

English Literature Summer Project (2022)

In the study of English Literature, the practice of '**close reading**' is key. 'Close reading' is the **sustained, detailed analysis of a text** (or a part of a text). It literally means looking closely at the text - whether that is a passage from a novel, a scene from a play, or a poem - and exploring **how the author shapes meaning using literary techniques**. Students often find it helpful to **annotate** the text as they read it through. Examples of annotation include highlighting or underlining key words and making brief notes in the margins. Good quality annotations show that you have read the text closely with the aim of identifying the author's methods (e.g., the connotations of certain word choices).

To prepare you for September, the English team have come up with a task that will involve practicing your 'close reading' skills. One of the first texts you will study in A Level English Literature is the play ***Othello* by William Shakespeare**, so this is a great opportunity to develop your analytical skills and give yourself a head start ready for the new academic year!

The task:

Below is an extract from the opening of *Othello* (Act 1 Scene 1) in which two characters - Iago and Roderigo - discuss a key event that has occurred off-stage: Desdemona, the beautiful daughter of a Venetian Senator, has **eloped** with 'the Moor' Othello. Othello is a brave and well-respected General in the Venetian army. He is also a Black man in a predominantly white society, therefore his secret relationship with Desdemona goes against the **social conventions** of the time (the play is set in the 16th century, when Venice was at war with the Ottoman empire). Iago is Othello's ensign (flag-bearer) which is a relatively low-status role within the Venetian army. At the point in the play, Iago is one of the few people to know about Othello's relationship with Desdemona and it is implied that he has divulged this information to Roderigo just before the scene begins.

Read the extract carefully and annotate it with your initial thoughts on the characters of Iago and Roderigo:

SCENE I. Venice. A street.

Enter RODERIGO and IAGO

RODERIGO

Tush! never tell me; I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

IAGO

'Sblood, but you will not hear me:
If ever I did dream of such a matter, Abhor me.

RODERIGO

Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.

IAGO

Despise me, if I do not. Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capp'd to him: and, by the faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place:
But he; as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them, with a bombast circumstance
Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war;
And, in conclusion,
Nonsuits my mediators; for, 'Certes,' says he,
'I have already chose my officer.'
And what was he?
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife;
That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster; unless the bookish theoretic,
Wherein the toged consuls can propose
As masterly as he: mere prattle, without practise,
Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had the election:
And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds
Christian and heathen, must be be-lee'd and calm'd
By debtor and creditor: this counter-caster,
He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,
And I--God bless the mark!--his Moorship's ancient.

RODERIGO

By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman.

IAGO

Why, there's no remedy; 'tis the curse of service,
Preferment goes by letter and affection,
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to the first. Now, sir, be judge yourself,
Whether I in any just term am affined
To love the Moor.

RODERIGO

I would not follow him then.

IAGO

O, sir, content you;
I follow him to serve my turn upon him:
We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly follow'd. You shall mark
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave,
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,
For nought but provender, and when he's old, cashier'd:
Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are
Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them and when they have lined
their coats
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul;
And such a one do I profess myself. For, sir,
It is as sure as you are Roderigo,
Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
In following him, I follow but myself;
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end:
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

RODERIGO

What a full fortune does the thicklips owe
If he can carry't thus!

IAGO

Call up her father,
Rouse him: make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the streets; incense her kinsmen,
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies: though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on't,
As it may lose some colour.

RODERIGO

Here is her father's house; I'll call aloud.

END OF EXTRACT

Once you have read and annotated the extract, answer the following questions:

1. How does Shakespeare present the character of Iago in this extract? What do you think his motivations are?
2. Why do you think Roderigo takes this news 'unkindly'?

Aim to write a brief paragraph in response to each of these questions. You must include **evidence from the text** (quotations) in your answers. Bring your work in to your first lesson.

You may find it helpful to watch a short clip from a performance of this the scene to give you an idea of how the lines can be delivered:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32XqR9TMjx0>