



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//English Literature

Shakespearean Genres

Unit A2 1

Othello

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Starting Point

In this unit there are 5 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03, A04 and A05.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of the selected play.

This Assessment Objective (AO) involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the play, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Dramatic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyse Shakespeare's use of such dramatic methods as characterisation, structure, language and staging.

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in plays. This means identifying dramatic features and showing how these features relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing dramatic methods – advice to teachers and students:

In this component, equal marks are available for the candidate's treatment of the extract and other relevant parts of the text. As the unit is closed book, examiners will be realistic about the amount of detail from the wider text which can be provided in the time available. Every play has its memorable phrases which come to mind when writing, but it is anticipated that the larger-scale features of form, structure, language and staging will be helpful in constructing a relevant response. The student will, however, be expected to respond in a more detailed fashion to the use of language and dramatic methods within the given extract. A reminder of the process of identification (of methods), illustration, analysis, and relation to the question may be timely.

A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which a play is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the play.

Each question will specify a particular type of context in the stimulus statement/directive. In this unit the stipulated context will be literary and will focus on the nature of a particular Shakespearean genre. Contextual information offered should be of this stipulated type. It should be relevant to the question. And it should be external to the play itself.



Contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections within a Shakespeare play, and between the extract accompanying the question and the wider text.

The student should explore similarities and differences between characters, plot lines, themes, staging, and other dramatic techniques within the play and its wider context. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded.

A05: Argument and interpretation

In this examination, the candidate should offer opinion or judgment in response to the given reading of the play, taking account of the key terms as the basis of the argument.

This AO is the driver of Unit A2 1 and is of primary importance.

A05 can be satisfied in full by the candidate developing his/her own reading in response to the given reading. If, however, critics are used, they must be

- used with understanding
- incorporated into the argument to reinforce or be seen as an alternative to the student's opinion
- not used as a substitute for the development of the student's own opinion
- properly acknowledged.

Coherence and relevance of argument will be rewarded. Students should be aware of the importance of planning in the sequencing and illustration of the reading they wish to put forward. They should also beware of the danger of replacing the key terms of the question with others of their own choosing which they assume mean much the same thing.

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a starting point for teachers and students. It reflects some of the stylistic and contextual issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research.



A01: Plot, Characters, Themes

Introduction

One of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello* has drawn interest because of its intimacy of domestic setting and the distribution of responsibility for the downfall of the eponymous character. The central characters Iago and Othello are alike in allowing their unfounded emotions to determine their actions. Both are responsible for the tragic catastrophe that occurs. Iago's villainous machinations and Othello's weakening confidence in himself interweave to propel the plot to its conclusion. Protagonist and antagonist are central to the outcome, making a viewing of the play both moving and painful, and inciting both fear and pity in the audience. With no subplots and little humour to lighten the ominous mood, the audience can only watch as Othello swiftly descends into paranoia, desiring and exacting revenge on the innocent Desdemona. The groundlessness of Iago's hatred (based loosely on a rumour) does not lessen his determination to destroy, as he harnesses Roderigo as a pawn, and exploits Cassio's every innocuous move – single-mindedly working to produce a consequence of tragic proportions.

Plot Summary

Act One, evening time, on a street in Venice, rejected suitor Roderigo and recently appointed ensign Iago meet and plot revenge against the latter's superior, the Moor of Venice, General Othello. Insulted by his limited promotion by Othello, Iago protests friendship for Roderigo and promises to exact a penalty from the General, new husband to Desdemona – rejecter of Roderigo's love. Iago begins with incensing Desdemona's father, Brabantio, against Othello – awakening him in the night and angering him with news of his daughter's elopement.

Secreting his presence, Iago removes himself to inform Othello of Brabantio's imminent arrival, the warning interrupted by the arrival of Othello's Lieutenant, Michael Cassio. Complying with the verbal command of the Duke of Venice, Othello takes himself to the Duke and other senators who inform them of their military need for him. Brabantio arrives with accusations that Othello is permitted to rebuke, with the called for presence and testimony of Desdemona supporting the honesty of their devotion.

Othello being commanded to Cyprus, leaves immediately; Iago, his wife Emilia and Desdemona to follow behind. Iago encourages Roderigo to gather his fortune and follow them to Cyprus. Upon arrival, in Act Two, as they wait for the safe arrival of Othello and his crew, Iago spies his opportunity of inciting distrust between Othello and Desdemona, by exploiting the innocent friendship of the new bride with Cassio. Encouraging Roderigo to believe in the truth of an affair between the latter, Iago manipulates a situation whereby Cassio and Roderigo fight – damaging the Lieutenant's reputation and causing Othello to dismiss his beloved Cassio from his service.

In Act Three, Desdemona intends to assist Cassio with his desire to be reinstated, but upon the arrival of Othello to this meeting, Cassio removes himself – a situation manipulated by Iago in suggesting guilt in the actions of the innocent pair. Iago casts further seeds



of doubt in Othello's mind, forcing his imagined infidelity to come to life. Continuing to press upon the weakened mind of the General, Iago uses a conversation between himself and Cassio – overheard by Othello – whereby the words spoken confirm Othello's worst fears. Supported by the presence of Desdemona's handkerchief – a present from Othello, and given to Iago by his wife – appearing in the wrong hands, Othello is unwaveringly convinced of his wife's betrayal and commits himself, in Act Four, to exacting a brutal revenge.

When an envoy arrives seeking the return of Othello to Venice and the placing of Cassio in his stead, Desdemona's pleasure at the news incites rage from Othello and he strikes his wife. Iago sees the opportunity to remove Cassio and/or Roderigo from the scene, in Act Five, convincing Roderigo to attack Cassio. Cassio is stabbed by both Roderigo and Iago. Iago ends Roderigo's life, and when Othello hears the cries he mistakenly believes Cassio has been killed, in completion of a promise made to him by Iago.

Having sent Desdemona to wait for him in their bedchamber earlier, Othello, in the final scenes, will not hear the protestations of his wife as she begs to understand his actions. Othello suffocates his wife, justifying himself to Emilia when she enters, in detailing his reasons for believing Desdemona unfaithful. Emilia, too late, is able to explain as false the vows made by Iago. Upon hearing her utter his guilt, Iago kills his wife and attempts to escape. He is arrested and some of his machinations are uncovered offstage in discussion with the survivor Cassio, and reading of letters found on the body of Roderigo. Othello offers himself up for arrest, detailing how he wishes to be remembered, before stabbing himself with a concealed weapon and kissing his wife as he dies. It is promised that Iago will be tortured for his role in the tragedy that has unfolded.

Characters

Othello

Like many tragic heroes, Othello is a character whose greatest strengths become vulnerabilities in the situation where he finds himself. Trust and loyalty - two traits which sum up Othello - are the making and the failing of the man. When the implicitly trusted Iago sheds doubt on the loyalty of Desdemona, Othello cannot resist the hinted possibility. Instead the words and proofs offered by Iago become the new truth. He does not doubt Iago's loyalty and so in turn allows the trust he had in his wife to be shattered. What was balanced and orderly in Othello's mind has been undermined; he rapidly falls victim to Iago's machinations. **Honesty and deception are inverted.** Chaos reigns. We may question why Desdemona is not allowed to defend herself and why Iago's loyalty is trusted before Desdemona can prove her own. The answers vary - the relative longevity of Iago and Othello's relationship, the Moor's fear of always remaining the 'outsider', or the need to restore order to society.

Before we are even introduced to Othello, his character is being traduced by his ensign, Iago. Iago declares the man as 'loving his own pride and purposes' (I.1.12) above all else; and Othello and Desdemona's marriage is defamed in vile terms, reduced to an account of elopement, thievery and bestiality. Never have a character's traits and circumstances been so destroyed in a Shakespearean play before the audience has a chance to meet with the person in question, and it is a pre-figuring that Othello's character will continue to be manipulated and misused for the purposes of another. When Othello does appear, his loyalty to the state and its need of him is made evident. As a general and commander of Venetian armed forces, Othello is a lauded warrior. That being said, his long service and military skill – he has been a survivor in war from the age of seven – has made him an outsider from the world of civility,



‘...little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats and broils of battle.’ (I.3.86-87)

He is also an **outsider** in the society of Venice. He is extolled by the highest echelons of Venetian society and government but he is not, and never will be, one of them. His welcome is conditional – evidenced quite clearly in the outrage of Desdemona’s father Brabantio, who feels that his admission of Othello into his family home has been evilly repaid by this unwanted marital union. Nature and society are now in imbalance - social stability has been breached. Othello is a ‘Moor’ with all the awe and horror that this word implied in Venice. When Desdemona became enthralled by him, Othello felt free of the stigma of the outcast. But when he comes to doubt her, and feels that eventually she should prefer ‘her own clime, complexion and degree’ (III.3.235), Othello’s confidence is shaken – and he becomes once more ‘different’ from the rest. It is the mutual love found with Desdemona that has quieted whatever inadequacies Othello has felt, whether from the years of service or the need to belong, and the words ‘...I do love thee, and when I love thee not, /Chaos is come again.’ (III.3.92-3) are more painfully prophetic every time they are heard.

Othello is not easily roused to **jealousy** – he casts off Iago’s insinuations about Desdemona being attractive and attracting attention in return.

‘I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this:
Away at once with love or jealousy.’ (III.3.194-196)

Once the seed is planted however, and the ‘proofs’ unfold, Othello succumbs to ferocious jealousy. When bemoaning his part in Desdemona’s death, Othello refers to himself as not having loved wisely – is it the choice of beloved, or his own actions he now decries? Others have highlighted Othello’s weak spot as his sense of honour, as Desdemona’s ‘betrayal’ is seen as a destruction of his reputation, ‘...My name, that was as fresh/As Dian’s own visage, is now begrimed and black/As mine own face.’ (III.3.391-393). Once bent on exacting a punishment, Othello promises murderous actions, nothing less will do. A monster is unleashed.

Iago

Iago is an experienced and capable soldier, husband of Emilia, and widely respected. When the play begins, he has been named ensign to General Othello – a slight he feels most keenly, believing he has been overlooked for a more deserving post. With that as an initial motive, it is Iago who poisons the mind of Othello, manipulates the actions of Roderigo and traps the innocent Cassio in a scheme laid purely for his own **revenge**. As he attempts to maintain the control he has established, and direct the chaos he has created, Iago’s scheme reaches a conclusion that ensures the destruction of Othello and Desdemona as well as that of his own wife Emilia and Roderigo. What Iago makes of this ending, we will never know, as he promises, ‘From this time forth I never will speak word.’ (V.2.310). There is no repentance, no seeking of redemption, nor is there gloating nor jubilation. In Iago’s words, ‘What you know, you know’ (V.2.309). We may know some, but we understand little. And so the tragic potential for evil continues, uncontained and uncontainable.

Energetic but seemingly motiveless, it is Iago’s lack of convincing reason for his hatred of Othello that makes him an image of evil itself. A much more complex version of the stock ‘Vice’ character of Medieval morality plays, Iago is referred to as a devil on several



occasions. It is Iago's own words that align him with God's antithesis. Line 65 of the opening scene has Iago pronounce 'I am not what I am' (I.1.65) – an inversion of God's statement to Moses in Exodus (Ex.3.14) 'I am that I am', and words that express him as an embodiment of the negative principle. Iago's outward appearance belies what is within; his evil wears an 'honest' face. Iago is a consummate villain. A Machiavellian villain.

- What are Iago's claimed motives? How convincing are they?
- Samuel T. Coleridge described his attitude as one of 'motiveless malignity'.

Iago is in turns brilliant, horrifying and enthralling to observe. With a baseless hatred Iago lays schemes at will, using his own arts of manipulation, opportunistically grasping any pieces of luck that come his way as he makes his way into Othello's mind. It is only to Roderigo that Iago admits his desire to hurt Othello in some way, 'I follow him to serve my turn upon him' (I.1.42), but it soon becomes obvious that Roderigo is not a bosom companion of Iago, but yet another tool to manipulate. Iago cannot feel affection for anyone. On different occasions, Iago is named as being honest, reliable, a straight talker, a beloved companion. Has Iago's reputation been another manipulated creation, serving his own purposes all along?

- Find both positive and negative references to Iago – spoken throughout the play.

Iago's choice of behaviour represents all that is repulsive in man's soul. His intelligence and cunning are terrifying. He is a master manipulator, bent on achieving his own will. He understands the mind of his fellow man more than most, and chooses to warp the strengths in others, into becoming their weaknesses. What is continually horrifying about Iago is his ability to belong comfortably in all corners of humanity, being a capable and successful member of society, while all along masking his true desires.

Desdemona

Desdemona is a youthful character who can be seen at times as bold and determined, at others submissive and faithful. Iago initially casts Desdemona in the role of sexual victim of Othello, whereas her father praises her as a docile, dutiful and faithful daughter. As it transpires, the union between Othello and Desdemona was one of choice, albeit made independently of her father. Brabantio is heartbroken – and dies from grief. For Iago however, the accusations of being inappropriately sexually active, are exactly what he delights in hanging further gossip upon. Desdemona becomes an innocent lamb sacrificed to Othello's jealous rage, thanks to the malignant involvement of Iago.

When the play opens, Desdemona, once a faithful and submissive daughter to Brabantio, Senator of Venice, has newly become a faithful and submissive wife to Othello, the Moor of Venice.

'My noble father,
...You are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,
And so much duty...
...I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.' (I.3.179-188)

A member of the upper levels of Venetian society, Desdemona has broken the rules of her house and society in choosing, independently, to elope with an outsider as regards colour, class and kin. 'With a greedy ear' (I.3.148) Desdemona had devoured the stories of Othello's history. In his words, 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed' (I.3.166).



Desdemona is strong-willed and honest in her speech; her attachment to Othello is sincere, if idealised. Desirous of following him in his campaigns, she capably takes on the role and duties of the General's wife, acting as hostess and befriending Othello's subordinates. She believes that she has his ear and that she has some influence over his decisions. Whether such a relationship, based on an idealisation of his character, could have flourished, we shall never know, as Iago takes it upon himself to ensure the destruction of the marriage.

Desdemona is an innocent character, frequently painted as the Christ-like good to Iago's demonic evil. To continue the comparison, Desdemona is betrayed by those she loves, and who should love her in return. She falls for an older, fascinating and experienced man who feels he has reached a long-awaited contentment in finding reciprocated love with her. For Desdemona however, the journey is only beginning – and she looks forward to many tomorrows. Othello ends such hopes. Iago is placed as protector of Desdemona as her husband carries out his military duties. Iago makes use of Desdemona as a pawn – twisting and corrupting every innocent move and choice of language. Once again she is betrayed. Roderigo is a rejected suitor of Desdemona – but one who cannot accept the refusal. His desire for her continues to flourish and ensures his involvement in a plot which ends her life. Brabantio cannot accept nature would 'err' in allowing his beloved daughter to desire Othello. 'I'll not have it so' (I.3.234), he declares when it is proposed that she should return to his house upon Othello's departure. Rejected by father, husband, all who should protect her, Desdemona is powerless.

Various readings have been made of Desdemona's final scenes. Does she fight and resist courageously – as she boldly declares of the blow received from Othello's hand 'I have not deserved this' (IV.1.240) – or willingly submit to Othello's fury, incapable of understanding or refuting the rage he feels for her. Modern critics often wish to read a resistance into Desdemona's actions – is this necessary? If we continue to associate Desdemona with Christ – we see a love freely given, and a love that does not die in death. The last selfless words expressed by Desdemona, confirm this undying love even further.

Emilia: O, who hath done this deed?
Desdemona: Nobody, I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell! (V.2.132-134)

Roderigo

Roderigo is a gentleman of Venice, and a rejected suitor of Desdemona who retains intense feelings for the lady – so much so he is capable of being **manipulated** into plots by Iago, with the false promise that Roderigo's assistance will draw Desdemona ever closer to himself. Roderigo's character degenerates as the plot unfolds, and while there are occasions when we feel a measure of sympathy for him – both as a victim of Iago, and in his doomed love – his gullibility and willingness to participate in the cruel and violent schemes of Iago soon lose him this sympathy.

Cassio

Cassio is a handsome, rich and widely respected soldier, newly appointed to Lieutenant by Othello. His looks, charm and inability to drink without incident – 'I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking' (II.3.30-31) – are manipulated as weaknesses by Iago. Iago belittles the new honour placed upon Cassio by referring to him slightly as 'a great arithmetician' (I.1.19) who is lacking in Iago's self-proclaimed battle-hardened experience. His jealousy is born of resentment of Cassio's class privileges, which ensured him promotion over the head of Iago. Iago further discredits Cassio by ensuring the Lieutenant loses his good reputation and standing with Othello. This cuts Cassio deeply,



and his need to regain his position is a circumstance easily manipulated by Iago. Devoted to Othello and with no illicit designs on Desdemona, despite Iago's insinuations, Cassio is the only character used by Iago who escapes with his life.

Emilia

Emilia is both a loyal wife to Iago, and a loyal lady's maid to her mistress Desdemona. Emilia's character grows as the play unfolds, demonstrating a strong-willed, more mature and sharply critical personality. It seems strange that Iago's devious behaviour has never been recognised by the perceptive Emilia, but her shock in the final scenes – demonstrated in the repeated 'My husband?' – reveals a genuine disbelief that he could be the mastermind behind Othello's misinformation, and Desdemona's death. If it is true that she has no suspicion of her husband, then Emilia's handing over of the handkerchief is a moment of unwitting complicity in the tragedy of her mistress and of Othello. She wishes to please her husband, 'I nothing, but to please his fantasy' (III.3.303), which further explains her lack of curiosity in Iago's desires for the handkerchief love-token. She thought less of the relationship of Othello and Desdemona, than of her own relationship with her husband – a reasonable situation.

Emilia is not – from the little interaction we are privy to – a silent acceptor of Iago's abuse, refuting his occasional insults with a defiant – 'You ha' little cause to say so' (II.2.111). Emilia is not ignorant of questionable behaviour in the world, accurately suspecting and naming Othello's tormentor as 'some eternal villain' (IV.2.134). In Act Four, Emilia reveals more understanding in the discussion of fidelity and marital betrayal with Desdemona than her mistress possesses. Experience has taught her that **men and women** are equal in their passions and desires – something Desdemona is yet to discover. It is this perceptive understanding of the sexes that ensure Emilia will not be physically or verbally intimidated by Othello, nor by Iago. Her determination to be heard, to defend her innocent mistress, and her honest description of both men in the concluding scene make Emilia someone to be admired. She does not shrink from responsibility when discovering her complicity in the deception of Othello nor does she 'hold [her]... peace' (V.2.225) as bid by her husband, despite his intimation of violence. In her dying words she takes comfort in her own honesty, 'So come my soul to bliss as I speak true' (V.2.257).



A02: Dramatic Methods

Staging

The Shakespearean stage was sparse. Locations were named and imagined, not lavishly depicted through 'scenery'; tempests were described and through description experienced; characters declared themselves invisible, and so they were; disguises were impenetrable. On the Elizabethan stage, the audience's belief was willing and sustained. For many in the audience, there was no disbelief to suspend.

Stage entrances and exits contribute to the presentation of Iago's scheming – his exit before Brabantio appears downstage in the first scene, for example, allows him to have stirred the pot without having been identified. When entering upon a scene, Iago is quick to manipulate what he finds there – consider his and Othello's arrival upon the conversation between Desdemona and Cassio in Act Three, scene One.

Movement around the stage lend a natural fluidity to the experience of a play, and in moments of dramatic necessity or tension, positions are taken that allow for the concealment of a character. Being hidden is of dramatic significance in permitting a scene to unfold, a proof to be heard, or a plot to develop. Othello eavesdrops on Cassio – 'Stand you a while apart' (IV.1.73) Iago instructs him, so the Moor will interpret Iago's conversation with Cassio 'Quite in the wrong' (IV.1.102). Hiding has not allowed Othello to uncover a truth, but rather to misinterpret even more: the dramatic irony is significant. Iago conceals himself at the opening of Act Five, with a false promise to Roderigo, as he states he will be 'Here at thy hand' (V.1.7) to assist. Combined with a number of exits and re-entries, Iago's movements in the scene act as a symbol for his machinations throughout – promising falsely, appearing in order to advance himself alone, and taking the opportunity to remove any who would reveal the truth about his actions.

The use of the marriage bed in the final scenes of the play is a particularly effective staging tool. The bed allows for an effective 'theatrical' presentation of Desdemona's death: the symbolic nature of such a location, the indication of corruption of the marriage and the placing of the confused Desdemona at the metaphorical and literal centre of the action. The opening and closing of the curtains are equally dramatic in the concealment and slow revelation of what has occurred. The curtains conceal the actions of Othello, keep secret from Emilia the death of her mistress, and once thrown wide, reveal the extent of the crime to the audience and players alike. (For an audience in a traditional theatre, the curtains of the bed and those of the proscenium arch may 'echo' each other.)

Imagery

Throughout *Othello*, Shakespeare's choice of figurative language propels several significant themes and ideas. The imagery of black and white, light and darkness, heaven and hell are all significant in establishing concepts of race, knowledge, virtue and vice.

Many of the actions in *Othello* occur in the dark of evening, or late at night. Shadows conceal truths, and the sun does not have opportunity to reveal the treachery. When Desdemona begs Othello, 'Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight' (V.2.87) her desperation



is one born from the hope that daylight will sweep away the metaphorical darkness of her night. The plea is too late.

The disparaging and insulting words associated with Othello's difference of skin colour all fall from the tongues of the knaves and the deluded – Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio. 'Black ram'... 'sooty bosom' and repeated reference of the word 'black' as a negative. The Senate sees only a 'valiant Moor' (I.3.47), Desdemona saw the true face and inner soul of Othello 'in my mind' (I.3.252), and Emilia is more interested in the black heart of the villain who is persecuting Othello, than the blackness of skin before her. If any racism does exist in Othello, it takes the form of insult, jealousy and anger – feelings and actions which are not recommended to the audience. Othello is not capable of maintaining his 'fairness' however – and he too soon internalises the negativity placed at his door.

At the heart of Othello is a paradox based on the traditional interpretations of white and black, light and darkness. It is the black Othello who is 'far more fairer than black' (I.3.291), and the white Iago who revels in hellish (black-hearted) schemes of treachery. It is Iago who spreads darkness into the mind of Othello, creating Othello's desire to 'Put out the light' (V.2.7). Desdemona – 'fair paper' (IV.2.73) and heaven-sent – has been mislabelled and recoloured by Iago's words. Othello longs to wipe clean the apparent stain of Desdemona's blackening sins, and prevent them from happening again – her image is now 'begrimed and black' to Othello's mind. Maintained virtue has become suggested vice, the heaven of their unity has become 'a burning hell' (V.2.138) and the light of Desdemona's love has become obscured in Othello's darkening vision.

Props

Handkerchiefs were significant in early modern Europe. They represented wealth and status, and the possession of another's handkerchief spoke volumes of the implied relationship.

Othello gifted Desdemona with an embroidered handkerchief as a love-token, one which Desdemona in innocence and loyalty kept by her 'To kiss and talk to' (III.3.300). Othello imbues the token with significance, allowing it to transform in his mind into an ominous symbol of loyalty and fidelity - which ironically it is for Emilia, when she gives it to Iago. The handkerchief moves from hand to hand, misused and misappropriated, turning from a symbol of love and unity into one of destructive jealousy.

Critics often pin the moment when the tragedy is sealed on the actions of Emilia. Consider however the scene where Othello rejects the offered handkerchief when Desdemona attempts to ease his headache. Othello disregards it with 'Your napkin is too little' (III.3.291) and it is he who drops it. The significance of this moment should not be overlooked. As the handkerchief is dropped and later retrieved by Emilia, Othello has symbolically rejected Desdemona's love and plays his part in the self-fulfilling tragedy of their love.



A03: Contexts

The form of a Classical Greek Tragedy – as articulated by Aristotle – is one into which *Othello* can fit. A word of caution here, however – do not push too hard – Shakespeare's variants on this model of tragedy are just as interesting as his adherence to it.

Inevitable doom is at the heart of Aristotelian tragedy – and from the outset, Iago has that doom planned for Othello.

The hero of the classic tragedy is usually one of high status, royalty or fame. This was in order to emphasise the extent of the tragic fall. A domestic tragedy – also popular during the Renaissance – contains a less socially impressive protagonist, one of middle or lower-class status, and one who might possibly be more easy for the audience to identify with. It has been argued that Othello himself could fit into either category, or that he is possibly more ordinary than the typical high-ranking hero. That said, the respect given to Othello by the noblemen of Venice, and his own claims of descending from 'men of royal siege' (I.3.22) do something to elevate his status.

Our hero is a tragic one – a hero in possession of a trait which is simultaneously something that makes him great, as well as being the flaw that becomes his downfall. Hubris – being over ambitious and prideful – is the typical tragic flaw. We could argue this about Othello, but how convincing would it be? The painfully ironic flaw of trust and loyalty is just as convincing. Next comes hamartia – an error in judgement which seals the tragic fate of the hero. Othello's listening to Iago would be such an error.

Fate also intervenes. The combination of events, some apparently small, that produces the fall of Othello is carefully contrived by the dramatist. The Shakespearean tragic hero is thus beset by both inner and outer forces which combine to effect his downfall. There are opportunities for redemption, and it is the lack of recognition of these moments that make the fall all the more tragic.

In the conclusion of Greek tragedies, a catharsis is experienced. The once ordered society has been temporarily thrown into chaos – the conclusion is the moment when the fog clears and the resettling occurs. The audience's emotions are purged, and we return to normality at the conclusion of the action. Aristotle said that the catharsis of the audience involved 'pity and terror' – pity at the dreadful fall of the hero, and terror at the realization that such an event could happen to anyone...to us! Some semblance of order is restored in our play, in that an evil action has reached its dramatic end, but it isn't comfort we feel at the end of *Othello*. In fact, a continued discomfort is experienced at the very real possibility of similar scenarios recurring. Justice is not fully represented in the outcome because, although tragedy metes out its own order, that order is not one of 'poetic justice'. If pity and fear are to be our key emotions in a Greek tragedy, then as the curtains close on *Othello*, there is ample opportunity for both. A man of great qualities has met a terrible end, self-caused, but in excess of what he deserved. Where our sympathy lies however is an interesting question – traditionally the hero is looked at with pity, but it is no difficult leap to suggest that the majority look to Desdemona with tears, instead of her husband. Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and Senecan Tragedy may also have influenced Shakespeare



– lending a taste of the more bloodthirsty and less restrained to the plot. The graphic ‘I’ll tear her all to pieces!’ (III.3.436) is a brutal image, more suited to a violent villain than a flawed hero. For Aristotle, however, the tragic hero needs not be categorised as purely good or consummately evil. The interworking of the two is the more interesting, and more convincing.



A04: Connections

Students should be keenly aware that there are equal marks available for their treatment of the extract and the wider text in the exam. The focus should be on parallels or connections between the extract and the wider text which are relevant to the key terms of the stimulus statement. It may be beneficial for students to prioritise connections that also reveal their knowledge and understanding of the dramatic methods (A02) and the nature of Shakespearean Tragedy (A03).

When studying the play, you will note many connections and it may be useful to track elements which show parallels or contrasts.



A05: Argument and interpretation

For your response to convince the examiner, it is important to have a well-structured argument so you need to plan before you write. It is a good idea to underline the keywords of the question before you begin to read and annotate the extract given – it will help you focus on the most relevant features.

Constructing an essay argument requires you to write thematically rather than chronologically, so make this easier for yourself by adding any relevant references from the rest of the play next to the notes that relate to them. You will be able to link them more easily and avoid missing connections that could have earned you marks before you go on to your next paragraph.

A very strong argument will examine alternative interpretations and explain why these have been dismissed as infeasible or ill-fitting. This does not need to form a large part of your essay, but it will show the examiner that you have thoughtfully considered other points of view and made an informed decision to reach your own conclusions.

Specimen Question:

Throughout the tragedy as a whole, Iago has no motive for the evil he does.

By referring closely to **Extract 1** and to other appropriately selected parts of the text, show to what extent you would agree with the view expressed above.

Your argument should include relevant comments on Shakespeare's dramatic methods, and relevant external contextual information on the nature of Shakespearean Tragedy.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of the given extract and other relevant parts of the text.

A01 and A04

Consider:

- What has led to the exchange printed in the extract? Consider Iago's intentions and the reason for Roderigo's capitulation.
- Iago speaks the words of most consequence in the extract – and yet leaves Roderigo to bear the burden of responsibility – consider the slander Iago is inciting, and the way his words go further than the words of Roderigo.
- Look at the conversation exchanged immediately before the extract – Iago outlines his feelings for Othello, and his intentions of abusing the relationship.
- Look at the words of Iago in reply to Brabantio's 'Thou art a villain!' (not included in the extract) – Iago's plain speaking and knowledge of himself as 'villain' make for a character who does not hide his motivation – there is no deeper reasoning behind



- Iago's actions – what he feels, is what he speaks – to the audience at least.
- Iago's later passing comment of Emilia and Othello's possible connection – he does not linger on it - for doing so may prove how insubstantial it is – and yet this too is a cause for his actions.
- Iago's easy manipulation of any situation – the enjoyment he takes from making the innocuous, poisonous.
- Iago's easy manipulation of any character – until his wife is able to see his actions and breaks the bond between them.

A02

Staging

- Iago and Roderigo both speak – but only Roderigo identifies himself – and Iago exits as soon as Brabantio makes to come downstairs.
- The movement and positioning of Cassio and Desdemona at various stages of the play is manipulated by Iago.
- The positioning of Othello, hidden from sight, when Iago speaks to Cassio later in the play, is manipulated by Iago to his own advantage.
- The hidden involvement of Iago in the fight he stages between Cassio and Roderigo: the situation manipulated to Iago's advantage – repositioning himself when he sees moments of opportunity.

Imagery

- Iago's choice of words poisons the minds of those around him – consider the imagery created in the words chosen to describe Othello and Desdemona's relationship in the extract.
- Consider how he speaks of Othello in his asides to the audience throughout the play.
- Consider how he abuses the idea of honesty when speaking to Othello about Cassio throughout the play.
- Consider how he encourages Othello to consider himself an outsider both of society, and from Desdemona's love, throughout the play.

Props

- Emilia does not know why Iago would want Desdemona's handkerchief, and yet he asks for it 'a hundred times'.
- Iago engineers the passing of the handkerchief into Cassio's hand, and thus Bianca's hand and into the sight of Othello.

A03

- The inevitable doom of Othello is sealed before this extract begins – the extract is step one in bringing the plan into action. The element of fate in tragedy: it has been said that in Shakespearean tragedy 'character is fate'.
- The willingness of Iago to manipulate anyone is revealed in the opening quotation of the extract – and as he overrides Roderigo's words throughout. Iago as antagonist.
- Iago manipulates the flaws of Othello, abusing his trust and loyalty, and poisoning his mind with fear. Othello's hamartia.
- Iago encourages the bloodthirsty brutality in Othello in a way suggestive of the more bloodthirsty genre of Senecan tragedy, inciting Othello to feel 'waked wrath' (III.3.368) - the consequences of such an awakening.
- The expected catharsis is arguably incomplete with Iago remaining silent and unwilling to give reasons for his behaviour. We are given no explanation of the evil which has erupted.

**Remember:**

- Stick to the key terms used in the question.
- Think what the question is really asking you.
- Argue clearly – explore opposing points of view but explain why they don't sway you.
- Make connections throughout the text, demonstrating your knowledge of the play and your ability to link concepts, ideas and references.



General Glossary for A2 1

– this glossary is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Antagonist | The main character who opposes the protagonist or hero in a narrative or drama; in simple terms he/she is the villain. (See protagonist.) |
| Aside | A brief remark made by a character during dialogue which is understood not to be addressed to or heard by other characters. In an aside true feelings are voiced, as distinct from what is being said for others to hear. See also soliloquy. |
| Blank verse | Non-rhyming lines of poetry, the standard verse form of Elizabethan drama, also known as 'iambic pentameter'. Each iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, like the sound of a heartbeat – five iambic feet make a ten syllable pattern per line, a rhythm frequently used in Shakespeare's work. |
| Characterisation | The means by which a character's traits are established, often through action and dialogue in drama. |
| Climax | The moment of greatest tension in a drama. It is usually near the end of the play where the rising conflict results in a high point of intensity. |
| Costume | The clothes or outfit worn by a character. |
| Denouement | The plot resolution of a narrative. |
| Dialogue | The words spoken between two or more characters in a play, novel or poem. |
| Dramatic convention | A set of rules which all parties in a dramatic performance accept (including, importantly the audience), e.g. the 'Three Unities' in classical Greek drama, the Shakespearean soliloquy, the missing fourth wall of a traditional nineteenth-century stage set, the impenetrability of disguise in Shakespearean drama. |
| Dramatic irony | A stylistic device where the audience is aware of the implications of a speech or act, but the character(s) involved is not. The audience has an understanding that the characters do not have. |
| Figurative language | Non-literal language – similes, metaphors, hyperbole and synecdoche, for example – used by writers to communicate additional meaning about characters and situations. |
| Imagery | This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language used in a more than literal way that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. |



Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects.

Juxtaposition

Placing two contrasting characters, things, ideas close together to illuminate meaning or create tension.

Lighting

Refers to the way the stage is lit and the equipment which provides artificial light effects.

Metaphor

Where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.

Meter (or metre)

The pattern of rhythmic accents in poetic verse, formed of stressed and unstressed syllables in certain numbers and combinations.

Metonymy

A form of figurative speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. One example would be referring to royalty or a monarch as “the crown”.

Motif

A dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.

Pathos

A quality of a play’s action or dialogue that stimulates the audience to feel pity for a character. Pathos is always present in tragedy, and may be present in comedy as well.

Props

Items used on stage by the actors.

Protagonist

The principal character in a novel or drama (See antagonist).

Soliloquy

A speech in which a character’s true feelings or intentions are voiced, usually but not always when that character is alone on stage. In general, soliloquies are longer than asides, which have the same revelatory function, and do not always involve turning ‘aside’ from an ongoing dialogue.

Sound effects

Sounds on the stage used to create the setting or atmosphere of the play, or for other dramatic effect.

Stage/Set design

This refers to the visual scenery on the stage, the creation of the background in which the play is set.

Stage directions

The directions written in the play script to indicate how the characters should speak and move. Shakespeare seems to have written very few explicit stage directions. These were added by later editors. There are however plenty of implicit stage directions in the Shakespearean text.

Structure

The way in which the parts of the plot are organised.



Synecdoche

A form of figurative speech where the whole concept of something is referred to by one of its parts. An example would be calling a car “wheels” or asking if someone can “lend a hand”.

Theme

A main idea or concern explored in a work of art.