

AS/A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE



WORKBOOK

Othello

Improve skills • Reinforce understanding • Achieve success

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How to use this workbook

Structure

The activities in this workbook help you develop the skills and knowledge that you will need to achieve your best grade in A-level English Literature, whichever exam board specification you are following.

Each section offers a clear structure with activities that gradually increase in difficulty:

- **Starting out:** accessible activities that offer an introduction to the topic
- **Developing your ideas:** skills-building activities that look in more detail at particular aspects of the text
- **Taking it further:** more challenging tasks that will test your understanding of the text and consolidate your learning

Boosting your skills

The final chapter of the workbook offers exam-focused activities that allow you to apply the skills you have developed. It also includes step-by-step guidance on the Assessment Objectives, and how to cover them in your written responses.

Features

Key terms

Definitions of key concepts and terminology. Understanding these and using them correctly in your written responses will help gain marks for AO1.

Key skills

Concise explanations of important skills to develop during your A-level studies. A variety of skills are covered, from fundamental ones such as analysing the structure of a text or embedding quotations in your writing, up to more advanced skills that are necessary to gain the top grades, such as exploring different interpretations of characters.

Challenge yourself

Advanced tasks that will push you further and help prepare you to achieve your best grade in the exams. They often focus on context (AO3), connections between texts (AO4) or critical interpretations of them (AO5).

Introduction: studying *Othello* at A-level

Your Shakespeare study for Key Stage 3 and GCSE will form a good basis for A-level. However, you will now have to extend your existing skills. In particular, you will need to be more aware of the possible critical approaches to the play, which is why this workbook devotes a chapter to them. You will also need to consider the play's social, historical and cultural context, and so one chapter in this workbook focuses on that. At the very least, you should be able to compare *Othello* with another Shakespeare play that you have studied, which will help to throw *Othello* into perspective. Obviously, knowing other tragedies like *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet* will be helpful, but *Othello* also has a surprising amount in common with some of Shakespeare's comedies, especially *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Above all, you need to develop your own interpretation of the play and be able to express this fluently, backing up your arguments with evidence from the text. You will be more fluent if you master the art of using short embedded quotations within your own sentences.

Characters

The study of characters remains important at A-level, but you will be expected to have a deeper awareness of their dramatic roles and the dynamics between them. You should avoid falling into the trap of writing about them as if they are real people. One interpretation of Iago, for example, is that he is not supposed to be psychologically realistic; instead, he is a traditional villain, like the devil in medieval mystery plays. According to this view, there is little point in trying to work out his motives for villainy.

Themes and language

Themes remain important, but you will need to show more awareness of how they are reflected in the language of the play, and be able to demonstrate how Shakespeare's language achieves its effects. In doing this, you will need to make correct use of technical terms such as 'metaphor' and 'simile'.

Gaining an overview

You will probably read the play in class, but it will help if you read it to yourself as well. When you have read the text and understood the plot and the character relationships, you need to develop an overview of the play. Ideally, you should be able to remember which Act any major event or speech occurs in, and perhaps even which scene, so that you can find it easily. This will help you when looking for quotes or comparing scenes. The 'Plot and structure' section in this workbook will help you to achieve this. An overview will also enable you to analyse the play's narrative arc and to relate this to the genre of tragedy.

Using the workbook

You do not necessarily have to attempt all the activities in the workbook: you could pick and choose according to your needs. However, there is a progression within each section, from the basics in 'Starting out' to 'Taking it further'. In addition, 'Challenge yourself' boxes aim to push you that little bit further to help you achieve the top grades. You should also take note of the 'Key skills' and 'Key terms' boxes.

Line references are to the Arden Shakespeare edition. They are given in short form: so, 1.2.3 refers to Act 1, scene 2, line 3. This will vary slightly in other editions, but the short quotations will help you to overcome this variation.

Contexts

You should be aware of the text as a product of its historical, social and cultural context, and how audiences have interpreted the text over time, up to the present day.

To gain credit for AO5 you will have to show an awareness of relevant context, incorporating references in your response where appropriate.

KEY SKILLS

Incorporating context

You should find that if you answer the question fully then you will be including context. You should not add unintegrated references to context as an afterthought.

Historical and social context

STARTING OUT

1

Othello is set in about 1570, when the Turks were attempting to take the strategically important Mediterranean island of Cyprus, at that point held by the Venetian Republic.

Read Act 1, scene 3, up to Brabantio’s entry (line 48). Then answer these questions:

(a) How does the situation in which the Duke of Venice and his senators find themselves create an appropriate setting for the emotional events of the play?

(b) How exactly does the Turkish fleet behave and how does this correspond to the action of the play?

(c) How does the situation seem to work to Othello’s advantage?

CONTINUED

2 Acts 2–5 are set in Cyprus, which is a frontier garrison threatened by the Turks. Cyprus is Christian, the Turks Muslim. To Shakespeare’s audience, only the Christian world was civilised. They would also know that shortly after the time of the play, Cyprus was captured by the Turks and remained under Turkish rule. Suggest how this might parallel what happens to Othello in the play.

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3 (a) Circle words and phrases below that you think could refer to important elements of *Othello*’s social context.

- Poverty
- War
- Gender
- Class
- Exploration
- Racism
- Science
- Honour and reputation
- Education

(b) Take three of your circled contexts and suggest for each how it would have influenced perceptions of the play in Shakespeare’s time, and how it might influence audiences now.

CONTEXT	THEN	NOW
1		
2		
3		

4 Look up the quotations below and explain how each relates to social or historical context. The first has been done for you.

LINE	CONTEXT
<p>A Iago: ... the devil will make a grandsire of you (1.1.90)</p>	<p><i>This shows religious belief, a racist identification of Othello with the devil, and a father's assumed right to choose his daughter's husband.</i></p>
<p>B Brabantio: It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect That will confess perfection so could err Against all rules of nature, and must be driven To find out practices of cunning hell (1.3.100–4)</p>	
<p>C Brabantio: Do you perceive, in all this noble company, Where most you owe obedience? (1.3.179–80)</p>	
<p>D Cassio: Let it not gall your patience, good Iago, That I extend my manners; 'tis my breeding That gives me this bold show of courtesies. (2.1.97–9)</p>	
<p>E Iago: Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, Is the immediate jewel of their souls (3.3.158–9)</p>	

CONTINUED ➞

<p>F Othello: A horned man's a monster, and a beast. (4.1.62)</p>	
<p>G Othello: ... so delicate with a needle, an admirable musician. O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear! (4.1.184–5)</p>	
<p>H Othello: Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, I took by th' throat the circumcised dog (5.2.351–3)</p>	

DEVELOPING YOUR IDEAS

5 How successful do you think the following student paragraph is in incorporating social context into its argument?

Annotate it to show its strength and weaknesses. Then write an overall assessment.

Desdemona is presented as a pure, virtuous teenage girl who accepts the conventional Jacobean belief that wives should be entirely faithful to their husbands, even if husbands are unfaithful. She even doubts that ‘there be women do abuse their husbands/ In such gross kind’, referring to adultery. She swears ‘by this heavenly light’ that she would not, linking fidelity to Christian obedience, but perhaps also to Diana, goddess of chastity and of the moon, if ‘light’ refers to the moon here.

Your assessment:

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6 The paragraph from a student essay below misses several opportunities to weave in relevant social and historical context. Rewrite it, making the relevance of context clear.

Othello is an outsider, as indicated by his being often referred to simply as ‘the Moor’. As a mercenary, he is useful to the state, and he appears to have been welcome in Brabantio’s home, but Brabantio does not want him to marry Desdemona, and thinks Othello must have won her trust by trickery. Desdemona has shown boldness in marrying Othello.

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7 Consider this statement:
‘Throughout the play, Desdemona plays the role of passive victim, even to the point of being partly to blame for the tragedy.’
Make notes below on how social context could be relevant to the following elements in the play if you were writing a response on how far you agree with this statement on Desdemona.

(a) Desdemona’s marriage

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(b) Her desire to go to Cyprus with Othello

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(c) Her efforts on Cassio’s behalf

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(d) Her refusal to believe that Othello could be jealous

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(e) Her reaction when Othello strikes her

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(f) How she dies.

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TAKING IT FURTHER

- 8 Read the following two passages:
- Act 3, scene 4, line 169 (Bianca’s entry) to the end of the scene
 - Act 4, scene 1, lines 109–62 (‘Alas, poor caitiff’ to ‘Faith, I intend so’).
- On a separate sheet, plan and write a response to the following question, referring to relevant context:
How does Shakespeare’s presentation of Cassio and Bianca in these passages reveal their characters?

KEY SKILLS

Writing about characters

Do not make the mistake of writing about the characters as if they are real people. Remember that they are Shakespeare’s dramatic constructions and write about them as such, showing *how* he presents them – what techniques he uses.

Challenge yourself

Bianca’s name means ‘White’. How far do you think Shakespeare’s naming of her is ironic, and how far do you think he means to defend her by calling her this? Is she really a courtesan – a high-class prostitute – or is this just how men perceive her?

Cultural context

STARTING OUT

- 1

For each cultural concept or belief below, suggest at least one way in which it features in *Othello*.
- (a)

The Chain of Being – a hierarchical order of beings, whose breakdown leads to Chaos
- (b)

Nature – the idea that social well-being depends on 'natural' behaviour
- (c)

The importance of reason to humanity
- (d)

Belief in evil and damnation
- (e)

Belief in the importance of honesty
- (f)

Courtly love
- (g)

Male fear of being cuckolded

DEVELOPING YOUR IDEAS

2 Add notes around the quotations below on how they relate to cultural concepts or beliefs.

(a) Othello:

Sweet soul, take heed,
Take heed of perjury. Thou art on thy death-bed.
(5.2.50–1)

(b) Othello:

perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not
Chaos is come again.
(3.3.90–2)

(c) Cassio:

You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees!
Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven,
Before, behind thee, and on every hand
Enwheel thee round!
(2.1.84–7)

(d) Othello:

It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible?
Confess! handkerchief! O devil!
(4.1.41–3)

CONTINUED ➞

3 Make notes on how honest each of these characters is regarded as being by other characters in the play, and how honest each actually is:

(a) Othello

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(b) Iago

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(c) Desdemona

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(d) Emilia

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(e) Cassio

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TAKING IT FURTHER

4 Bearing cultural context in mind, write at least one paragraph explaining how far you agree with one or both of these statements:

(a) Othello’s marriage upsets the social order, which ultimately leads to tragedy.

(b) Othello’s great mistake is to trust Iago, his subordinate, rather than his own wife.

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