Previously you have learned about critical theories and used them to understand and interpret various texts. Now you will learn about **Historical Criticism** and use it to interpret and perform scenes from *Othello*.

**Historical Criticism**
While acknowledging the importance of the literary text, Historical Criticism draws on the significance of historical context of literature. This theory assumes that texts both influence and are influenced by the times in which they were written. For example, an interpretation of *The Crucible*, which is set in seventeenth-century New England, may be enhanced by an understanding of political developments in the 1950s when Arthur Miller wrote the play.

The use of Historical Criticism assumes that:

- Text cannot be separated from its historical context: a web of social, cultural, personal, and political factors.
- The understanding of a text is enhanced by the study of beliefs and artifacts such as diaries, films, paintings, and letters in existence when the text was created.

1. Show your understanding by paraphrasing each of these assumptions of Historical Criticism.

2. Your teacher will lead a guided reading of an excerpt from “The Moor in English Renaissance Drama.” After reading and discussing the excerpt, locate textual evidence from Act I of *Othello* that confirms or negates D’Amico’s assertions.
Relations between England and Morocco were extremely complex, and the opinions generated by those relations were as varied. What we find is not one image of the Moroccan, but many images, from the dangerously inscrutable\textsuperscript{1} alien to the exotically attractive ally. I have reviewed the experiences of these men in this chapter because, it seems to me, theater has the ability to re-create for its audience the encounter with an alien culture and to force an imaginative assessment of likeness and difference. Through this kind of experience some prejudices may be confirmed, while in other ways spectators may come to see themselves and their world differently.

The positive and negative characterizations that emerge from the first fifty years of trade and diplomacy can with ease be related to the specific historical perspectives of trade, war, and diplomacy. But traditional images of the Moor as black devil, Islamic infidel, or oriental despot were certainly drawn on to articulate what the traders and diplomats experienced. Optimistic prospects, disappointment and frustrations, and strong prejudices against Catholic Spain were by turn equally strong. Dramatic contexts, too, reflect a give-and-take of opinion, a frequent counter-balancing of prejudices, the interplay of abstract stereotypes and the more complex shadings of experience.

The theatrical representation of the Moor, while shaped in part by the traditional anti-Islam polemic\textsuperscript{2}, or the characterization of the black man as devil, also reshapes those traditions. Along with the stereotypes we will find subtler explorations of the problems that beset individuals from different cultures as they attempt to judge one another. Stereotypes often provide a convenient mask the dramatist can use to identify a character. But under the pressure of dramatic experience that character will often move closer to the context of the observer’s world, exhibiting the same needs, frustrations, and perceptions that shape “our” experience. As with the diversity of opinion about Moors and Morocco represented by the reports of traders and diplomats, we must follow the complex, and at times tangled, dramatic interplay of ideas, opinions, stereotypes, and fresh characterizations within the plays. Even if the spectator does not come away from the dramatic experience with a fuller understanding

\textsuperscript{1} inscrutable: mysterious
\textsuperscript{2} polemic: controversial argument
3 Yet the representation of the Moor could also lead the dramatist and the audience beyond a comfortable sense of superiority or the superficial titillation provided by a darkly alien villain. The Moor could become a dramatic symbol of the many stereotypes and masks that divide society and alienate the individual. The process by which a character is reduced to a type and the consequences of that reduction became a central dramatic issue. The representation of the Moor, whether motivated by a desire to make theatrical capital of a famous event, such as the Battle of Alcazar, or by a desire to discover and explore difference, opened up the question of what resulted from the contact between different cultures, religions, and races.

4 Dramatic interest also seemed naturally to focus on the question of the kind of power the isolated individual sought within a society of others. Power could mean destroying or mastering that society, controlling its women and tricking its men into acts of blind self-destruction. Or power could be sought in ways acceptable to society, as was the case for Othello, who could seem “fair” both within his dark exterior and within the Venetian state because of his military prowess. Audiences and dramatists were drawn to the Moor as a type because the character provided a way to examine some of the most difficult questions of division and alienation. The audience that witnessed the struggle for self-control and the insidious powers that transform Othello would confront the destructiveness of its own collective perceptions of race, religion, and cultural difference. In this case, the audience would engage in an exchange of something other than a coin for the sight of a dead Indian; the living character required that the audience engage in an emotional and intellectual exchange. And that giving, which is the life of theater, certainly drew the audience into some understanding of the tragic divisions within their own world as mirrored in the story of a character such as Othello, the Moor of Venice.

5 Our imaginative journey into the dramatic world of these plays fosters respect for the willingness and ability of Renaissance dramatists to do more than trade in dead stereotypes. Most of the plays created for their audience a complex dramatic encounter with the Moor. The audience identified the otherness of the type and to the extent that individual members of that audience saw difference as essential to human experience, they were connected to the outsider. Working within the conventions of Western theater and poetry, the dramatist could use

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3 *titillation*: excitement
4 *prowess*: exceptional ability
5 *insidious*: stealthy, deceitful
the open stage of Shakespeare's age to explore inner perspectives and challenge easy assumptions about difference and inferiority. The poet-dramatist was provided with a further connection between the Moor, or the alien, and the role of the artist within society. (212–213)

Shakespeare more than any other dramatist of the English Renaissance used theater to create an important political perspective that framed the encounter between different cultures. On the Moor he focused the problems that any state would face when it moved from a relatively closed condition to the open expansion that generates contact and conflict with other civilizations. Around the Moor he built those conflicts which test a society's sense of the natural rightness of its particular cultural traditions. He saw that with the kind of political expansion that characterized Renaissance Venice and ancient Rome came the problem of absorbing the outsider and the fear of being absorbed. The opposition between Roman reason and the darkly feminine otherness and fertility of Egypt is but one variation on this conflict between different conceptions of power and order. Shakespeare could also identify with a Moor of military virtú who is fearful of the erotic femininity of Venice, a European city as exotic for him as Alexandria was for the Romans. For the modern, cosmopolitan state that thrives on the exchange of goods and images with other nations and cultures, this conflict persists in the struggle between a closed national identity and the need for intercourse with others.

...Shakespeare wrote for a society that saw its contact with other people increase, while it struggled to define for itself the kind of government and religion it would have. Traditional definitions of Western norms and of the others who deviated from those norms provided a groundwork for curiosity, or a base of operations for exploration and exploitation. But the ground was and always is shifting as experience and traditional values interact. What may have seemed strange turns out to be familiar, as when Clem finds that courts in Morocco and England are much the same; and what is native may, upon closer examination, turn out to be more monstrous than the strangest alien. As we have seen with Tamburlaine, an outsider who became a projection of new political ambition, the imaginative contact with the outsider became a way of dramatizing the need to create new categories. The Moor's difference was something established by tradition, and the Moor was a sign of spatial distance, a creature from a distant place. But for the English Renaissance stage the Moor could also be identified with the newness of discovery, exploration, and trade. This experience, real or theatrical, might confirm or challenge the tradition. Since the Moor was often portrayed as isolated and in rebellion against Western society, the type might conveniently be treated as exotic or as a projection of new political ambition.

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6 exploitation: the use of someone or something for profit
7 Tamburlaine: a character who had high political aspirations, from the play of the same name by Christopher Marlowe.
channel opposition to traditional structures. If the old definitions
fixed the character in safe inferiority, the new experience created an
emotionally and intellectually charged encounter with a figure who
required the audience to reflect on and to question its own values.

The plays certainly trade in what were, and still are, trusted
assumptions about the Moor, Islam, and cultural difference. And they
also draw upon our fascination with how another culture can make the
familiar world seem strange. It is unsettling and also exciting to feel the
ground of assumptions shift, as is the case in travel, when the norm is
not your norm, when dress, speech, food, and the details of life reflect a
difference that places you at the margin, reduced to a sign of deviation
from the norm. That sense of disorientation was projected into an
Eleazar8 who speaks of the finger of scorn pointed at him, or Othello who
fears the accusing gesture that will destroy his reputation. What is most
disturbing for the outsider is the sense that the secret, unwritten codes are
being used to degrade one’s true image. As a group, sharing language, a
national and racial identity, and an inherited set of theatrical conventions,
the audience would have been like those Venetians or Spaniards who
share a culture the Moor can never understand. And yet the individual
spectator might retain a sense of separateness and know what it is like
to be the object of open scorn, or what is worse, to feel the unspoken
isolation of one who is reduced to a mere sign of the abnormal. (214–215)

8 Eleazar: a villainous Moor in an English Renaissance drama called Lust’s Dominion.