



Othello by William Shakespeare

Before reading

- 1 Ask students about plays that they have read or seen at the theatre. Check that they know and understand the three types of genre: *Comedy*, *History* and *Tragedy*. Students work in pairs to sort the Shakespeare plays into the correct categories. Ask different pairs for their answers, explaining the reason for their choices.

Answers

Comedy	History	Tragedy
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	<i>Richard III</i>	<i>Othello</i>
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Henry V</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	<i>Henry VIII</i>	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>

- 2 Explain to students that they are going to read a scene from one of Shakespeare's tragedies. Read aloud the definition of a Shakespearean tragedy. Elicit or explain that the protagonist is the main character in a play, but do not explain any other vocabulary. In pairs, students discuss the three questions. Monitor and help as needed, then discuss answers as a class.

Answers

- 1 Someone who has a high position in society and is well-regarded; e.g. a general in the army, a member of the royal family.
- 2 A negative aspect of personality; e.g. dishonesty, lack of empathy, insecurity, etc.
- 3 One or more people die at the end of the play.
- 3 Ask students to read *About the play*. You may need to explain *humble* (from a low social class). Working in the same pairs, students discuss their answers to the questions to help them try to work out Othello's major character flaw. Discuss ideas briefly as a class, but don't confirm any ideas at this point.

CULTURAL INFORMATION

Shakespeare did not invent the genre of the tragedy: classical Greek tragedies were first performed in Athens around the 6th century B.C. Like Shakespearean tragedies, they featured a hero with a major character flaw which caused his downfall or death. Shakespearean tragedies follow a five-part format, each part corresponding to an act of the play. Part 1 sets the scene, describes the characters and begins the action; Part 2 develops the action; Part 3 brings events to a climax; Part 4 provides further development; and Part 5 is where the whole story comes together, any revelations are made, and everything is resolved.

While reading

- 1 Students read the text and decide if the statements are true or false. Remind them to correct the false statements. When you check answers, ask students to tell you the part of the text that gave the correct answer (in italics in **Answers** below).

Answers

- 1 False. Up to this point Brabantio loved Othello. *Her father loved me, often invited me to their house ...*
 - 2 True. *... all the battles and wars ... my great adventures ... the dangerous escapes ...*
 - 3 False. Some of his stories made her cry. *My stories made her feel different emotions: sometimes they made her cry.*
 - 4 True. *She said that if I had a friend who loved her, I should teach him to tell her stories because that would make her fall in love with him. When she said that, I told her I loved her.*
 - 5 True. *My dear daughter, which man here in this room is most important to you?*
 - 6 False. She's an only child. *I am glad I don't have another daughter.*
- 2 Students read the text again and answer the questions. They can compare answers in pairs before checking as a class.

Answers

- 1 Because she was fascinated by his stories, which caused her to feel different emotions. He seemed very exciting and brave to her.
- 2 She probably thought that he would disapprove and not allow her to marry Othello.
- 3 He is against the marriage: *You have tricked her. You have taken my daughter away from me, so you have broken my heart, too.* Duke observes ... *it does no good to be unhappy about something that has already happened.*
- 3 Tell students they are now going to look at the characters of Othello, Desdemona and Brabantio. Read the three quotes. Working alone, students write adjectives or phrases that could describe their characters, based on the quotes. In less confident classes, students can work in pairs.

Possible answers

- Othello:** honest, plain-talking, someone who prefers action to words
- Brabantio:** angry, jealous, stubborn, concerned for his daughter, loving, protective
- Desdemona:** respectful towards her father, loyal towards Othello, stubborn, truthful



- 4 As a class, discuss ideas about Othello's tragic character flaw now that they have read the scene.

Answer

Othello's major flaw is his insecurity about his background. He was once very poor and he feels that he does not deserve Desdemona's love, given her background. As a result he rushes to marry her. (His insecurities also lead to jealousy later on in the play, resulting in his death at the end.)

After reading

- 1 Students work in small groups to think about the relationship between Brabantio, Othello and Desdemona. Refer them to the questions about each character and encourage them to imagine how each person feels, both before and after the scene. Tell students to make notes for the next activity.
- 2 Students work alone and choose one of the three characters. Using their notes from the previous exercise, they write a letter from that character to a friend describing in their own words what happened and how they feel. In less confident classes, students can work with another student who has chosen the same character to plan and write their letter.

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Students write a second letter, this time from one of the other characters.