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Auszug aus:

William Shakespeare: "Othello"

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William Shakespeare: *Othello* – Focus on Iago, Othello and Desdemona

by Rita Reinheimer-Wolf



In dieser Einheit analysieren die Schülerinnen und Schüler Auszüge aus der Tragödie *Othello* und ordnen diese in thematische Kontexte ein (z. B. *polytrous, love, racism*). Zudem setzen sie sich ebenfalls mit den Figuren Iago, Othello und Desdemona auseinander. Mithilfe unterschiedlicher Methoden werden inhaltliche und emotionale Zugänge zu der Tragödie für Jung-Leserinnen und Leser geschaffen. Hierbei erarbeiten die Lernenden auch, wie sich Aussagen des Stückes auf die Gegenwart übertragen lassen und bewerten das Drama.

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In dieser Einheit analysieren die Schülerinnen und Schüler Auszüge aus der Tragödie *Othello* und ordnen diese in thematische Kontexte ein (z. B. *jealousy*, *love*, *racism*). Zudem setzen sie sich explizit mit den Figuren Iago, Othello und Desdemona auseinander. Mithilfe unterschiedlicher Methoden werden inhaltliche und emotionale Zugänge zu der Tragödie für junge Leserinnen und Leser geschaffen. Hierbei erarbeiten die Lernenden auch, wie sich Aussagen des Stückes auf die Gegenwart übertragen lassen und bewerten das Drama.

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Competences and skills:

By working with the materials and the play *Othello*, students enhance their **reading skills**. Furthermore, they practice their competences in **explaining and analysing texts** when working closely with extracts from the drama. Students' **speaking skills** are improved by holding short presentations/speeches, engaging in a discussion and a hot seat activity as well as staging a trial at court. Finally, students' **writing competence** is enhanced by writing two comments.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

C Comment	CH Characterisation	CT Creative task
D Discussion/debate	G Group work	IN Interview
MC Multiple choice	PM Placemat	PR Presentation
RC Reading comprehension	RP Role play	T Working with a text
W Writing		

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: What do I think of Shakespeare and his work?	M1–M5	G, MC, PR, T
2: Who is Iago – A misogynist, a jealous man or merely a sociopath?	M6	CH, D, T, W
3: Who is Othello – Just a lovesick outsider?	M7–M8	C, G, IN, PM, T, W
4: Who is Desdemona – Just a victim of Othello's aggressiveness?	M9–M10	C, PM, T, W
5: Shakespeare, <i>Othello</i> and me	M11–M13	MC, RP, W
Exam: William Shakespeare: <i>Othello</i>		CT, RC, T

William Shakespeare: *Othello* – Focus on Iago, Othello and Desdemona

Facts

William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* was written in 1604 and a first published version appeared in 1622. It is the story of the downfall of Othello, a Moor and an immigrant to Venice and the Venetian republic's most honoured military commander. Desdemona has fallen in love and eloped with him. At the outset of the play, Venice is preparing to defend itself from a threatened naval attack by Ottoman Turks. Othello is asked to lead the military forces. Brabantio, an influential senator and Desdemona's father, is angry when he discovers that his daughter has married Othello. Brabantio even accuses the Moor of using witchcraft to take his daughter away from him.

Othello is sent to Cyprus for his military mission together with Desdemona and his ensign Iago. Iago, having served Othello loyally for a long time, is embittered because he has not received the promotion he had expected. Cassio, a young Florentine soldier, has been made lieutenant over him. Iago plans to revenge himself viciously on both Cassio and Othello. Manipulating Othello, Iago succeeds in making Othello believe that Desdemona is in love with Cassio and has been unfaithful to the Moor. Iago even contrives ocular proof of Desdemona's adultery, using Desdemona's handkerchief which is said to have been found in Cassio's bedchamber. The truth is that Desdemona has dropped the handkerchief and it was then handed over to Iago by Desdemona's lady-in-waiting Emilia, who is Iago's wife. Convinced of his wife's sexual betrayal, Othello is hopelessly seized by jealousy not realising Iago's dishonesty and vicious manipulation. Othello's jealousy culminates in his smothering Desdemona in her bed. When Iago's manipulation is revealed by Iago's wife, who then is killed by her husband for telling the truth, the Moor kills himself. He has finally realised his fatal error concerning his wife's moral integrity. Iago is led away to be punished.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) used classical ancient literature as sources of inspiration for his plays. The playwright, however, transformed these sources to fit his own dramatic purposes. Othello, the heroic Black Moor, was exceptional because at the

time, negative stereotypes of the Black man prevailed. In many traditions, the Black man was associated with lust, sin, and death. Moors in plays were usually sinister figures. It is noteworthy that in *Othello*, the playwright breaks with these stereotypes.

The plot of *Othello* is taken from a collection of tales by the Italian writer Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi. Shakespeare stuck to this tale closely but also made significant changes. For example, in contrast to the original tale, the villain Iago is presented by Shakespeare as a very lonely figure relying on no one but himself.

Notes on the material

This unit provides ample opportunity to assess the three main characters Iago, Othello and Desdemona from the tragedy *Othello* (1622) by William Shakespeare. The different topics can be dealt with separately according to the individual situation. It is recommendable that students possess a good knowledge of the plot before working with this unit.

Topic 1 encourages students to reflect on their individual attitude towards Shakespeare's work. Then, students enhance their speaking competence by presenting an overview of the plot of *Othello* with the help of a grid. As a third step, learners are presented a multiple-choice questionnaire about details of the tragedy. Finally, a selection of quotations from the play has to be matched with a general topic that is dealt with in *Othello*. A dramatic reading exercise finishes off topic 1 to give students an idea of the different emotions that are involved in certain scenes of the tragedy.

Topic 2 centres around the assessment of Iago's character. First, learners are asked to select quotations by Iago, to paraphrase or define them, to describe the context of the scene and to express their interpretation of the quotations. Then, students write a characterisation of Iago before holding a final discussion on the relevance of Iago in the 21st century.

Topic 3 focusses on Othello and the analysis of the tragic hero's personality. Students are offered eight extracts from the tragedy and answer questions about them. All the extracts are utterances made by Othello. As a next step, a hot seat activity with Othello

is prepared in groups of three students. The final task of topic 3 consists in writing a comment on the theme of racism.

In **topic 4**, students work on Desdemona's character and her role in the tragedy. First, they answer questions about the five excerpts from the play that are presented. All the quotations centre around Desdemona. After this, students write a comment dealing with the question whether Desdemona can be called responsible for her own death.

Topic 5 rounds off the intensive analysis of Shakespeare's characters. First, learners fill in a multiple-choice questionnaire about the ranking of the characters in *Othello*. By talking to their classmates, they can establish a class ranking. Students go on preparing a complex creative speaking task: a trial at court during which Othello's responsibility is decided on. The trial at court is prepared in small groups with the help of role cards. This way, the major events and facets of the tragedy are revised. Finally, learners are asked to deal with six (creative) tasks offering the opportunity to evaluate the play by integrating personal ideas.

The material includes a written assignment based on an article from *The Guardian* on the theme of jealousy. The test comprises three tasks: students have to outline the main information of the text and relate it to the tragedy. The exam concludes with a creative writing task, in which students tell the story from Desdemona's perspective.

Edition of the tragedy used for this unit:

No Fear Shakespeare: *Othello*. Spark Publishing. New York 2003. ISBN: 978-1-5866-3852-8.
The references in this unit refer to this edition.

Topic 1: What do I think of Shakespeare and his work?

M1 Worksheet – Statements on Shakespeare’s work



- | | |
|----|---|
| A. | Reading a play by William Shakespeare is a waste of time because it is difficult to decipher, and the topics are obsolete. |
| B. | The themes in Shakespeare’s works are timeless and their messages can therefore still serve as a lesson. |
| C. | Reading Shakespeare is a great experience because his characters are real-life characters. |
| D. | The world presented in Shakespeare’s plays cannot be compared to the 21st century. So, why should I bother reading his plays? |
| E. | In a technological-oriented age, Shakespeare’s plays illustrating the lives of aristocrats are useless. |
| F. | Reading a play by Shakespeare opens a world of imagination that can enrich my life. |

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Working with the statements



- In six spots in your classroom, you can find six different statements on William Shakespeare’s work. Go to the statement that applies to you personally and your experience. Share your opinion and experiences with the classmates that have also come to the same spot as you.
- Present your group’s discussion results to the rest of the class in a brief presentation.

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