

Guided Questions for *Othello*

Act I

1. What is Othello's position in society? How is he regarded by those who know him? By his own words, when we first meet him in scene ii, what traits of character does he manifest?
2. How do you account for Brabantio's dismay on learning of his daughter's marriage, despite the fact that Desdemona has married a man so generally honored and admired?
3. What is Iago's view of human nature? In his fondness for likening men to animals (as in I. i. 49-50, 90-91; and I. ii.380-381), what does he tell us about himself?
4. What reasons does Iago give for his hatred of Othello?
5. In Othello's defense before the senators (iii), how does he explain Desdemona's gradual falling in love with him?
6. Is Brabantio's warning to Othello (I. III. 293-294) an accurate or an inaccurate prophecy?
7. By what strategy does Iago enlist Roderigo in his plot against the Moor? In what lines do we learn Iago's true feelings?

Act II

1. What do the Cypriots think of Othello? Do their words in scene i make him seem to us a lesser man or a larger one?
2. What cruelty does Iago display toward Emilia? How well-founded is his distrust of his wife's fidelity?
3. In II. iii. 221, Othello speaks of Iago's "honesty and love." How do you account for Othello's being so totally deceived?
4. For what major events does the merrymaking in scene ii give opportunity?

Act III

1. Trace the steps by which Iago rouses Othello to suspicion. Is there anything in Othello's character or circumstances that renders him particularly susceptible to Iago's wiles?
2. In III. iv. 49-98, Emilia knows of Desdemona's distress over the lost handkerchief. At this moment, how do you explain her failure to relieve Desdemona's mind? Is Emilia aware of her husband's villainy?

Act IV

1. In this act, what circumstantial evidence is added to Othello's case against Desdemona?
2. How plausible do you find Bianca's flinging the handkerchief at Cassio just when Othello is looking on? How important is the handkerchief in this play? What does it represent? What suggestions or hints do you find in it?
3. What prevents Othello from being moved by Desdemona's appeal (IV. ii.33-92)?
4. When Roderigo grows impatient with Iago (IV. ii. 181-202), how does Iago make use of his fellow plotter's discontent?

5. What does the conversation between Emilia and Desdemona (scene iii) tell us about the nature of each?
6. In this act, what scenes or speeches contain memorable dramatic irony?

Act V

1. Summarize the events that lead to Iago's unmasking.
2. How does Othello's mistaken belief that Cassio is slain (V. i. 27-34) affect the outcome of the play?
3. What is Iago's motive in stabbing Roderigo?
4. In your interpretation of the play, exactly what impels Othello to kill Desdemona? Jealousy? Desire for revenge? Excess idealism? A wish to be a public avenger who punishes "else she'll betray more men"?
5. What do you understand by Othello's calling himself "one that loved not wisely but too well" (V. ii. 354)?
6. In your view, does Othello's long speech in V. ii. 348-366 succeed in restoring his original dignity and nobility? Do you agree with Cassio (V. ii. 372) that Othello was "great of heart"?

General Questions

1. What motivates Iago to carry out his schemes? Do you find him a devil incarnate, a madman, or a rational human being?
2. Whom besides Othello does Iago deceive? What is Desdemona's opinion of him? Emilia's? Cassio's (before Iago is found out)? To what do you attribute Iago's success as a deceiver?
3. How essential to the play is the fact that Othello is a black man, a Moor, and not a native of Venice?
4. In the introduction to his edition of the play in *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, Alvin Kernan remarks:

Othello is probably the most neatly, the most formally constructed of Shakespeare's plays. Every character is, for example, balanced by another similar or contrasting character. Desdemona is balanced by her opposite, Iago; love and concern for others at one end of the scale, hatred and concern for self at the other.

Besides Desdemona and Iago, what other pairs of characters strike balances?
5. Consider any passage of the play in which there is a shift from verse to prose, or from prose to verse. What is the effect of this shift?
6. Indicate a passage that you consider to be memorable for its poetry. Does the passage seem introduced for its own sake? Does it in any way advance the action of the play, express theme, or demonstrate character?
7. Does the play contain any tragic recognition – a moment of terrible enlightenment, a realization of the unthinkable?
8. Does the downfall of Othello proceed from any flaw in his nature, or is his downfall entirely the work of Iago?