

Topic: Shakespeare: Race in *Othello*

Level: C2

Time: 2 hours

Aims

- To develop students' ability to read and analyse Shakespearean language.
- To give practice in summarising an argument and using persuasive language in spoken and written form.
- To identify and discuss issues of race and racism in *Othello*.
- To understand and appreciate the relevance of Shakespeare in exploring contemporary issues.

Introduction

This lesson uses the play *Othello* to explore early modern and contemporary attitudes to race and gives students supported practice in analysing and interpreting extracts of the play. Students will be introduced to four key characters, will engage in role play and will use persuasive language to act out a mock court case. The session culminates in a discussion of how current issues pertaining to race interact with those in the play, and can be extended by writing a formal letter.

Line numbers will be referred to as follows: (1.1) = line 1.

Preparation

Find the SparkNotes short plot summary of *Othello* on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU>

Photocopy one copy of '**Othello student worksheets**' per student.

Divide your total number of students by three. Photocopy that number of copies of the **Group A: Brabantio** (p.1-2 of '**Othello additional resources**'), **Group B: Desdemona** (p.3-4 of the additional student worksheet) and **Group C: Othello** (p.5-6 of the additional student worksheet) for use in **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** (p.3-5 of the lesson plan).

Photocopy the same number of copies of the **Prosecution** and **Defence** box worksheets (p.7-8 of the additional student worksheet) and one copy of the **Final Prosecution** and **Final Defence** box worksheets (p.9-10 of the additional student worksheet) for use in **Task 4 – Putting Brabantio on trial** (p.6-7 of the lesson plan).

Make sure that dictionaries are available for reference.

Read the suggested answers for **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** as they contain detailed analyses of the extracts.

Procedure

Warmer – Stereotypes (10 mins)

This activity aims to reveal – in a light-hearted way – the assumptions we make about different cultural or racial groups. It aims to prepare students for the racist language exhibited by Iago in **Task 2 – A secret marriage** and to pave the way for further discussion on racial stereotyping in **Task 5 – Discussion**.

- Put students into groups of three to four and ask them to describe a ‘typical’ British person. If appropriate, you could ask students to jot down their ideas on flip chart paper, including a mind-map and/or an illustration. At this point, don’t comment on their output.
- Draw students’ attention to the ‘stereotype’ definition in the box. Ask groups to discuss whether their ‘typical’ British person represents a stereotype. Encourage students to challenge the idea of a ‘typical’ British person, if they haven’t already. Elicit some problems with generalising about certain cultural or racial groups.

Suggested answers:

1. *Students may produce a variety of ideas. Some students’ discussions might revolve around a top hat-wearing tea-drinking Brit who talks about the weather. Others may challenge the idea of a ‘typical’ British person and put forward a view that recognises the cultural diversity of 21st century Britain.*
2. *Students should recognise that generalising about cultural or racial groups is problematic, and that a ‘typical’ British person doesn’t really exist. Students should also be able to recognise how easy it is to make positive and negative assumptions about cultural groups.*

Task 1 – Introducing *Othello* (10 mins)

This task aims to provide a short summary of the play and to introduce some of the main characters.

- Ask students to work in pairs to discuss questions 1 and 2.
- Play the SparkNotes YouTube plot summary from the beginning until 0.45 (see link in **Preparation**). Repeat if necessary.
- Ask students to discuss whether or not their predictions were correct.

Suggested answers:

1. *Encourage students to speculate but do not comment on their ideas. Students may comment on the setting (looks European), the period costume, the romantic relationship (Othello and Desdemona), the onlooker (Iago) and the fact that one of the characters is black.*
2. *A ‘tragedy’ in Shakespearean drama is a story in which the principle character – usually a man of importance or outstanding personal qualities – falls to disaster through a combination of personal failing and outside circumstances. Note: it is distinguished from ‘tragedy’ as simply a sad or shocking event. ‘Moor’ would have meant ‘Muslim’ for an early modern audience; a general term for someone who is ‘not one of us’, by implication from Africa or Asia. ‘Venice’, which provides the setting for the opening of the play, suggests western wealth and sophistication. The pairing of ‘Moor’ with ‘Venice’ invites an unusual contrast between eastern exoticism and western civilisation.*

Task 2 – A secret marriage (20 mins)

This task is intended to set the scene and provide the necessary plot information for **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** It provides supported practice in analysing an extract from Act 1, Scene 1 and introduces the theme of racism.

- Ask students to read the scene-setting text in the box.
- Draw attention to the glossary, which will help students to understand some of the archaic language.
- Ask students to work in pairs to read the extract and discuss questions 1-3. Ask students to change partners and discuss questions 4-5. Elicit feedback as a whole class.

Tip

The glossary is intended to help students understand the meaning of the words, not to target language to be learned. You could tell students not to worry if the language is unfamiliar, as some of it is archaic; that they don't need to understand every word, as long as they understand the gist of the passage.

Suggested answers:

1. *Brabantio might feel shocked, angry, afraid, scared etc... It's the middle of the night and he has just been told that his daughter's missing and has been secretly married. He may also be disgusted or offended at the sexual language and imagery used by Iago about his daughter.*
2. *The 'old black ram' and 'devil' are Othello. The 'white ewe' is Desdemona.*
3. *Iago wants Brabantio to wake up! 'Arise, arise' (1.93).*
4. *Students might feel uncomfortable at the crude sexual language used by Iago, and by the language used to describe Othello. Iago is aiming to shock by his choice of language.*
5. *Some students may view Othello as a sinister predatory character, based on Iago's description. Others might question this view and suspect that the violence of Iago's language suggests that he dislikes Othello.*

Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate? (30 mins)

This task aims to give students practice in analysing extracts of the play from Act 1, Scenes 2-3 in small groups, guided by discussion questions. It aims to help students get to know three principle characters – Othello, Desdemona and Brabantio – and to explore their relationships with each other through role play. The extracts also model aspects of persuasive language which lay the foundation for the subsequent tasks.

- Ask students to read the scene-setting text in the box.
- You could also play the SparkNotes YouTube plot summary from 0.45-2.00 (see link in **Preparation**).
- Divide the class into three big groups: A, B and C. Each of these groups will take a different character.

- If your class is large (if there are more than 12 students in total) divide students into smaller sub-groups of 3-4.
- Give out **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** worksheets to each group (found on ‘**Othello additional resources**’ p.1-6).
 - Give **Group A: Brabantio** (p.1-2 of the same) to one group
 - Give **Group B: Desdemona** (p.3-4) to another group and **Group C: Othello** (p.5-6) to the final group. Ensure that **Group B: Desdemona** have their student worksheets to hand, as they will need to refer back to **Task 2 – A secret marriage**.
- Ask students to read their character’s speech and to discuss the questions.
- Circulate and monitor the discussions using the suggested answers to give clues, explain language, or augment the discussion where appropriate.

Tip

Wherever possible, encourage students to find examples in the text to back up their answers and opinions. Encourage students to look up unfamiliar words in the glossary attached to each extract, or in dictionaries.

Suggested answers for Group A: Brabantio:

1. *Brabantio is very angry. This is seen in the insulting language he uses to address Othello: ‘O thou foul thief’ (l.75) and ‘Damned as thou art’ (in other words – ‘you devil’ (l.76). See also the accusatory repetition of ‘thou’ (‘you’) and the use of questions and exclamation marks. The run-on lines suggest that the pace of the speech is quick and breathless. Violent and pejorative verbs such as ‘stowed’ (l.75), ‘bound’ (l.78), ‘shunned’ (l.80), ‘abused’ (l.87) suggest feelings of aggression. His language is also persuasive; he uses hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration used for effect) to prove that Othello is a villain (e.g. ‘devil’, ‘thing’).*

2. *He accuses Othello of hiding his daughter (l.75), of using witchcraft to make her fall in love with him (l.76-78) and of tricking, drugging or kidnapping her (l.86-88).*

3. *He expected her to marry one of the ‘wealthy curled darlings of our nation’ (l.81) - a handsome young Venetian man, as befitted her social status.*

4-5. *Note the contrast of light/dark and angelic/demonic language and imagery. Desdemona is ‘a maid so tender, fair, and happy’ (l.79) - young, beautiful/white. The colour white connotes moral purity and innocence. By contrast, Othello is dehumanised, cast as the devil (‘Damned’ l.76) and a ‘thing’ (l.84) that should be feared (l.84). His ‘sooty bosom’ (l.83) – which contrasts with Desdemona’s ‘fair’ skin – suggests dark motives as well as skin.*

Suggested answers for Group B: Desdemona:

1. *Desdemona is clearly deeply in love with Othello, enough to express her feelings so openly before the entire senate. Her language is dramatic and persuasive. She describes the ‘downright violence’ (l.264) of her feelings and her willingness to ‘trumpet to the world’ (l.265) how she has left her old privileged life to be with him. Her heart is wholly conquered (‘subdued’ l.265) by him, and everything about him (l.266). She has given her whole life to him (‘Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate’ l.269) because of ‘his honours and valiant parts’ (bravery) (l.268). The fact that she pleads for him (‘dear lords’ l.270) demonstrates her affections.*

2. Desdemona uses dramatic imagery and metaphors to make her point. 'Storm of fortunes' (p.264) connotes the strength of natural disasters. 'Trumpet to the world' (l.265) suggests a joyful shameless celebration of their love. Her desire to 'consecrate' her 'soul' (l.269) to Othello has religious associations, suggesting that he has assumed god-like status to her. If he goes away to war and leaves her, she will be 'a moth of peace' (l.271), a metaphor that implies that she is insignificant without him.

3. She wants to go to war with him, as she would be miserable without him.

4. See answers 1-2. Desdemona's language provides a direct contrast to Iago's in **Task 2 – A secret marriage**. In Iago's description, Othello is a sinister, sexually predatory character; a 'devil' (l.95) who has taken an old man's daughter against her will. By contrast, Desdemona's description of Othello shows that she feels the very opposite, and has gladly faced the consequences of an unconventional elopement because of her love for him.

Suggested answers for **Group C: Othello**:

1. Brabantio 'loved' Othello and often asked him to recount his life story (l.142). Othello's narrative – which is long even in summary – conjures up an image of father and daughter fascinated and intrigued by tales told, possibly over many nights, by a family friend.

2. Othello has had an eventful life: 'battles, sieges, fortunes' (l.144); 'moving accidents by flood and field' (l.149); 'hair-breadth 'scapes* i' th' imminent deadly breach' (hair-raising military adventures l.150); being captured by 'the insolent foe' (l.151) and 'sold to slavery' (l.152); travels through large caves and empty wildernesses, over quarries, rocks and mountains (l.154-155). It's no wonder that Brabantio invited him often!

3. Desdemona falls in love with Othello. She 'would seriously incline' (l.160) to hearing his stories – that is, she was drawn in emotionally and physically. She gives him, in response, 'a world of kisses' (l.173) and loves him 'for the dangers' (l.174) he has survived. Othello's language is eloquent and moving, and gives us some sense of the gentle, wise and fearless man who has captured Desdemona's heart.

4. Students may respond in a variety of ways. You would hope that their opinion of him would be different after hearing Othello's own account of his relationship with Brabantio, his courtship of Desdemona and the things that he has been through. Students should notice a sharp contrast between the way Iago describes him in **Task 2 – A secret marriage** and the way he presents himself. Some students may also comment on the assumptions that they might have made about Othello before hearing his side of the story.

- Now divide students into new groups of three, ensuring that they each contain one student from group A, group B and group C. Students should now be in a group with two other characters. If a student really struggled with the previous activity, pair them with a confident student from the same group.
- Direct students to their role card (found at the bottom of each **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** additional student worksheet).
- Tell students that they are going to play the role of their character. Explain that they will take turns to give their opinion about whether they think that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona should be allowed, and to persuade the other characters. Encourage students to use the role cards for guidance.
- Encourage students to quote from the text and to improvise using their own language.

- Circulate and monitor the role plays. Encourage students to interact in character, to ask questions and to try to speak persuasively.

Task 4 – Putting Brabantio on trial (40 mins)

This task aims to give students the opportunity to explore the theme of racism by enacting a mock court case. It gives students practice in summarising, identifying and constructing key points in an argument and using persuasive language. It is also intended to help students consider how contemporary attitudes to race interact with those in the play.

Tip

It should be made clear to students that this is an imagined trial and not part of the plot of *Othello*.

- Ask students to read the scene-setting text in the box.
- Remind students that although Brabantio does eventually accept the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, he has just accused Othello of using witchcraft to make Desdemona fall in love with him. He doesn't understand how his daughter could fall in love with a black man, given the choice of the Venetian men she is surrounded by, so suspects Othello of foul play. In today's society, Brabantio's views would be considered highly racist.
- Explain that you are going to imagine that Brabantio is on trial for racist behaviour. Tell students that you are going to act out the trial as a class.
- First, ask students to elect a judge. Students should agree that this person will make a fair decision. You could ask for nominations and take a vote.
- Explain that the motion (the application made to the judge) is: 'Brabantio is a racist'.
- Divide students into two groups of prosecution and defence.
- Hand out one per sub-group of the **Prosecution** box worksheets to the prosecution groups (found on p.7 of the additional student worksheet) and the same for the **Defence** (found on p.8 of the same). Ask each group to think of three key reasons why Brabantio is or isn't a racist. Tell them that their reasons must be convincing enough to persuade the judge.
- Circulate and monitor group work, supporting where necessary. The student acting as judge can also circulate and listen, as hearing their discussions will help them to make a final decision.

Suggested answers:

Students may come up with a variety of reasons of their own. However if they are struggling, prompt them to consider the following reasons, directing them to the text for support.

The prosecution believes that Brabantio is a racist for the following reasons:

- *The language he uses towards Othello is highly racist and dehumanising. Give examples from Brabantio's speech in **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?***
- *He used to love Othello but when he found out that he might gain him as a son-in-law, this was too close for comfort.*

- *He accuses Othello of using witchcraft to steal Desdemona, implying that she couldn't possibly love a black man of her own free will.*

The defence believes that Brabantio is not a racist for the following reasons:

- *He's just been woken in the middle of the night to the shocking news that his daughter is missing. He's in a state of emotional distress. He's not thinking clearly and is not responsible for his words.*
- *It's not Brabantio who's the racist: it's Iago. He puts the ideas into Brabantio's head when he is emotionally vulnerable.*
- *Brabantio actually loves Othello; this is confirmed by Othello himself in his speech in **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** Othello wouldn't love a racist.*
- *Brabantio is merely acting as any doting father would towards the man whom he thinks has kidnapped his daughter.*

- Now ask students to get back in their original two big groups of prosecution and defence. Tell them that each group are going to agree three main points together to support their argument and to persuade the judge.
- Ask students to appoint a chairperson. This person will be responsible for leading the discussion within their group and for making the final decision about which points will be argued in the court case.
- Ask students to appoint a reporter. This person will be responsible for writing down the three main points they agree on.
- Ask students to appoint a spokesperson. This person will be responsible for presenting their three main points persuasively to the judge.
- Hand out one **Final Defence / Final Prosecution** box worksheet to each group respectively (found on p.9-10 of the additional student worksheet). Give students about ten mins to agree their three main points.
- Set up the mock court. Write the motion on the board: 'Brabantio is a racist'. Ask the judge to sit at the front. Ask each spokesperson to put forward their case to the judge.
- Ask the judge to decide which group presented the most convincing argument. This group have won the case.

Extension:

The judge could be invited to ask questions and the spokesperson to defend their views.

Task 5 – Discussion (10 mins)

This task aims to develop students' understanding of issues surrounding racism by discussing how attitudes towards race have evolved since Shakespeare's time. It is intended to consolidate the issues raised throughout the session by returning to the theme of racial stereotyping introduced in the **Warmer – Stereotypes (10 mins)**. It also aims to help students to discuss and gather ideas for the **Homework / Extension – Write a letter to your Home Secretary** task.

- Ask students to work in small groups to discuss the questions.

Homework / Extension – Write a letter to your Home Secretary

This task – which can be set as homework or as a follow-up task for a separate session – is intended to give students the opportunity to draw on persuasive techniques used by characters in **Task 3 – Is the marriage legitimate?** and by themselves in **Task 4 – Putting Brabantio on trial** to produce a piece of formal persuasive writing. It follows on from **Task 5 – Discussion** by allowing students to put the views they've discussed on the theme of racism into writing.

- Ask students to make notes on the questions they have discussed under the headings provided on the student worksheet. Direct their attention to the guidance notes in the box which address structure, layout, language, style and useful phrases for writing a formal, persuasive letter.
- When students have completed their letter, you could post them to the Home Office. An official response – if you happened to get one – would provide excellent follow-up opportunities to the session.