rounded and relatable characters.
3. Without giving students any information on the actual events in the play, in groups have them create (write it down for optional written assessment) a story containing all of the characters on the list involving jealousy and miscommunication (or whatever theme you initially chose).
4. Have students give a 3-5 minute performance of the action of their plays.
5. Hold on to these story ideas for discussion after students have read the play.

Tools for Assessment; Assessment occurs throughout this lesson as students:

- Actively watch and discuss the popular media clip.
- Actively participate in the discussion of characters from the clip and *Othello*.
- Work in a group to create an original story involving characters from *Othello*.
- Actively participate in their group's performance of their story.
- Performances may be assessed with the following criteria:
 - Did they incorporate all the characters?
 - Did they incorporate the required theme?
 - Did they stay focused during the performance?
 - How creative/original was their story?
- Behave appropriately as an audience member during other performances.

Let's Get Critical

☆ Discussion Questions

Middle School/Jr High Discussion Questions

Compare and Contrast

- Think of characters from other stories who use disguises, like Iago, to cover up their true nature.
- What do Othello and Iago have in common?
- Think about the three women in the play, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. How are they the same? How are they different?

Relationships

- Iago is jealous of Cassio's promotion and decides to get revenge. Have you ever become jealous of something someone else had? What did you do about it?
- Iago asks Emilia to try and get Desdemona's handkerchief. She suspects he might have bad intentions. What would you do if someone asked you to do something mean to someone you cared about?
- Which character in the play do you think is most similar to your personality? Why?

Text

- After getting in trouble for fighting Cassio says, "Reputation, reputation, reputation! I have lost my reputation." (2.3) What is a reputation? Is it important?
- About falling in love Iago says, "Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners:" (1.3) Do you agree or disagree.

Shakespeare's World

- Do you think Shakespeare was for or against a person marrying someone who is different from him or herself in race or upbringing?
- Discuss what it would be like to see this play at Shakespeare's theatre the Globe, in the hot afternoon, standing up, with all men on stage.
- How do you think Shakespeare would react if he knew that you were learning about his play more than 400 years after he wrote it?

High School Discussion Questions

Compare and Contrast

- Compare and contrast the relationship between Othello and Desdemona with that of Cassio and Bianca. How are they healthy and unhealthy?
- Compare Iago with other (Shakespearean) villains. How does he rate on the wicked scale?
- Examine the similarities and differences in class, freedoms, and wisdom of the three women, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, in the play.

Relationships

- What struggles do those who marry interracially or interculturally face today?
- Why, even after being strangled will Desdemona not name Othello as her murderer and instead say, “Nobody; I myself. Farewell: Commend me to my kind lord.” What does this have to do with abusive relationships?
- Othello is referred to as ‘the Moor’ nearly 60 times in the play, but is called by his name only about 20 times. What might the effects of this labeling be on a person?

Text

- Iago tells Cassio, “Reputation is an idle and most false imposition: oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser.” (2.3) Do you agree or disagree?
- Speaking about the involuntary nature of love Iago says, “Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners:” (1.3) Look at the love stories within the play. Do you find this statement to be true?
- After being caught in his lies Iago refuses to explain his actions saying, “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know.” (5.2) Review what he says earlier about his motivations. Do they substantiate his actions?

Shakespeare’s World

- Look at the textual references to Othello’s race to better determine the impact of racial relations within the tragedy. What is Shakespeare saying about race?
- Re-read the conversation between Emilia and Desdemona at the end of 4.3. Who do you think Shakespeare agreed with? What might he have been trying to tell the audience?
- Considering both the good and bad, especially the pathetic end most of the characters meet, in the play do you think Shakespeare was or wasn’t ahead of his time in consideration of racial and gender ideals?

I've Got to Know More!

☆ Links to Further Reading

Othello's Black Handkerchief by Ian Smith

https://www.jstor.org/stable/24778431?seq=25#metadata_info_tab_contents

Racism, Misogyny and 'Motiveless Malignity' in *Othello* By Kiernan Ryan

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/racism-misogyny-and-motiveless-malignity-in-othello>

Universal and Persistent Emotions

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/universal-and-persistent-emotions/>

Wrestling With Form By Ace G. Pilkington

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/wrestling-with-form/>

Total Allegiance to Justice By Jerry L. Crawford

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/total-allegiance-to-justice/>

The Moral Geography of *Othello* By Michael Flachmann

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/the-moral-geography-of-othello/>