**Character Development: Othello**

Othello is the focus of this play. In conventional literary and dramatic terms, he is the tragic hero. However you view him, it is the change in him – or the revelation of an aspect of his nature which neither he, nor the other characters, nor the audience had been previously aware – which brings about the fatal consequences. How you respond to this development, and how it and its consequences affect you, will determine you respond to the play.

We can examine some critical moments to highlight the key points in the development of a character. However, as soon as we try to select ‘moments’ we realise that how important every detail is. What follows, therefore, is one attempt at selecting critical moments in the development or revelation of Othello.

This selection uses comments by other characters as well as Othello’s own words, because they all help to form the audience’s response to this crucial central character.

**Act I Scene1**

**Lines 8-17**

The first view of Othello we receive is Iago’s. (At this point we do not even know that it is he who is being referred to since he has not yet been named.) We are shown an arrogant and pompous man who seems to have promoted an unsuitable man to be his deputy. The audience has nothing to measure this view against.

* What effect do you think this has on the audience?

**Lines 88-91**

Iago presents us (and Brabantio) with a gross sexual image of ‘The Moor’.

* How does this affect the audience’s assessment of Othello?

**Act I Scene 2**

**Lines 6 and 17-28**

At his first appearance, Othello seems confident and open – very secure of himself and of his worth to Venice.

* Since Iago has told us he is arrogant, do you think this view might confirm what he has said?

**Lines 59-61**

Almost immediately we see his utter confidence in his ability to command a situation.

* How would you describe is tone: arrogant, contemptuous, authoritative?

**Lines 83-84**

Othello declares his knowledge of when to fight and when not to.

**Lines 62-63**

Brabantio accuses Othello of being a thief and a practitioner of black magic.

* What is the audience’s view of Othello at this stage in the play?

**Act I Scene 3**

**Lines 48-49**

The Duke greets Othello as ‘valiant’ – the man to lead the Christian Venetians against the infidel Turks.

**Lines 76-94, 114-119, 128-170**

We hear Othello declare his readiness to tell the senators everything openly, his trust in Desdemona, and the story of his life which he believes won her heart. It is important to be aware of his tone and style.

* Is he performing?
* Is he over-confident?
* Is he a great man aware of his greatness?
* Is he humble, open and honest?
* Does he like the sound of his own voice, or does he think of himself as unsophisticated (‘rude’) in present company and therefore is trying hard to speak in a stately way?

**Lines 248-254**

Consider the way Desdemona speaks of her love.

**Act II Scene 1**

**Lines 183-193**

Look at Othello’s rapturous language here.

* Does it sound as confident as he did in Act I?
* Is this a new Othello?
* What are his feelings about love as he is experiencing it?

**Lines 281-284 and 290-291**

Notice Iago’s contrasting views of Othello as a good husband and adulterer.

**Act II Scene 3**

**Line 6**

Othello reveals his trust in Iago for the first time (‘most honest’).

**Lines 163-169**

He shows his sense of ‘Christian shame’, his concern for the ‘propriety’ of Cyprus and, again, his trust in Iago.

* Do you think he still seems to be the man who can deal easily and confidently with this kind of riotous situation?

**Lines 195-198**

* Do you think he is using the threat of anger as a deliberate method of investigation, or do you think he does feel that he could lose control of his temper?

**Lines 305-306**

Notice Iago’s view, as offered to Cassio, that Desdemona command Othello.

* Although we know Iago has his own motives for saying this, might there be any truth in his view?

**Act III Scene 3**

**Lines 77 and 84**

Othello repeats his utter commitment to Desdemona.

**Lines 91-93**

He declares, in extraordinary language, the power and fragility of his love.

* What is the effect of ‘Excellent wretch’ and the ideas of ‘Perdition’ and ‘Chaos’?

**Lines 119-123**

He reveals the depth of his trust in Iago, whose thoughts are frightening.

* What is happening to his confidence?

**Lines 158, 166, 175**

His insistence on knowing Iago’s thoughts lead to outbursts of almost wordless distress.

**Lines 180-196**

* What is the effect of his claim not to be jealous and to trust Desdemona?

**Line 217**

Iago’s declaration of ‘too much loving’ Othello, leads to his powerful commitment to him.

* What are the implications of his use of the word ‘bound’?

**Lines 246-247, 262-283**

Now, at the heart of this pivotal scene, Othello is given two soliloquies in which his love for Desdemona changes to loathing and his trust in Iago is absolute. Listen to these speeches. They are key revelations of the way his mind is working.

* How do you interpret the change in him?

**Lines 344-363**

He is now emotionally tortured and, in this state, claims that he would be happier if he were ignorant of her infidelity, before announcing the loss of balance of his mind. Look carefully at the way he expresses this.

* What does it tell you about the way he experienced tranquillity of mind?
* What also does it tell you about him that he is so certain of this loss?

**Lines 365-379, 390-396, 402, 438, 449-457, 464-467, 478-479, 483-485**

Finally he moves into a new mode of demanding ‘ocular’ proof, decisively blowing away his love, and committing himself to Desdemona’s and Cassio’s death, promoting Iago to take the latter’s place. Listen to the way he expresses these thoughts.

* What is the tone and style?
* What do you understand about him now?

**Act III Scene 4**

**Lines 34-40**

Notice the ‘tortured’ language Othello uses in describing Desdemona’s hand.

* What do you interpret about the way he views her from this description?

**Line 95**

* What has happened that he should exit so violently? (Earlier he said that he would deny her nothing.)

**Act IV Scene 1**

**Line 167**

Othello has not seen what is actually happening with Cassio and Bianca.

* Is he seeing what he wants to see, what Iago persuades him he is seeing, or is he deluded in some way?

**Line 205**

When Iago has persuaded Othello not to poison Desdemona but to strangle her, Othello is pleased at ‘the justice’ of this.

* In what way do you think he means ‘justice’?

**Line 235**

* Why do you think he strikes Desdemona and calls her ‘Devil’?

**Lines 248-259**

* How does his language show how his inner world has disturbed his ‘public’ role?

**Act IV Scene 2**

**Lines 63-65**

* As Othello confronts Desdemona, what conflict in the way he sees her do we see tearing him apart?

**Lines 73-74**

For the first time he directly accuses her of being a whore.

**Act V Scene 2**

**Lines 1-22**

Othello, looking at the sleeping Desdemona, contemplates the fact that he is going to kill her.

* Is this the language of the Othello who was so sure of himself at the start of the play? Listen to the tine, style and rhythm.

**Lines 92-102**

* How does he react once he has done the deed and Emilia is banging on the door?
* Does he seem like a man who has done justice?

**Lines 235-236**

When he has discovered that Iago has misled him, he attacks him physically rather than resorting to words.

* What do you make of this?

**Lines 260-282**

* What do his words tell us about what he now realises about himself?
* What is his tone?

**Lines 349-357**

* What do you understand about his final frame of mind and the tone and style with which he describes himself?

A key question about Othello is to what extent you regard him as responsible for what happens. The way you answer this will affect the way in which you view the play as a whole.

Other questions to ask are:

* Is Othello a tragic figure?
* Is Othello a fool to believe Iago?
* Even if Iago is very convincing, why is Othello’s response so sudden and extreme?
* He himself says he will lose control of himself if he falls out of love. So why does he?
* What is Iago’s power?
* To Othello it must seem that Iago is simply (honestly?) revealing the truth. But what do we see?