



**Leaving Cert English**

**Sample Notes**

**Othello**

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## Summary Act I

### Scene 1

The play Othello is set in Venice and in the opening scene we are introduced to two arguing figures – Roderigo and Iago. The wealthy Roderigo hired Iago to help him win the love of Desdemona, but has been making no progress at all. We discover that he has just found out that Desdemona has married Othello, a general whom Iago serves as ensign. Iago reveals that he hates Othello for many reasons, the chief among them being that he passed over Iago for a promotion. The position of lieutenant was instead awarded to Michael Cassio, who had no previous experience in leading men. Iago is only pretending to serve Othello, so that he might be in the perfect position should an opportunity to serve his own self-interest arise.

Iago, a manipulative character who delights in his villainy, convinces Roderigo to alert Desdemona's father of the wedding. Her father is a Venetian senator by the name of Brabantio. The two men go to stand under his window and call out to him that he has been robbed by "thieves". Brabantio appears and is furious with them for disturbing the peace. He initially refuses to believe them. He assumes Roderigo is merely scheming to see Desdemona, and the audience discovers that he has told him to stay away from his daughter before. Iago speaks up at this point, and tells the senator vulgarly that his daughter and Othello are having sex by saying that they are "making the beast with two backs". Brabantio begins to take what he hears seriously and decides to search for his daughter. Seeing the success of his plan, Iago leaves Roderigo alone and goes to attend on Othello, as he cannot have it discovered that he was speaking against him. Like Brabantio, Othello has no idea that Iago convinced and helped Roderigo to make the accusation. Once Iago departs, Brabantio comes out of his house, revealing that Desdemona is nowhere to be found, and furious at her disappearance. He claims that she must have been stolen away with magic, and he and his men follow Roderigo to confront Othello.

## Summary Act 2

### Scene 1

In the next scene the setting moves to Cyprus, where we join Montano - the island's governor - as he watches a storm with two other gentlemen. Montano announces that there's no way that the Turkish fleet of ships could survive the storm, and immediately Cassio arrives and confirms this. As his ship travelled from Venice, Cassio watched as most of the Turks lost their fleets in the tempest. The storm is so strong it's still uncertain whether Othello's ship has been able to sail through it. Briefly, our hopes are raised when voices offstage announce the sighting of a sail offshore, but that ship turns out to be carrying Desdemona, Iago, Roderigo and Iago's wife Emilia. Desdemona disembarks from the ship in search of her husband, but when Cassio breaks it to her that Othello has yet to arrive, a friendly soldier announces the arrival of a third ship. While the company waits for the ship, Cassio and Desdemona tease Emilia about being a chatterbox, but Iago takes the opportunity to criticize all women as liars and hypocrites, saying they are lazy in all matters except sex: "You rise to play and go to bed to work". Desdemona reveals her witty nature as she plays along, laughing as Iago belittles women, whether beautiful or ugly, intelligent or stupid, as equally despicable, and pointing out the contradictions in his statements. Cassio then takes Desdemona away to speak with her privately about Othello's arrival, and Iago watches them go. He sees Cassio take Desdemona's hand as he speaks with her and, in an aside, plots to use it as evidence that they are having an affair. Iago wants Cassio to be stripped of his newly gained promotion to lieutenant. "With as little a web as this I will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio," he asserts.

Othello arrives safely and greets Desdemona, expressing his love and devotion to her and giving her a kiss. He is happy to be in Cyprus, and thanks the Cypriots for their welcome and hospitality. He then orders Iago to unload the ship, and everyone except Roderigo and Iago heads to the castle to celebrate the drowning of the Turks. Now is the perfect time for the two to conspire, and Iago tells the despondent Roderigo that Desdemona is too young for Othello, and will soon weary with his ways and faded looks. But, Iago continues, if she seeks a lover then the

obvious first choice for Desdemona will be Cassio, whom Iago characterizes over and over again as a “knave”. Roderigo tries to argue that in taking Desdemona’s hand, Cassio was merely being polite, but Iago’s silver tongue convinces him to start a fight with Cassio at the feast that night. Iago tells him that the fight will come across as worse in such a still-tense city, and will make Cassio fall out of favour with Othello. Left alone onstage again, Iago explains his actions to the audience in a soliloquy. We learn that he secretly lusts after Desdemona, and a factor in this lust is that he suspects that Othello has slept with Emilia, and he wants to get even with the Moor “wife for wife”. But, Iago continues, if that is not possible, Roderigo’s accusation of Cassio will set his plan in motion - to make Othello suspect his lieutenant of sleeping with his wife and torture Othello to madness.

## Summary Act 3

### Scene 1

Beginning his campaign to win his way back into Othello’s graces, Cassio sends musicians to play music beneath the general’s window. However, it’s clear that Othello is not impressed when he sends his servant, a clown, to tell the musicians to go away. Cassio asks the clown to coax Emilia to come speak with him, so that he can ask her for access to Desdemona. When the clown leaves, Iago enters and tells Cassio that he will send for Emilia straightaway and that he will also figure out a way to distract Othello, so that Cassio and Desdemona can confer privately. When Iago leaves, Emilia enters and reveals to Cassio that Othello and Desdemona have already been discussing his case. Desdemona has pleaded on Cassio’s behalf, but Othello worries that Montano’s influence and popularity in Cyprus would make Cassio’s reappointment impractical, no matter how much Othello cares for his former lieutenant. Emilia allows Cassio to come in and tells him to wait for Desdemona.

## Summary Act 4

### Scene 1

Othello and Iago enter in mid-conversation. Iago is in the process of goading Othello, by saying there's nothing wrong with a kiss his wife and Cassio might have shared in private. He continues by arguing that maybe they were just naked together and nothing happened, and that if he gave a handkerchief to his own wife, she could do with it as she pleased. This all sounds to Othello like Iago is merely trying to soften the blow, and the persistent insinuations of Desdemona's unfaithfulness work him into an incoherent frenzy. He focuses obsessively on the handkerchief and keeps pumping Iago for information about Cassio's comments to Iago. Finally, Iago reluctantly admits that Cassio has told him he was on top of Desdemona in bed, and Othello "falls down in a trance".

Cassio enters, and Iago mentions that Othello has fallen into his second fit of epilepsy in two days. Cassio says they should do something to revive him, but Iago convinces him it must simply run its course, and that Cassio should leave before Othello awakens. Before Cassio leaves however, Iago tells him that he would like to speak to him once he has gone. Othello comes out of his trance, and Iago explains that Cassio was there and that he has arranged to speak with the ex-lieutenant. Iago tells Othello to hide nearby, and that he will quiz Cassio on his time spent with Desdemona, and whether he plans on sleeping with her again. Othello will be able to observe Cassio's face during their conversation. When Othello is gone however, Iago informs the audience of his actual intention. He will joke with Cassio about the prostitute Bianca, so that Cassio will laugh as he tells the story of Bianca's pursuit of him. Othello will be driven mad, thinking that Cassio is joking with Iago about Desdemona.

The plan works: Cassio laughs uproariously as Iago tells him there is a rumour going around that he will marry Bianca. Cassio denies it, and says she made it up because she thinks he is in love with her. He tells Iago the details of Bianca's love for him, and even makes gestures in an attempt to depict her sexual advances. Every time he speaks, laughs or makes a movement, Othello imagines that he is recreating the scene of how he took Desdemona from their

bedchamber. Just as Cassio says that he has to get rid of Bianca, she herself enters with the handkerchief and again accuses Cassio of giving her a love token given to him by another woman. Othello sees her holding his handkerchief. Bianca tells Cassio that if he doesn't show up for supper with her that evening he will never be welcome to come back again, and then leaves. Iago urges Cassio to follow her, and he admits he must or she'll start screaming in the streets. Othello comes out of hiding when they are gone, and immediately asks Iago how he thinks he should murder the former lieutenant. He goes on to despair over his own hardheartedness and love for Desdemona, but Iago reminds him of his purpose. Othello has trouble accepting that his beautiful, graceful and pure wife could have carried out adulterous actions. He suggests that he will poison his wife, but Iago advises him to strangle her in the bed that she contaminated through her infidelity. Iago also promises to arrange Cassio's death. With poor timing, Desdemona chooses that moment to enter, unaware that an event which will seal her fate has just transpired. She comes with Lodovico, who has come from Venice with a message from the duke. Othello is still caught up in images of Cassio and Desdemona playing him for a fool, and he reacts with irritation when Lodovico inquires about Cassio. Desdemona worsens the situation by answering Lodovico, and telling him that though Othello and Cassio have fallen out, perhaps the situation can be put right. Othello scoffs at her, but when she asks him what he means, he pretends to be engrossed in the Duke's letter. The letter itself is also a source of upset for Othello, however. He has been called back to Venice, with orders to leave Cassio as his replacement in Cyprus. When Desdemona hears the news she exclaims that she is delighted to be returning home. Then, seemingly for no reason, Othello strikes her. She begins to weep at his ill-treatment, but he claims her tears are false, and she rushes offstage. Lodovico, who is horrified by Othello's loss of self-control, asks Othello to call her back and apologise. Othello does so, but then makes matters worse by merely calling Desdemona back just to mock her tears once more. He tells Lodovico that he will obey the duke's orders, commands Desdemona to leave, and storms off. Lodovico is shocked by what has transpired, and asks if he's dealing with the same man he once knew. He asks Iago if Othello is losing his mind, and through feigning reluctance to talk, Iago plants the seeds of doubt in Lodovico's mind. Iago refuses to answer Lodovico's questions, telling him that he must see for himself.

## Summary Act 5

### Scene 1

Scene one opens with Iago and Roderigo lying in wait outside the brothel where Cassio visits Bianca. Iago gives Roderigo a sword and directs him to a place where he will be able to ambush Cassio. Iago then leaves the scene, although Roderigo asks him not to go too far in case he needs help killing Cassio. Aside, Iago tells the audience that whichever man dies, it will work in his favour. If Roderigo dies he won't be able to demand that Iago return the jewels, and if Cassio dies he'll never be able to defend himself against accusations of his affair with Desdemona. After thinking about it however, Iago decides that it is Cassio who must die, as he is handsome and well spoken and could convince Othello that Iago is a liar. Cassio enters, and an enraged Roderigo stabs at him. However, Cassio triumphantly reveals he is wearing armour under his cloak and immediately attacks Roderigo, wounding him. In the commotion, Iago sneaks up behind Cassio and stabs him in the leg. Iago immediately disappears and, not knowing who has stabbed him, Cassio falls. At this moment, Othello enters and hears Cassio's cries of murder. Othello believes that Iago has attacked him and killed him, and marvels at what a loyal friend he is. Taking strength from what he believes to be Iago's successful vengeance, Othello returns to his bedroom to kill Desdemona.

Lodovico and Graziano enter and hear Cassio's and Roderigo's cries. It's too dark for them to see who's calling, and they linger for a moment before going to help, aware that it could be some sort of trap. Iago takes the opportunity to enter then, carrying a light. He pretends to discover Cassio for the first time as he calls out for help, and then stumbles upon Roderigo. Iago takes the opportunity to stab Roderigo immediately, shouting that he is a murderer and a villain. During this time, Graziano and Lodovico are still unable to see Iago, and they are unaware of what he is doing. Finally, the three men come face-to-face, and they question Cassio about his injuries.

At the moment, Bianca enters the scene and begins to panic upon seeing the wounded Cassio. Iago questions Cassio but Cassio can give no answers or reasons for the attack. Iago holds the

light down, and exclaims with surprise that it is Roderigo from Venice who attacked him. Cassio says that he does not know Roderigo. Attendants carry off Cassio and Roderigo's corpse, and Iago suggests to Lodovico and Granziano that Bianca had a part to play in the attempted murder, pointing out how pale she has become. Emilia enters, and Iago imparts the whole tale to her, adding that this sort of thing should be expected when you visit whores. They interrogate Bianca, who admits that Cassio ate dinner with her, but steadfastly claims she has nothing to fear and is innocent. Iago takes Bianca under arrest, and sends Emilia to tell Othello and Desdemona what has happened. Iago ends the scene with an aside: "This is the night that either makes me or fordoes (undoes) me quite".

## Analysis of Characters

### Othello

The namesake of the play, Othello is our protagonist and tragic hero. He is a Christian Moor, and the general of the armies of Venice. Othello is a strong, powerful figure who also has an eloquent way with words. Although he is a cultural and racial outsider in Venice, his skill as a soldier and leader are clearly valuable and respected by the state. He is constantly called to assist the duke and to speak with the senate, as we are told by Cassio's comment that the senate "sent about three several quests" to look for Othello. Othello clearly commands respect, and is admired by all those who know him. As a sign of this trust and respect, the Venetian government puts him in full martial and political command of Cyprus. Indeed, in his dying speech Othello reminds the Venetians of the "service" he has done their state.

Despite all this however, from the beginning of the play it becomes clear very quickly that Othello harbours a huge number of insecurities. As soon as Iago hints that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him he believes it almost immediately, blaming his old age, the fact that he doesn't have the manners of a courtier, that he is a soldier and his race. He possesses a "free and open nature," which his ensign Iago uses to twist his love for his wife, Desdemona, into a powerful and destructive jealousy.

Shakespeare cleverly uses Othello's introduction to us as a character to set his isolated nature firmly in our mind. We hear of him, but do not see him. Indeed, for most of the first scene Roderigo and Iago call him nothing but "he" and "him". Once they become more specific in their descriptions, they still avoid his name, and use racial epithets instead. These include "the Moor", "the thick-lips", "an old black ram", and "a Barbary horse". Othello actually appears at the beginning of the second scene in act one, yet despite this we still do not hear his name mentioned until scene three. After this, Othello's isolation becomes more physically marked onstage. For example, his is the last of the three ships to arrive to Cyprus at the beginning of the play, and he stands apart while Cassio and Iago supposedly discuss Desdemona in act four, scene one. Added to that, Othello presumes that Cassio is dead despite not being present for

the attack in act five, scene one. Othello's status as an outsider may be the reason he is such easy prey for Iago, and his isolation is one of the main themes of the play.

Even the people who would consider Othello their social and civic peer, such as Desdemona and Brabantio, set him out as different and otherworldly. Othello points this out to us when he tells the duke of his visits to Brabantio's house. He says, -"[Desdemona's] father loved me, oft invited me, still questioned me the story of my life from year to year". It is because of the strange tales of his life that Othello is able to woo Desdemona, and it is also another indication of the eloquence of his speech. The duke's reply to Othello's tale of how he brought about his courtship and marriage of Desdemona with his tales of adventure is: "I think this tale would win my daughter too".

Aside from others pointing it out, Othello sometimes makes a point of presenting himself as an outsider. It is unclear whether he does this because he is aware of his exotic appeal, or merely because he is self-conscious and defensive about his difference from other Venetians. For example, even though he has proved his eloquence on a number of occasions beforehand, he blames Desdemona's unfaithfulness on his inability to speak sweetly. In act one, scene three, he protests, "Rude am I in my speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace". Though this rudeness of speech never comes to pass in the play, Othello's eloquence is put under strain by Iago's constant hints and suggestions. In the final moments of the play, Othello regains his composure and, once again, seduces both his onstage and offstage audiences with his words. The speech before his suicide is a gripping tale that holds the audience's attention, gives a picture of the brave, noble warrior he once was, and makes his suicide all the more tragic. It is the tension between Othello's victimization at the hands of a foreign culture and his own willingness to torment himself that makes him a tragic figure rather than simply Iago's ridiculous puppet.

- "Haply for I am black, and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have; or for I am declined into the vale of years—yet that's not much— She's gone."
- "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak of one that loved not wisely but too well; of one not easily jealous, but being wrought perplex'd in the extreme."

- “I kissed thee ere I killed thee, no way but this, Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.”

## Themes, Motifs & Symbols

### Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

#### The Incompatibility of Military Heroism & Love

From the very beginning of the play, it is made clear to the audience that above all else, Othello is a soldier. It is his main characteristic, and it is a very important part of how he views his own identity. Immediately however, his career affects his married life. When he is ordered to Cyprus by the Duke, in order to defend it from the Turkish invaders, Othello notes that he himself is used to the callings of his military life, saying that it “...hath made the flinty and steel couch of war my thrice-driven bed of down”. He asks that his wife be more comfortably accommodated, but she insists that she is a soldier's wife now, and will follow him to Cyprus. In many ways, Desdemona seems to be the perfect match for Othello – She easily accepts his duty to the state despite their being newlyweds, she tells the duke that she is part of a soldier now and follows Othello to Cyprus, she is unshaken by the tempest and appears unafraid of the imminent Turkish invasion. Added to that, she seems open to all the changes to her life which accompany her marriage. For example, she is genuinely curious rather than irate when she is roused from bed by the drunken brawl in act two, scene three. Othello himself seems to see this, and he refers to her as his “fair warrior”, delighting in having her by his side while he is in his element.

Othello's identity as a general also enables him to gain acceptance into Venetian society in an era when this would have been extremely difficult. Mercenary Moors were common during that time period, but Othello has risen above the ranks and is often called to the side of the duke. We see throughout the play that characters constantly reference Othello's prowess as a soldier, and his skill in conducting warfare. References are made to his lack of fear on the battlefield and his fighting ability. That said, it is clear that Othello is still seen as an outsider. Brabantio was

perfectly happy to have Othello in his home and to have him tell stories, but he is shocked when he discovers that his daughter has married a Moor. He turns very quickly, and accuses Othello of having bewitched her with black magic and stolen her. When Desdemona affirms that she married him because she loves him, he bars her from his home.

Othello's identity as a soldier is tied into every facet of his life. He woos Desdemona with his tales of military battles and his travels with the army. However, once he reaches Cyprus, there is very little for him to do in a military capacity. The Turks have drowned, and the invasion never occurs. We almost see how much of a loose end he is at in the second scene of act three when he states that he will view the town's fortifications, having little else to do. Othello uses his military prowess and success as a means to reassure himself, and to help battle the insecurities he has developed from a life facing constant prejudice. However, once it becomes clear that there is no call for his abilities as a soldier in Cyprus, those insecurities slowly begin to creep back in. He can no longer prove his bravery and reaffirm his manhood publically on the battlefield, and as a result, Othello begins to feel uneasy in a private setting, the bedroom. Iago, who seems to sense this weakness and insecurity, preys upon it and takes advantage of it. When Othello is so overcome by rage and jealousy that he slips into a trance, Iago is quick to point out that it was "[a] passion most unsuited such a man." In other words, Iago is calling Othello unsoldierly. Iago also takes care to mention that Cassio, whom Othello believes to be his competitor, saw him in his emasculating trance.

Othello is desperate to cling to his military way of thought, and to prove himself as a soldier once more. No doubt, everything is far clearer to him on a battlefield than it is when dealing with matters of the heart. His identity as a soldier becomes even more important to him, as his identity as a lover who can please his wife seems to prove false and unfounded. With his inability to prove himself as a soldier mingling with his failed identity as a lover, Othello begins to confuse the one with the other. His expressions of jealousy start out in a foreseeable manner, as he exclaims "Farewell the tranquil mind", but they quickly devolve into an absurd and strange farewell to war - "Farewell the plum'd troops and the big wars that make ambition virtue! O, farewell, farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump, the spirit-stirring drum, th'ear piercing fife, the royal banner, and all quality, pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!"

It's pretty clear here that Othello is saying goodbye to all the wrong things, as his failure as a soldier is tied intrinsically to his failure as a man, which is linked to his failure as a lover. That said, there is something very noble in Othello's way of thinking, and audiences have found themselves seduced by these speeches. Othello's final speech before his suicide is one which reminds the audience of the noble figure at the start of the play, the strong general. When he speaks of the deeds he performed defending Venice, and asks those around him to remember all the good he did for the state, Othello is relying on his identity as a soldier to glorify himself in the public's memory, and to try to make his audience forget his and Desdemona's disastrous marital experiment.

## Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

### Sight and Blindness

The act of seeing and sight is a very prevalent motif throughout this play. When Desdemona asks the duke to be allowed to accompany Othello to Cyprus, she explains that she is a soldier's wife and will follow him anywhere by saying that she "saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate". This is an important quote, as not only is it indicative of Desdemona's understanding of Othello's identity as a soldier, it also tells us that she saw through the darkness of his skin and the prejudice against him. She sees him for what he is, even if he himself cannot. This is especially tragic when we realise that it is Othello's insecurities over the colour of his skin which result in the rage and jealousy that drives him to kill Desdemona.

There are many references to sight throughout the play, and some of these hint at the later manipulation of the characters that is to come. For example in act one, scene three, the senator suggests to the duke that the Turks are merely feigning their retreat to Rhodes, when he says that it is "a pageant to keep us in false gaze". The beginning of act two opens in Cyprus where we see people staring out to sea looking for the ships coming in, unsure as to whether they will be enemy or friendly.

Sight as a motif especially comes into play with Othello's character. He is a man who trusts what he can see – He trusts Iago because as far as he can "see" Iago is a trustworthy friend. He never once thinks to investigate further. When Iago suggests that Desdemona is cheating on him, Othello immediately demands "ocular proof". However, Othello is blinded by his faith in Iago, and is frequently convinced by things he does not see:

- He demotes Cassio from the position of lieutenant based on the Iago's version of events.

- He instantly believes Iago's story of seeing Cassio wiping his beard with a handkerchief exactly like the one he gave Desdemona.
- He believes that Iago has successfully murdered Cassio simply because he heard the man scream.

His weakness in taking things on faith from what he sees also comes into play when Iago quizzes Cassio on Bianca, and Othello watches. Othello trusts what he sees entirely, and even though he cannot hear what Cassio is saying, he imagines that he is describing how he wooed his wife.

After Othello has killed himself in the final scene, Lodovico demands that Iago, "look on the tragic loading of this bed. This is thy work. The object poisons sight. Let it be hid." Much of the main plot of the play revolves around the characters never seeing things: Othello never sees any sign of Desdemona's infidelity yet believes it totally, and Emilia, although she watches Othello erupt into a rage about the missing handkerchief, does not figuratively "see" what her husband has done.

## Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

### The Handkerchief

The handkerchief is an interesting symbol in this play, as it means different things to all the different characters. To Desdemona, it is the first gift that Othello ever gave her, and it is a symbol of his love for her. It is portentous then, that when she seems to lose it he begins to treat her badly and shout at her. To Othello, the handkerchief initially represents marital fidelity. He tells Desdemona that it was woven by a 200-year-old sibyl, or female prophet, using silk from sacred worms and dye extracted from the hearts of mummified virgins. He tells her that it is magic, and that his mother kept it her whole life so his father would be faithful to her. If lost, the spell would be broken and he would stray. The pattern of strawberries (dyed with virgins' blood) on a white background strongly suggests the bloodstains left on the sheets on a virgin's wedding night, so the handkerchief implicitly suggests a guarantee of virginity as well as fidelity. Such red on white is private and dear to the heart of Othello, and he expects it to be similarly dear to his wife. Iago however, is able to use how important the handkerchief is to Othello to drive him into a further rage. He manipulates the symbolism of it so that Othello comes to see it as a symbol of Desdemona herself—her faith and chastity. By taking possession of it, he is able to convert it into evidence of her infidelity. He plants it in Cassio's room, and implies to Othello that Desdemona gave the handkerchief to Cassio herself. Othello later sees Bianca the prostitute with it, and assumes it was given to her by Cassio as a love token. Othello sees this as evidence of how Desdemona easily gave herself to Cassio, who cared no more for her than a handkerchief. It is the belief that Desdemona gave away his handkerchief and the sexually implications of the gift, along with the symbolism he attached to it, that drives him to kill her.