



# ***OTHELLO***

## **AQA A-Level English Literature A**

**Paper One: Love through the ages**

**Section A: Shakespeare**

**Name:**

**English Literature teacher:**

# The Assessment Objectives

**AO1:** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression

**AO2:** Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts

**AO3:** Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received

**AO4:** Explore connections across literary texts

**AO5:** Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations

## How can I demonstrate these assessment objectives?

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| <b>AO1</b> | Relevant arguments and discussion of the scene and the play as a whole. A range of precise points should be made and you should use appropriate subject specific concepts and terminology.   |
| <b>AO2</b> | Arguments should include engagement with Shakespeare's methods and effects. The best answers will explore how Shakespeare's methods work together. You should also consider how structure shapes meaning.  |
| <b>AO3</b> | Arguments should include factual context or opinions based on context that shows an understanding of how contextual factors shape meaning. Comments on genre or ideas about tragedy may also be used relevantly.   |
| <b>AO4</b> | Connections to other parts of the play should be relevant to the question. References to other scenes in the play should use specific references and discussion should be analytical. Consider how the text can be seen as framed by a wider network of texts and contexts to which it connects.                           |
| <b>AO5</b> | The essay should offer alternative readings and arguments. Critical arguments might be offered to enhance the arguments or the alternatives offered; the best answers will evaluate the viewpoint contested in the question. You should explore how the interpretation of texts is not a fixed process, but a dynamic one. |

# Pre-teaching tasks

Before we study each scene in class you will need to read it at home and understand it the best that you can (use the digital *Othello* study pack to help you). You will also need to complete the following comprehension questions so that you are ready to engage with the scene in class.

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**Act One is set in Venice a highly civilised and commercially prosperous ‘city state’ ruled by an elected Duke or Doge. As you read Act One, consider Shakespeare’s presentation of Venetian society and its values during the Renaissance era as the backdrop to the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.**

## Act 1 Scene 1

1. What is Iago’s complaint against Othello?
2. What insight do you gain into the relationship between Othello and Iago from Iago’s speech on lines 41 – 66?
3. What is the significance of the following quotation in revealing Iago’s feelings towards Othello: “In following him I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end”?
4. What can you infer about Iago from the way that he speaks to Brabantio in this scene?
5. What is the significance of Iago’s exit on line 158?
6. What do you learn of Roderigo’s character from his words and actions in this scene?
7. The characters of Othello and Desdemona are introduced in this scene before we actually meet them. What do we know about them so far?

## Act 1 Scene 2

1. Look closely at Othello’s speeches to Iago. What is his response to Brabantio’s complaint?
2. What do you learn about Desdemona’s history from Brabantio’s speech from line 62? How does this affect your view of their relationship?
3. What are Brabantio’s main objections to the marriage of Desdemona and Othello?
4. What prevents Othello’s arrest at the end of the scene?

## Act 1 Scene 3

1. What do you learn about the political situation at this point in the play? Why do you think this might be significant?
2. Look closely at Othello’s speeches in defence of his marriage:
  - a. What tone does he use when addressing the senate?
  - b. How do you respond to the phrase, “Rude am I in my speech”?

- c. What do you learn about his background and experience?
  - d. Do you think there is a strong foundation for marriage based upon what Othello says?
3. What is your impression of Brabantio and his relationship with his daughter in this scene? What insights do you gain about the context of the play?
  4. What do you learn about Desdemona's character when she defends her choice of husband to her father and the Duke?
  5. How far does Desdemona's behaviour fit with Brabantio's account of her as "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself"?
  6. Are you convinced by her actions and language that she genuinely loves Othello? Do you think that their relationship is based on hero-worship?
  7. What do you find interesting about the comments made by the Duke in this scene?
  8. Read the exchange between Iago and Roderigo from line 302:
    - a. Roderigo is suffering from unrequited love and it seems that his prospects with Desdemona are hopeless. What arguments does Iago use to convince Roderigo to continue his pursuit of Desdemona?
    - b. What sort of imagery and language does Iago use when describing love, in particular the relationship between Othello and Desdemona?
    - c. What does Iago say is his motivation for making Othello a cuckold? (This is the first reference to cuckoldry in the play, which is a widespread theme in medieval and Renaissance English literature.)
  9. Read Iago's first soliloquy carefully. What does it reveal about his true character and the working out of his revenge plot against Othello?

**In Act Two, the location shifts to Cyprus as a result of the impending threat of barbarism in the form of the Turkish fleet. This shift is significant in a number of ways and it is important to consider how the characterisation and plot development are affected by it. Note that Act Two begins with a storm; what might be the significance of this?**

### **Act 2 Scene 1**

1. What is the purpose of the discussion between Montano and the Gentleman?
2. How is tension created at the beginning of the scene?
3. What is Cassio's opinion of Desdemona? How is this likely to help Iago in his plan?
4. What is your impression of Iago from his conversation with Emilia and Desdemona from line 100? What is the purpose of this exchange between them?
5. Summarise Iago's attitude towards women as expressed in this scene.
6. Othello arrives on line 173. What state of mind is he in and how does his use of language and imagery reflect this?
7. Look closely at the exchange between Roderigo and Iago between lines 205 and 266.
  - a. How does Iago convince Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio? What is his view of the relationship between Desdemona and Othello?
  - b. How does he intend to use Roderigo in his plan?
  - c. Why do you think that he is able to manipulate Roderigo so successfully?

8. Read Iago's soliloquy carefully. How has his revenge plot developed further by this point in the play?

### **Act 2 Scene 2**

1. A herald proclaims "the celebration of [the] nuptial of Othello and Desdemona. What is your impression of Othello as Governor of Cyprus from the Herald's announcement?"

### **Act 2 Scene 3**

1. Comment on the contrasting opinions of Desdemona expressed by Iago and Cassio.
2. How does this scene reveal the working out of Iago's plan?
3. What change do you notice in Othello's speech in lines 185 – 199?
4. Cassio shows how distraught he is at his demotion when he says, "I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." How is this imagery continued throughout the rest of the conversation?
5. How does Iago intend to use Desdemona in his plan?
6. Read Iago's speech on lines 303 – 328 and summarise the plan that has been conceived by the end of this speech.

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**In Act Three, Iago's manipulation of Othello begins to take a hold on him and we see a gradual breakdown in his character and language.**

### **Act 3 Scene 1**

1. What does Cassio do to try to appease Othello?
2. How does Othello react to Cassio's gesture?
3. What does Iago tell Cassio after the clown leaves?
4. What news does Emilia bring to Cassio?

### **Act 3 Scene 3: 'the temptation scene'**

#### **Lines 1 – 89**

1. What promise does Desdemona make to Cassio? What is the significance of this promise?
2. How does Cassio unwittingly play into Iago's hands? How does Iago try to exploit his actions?
3. Comment on the conversation between Desdemona and Othello. How does she contribute to her own downfall?

#### **Lines 90-195**

1. How does Iago win Othello's trust and arouse his suspicion?
2. What is the significance of Iago's comments about reputation and how do they compare with his words to Cassio earlier in the play?

3. What is the significance of Iago's warning about "the green-eyed monster"?
4. What is Othello's response and how does this play into Iago's hands?

#### **Lines 196 – 279**

1. What do you think is the purpose of Iago's remark, "In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands"?
2. How does Iago convince Othello that he has his General's interests at heart?
3. Othello refers to Desdemona's marrying him as "nature erring from itself." What is the significance of the remark, taking into account the attitudes of the other characters?
4. Find a quotation which best sums up Othello's state of mind at this point in the play.
5. What do you notice about the timing of Iago's exit and return in this part of the scene?

#### **Lines 280 – 333**

1. What is the effect upon Othello of Desdemona's return on line 280? How does this fit with his earlier feelings?
2. Comment on the meeting between Othello and Desdemona. How have things changed between them?
3. What do you learn about the relationship between Iago and Emilia?
4. How does Iago intend to use Desdemona's handkerchief in his plan?

#### **Lines 333 – 480**

1. How has Othello changed by this point in the play?
2. How does Othello react towards Iago after this speech?
3. How does Iago turn the situation to his advantage?
4. What 'evidence' does Iago provide of Desdemona's supposed betrayal? What effect does this information have upon Othello and his language?
5. What is the effect of Othello kneeling during this scene?

#### **Act 3 Scene 4**

1. What do you think is Shakespeare's dramatic purpose in including the brief exchange between the Clown and Desdemona in this scene?
2. What is the dramatic effect on the audience of Othello's discussion with Desdemona?
3. How is the contrast between Desdemona's true innocence and Iago's version of her emphasised during this scene?
4. How does Emilia's perception of Othello contrast with Desdemona's?
5. How does what you learn of the relationship between Bianca and Cassio influence your opinion of Cassio's character?

### **Act 4 Scene 1**

1. Find a quotation to support each of the following statements:
  - a. Iago taunts Othello and controls his imagination
  - b. Iago ironically plays devil's advocate
  - c. Iago revels in his power to torment Othello
  - d. Othello breaks down
  - e. Othello's language is 'Iagoised' (corrupted with the ensign's distinctive idiom)
  - f. Despite his apparent conviction to murder Desdemona, Othello is actually struggling to contradictory emotions for his wife
  - g. Othello is torn between opposites: love/hate; public/private; personal/professional
  - h. Iago feigns reluctance to speak ill of Ludovico
2. How does Desdemona react to the physical violence that she endures in this scene?
3. Why is it significant that Othello's actions towards her are witnessed by visitors from Venice?

### **Act 4 Scene 2**

1. What effect does Othello's questioning of Emilia have on his behaviour?
2. How does Othello's treatment of Desdemona affect your view of their relationship at this point in the play?
3. Consider the language and imagery used by Othello in this scene. How has it changed?
4. What do you feel about Desdemona's language and actions towards Othello in this scene? How does she react to his false accusations and what do her reactions reveal about her character?
5. Look closely at the exchange between Desdemona, Emilia and Iago. What is the effect of irony in this scene?
6. What new information do you learn from the discussion between Roderigo and Iago at the end of this scene? How might this affect the rest of the play?
7. What dramatic function is served by this scene? How essential is Roderigo to the success of Iago's plot? What other function could he serve in the play?

### **Act 4 Scene 3: 'the willow scene'**

1. How do Othello's actions at the beginning of the scene create a sense of foreboding?
2. What do you learn about the willow song? How does the story that Desdemona tells about it foreshadow her fate?
3. What is the dramatic effect of the speech between Desdemona and Emilia being broken by her singing?
4. Desdemona and Emilia discuss male and female relationships and marriage. How does Emilia's view of the world contrast with Desdemona's? Think about:
  - a. Their views on marriage and adultery

- b. Their response to Othello
  - c. Their use of language
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### **Act 5 Scene 1**

**At the end of Act 4 Scene 2, Iago introduces the idea of killing Cassio to Roderigo. In this scene, things do not quite go to plan.**

1. What attitude does Roderigo show towards killing Cassio?
2. What do we learn from Iago's asides?
3. What do Othello's words at lines 31 – 37 tell us about his state of mind?
4. Comment on Iago's words and actions as he re-enters the scene at lines 46
  - a. How does he fool Gratiano and Lodovico into believing him "a very valiant fellow"?
  - b. Why does he kill Roderigo?
  - c. How does he explain Roderigo's death to the others?
  - d. What is his attitude toward Bianca?
5. What does Iago's final aside in the scene tell us about his position at this point in the play? How would you expect him to deliver these lines?
6. How would you describe the dramatic impact of this scene?

### **Act 5 Scene 2**

1. Explain Othello's conflicting emotions as they are revealed in his speech at the beginning of this scene.
2. Read the discussion between Othello and Desdemona after she wakes up on line 22:
  - a. What is the dramatic impact of this exchange?
  - b. How does she unwittingly reinforce Othello's conviction that she is guilty?
3. Look closely at Othello's speech on lines 89-99. How does Shakespeare convey the nature of his emotion through the language used?
4. Consider Emilia's words and actions in this scene:
  - a. How does Emilia respond to Othello on discovering Desdemona?
  - b. How important is she in this scene?
  - c. How does her behaviour in this scene influence your view of her?
5. How is the truth of Iago's villainy revealed?
6. What is your impression of Othello from his final speeches in this scene? Consider his language in detail.
7. Consider the impact of the ending of the play:
  - a. Do you think the ending is successful? Why do you think the final words of the play are left to Lodovico?
  - b. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to leave the fate of the "hellish villain" Iago unresolved?

# Othello: Contexts

## Biographical context

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the English town of Stratford-Upon-Avon. He was born to relatively well-off middle-class parents and was educated at a local grammar school, where among other subjects he studied Latin.

Shakespeare was born early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, whose reign epitomised a Golden Age in English literature and culture. The Renaissance in the Arts had started in Italy more than a century earlier and Shakespeare's works are imbued with the spirit of his age.



After leaving school, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, before moving to London, the heart of a rapidly growing theatrical world, and becoming an actor. He started writing his own plays shortly after. Very little is known with certainty about his life, but he became quite a wealthy man and owned a fine house in Stratford. He died in 1616, succeeded by two daughters; his only son, Hamnet, died as a child.

He wrote 37 plays in all, as well as a number of poems, which includes a celebrated sequence of sonnets. He remained an active member of the King's Men theatrical company until shortly before his death.

## Historical and social contexts

### The Renaissance

The Renaissance (literally 'rebirth') saw a revival of artistic and intellectual endeavour, which began in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. It spread gradually northwards across Europe, and is first detectable in England in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century in the writings of the scholar and statesman Sir Thomas More and in the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Its keynote was a curiosity in thought which challenged old assumptions and traditions. There was a new confidence in human reason and in human potential which challenged old convictions. Classical texts and the culture of Greece and Rome were rediscovered and, with this rediscovery, the 'golden age' of English literature began, of which Shakespeare's plays are a part.

### Shakespeare's drama and the Renaissance

Shakespeare's drama is innovative and challenging in exactly the way of the Renaissance. It examines and questions the beliefs, assumptions and politics upon which Elizabethan society was founded. And although his plays conclude in a restoration of order and stability, Shakespeare subverts traditional values, as we see in *Othello*, where the tragic hero is a black man and the heroine an assertive young woman. Critical, rebellious, mocking voices, like Iago's, are heard in Shakespeare's plays. Are characters like Iago given subversive views

to discredit them, or were they the only ones through whom a voice could be given to radical and dissident ideas? Was Shakespeare a conservative or a revolutionary?

Because of censorship, any criticism Shakespeare makes of the way those in authority behave, or questions he asks about race and nobility, had to be muted or oblique. Direct criticism of the monarch or contemporary English court would not be tolerated. This has something to do with why Shakespeare's plays were always set either in the past, or abroad, as is the case with *Othello*.

### **Nationalism and xenophobia**

It is vital that you are aware of the attitudes that existed towards foreigners in Elizabethan England. Italy had what has been called a 'double image.' On one hand, it was a land of refinement and romance, a model of civilisation. Venice, Europe's centre of capitalism, was a free state and renowned as one of the most beautiful cities in Italy.

On the other hand, Italy was a country associated with decadence, villainy and vice. Venice itself was suspect, because it was, as Prof. Norman Sanders puts it, 'a racial and religious melting pot.' Elizabethans were against mixed marriages and viewed Negroes and 'blackamoors' with suspicion. Elizabeth I issued edicts demanding their removal from England because they were considered an 'annoyance.' What we would now deem racist views were common, and many people believed that black people were only fit to be slaves.

### **Moors and Muslims**

'Moor' and 'blackamoor' (a contraction of 'black as a moor') were used very loosely in Elizabethan England to indicate any person of dark or black skin, including all people of African descent, but correctly referred to Muslims who originated from Morocco and who had conquered and settled in Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Parts of Spain remained Muslim and many Moors from North Africa settled there until the 'Moorish kingdom' of Granada was finally defeated by the Spanish kings in 1492, following which all Moors were forcibly converted to Christianity as 'Moriscos.' With his Spanish name and the 'sword of Spain', it seems probable that Othello was a Morisco expelled from Spain and hence a converted Christian.



Ab el-Ouahed ben Messaoud was the Moroccan ambassador to the court of Queen Elizabeth I in 1600. He may have been the inspiration for the character of Othello

### **Religion in Shakespeare's England**

The nationalism of the English Renaissance was reinforced by Protestantism. Henry VIII had broken with Rome in the 1530s and in Shakespeare's time there was an independent Protestant state church. Shakespeare's plays are free from direct religious sentiment, but their emphases are Protestant. Othello has converted to Christianity and the preoccupation with good and evil in the play suggest its religious context. The central figures of many of Shakespeare's plays, including *Othello*, are frequently individuals beset by temptation and the lure of evil. Shakespeare's heroes have the preoccupation with self and introspective

tendencies encouraged by Protestantism. We see an example of Othello's introspection in Act 3 Scene 3 when he is alone on stage and begins to doubt his attractions as a husband.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are haunted by their consciences; they agonise over their actions as they follow what can be understood as a spiritual progress towards heaven or hell. This is exactly the psychological journey that Othello goes on. We see evidence of Othello's tormented conscience both before and after he kills his wife.

### **Female subordination**

Although questions were being asked about the social hierarchy, women remained in subordinate roles, their lives controlled by patriarchy during the Renaissance. Women expected to be ruled by men, as Desdemona's submission to Othello demonstrates. Women had few legal rights. They were entitled to inherit property, but if they married, everything they owned passed to their husbands. Many men saw women as possessions, and fathers expected to choose husbands for their daughters, as Brabantio does in *Othello*. Intellectually, women were thought to be inferior to men, and incapable of rational thought. They rarely received an education. Assertive and argumentative women were seen as a threat to the social order and were punished for their behaviour with forms of torture such as the ducking stool, the scold's bride (an iron framework placed around their head) or 'carting' (being carted around town and publicly mocked).

However, European visitors to England commented that English women had more freedom than was the case in many other European countries. Shakespeare's wife successfully managed a home and property, as well as her family, for twenty years while Shakespeare was pursuing his career in London. Shakespeare's audiences included women, and he wrote a large number of parts for strong-minded female characters, like Desdemona and Emilia.

Women's parts in plays did not equal men's in number, size or status because they were written for boy actors with unbroken voices, since it was unthinkable for women to perform on stage. However, Shakespeare was interested in female perspectives and psychology, and women have significant roles in all the major tragedies as wives and daughters. None of them, however, live at the end of their respective plays.

### **Ownership**

A woman's place was in the home and she had no role to play in the public arena. Women were possessions and were dependent on their fathers until they were handed over to the rule of their husbands, who they also had to love, honour and obey. Since women were considered to be naturally inferior in intellect and morality, their feelings or points of view were not considered; all decisions were taken out for them and they were expected to accept them without argument and carry out the wishes of men. They had no or little education; Othello describes how their job was to be "delicate with a needle" and



“sing the savageness out of a bear.” The consequences of not performing these daughterly and wifely duties were serious, involving being disowned and deprived of a home, financial support and a place in society; prostitution was often the only way to survive without a dowry or a supportive male relative. Women could only rise through their association with men and their rank; hence Emilia’s assertion that she would commit adultery if it made making Iago a monarch.

For women, male ownership meant being subject to restriction of movement and lack of control over their bodies. It was a man’s worst nightmare to have a wife or daughter who caused the loss of his honour and status in the community through attracting gossip and besmirching her reputation.

Though they seem to represent three social levels, the women in this tragedy all accept that they are powerless and subject to male decree and patronage: Emilia has no choice but to accompany the party to Cyprus, as Othello has ordered it, and Desdemona could not have stayed in Venice, having been cast off by her father. Desdemona wants a different life from the one she was born to and that her father had in mind for her, but she has no more real control over her life than Bianca, who accepts her fate with the line, “I must be circumstanced.”

### **Double standards**

Social attitudes to male and female behaviour then, as now, were very different: male promiscuity, adultery, pre- or extra-marital sex were not condemned and considered natural. Cassio’s consorting with a prostitute, whether married or not, would be commonplace, and not only expected of men generally – soldiers in particular – but even admired. Roderigo’s death as a punishment for his foolishness, not for his “unlawful solicitation” of a married woman, was licensed by medieval romantic literature. By contrast, fornicating women were considered a threat to the Church and to the fabric of society; they were blamed for leading men astray, destroying men’s honour and bringing shame on the extended family. Women were thought to be easily seduced, being descended from Eve, the betrayer of mankind.

Critics have commented on the dislocation of love and sex the men in the play share, but that does not affect the women. Men wished to marry virgins and to have chaste wives for social reasons, but have whores available for their pleasure, thereby creating the dichotomy of two types of women, reputable and not. Women’s social position was determined by their relationship to men and consequent sexual status. There were only four categories (with no equivalent male variations): maiden, wife, widow and whore. A fifth category – witch – was reserved for those not regarded as real women because of their masculine characteristics, ugliness or barrenness.

### **Reputation**

What distinguishes a respectable married woman like Emilia from a “strumpet” like Bianca is not her appearance or social background, or even her sexual behaviour, but her reputation,

that is, the label she is given by society. This made reputation an essential commodity for social survival, yet it was vulnerable to attack by any dissatisfied male. There was no forum, in which calumny (defamation) could be contested and a reputation once lost could not be regained. The fallen woman became the prey of gossips, and was ostracised and excluded from polite society, necessitating suicide or entrance into a nunnery.

### **Silent victims**

The virgin, newly-wed or demure widow was a target for predatory rakes and lechers whose conquest of the apparently unattainable was an irresistible challenge to their masculinity, and brides and betrothed woman, being in a state of transition, were particularly vulnerable to assault and slander. Though they were rarely punished, in reality or fiction, the conquered literary had to die or be killed. Desdemona seems to be doomed from birth by her name, meaning “unfortunate.” It is interesting that characters and audiences alike are concerned at the injustice of Desdemona’s death on the grounds that she is not guilty, not because it would be unacceptable for her to be murdered, even if she had slept with Cassio. This silence renders women tragic victims.

Women were expected to be seen, but not heard, even especially in their husbands’ or fathers’ presence. Together, Emilia with 245 lines and Desdemona with 388, have only half as many as Iago in the play. Between them the women show the subordinate and passive position of women in Venetian society who must wait to be visited, proposed to, and sent for. Though they may have temper tantrums (Bianca) or be critical of men in private (Emilia), essentially they have no choice but to conform and comply on pain of rejection, violence or death. Desdemona learns not to complain and, with the psychology of the victim of domestic violence, begins to blame herself and make excuses for her abuser.

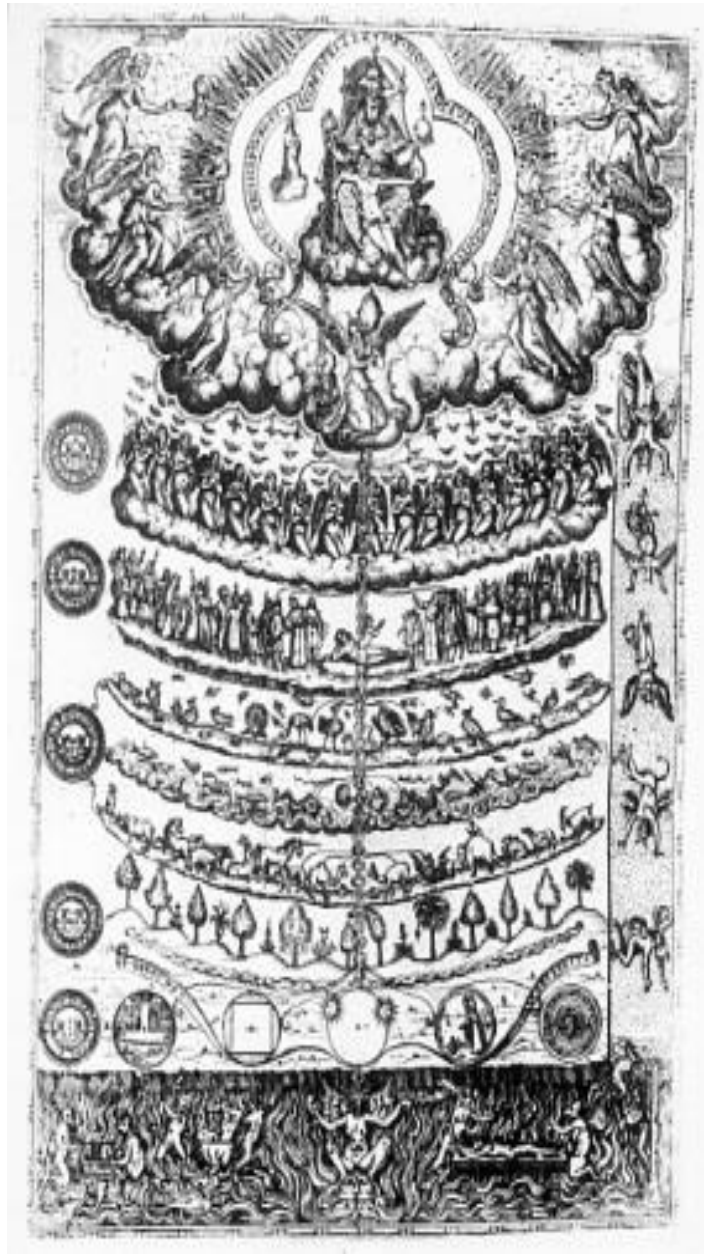
### **Male fantasies**

In medieval and 16<sup>th</sup> Century literature written by men, women tended to be represented as either Christian martyrs or malevolent devils, one extreme to the other (and this continued until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century). Characters divide women into virgin and saints, or whores and devils, with nothing in between; the former could become the latter overnight, but not vice versa. Women, as the unknowable ‘other’, could easily be seen as the enemy and destroyer, pretending to be angels, but really in league with Satan to lure men to their doom through seduction and enchantment. Dialogues between all the male characters reveal a deep-seated fear of women deceiving them and thereby gaining supremacy and making them a laughing stock, as revealed by Brabantio’s dream, Cassio’s reaction to the idea that Bianca wants to marry him, and Othello’s horror of cuckoldry.

### **Cultural contexts**

The England of the early 1600s was involved in ambitious ventures of discovery and colonial expansion. The new century brought new challenges to the Elizabethan world view and ideology inherited from the Middle Ages, and this conflict is represented in the tragedy here. This section has notes on some of the contemporary religious beliefs and social

attitudes that throw light in the hopes, fears, thought and actions of the characters in *Othello*, and that Shakespeare exploits, while simultaneously calling them into question.



### The chain of being

The Elizabethans inherited from medieval theology the idea of a hierarchical chain of being on which every creature appeared in its ordained position on a ladder descending from God through angel, king, man and woman (in that order), to animal, vegetable and finally mineral. It is necessary to know more about this belief in a divine order to appreciate the objection to women ruling men, and why it was believed that failure to apply reason reduced humans to the animal state of being governed by appetite and instinct alone. In Shakespeare, a human who falls below the level of man into bestiality is labelled a monster. Likewise, any change or reversal in this order is likely to result in tragedy.

### Great Chain of Being: Levels

- **God**
  - existence + life + will + reason + immortality + omniscience, omnipotence
- **Angels**
  - existence + life + will + reason + immortality
- **Humanity**
  - existence + life + will + reason
- **Animals**
  - existence + life + will
- **Plants**
  - existence + life
- **Matter**
  - existence
- **Nothingness**
  -

### Nature

The ubiquitous presence of the word nature in Elizabethan literature, in addition to imagery deriving from it, and arguments about it, stems from the contemporary debate about the definition of nature, which has two contradictory aspects: the benign and the harmonious, and the malignant and violent. Shakespeare's plays also examine closely the concept of human nature and its relationship to nature as a whole. Reversals of nature or what is "natural" will inevitably invert the order and result in catastrophe.

### **Appearance**

External appearance was believed by many in Shakespeare's time to be what lay within, that is, goodness or evil. Appearance versus reality is a central issue in *Othello*, and the imagery of "seeming" permeates the language of the play. If appearances, which are all we have to go on, are deceptive, and therefore character judgement is false, knowledge erroneous and truth evasive, then one cannot be sure of anything. This is the conundrum that torments many of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, because Iago looks honest, Othello assumes him incapable of villainy. This uncertainty over appearance is a more modern concept of identity, which Elizabethans were only beginning to grasp – sometimes with tragic consequences.

### **Black and white**

Black was traditionally the colour of evil and of the devil, according to Biblical and mythological sources. "Fair", "white" and other words were associated with light, which were part of the semantic field of beauty and goodness, whereas "dark", "dusky" and "night" held the opposite connotations of ugliness and barbarism, which Iago is able to use to powerful effect against the "sooty-bosomed" Moor. A marriage between a black man and a white woman – and the idea of their possible "filthy" progeny – would have been deeply shocking at the time. When black and white absolutes shift position, the society might well expect tragic events to occur.

### **Reason**

The failure of reason was considered to be the cause of the fall of man (Adam followed his love for Eve to overrule his better judgement and obedience to God), and Elizabethans therefore believed it was dangerous to let reason be dominated by passion. Characters in Shakespeare who became uncontrollable emotional are heading for a fall, as their intellect is what makes them human (superior to beasts) and keeps them sane. Othello gives way to his wrath and this is the downward turning point for him. In a state of heightened passion, such as anger and jealousy, mistakes are made, impulses are activated with sufficient reflection to moderate them, and one is no longer in control of oneself or the situation. A lack of reason will always lead to tragic consequences.

### **Evil spirits**

Evil spirits were believed to be ever within earshot and on the watch for opportunity to corrupt and snatch a human soul from the pathway of righteousness. Characters in Shakespeare who are foolish, hubristic or tempted enough to invoke spirits from murky hell to help them, commit foul deeds are sealing their own damnation. Othello fears this is what he has done in marrying Desdemona, and Brabantio in inviting Othello into his house. However, Othello's invitation to evil actually takes the form of him giving ear to Iago's temptations and bonding himself to him.

### **Damnation**

The fear of damnation and of hell apparent in the works of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights stems from the contemporary conviction that there literally was such a place below ground, inhabited by tormented souls allowed to walk the earth between midnight and dawn. Hell was typically portrayed the way Othello describes it, and engulfed in dark flames fuelled by sulphur (brimstone) to torture human flesh. The Elizabethans also believed in witches, diabolic possession and the incarnation of the devil and his agents in human form – which is how Othello finally sees Iago. The journey to hell is part of the tragic process.

### **Lying**

Telling lies was a form of deception considered to be a much more serious offence than nowadays. It was a diabolical trick because Satan told lies to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Telling the truth was the way to shame the devil, and lying put one's soul at risk, especially since promises and oaths were thought to be witnessed by heaven. A gentleman's word was assumed to be the truth, unless there was good reason to believe otherwise – which in Iago's case there is not – and it was a grave insult to call someone a liar.

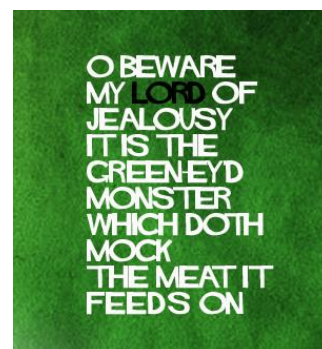
### **Jealousy**

Because irrational, jealousy was viewed as a sudden infection against which there was no prevention or cure. It eroded trust and dissolved the bonds holding together marriages, families and the social framework; it could let in evil and chaos. It guarantees calamity and tragedy.

### **Chaos**

Chaos was the undoing of God's creation, a return to darkness and nothingness indicating the breakdown of the chain of being, the harmony of the universe and nature's understood relations. Shakespeare's contemporaries had a terror of the return of the anarchy of the civil war period prior to the Tudor settlement and mostly peaceful reign of Elizabeth I. Chaos could initiate personal and civic tragedy.

Chaos meant more than just disorder, it was an image of a return to the state prior to the creation of the universe, that is, the black void. For chaos to come again the world must be de-created through a 'gross revolt' against nature – this is what Desdemona is accused to in her choice of husband by Iago, and in her lustfulness by Othello. The barrier against chaos is reason; Othello asks Iago for a reason and is refused the last time he speaks to him. Without a cause the universe makes no sense and chaos rules.





### **Courtly love**

Romance was the genre of courtly love, represented in *Othello* by Cassio, the attractive ladies' man with his chivalrous manners and poetic language, devoted to his fair lady, who he worships as divinity. She is expected to have rival suits for her hand, competing for the right to serve her. Romance concerned exotic tales of magic, superstition and travel to distant parts, as well as love affairs, and brought together the masculine ideals of the soldier and the lover, as in the Arthurian legends. By definition, the courtly lover had to be a member of high society and concerned above all with the notions of honour and reputations. Here, however, the ideal of courtly love goes tragically wrong.

### **Cuckoldry**

Cuckoldry, becoming a horned beast, was a prevalent male fear at the time, as it meant not only being an object of ridicule as a man who could not control his wife, and who had married a woman with unnatural sexual appetite, but was related to the wider issue of primogeniture and succession. Illegitimate children could not be assimilated comfortably into the family structure and were seen as a threat to the social fabric and the cause of inheritance complications and sibling resentments. Though desirable, young and beautiful wives were considered dangerous, as they were likely to both captivate their husbands and to be a target for seduction by other men, as Roderigo confirms. Cuckoldry may be seen as an initiator of tragedy.



### **Chastity**

The insistence on female chastity in so many Shakespeare plays is because of the security of society and peace of mind of men was dependent upon women's virginity before marriage and chastity after it, meaning faithfulness to their husbands. In a society that passed inheritance down the male line, men needed to be sure that their son was really their own and not someone else's bastard, and a man's reputation would be destroyed by an unfaithful wife. This is why the issue of chastity is such a crucial lever to the plot of *Othello*.

# Application of context

You need to be aware of the text as a product of its historical, social and cultural context, and how audiences have interpreted the text over time, up to the present day. To gain credit for AO3 you will need to show an awareness of relevant context, incorporating references in your response where appropriate. You should not add unintegrated references to context as an afterthought; you must explore how contextual factors shape meaning.

## Recognising changing perceptions of historical and social contexts

Take some of the contextual ideas from the previous notes and add them to the grid below. For each one, suggest how different perceptions of the play might have been in Shakespeare’s time and now.

| Context                      | Then   | Now  |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Honour and reputation</b> | Reputation and honour were very important. Brabantio is dishonoured by Desdemona’s marriage to Othello. Othello feels dishonoured by her supposed infidelity. Cassio is mortified at the loss of his reputation. | The concept of honour is now considered old fashioned, or is at least far more complicated. Reputation has commercial value, but people do not identify so strongly with their moral reputation. |
|                              |  |  |
|                              |  |  |

## Exploring how historical and social context shapes meaning in language analysis

| Line   | Context notes   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Iago:</b><br/>           "... the devil will make a grandsire of you" (1.1.90)</p>   | <p>This shows religious belief, a racist identification with the devil and a father's assumed right to choose his daughter's husband.</p> |
| <p><b>Brabantio:</b><br/>           "it is a judgment maimed and most imperfect<br/>           That will confess perfection so could err<br/>           Against all rules of nature, and must be driven<br/>           To find our practices of cunning hell"<br/>           (1.3.100-4)</p> |   |
| <p><b>Brabantio:</b><br/>           "Do you perceive, in all this noble company,<br/>           Where most you owe obedience?"<br/>           (1.3.179-80)</p>   |   |
| <p><b>Cassio:</b><br/>           "Let it not gall your patience, good Iago,<br/>           That I extend my manners; 'tis my breeding<br/>           That gives me this bold show of courtesy."<br/>           (2.1.97-9)</p>  |   |
| <p><b>Iago:</b><br/>           "Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,<br/>           Is the immediate jewel of their souls"<br/>           (3.3.158-9)</p>   |   |
| <p><b>Othello:</b><br/>           "A horned man's a monster and a beast"<br/>           (4.1.62)</p>   |   |
| <p><b>Othello:</b><br/>           "so delicate with a needle, and admirable musician,<br/>           O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear!"<br/>           (4.1.184-5)</p>  |   |
| <p><b>Othello:</b><br/>           "where a malignant and a turbaned Turk<br/>           Beat a venetian and traduced the state,<br/>           I took by th' throat the circumcised dog"<br/>           (5.2.351-3)</p>  |   |

## **Cultural context**

For each cultural concept or belief below, suggest at least one way in which it features in *Othello*.

**The Chain of Being – a hierarchical order of beings whose breakdown leads to chaos**

**Nature – the idea that social well-being depends on ‘natural behaviour’**

**The importance of reason to humanity**

**Belief in evil and damnation**

**Belief in the importance of honest**

**Courtly love**

**Male fear of being cuckolded**

Annotate the following quotations to show how the language used reflects cultural contexts and beliefs.

**Othello: 5.2.50-1**

Sweet soul, take heed,  
Take heed of perjury. Thou art on thy death-bed

**Othello: 3.3.90-2**

Perdition catch my soul,  
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not  
Chaos is come again.

**Cassio: 2.1.84-7**

You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees!  
Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven,  
Before, behind thee, and on every hand  
Enwheel thee round!

**Othello: 4.1.41-3**

It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is't possible? Confess! Handkerchief! O devil"

## Applying context in your responses

How successful do you think the following student paragraph is in incorporating context into its argument? Annotate the response to show its strengths and weaknesses

*Desdemona is presented as a pure, virtuous teenage girl who accepts the conventional Elizabethan and Jacobean belief that wives should be entirely faithful to their husbands, even if husbands are unfaithful. She even doubts that “there be women do abuse their husbands / in such gross kind,” referring to adultery. She swears “by this heavenly light” that she would not, linking fidelity to Christian obedience, but perhaps also to Diana, goddess and chastity and the moon.*

Now, write a paragraph of your own in response to each of the following statements. You should include ideas about the chain of being, social duty and obedience towards parents, and attitudes towards gender where appropriate.

**Othello’s marriage upsets the social order, which ultimately leads to tragedy.**

**Othello’s great mistake is to trust, Iago, his subordinate, rather than his own wife.**

# Literary and dramatic contexts

## Greek Tragedy: Definitions from Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 B.C.)

A tragedy is a play in which the protagonist, usually a person of importance and outstanding personal qualities, falls to disaster through the combination of a personal failing and circumstances with which he or she cannot deal

### Conventions:

**Greek tragic protagonist** – of a very high status at the play's opening – suffers an immense and catastrophic fall linked to their hubris

**Hubris** – overwhelming arrogance – aligning oneself with the gods, a flaw of the protagonist

**Hamartia** – an error in perception made by the protagonist: failing to perceive reality/others as they truly are

**Free will** – the protagonist's ability to freely make choices that will lead to their salvation or their downfall

**Nemesis** – a spirit sent by the gods to enact revenge upon the hubristic protagonist

**Desis** – the 'rising action' of a tragedy – complications and entanglements created by the Nemesis

**Peripeteia** – the point at which the reversal in fortune of the protagonist becomes irreversible and inevitable – the reversal in fortune is devastating and profound

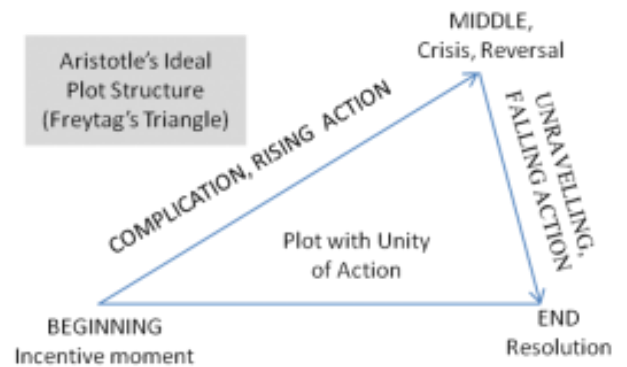
**Lusis** – the 'falling action' of a tragedy – the decline towards the catastrophic conclusion of the play

**Anagnorisis** – the point at which the protagonist comes to truly understand his own identity and the truth of his actions and their consequences

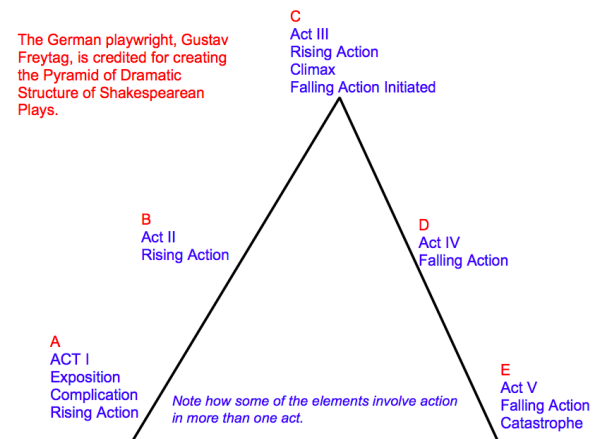
**Catastrophe** – the devastating conclusion of a tragedy: the protagonist loses their status, associated with terrible violence and bloodshed

### Applying the conventions of Greek tragedy to *Othello*

1. Othello is very high status and at the height of his powers at the play's opening: highly valuable to the city-state of Venice as a warrior 'general' and recently married to the beautiful, pure and high status noblewoman Desdemona.
2. There are elements of hubris in Othello in Act 1
3. Iago acts as the Nemesis – the figure who acts to 'punish'/destroy the protagonist



4. Iago creates the desis through his machinations
5. Othello's hamartia is evident in his misunderstanding of Iago, Cassio and Desdemona and their words and actions
6. The peripeteia occurs at the conclusion of Act 3 Scene 3 when Othello becomes aligned completely with Iago through their quasi-marriage ceremony: 'I greet thy love, not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous'
7. Through Iago's asides and soliloquies Othello's free will is foregrounded – placing some culpability on the protagonist – thus the tragedy can be seen as didactic
8. The anagnorisis occurs in Act 5 Scene 2 where Othello finally comes to understand the depravity of both Iago and his own actions
9. The catastrophe is devastating with the murders of Desdemona and Emilia and the suicide of Othello



### Conflict and suffering in tragedy

Conflict lies at the heart of all of Shakespeare's tragedies. Driven by negative impulses and emotions – envy, hatred, lust and personal ambition – characters in tragedies find themselves embroiled in disputes with each other. Often these disputes lead to disorder and division. They also cause great suffering to the tragic protagonist and those around them. In *Othello* the focus is narrow; the conflict we witness is in Othello's mind. Othello becomes divided against himself, conflicted about whether he loves or hates Desdemona. His conflict causes him great suffering and anguish, which intensifies as the play moves towards the tragic outcome. Shakespeare does not suggest that Othello deserves to suffer but the audience knows the consequences of the hero's conflict will be terrible. In tragedy, conflict and suffering end on violent death. When Othello's internal conflict drives him to murder, we know that the resolution of the play must include the tragic protagonist's own demise.

However, *Othello* is a highly original tragedy. Shakespeare presents the first black hero in English drama, departing from theatrical convention. Shakespeare also subverts tragic conventions by keeping the evil revenger Iago alive at the end of the play. In most Jacobean tragedies the villain dies as part of the process of catharsis so that order can be restored. Iago's dominance in this tragedy is also unusual; the villain and the hero have equivalent stage time and are equally powerful speakers.

### Love and pity in *Othello*

*Othello* is a tragedy preoccupied by the nature of love. In Act 1 we are presented with a couple whose deep mutual love makes them appealing to the audience. We side with Othello and Desdemona in the Senate scene in Act 1 Scene 3 because love is threatened. As the play progresses our admiration for the couple is turned to pity, as we watch Iago destroy their relationship. From Act 3 love is undermined by mistrust, uncertainty and jealousy.

However, in spite of violent deaths in Act 5, it is possible to argue that love reasserts itself at the end of *Othello*. Desdemona defends her love for Othello with her dying breath, and the tragic protagonist dies 'upon a kiss' (5.2.357).

### The power of the villain in *Othello*



In *Othello* the tragic hero becomes a victim because of the evil schemes of the villain, Iago. The suffering of the central couple is as a direct result of his malicious plotting. The audience will recognise that Othello has faults, but that he is a noble man brought low by a very powerful adversary. The play is extremely painful to watch because we know how untrustworthy the villain is from the very first scene, and can see how expert Iago is at exercising his power.

### Morality plays

A morality play is an allegorical drama popular in Europe especially during the 15th and 16th Centuries, in which the characters personify moral qualities (such as charity or vice) or abstractions (as death or youth) and in which moral lessons are taught.

#### Conventions:

**Liturgical drama** with a didactic purpose – the promotion of Christian ethics and virtues

A presentation of the (Christian) moral options available to humanity – present a **psychomachia (battle of spirits/ souls)** within the protagonist: to choose virtuous action or to succumb to sin?

Present **allegorical characters** that embody Christian virtues and vices, humanity and aspects of culture and society

In morality plays characters are **one-dimensional and symbolic**, unlike the characters of Elizabethan/Jacobean (Shakespeare's) drama which become fully fleshed out and multi-dimensional



The **'Everyman' figure** (the embodiment of all humanity – aligned with the audience) is tempted by the **embodiments of vice**: Lechery, Wrath, Pride, Gluttony, Envy, Jealousy, for example, while the **embodiments of Christian virtue** such as Love, Faith and Hope attempt to persuade him to behave morally; other figures appear as wise mentors to guide 'Everyman' such as the 'Old Man'.

Morality plays foreground **free will** and humanity's abilities to make choices that lead to either our redemption or our downfall.

Often bawdy and ribald they **promoted Christian values** to a largely illiterate audience within a comical and entertaining form

## Applying the conventions of morality plays to *Othello*

1. Othello can be seen as a descendent of the 'Everyman' figure: a character who embodies many of the virtues of humanity yet who is tempted by, and succumbs to, sin
2. Othello's psychomachia is powerfully presented to the audience as he struggles to perceive reality and to make appropriate choices
3. Othello possesses common human frailties that perhaps align him with the audience: he succumbs to potent emotions rather than using his reason, is acutely aware of his own cultural weaknesses and vulnerabilities – his status as an outsider in a white European culture makes him easy prey for Iago – the white European ensign
4. Iago can be seen as a descendent of the 'vice character' of the morality play:
  - a. The embodiment of the devil or a daemon
  - b. The embodiment of cardinal sin: jealousy, pride, wrath
  - c. A powerfully persuasive figure determined to destroy the virtue of others through tempting them to sin
5. Desdemona can be seen as a descendent of the 'virtue character' embodying Christian virtues - particularly faith and love
6. The play can be seen as didactic as Othello's choices are foregrounded through Iago's soliloquies and asides – free will is foregrounded

## Machiavelli

Author of *The Prince* – a Renaissance political treatise on how to gain and sustain political power

Connects to the political intrigues of Italy during the Renaissance – warring factions and city-states struggling for supremacy pre-unification

Promotes amoral actions to gain power

Does not promote evil actions as an end in themselves, but as sometimes appropriate or required in order to gain power

Associated with complex scheming and machinations utilised in order to gain supremacy over others



## Linking Machiavelli to *Othello*

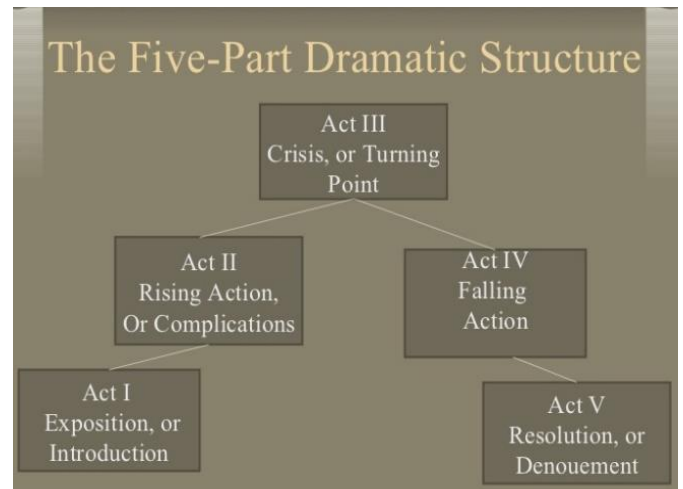
Iago can be seen as a Machiavellian villain:

1. appears in some ways to be entirely motivated by a desire for power and status – the 'incentive moment' provided in Act 1 Scene 1 is his desire for the position of lieutenant
2. creates complex schemes in order to gain power – by Act 3 Scene 3 he has gained the lieutenantancy

3. is profoundly amoral – rejects Christian values and virtues and promotes humanist ideals – is calculated and rational in his approach to others
4. acts in an evil way to gain what he desires – evil actions as a means to an end
5. revels in his power over others - seen in the soliloquies and asides to the audience  
'pleasure and action make the hours seem short'

# Structure

The division of Shakespeare's play into acts and scenes is not included in the earliest texts: the quartos. In the First Folio of Shakespeare's work, published in 1623, seven years after his death, act and scene divisions for many of the plays were introduced by the editors. *Othello* is unique in that the quarto was divided into five acts. But that these divisions were not written down does not mean that they were not included in performance. All actors and audiences at this time expected a play to be presented in five acts. By convention, a new scene commenced when the stage was empty of actors, or where there was a substantial change of characters.

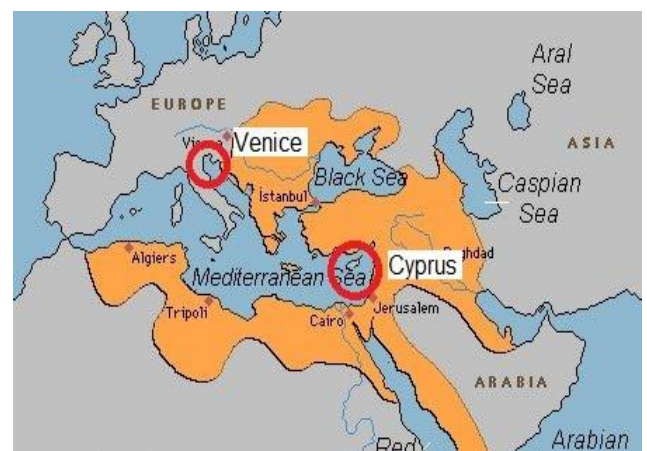


Shakespeare undoubtedly wrote his plays with a sense of shaping them into five acts. Generally Act 3 marks a key turning point in the plot, as it does in *Othello* where Scene 3 shows Iago coming in ascendant over Othello. Thereafter the pace quickens, the pressure builds up and crisis and climax are revealed as the plot races to its conclusion. In the tragedies the inevitable message of the second part of the play is that time brings defeat, disaster and death.

Although a relatively short play, *Othello* subjects the audience to intense and prolonged dramatic tension because of its tensely wound plot structure. There are no changes of perspective, sub or parallel plots, or fully memorable comic interludes with fools, porters or gravediggers and such like, as there are in other tragedies, so the audience is particularly conscious of the chain of cause and effect driving the play.

## The use of settings

There are two principal locations in *Othello*, Venice and Cyprus, but gradually our attention becomes fixed on a single bedroom, creating a feeling of claustrophobia that is unique in Shakespeare's tragedies. The outer world becomes insignificant as Othello becomes obsessed and jealous. The use of Venice as a location is significant; at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, dramatists began to use Italy as a suitable location for revenge tragedies. The Italians were thought to be worldly and Venice in particular was associated with everything that was culturally sophisticated. It was a location that suggested power, order and wealth.





It is appropriate the Machiavellian trickster Iago should originate and appear in an Italian setting before being transported to Cyprus. Shakespeare's use of a war with the Turks and the uneasy atmosphere of the garrison town in Cyprus – a 'halfway house' between civilisation and the heathen world – is also dramatically significant. The war isolates Desdemona from everything and everyone she knows; similarly, Othello feels his difference and isolation in Cyprus. Here, in this unfamiliar setting, with the threat of danger lurking, passions are unleashed and order is destroyed. The storm helps to establish and reflect the fear and violence that the characters will experience in Cyprus, while also being a symbol of the love of Othello and Desdemona.

### **A sense of claustrophobia**

The sense of claustrophobia is heightened by the fact there is no real subplot in *Othello*. The action of the play focuses on Iago's role and Othello's reactions to his 'reports' (5.2.183). Even characters who seem to have other 'lives' are closely linked to the married couple: Roderigo's foolish hopes and Cassio's relationship with Bianca provide points of comparison with the Othello – Desdemona match. Our sense of claustrophobia is heightened because we are observing a group of characters who exist in a tightly knit social network, where each character has a clearly defined position and a view of every member of the group. Iago threatens the order and harmony of the network because he is able to manipulate the most powerful group member. The single plot intensifies dramatic tension: we are never given a moment's respite to look away from Iago's progress as he pushes Othello towards tragedy.

### **Long and short scenes**

The construction of scenes is extremely effective in *Othello*. Long scenes of painful discussions or confrontation are punctuated by short scenes or moments of violence – verbal and physical. Act 3 Scene 3 is a good example of how Shakespeare structures a scene for maximum theatrical impact. It is the longest scene in the play, and painful to watch. Iago takes full advantage of the awkwardness that already exists between the married couple. His relentless assault on Othello begins after Desdemona has tried and failed to get Cassio reinstated. When he knows he has hooked Othello, Iago exits. It is safe to leave because Othello has just asked him to set Emilia spying on Desdemona: Iago's poison is working. Othello's first moment of isolation shows his agony. He asks wretchedly, 'why did I marry?' (3.3.245). After further awkward exchanges between the major characters, Othello is back in Iago's clutches. From line 331 to the end of the scene, 130 lines later, Othello's speeches become explosive and bloodthirsty. By the end of the scene Othello's 'fair warrior' (2.1.179) has become 'the fair devil' (3.3.481). Iago has won the battle of words.

### **Reversal and repetition**

The structure of the play relies on reversal and repetition. In the first three acts Iago comes to dominate. In Act 1 he is the underdog, overlooked and irrelevant except as an escort for Desdemona. In Act 2, Iago forms his plans and sets up his revenge, so that in Act 3 he is able to triumph over Othello. Conversely, Othello is at his most secure in Acts 1 and 2, when he

defends and then consummates his marriage. In Act 3 he struggles to resist the jealousy that threatens to overpower his reason, succumbing to it in Act 4. In Act 5, Othello sinks further when he smothers Desdemona. He becomes when Iago is: a destructive revenger. At the end of the play the tragic protagonist is partially redeemed when he recognises his folly and chooses to destroy himself, while Iago's downfall is assured when he is revealed as a scoundrel.

## The timescale of *Othello*

### The 'double time scheme'

The theory of a 'double time scheme' in *Othello* dates from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. There can be no doubt that there are inconsistencies in the way that time is presented in *Othello*. It appears that the disintegration of Othello's mind and marriage occurs extremely fast and Iago recognises that he must move quickly if his plots are to remain concealed; at the same time the characters make statements that suggest time is moving slowly.

### 'Long time'

In Act 3 Scene 3, Iago describes Cassio's lustful dream, which we are told occurred 'lately' (3.3.16) when Iago shared Cassio's bed. In Act 2 Scene 4, Bianca complains to Cassio that he has stayed away from her a week, and Othello himself says that he believes Desdemona has committed adultery with Cassio 'a thousand times' (5.2.210). It seems highly unlikely that Lodovico would have been sent from Venice to install Cassio as a governor within a week of Othello's arrival in Cyprus. These statements which suggest 'long time' are primarily designed to increase the plausibility of Othello's jealousy. But it is also necessary for Shakespeare to present the poisoning of Othello's mind occurring swiftly, without a substantial interval of time. The play would be less dramatic if Iago loosened his grip on his victim once he was in his grasp.

### 'Short time'

This brings us to the question of 'short time.' The first act of *Othello* takes place in one night. When the characters have arrived in Cyprus (after a period of travelling) time seems to move very quickly, increasing the sense of claustrophobia and heightening the intensity of the drama. The characters land just before 'this present hour of five' (2.2.9-10), the wedding celebrations occur that evening, Cassio is dismissed from his post the same night and we see Iago packing Roderigo off to bed at dawn the following morning. On this day Desdemona pleads for Cassio, having met with him earlier in the morning. Iago sees his chance and moves into action immediately. Between Act 3 Scene 3 and Act 4 Scene 1 there

### Terminology for writing about structure

**Atmosphere:** the mood or tone set by the writer

**Climax:** the most intense or decisive point

**Dialogue:** the lines spoken by the characters

**Exposition:** the start of the play where the ideas are initiated

**Flashback:** (Analepsis) Presents past events

**Flash-forward:** (Prolepsis) presents future events

**Foreshadowing:** Hints what is to come later in the text (can be misleading, though)

**Motif:** a recurring element

**Resolution:** the answer or solution to the conflict

**Setting:** the geographical and/or historical location

**Shift:** a switch or change of focus

**Tension:** the feeling of emotional strain

might possibly be a short interval, but thereafter there can be no break until the curtain falls at the end of Act 5. It is this relentlessness that grips us in the theatre, where we do not notice the inconsistencies. It might also be argued that an insistence on 'short time' is a deliberate theatrical decision. Perhaps Shakespeare uses his time scheme to show us how powerful and unreasonable jealousy is. We know that Desdemona has not had the opportunity to commit adultery yet, and yet her husband becomes convinced that he has betrayed him often.

# Critical Interpretations

A05 asks you to offer alternative readings and arguments. Critical arguments should be offered to enhance your argument and explore alternative interpretations.

## Early views

**Thomas Rymer**, one of the play's most negative critics, wrote a commentary on *Othello* in *A Short View of the Tragedy* (1693). Rymer was outraged by the idea of a black hero and would not accept that they play was a great tragedy, declaring the **'defect'** of Othello was that it did not have a moral lesson. Rymer suggested that Othello might serve only as **'a caution'** to maidens not to run away with 'blackamoors' without their parents' consent. In contrast to Rymer, **Dr Johnson's** (1765) response to *Othello* was positive. In Johnson's view Othello was **'magnanimous, artless and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge.'** Johnson also suggested that the play provided as **'very useful moral, not to take an unequal match.'**

Rymer was as dismissive of the implausible characters as the plot: Othello was a 'jealous Booby', Iago too villainous to be believed, and Desdemona a woman without sense because she married a 'blackamoor'.

## Nineteenth and Twentieth Century views

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, **Coleridge** offered a view of Iago's characterisation that has been influential. He argued that Iago is **'a being next to the devil,'** driven by **'motiveless malignity.'** Coleridge suggests that Iago operates without adequate motivation; he is bad because he is bad. Many critics have commented on his skill as a 'dramatist'. Other 19<sup>th</sup> Century critics shared Rymer's views about Desdemona's marriage to Othello, suggesting she must be a strumpet who lacks morals because she marries a Moor. At the end of the century **Swinburne** argued that Othello must be seen as **'the noblest man of man's making.'**

In 1904, **AC Bradley** presented a positive analysis of Othello, whom he saw as blameless. For Bradley, Othello was **'the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes.'** Bradley's Othello is **'so noble ... [he] inspires a passion of mingled love and pity.'** Bradley also argued that the newness of his marriage makes Othello's jealousy credible. Bradley believed that Othello never falls completely and suggested that at the end of the play we feel **'admiration and love'** for the hero. Two influential critics rejected Bradley's positive analysis of *Othello*. Commenting on Othello's final speech, **TS Eliot** says the Moor is guilty of trying to cheer himself up by attempting to evade reality. For Eliot this speech is a **'terrible exposure of human weakness.'** **FR Leavis** argued that Othello is responsible for his own downfall because he has a propensity to jealousy and a weak character, which is sorely tested by marriage. Othello's love is dismissed. It is **'composed very largely of ignorance of self as well as ignorance of her [Desdemona].'**

Iago has been considered as an example of the typical stage Machiavel who **'personifies ... self-interest, hypocrisy, cunning'** (Leah Scragg in 'Iago – Vice or Devil?'). Several 20<sup>th</sup> Century critics were preoccupied by the Christianity of Othello. Many noted the Christian signification of certain speeches. Some critics have suggested that Othello is damned when he commits suicide because he has sinned against God's law; he has also been accused of other soul destroying sins: murder, despair and entering into a compact with the devil (Iago). Other critics have suggested that *Othello* affirms a morality that is consistent with Christianity; the play presents a positive view of love and faith and shows us that vengeance is wicked and pride dangerous.

Desdemona received a good deal of critical attention during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Some commentators suggested she is a goddess and a saint, others saw her as a representative of goodness and purity. Many critics commented on Desdemona's commitment to love.

In *Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero* (1937), **FR Leavis** analyses Othello's final speech, commenting that Othello has **'discovered his mistake, but there is no tragic self-discovery.'** **Leavis says Othello remains 'un-self-comprehending'** and that the play **'doesn't involve the idea of the hero's learning through suffering.'** To what extent do you agree with Leavis?

## Contemporary approaches

### Feminist readings

Feminist readings of the play explore the gender politics of *Othello*. A feminist critic would consider the roles of male and female characters in relation to the patriarchal context of the play. Many feminist critics have noted how female characters in Jacobean tragedies are victims who have limited power and are punished for their sexuality.

**Marilyn French** explores the masculine value system at work in *Othello*. In spite of her assertiveness in choosing her own husband, French suggests Desdemona **'accepts her culture's dictum that she must be obedient to males'** and is **'self-denying in the extreme'** when she dies.

**Lisa Jardine** shares French's viewpoint about the misogyny of Othello. She suggests that the stage world of Jacobean drama is wholly masculine and argues that there is only a male viewpoint on offer. Jardine asserts the view that Desdemona proves to be **'too knowing, too independent.'** Because of her waywardness, she is punished by patriarchy. Jardine suggests Desdemona becomes a stereotype of female passivity.

### Marxist readings

A Marxist critic would be interested in the political context of *Othello* and power structure of the society in which Iago and Othello operate. Marxist critics also examine the relationships between masters and their servants. **Dympna Callaghan** considers the cultural significance of Desdemona's wedding sheets and the handkerchief, commenting on how these objects had economic and symbolic value in the Renaissance. Callaghan sees the

handkerchief as a **'miniature of the nuptial linens'** and suggests it is crucially important to the stability of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona.

A Marxist reading of Iago may consider whether his subversion of the social order in the play is politically justified. Can Iago be considered a working-class hero? To what extent does he have a legitimate grudge against a bourgeois system that has oppressed him? We need to consider Iago's motives for revenge against Othello and Cassio, and whether or not Othello is a tyrant who deserves to be removed from power.

### **New Historicist readings**

New Historicist critics seek to consider *Othello* in relation to its social and historical context, looking at the play in relation to the ideology and beliefs of Shakespeare's society. New Historicists are particularly interested in whether or not reinforces or subverts the values of Shakespeare's society. Commenting on violence against female characters in drama of the Jacobean period, **Leonard Tennenhouse** asserts the view that **'Jacobean tragedies offer up their scenes of excessive punishment as if mutilating the female could somehow correct political corruption. The female in question may be completely innocent ... yet in play after play she demands her own death or else claims responsibility for her murder.'** Tennenhouse suggests Desdemona has to be destroyed because she is subversive. Unlike many feminist critics, Tennenhouse suggests that Desdemona is the **'embodiment of power'** when she appears in Act 1 and defends her right to choose her own husband.

**Frances Dolan** considers *Othello* in relation to its historical context. She notes how in Shakespeare's society, murdering one's spouse was considered a threat to the social order. Dolan also comments on how Jacobean drama reflects 17<sup>th</sup> Century anxieties about the radical 'other', the traitor 'inside', the plotting subordinate and abusive authority figures. Dolan says that Othello can be linked to all these **'spectres of disorder.'** Dolan defines him as a **'domestic tyrant who murders his wife on spurious grounds.'** She also suggests Othello is in an ambiguous position because of his race. He cannot hold onto his authority with any confidence or security because he is different from the Venetians. For Dolan, Othello's race would have undermined his heroism: **'by making his protagonist black, Shakespeare prepares his original audience to question Othello's authority, to suspect that he might misuse it groundlessly.'**

In *Othello's Real Tragedy* **Caryl Phillips** offers a reading of *Othello* informed by historicist approaches. Phillips stresses the hero's isolation as a black man in a white world. He says Othello is fully aware of his **'tenuous'** position and that his tragedy is caused when he **'begins to forget that he is black.'** Do you agree with this view?

**Nicholas Marsh** considers Iago in relation to his historical context. He suggests that Iago represents a new way of thinking about the world. Iago is a typical malcontent or Machiavel, a dissatisfied and cynical man who will not stay in his place. He wants to get his own back on a society that thwarts him. Marsh points to Iago's speech in Act 1 Scene 3, where he outlines his philosophy – "tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus" – as proof of his

subversive qualities. By way of contrast, Othello **'often conjures the magnificence of a traditional, military order and medieval ideals, such as honour. His love for Desdemona has strong overtones of medieval courtly love where the woman's purity is worshipped and idolised.'**

### **Post-colonial readings**

A post-colonial critique of the play considers the way in which Othello's race is portrayed, and considers the hero's 'outsider' status in a white world.

In *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (1987), **Ania Loomba** suggests the central conflict in *Othello* is **'between the racism of a white patriarchy and the threat posed to it by both a black man and a white woman.'** For Loomba, woman and blacks exist as 'the other' in this play. Loomba argues that Othello has a split consciousness and is **'a near schizophrenic hero'**; his final speech **'graphically portrays the split – he becomes simultaneously the Christian and the Infidel, the Venetian and the Turk, the keeper of the state and its opponent.'** Loomba suggests Othello is an honorary white at the beginning of the play but becomes a 'total outsider' because of his relationship with Desdemona, which ruptures his **'precarious entry into the white world.'** Loomba insists, however, that *Othello* **'should not be read as patriarchal, authoritative and racist spectacle.'** Instead the play should be used to 'examine and dismantle' ideas about racism and sexism.

**Karen Newman** says the play exposes the **'fear of racial and sexual difference'** of Renaissance culture. Newman argues the white male characters in *Othello*, especially Iago, feel threatened by the **'power and potency of a different and monstrous sexuality'** which Othello represents. Newman looks at the play in relation to Elizabethan stereotypes of the black male, in particular, worries about mixed marriages. Shakespeare's contemporaries feared **'the black man had the power to subjugate his partner's whiteness.'** This makes the black male monstrous. However, Newman suggests **'by making the black Othello a hero, and by making Desdemona's love for Othello ... sympathetic'**, Shakespeare's play challenges the racist, sexist and colonialist views of his society.

### **Other useful critical comments**

**Use critical comments to enhance your analysis and develop your response. When reading the ideas of other readers you should consider the following points:**

- **Do you agree with the perspective of idea that the critic presents?**
- **Does the reading help you to form your own view on events or characters?**

In *Othello* (1997) **EAJ Honigmann** claims that *Othello* is **'the most unbearably exciting'** of Shakespeare's tragedies. What details of the play may have led him to say this?

**Caryl Phillips** says Othello's love of Desdemona **'is the love of possession. She is a prize, a spoil of war.'** To what extent do you agree with this interpretation?

**Dr Johnson** took a very dim view of Iago. He said that **'the character of Iago is so conducted, that he is from the first scene to the last hated and despised.'** Do you think that this is how Shakespeare intended the audience to react to Iago? Are there other ways of responding to Iago?

**Caryl Phillips** has commented that Othello is **'a man of action, not a thinker.'** Phillips also suggests that Othello's position is tenuous: **'in his very first speech he subconsciously acknowledges the social pressure he is under'** (as a black man in a white world) when he makes references to his services to the state.

**Caryl Phillips** has remarked on Othello's lack of confidence as a wooer, pointing to two lines: 'It was my hint to speak' (1.3.143) and 'upon this I spake' (1.3.167). Phillips says that Othello **'feels constantly threatened and profoundly insecure.'** To what extent do you agree that Othello is an insecure lover?

**EJ Honigmann** comments that Iago is a seductive character who is able to get the audience to collude with him. Because **'his victims lack humour, Iago appeals to us as more amusing'** than other characters. Shakespeare's **'dramatic perspective compels us to see with his eyes and to share his "jokes". His humour also makes him seem cleverer than his victims.'** Is this how you view Iago?

Writing in 1697, **Thomas Rymer** dismissed Desdemona as **'a silly woman'** whose virtue was suspect. Rymer was offended by Desdemona's vulgar conversation with Iago, commenting that Desdemona was behaving like **'any country kitchen-maid with her sweetheart.'** Do you think that Desdemona is silly and vulgar in this scene?

**Caryl Phillips** remarks that Othello's line **'she had eyes and chose me'** (2.3.193) reveals Othello's gross insecurity. He also says that the 'fatal mistake' Othello makes is **'to question his own judgement.'**

**GK Hunter** says that Iago's racial prejudice means that he wants to make Othello's deeds **'fit in with the prejudice that his face ... excited.'** In other words, Iago wants to prove that black men are evil. Do you find this reading of the play plausible?

**GK Hunter** has said that *Othello* becomes **'a tragedy of the loss of faith.'** Do you agree with this assessment? To what extent do you think that the loss of faith is the cause of Othello's downfall?

In her essay *The Noble Moor* (1956), **Helen Gardner** sees the murder of Desdemona as having upon it **'the stamp of the heroic.'** Gardner says **'the act is heroic because Othello acts from inner necessity ... the act is also heroic in its absoluteness, disinterestedness, and finality ... it must be done.'**

**Lisa Jardine** has claimed that Othello murders Desdemona **‘for adultery, not out of jealousy.’** Jardine adds that Othello **‘acts with complete certainty of her guilt.’** To what extent do you agree with this interpretation?

**Caryl Phillips** believes that **‘the pressures placed upon him rendered his [Othello’s] life a tragedy.’** Phillips is referring to the pressure of a black man in a white world. Phillips sees Othello’s tragedy as a result of his insecurity and isolation in Venetian society: **‘Life for him is a game in which he does not know the rules.’**

**Ania Loomba** says that **‘Othello is both a fantasy of interracial love and social tolerance, and a nightmare of racial hatred and male violence.’** To what extent do you agree with her interpretation of the play?

**Coleridge** says that Othello struggles not to love Desdemona. He claims that Othello is not driven by jealousy, but by **‘moral indignation and regret’** that Desdemona’s virtue has been destroyed.

**EAJ Honigmann** suggests that it is possible to see Desdemona as **‘the strongest, the most heroic person in the play.’**

**EAJ Honigmann** interprets Desdemona’s last words as ‘an act of forgiveness.’ He claims that **‘love and goodness defeat evil’** at the end of *Othello*. Do you agree?

**EAJ Hongimann** comments that **‘one wonders ... whether the men are capable of unselfish love’** in *Othello*. Which male characters can these comments be applied to?

**EAJ Hongimann** suggests that Emilia’s final actions prove that love triumphs over hate. He says **‘Emilia’s love [of Desdemona] is Iago’s undoing.’** Do you agree that love triumphs over hate in this play?

**FR Leavis** has claimed that Othello’s jealousy **‘is unassociated with any real interest in Desdemona as a person.’** He says Othello **‘slips ... readily into possessive jealousy because he is self-centred.’**

**Helen Gardner** suggests that Desdemona is **‘love’s martyr.’** By dying she wins Othello’s love again. Do you find this reading of the end of the play plausible?

**AC Bradley** says **‘Othello is a man of mystery, exoticism and intense feeling, trustful, open, passionate but self-controlled: so noble ... he inspires a passion of mingled love and pity.’**

**Ania Loomba** believes **‘Othello should not be read as a patriarchal, authoritative and racist spectacle, nor as a show of female or black superiority. The play should be used to examine and dismantle the racism and sexism of the leadership of the state.’**

**FR Leavis** states that **'Othello has a propensity to jealousy and possesses a weak character: the stuff of which he is made begins at once to deteriorate and show itself unfit. His love is composed largely of ignorance of self as well as ignorance of Desdemona.'**

**Samuel Johnson:**

**'The cool malignity of Iago, silent in his resentment, subtle in his designs, and studious at once of his interest and vengeance.'**

**'Othello – inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge.'**

**'The soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit, unconscious of her innocence, her artless perseverance in her suit, and her slowness to suspect that she can be suspected.'**

**Coleridge** stated **'Iago is being next to the devil only not quite the devil – and this Shakespeare has attempted – and executed – without disgust, without scandal.'**

**AC Bradley** writes of Othello: **'His trust where he trusts is absolute. Hesitation is almost impossible to him ... love, if he loves, must be to him the heaven where either he must live or bear no life. If such as passion as jealousy seizes him, it will swell into a well-nigh uncontrollable flood.'**

## **Engaging with AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations**

**For each of the critical comments / interpretations that you have read in this section:**

1. Find as many ways of responding to the statements as you can, some positive, some in disagreement.
2. Compare and contrast the critical comments from different periods, comparing different critical approaches and concerns.
3. Make links to specific evidence from *Othello* to support or dispute the critical reading presented here.

# Paper 1: Love through the ages

The aim of this exam is to encourage you to explore aspects of the theme of love as seen over time, using unseen material and set texts. You will be prepared for this exam paper by reading widely in the topic area, reading texts from a range of authors and times.

Some of the different aspects of love that can be explored include: romantic love; love and sex; love and loss; social conventions and taboos; jealousy and guilt; marriage; approval and disapproval ...

You will study:

- One Shakespeare play (*Othello*)
- A pre-1900 poetry anthology of love through the ages
- *The Great Gatsby*

In the examination you will also compare two unseen poems.

## The representation of love in *Othello*

### Types of love in *Othello*

Romantic love

Sexual love

Jealousy

Love and cruelty /  
violence

Love and regret

Hero-worship

Familial love

Courtship

Marital love

Honour

Adultery

Lust

Anything else?

### Love and relationships

#### Double standards

At the heart of *Othello* is the idea of double standards, a concept which still exists today. Codes of conduct for men and women were very different in this play as they were in Shakespeare's society. Men have more personal freedom, and women are judged by them and in relation to them. Bianca's vulnerable status as a 'strumpet' (994.1.97) reminds us of the double standard: it is socially acceptable for Cassio to consort with a courtesan, but it is presumptuous for Bianca to expect him to marry her. Iago pretends to help Roderigo in his adulterous pursuit of Desdemona because it enables him to keep hold of his 'purse' (1.3.381). Men toy with and discard women as they choose. Iago's successful vilification of Desdemona is the key example of this. Iago uses the double standard to his advantage when he blackens Desdemona's name. The masculine code of honour is threatened by the idea of active female sexuality, so Iago destroys Othello by making the hero believe his chaste wife has strayed. There are two types of women in *Othello*'s world: chaste wives or whores. If Desdemona is not one, then she must be the other. If she is a whore, she has to be punished.

## Couples

Initially, Desdemona and Othello stand apart from the other couples because they have a harmonious relationship. There is no disillusionment or dissatisfaction here. The relationships of Bianca and Cassio and Emilia and Iago are not happy. The former is an unequal match between a 'customer' (4.1.120) who feels limited affection and a 'bauble' (4.1.134) whose genuine love makes her unhappy. Cassio reveals the limitations of this relationship – which he clearly feels is unworthy in some way – when he tells Bianca to be gone because he would not be seen in her company. Emilia and Iago are a chilling match. Marriage has made Emilia cynical about male-female relationships. She knows she is merely 'food' (3.4.105) for Iago, acceptable until she disobeys him and refuses to be silent, at which point her husband tries to kill her.

The misogyny of Iago casts a dark shadow over Othello's relationship with Desdemona, which seems full of optimism and delight at the start of the play. Despite their different social, cultural and racial backgrounds the hero and heroine symbolise a meeting of two minds in Act 1 and 2. Othello loves Desdemona for her feminine grace and sympathy; she loves him for his masculine heroism. Essentially, Othello and Desdemona love each other harmoniously because of the differences they perceive in each other. These differences become distorted by an interloper, a man who cannot bear to see two loves 'well tuned' (2.1.198). The envious, unhappily married Iago destroys true love.

| Othello and Desdemona | Iago and Emilia | Cassio and Bianca |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|                       |                 |                   |

### **A love triangle?**

In some ways it is possible to see the Othello–Desdemona–Iago relationship as a warped kind of love triangle. Iago seeks to displace Desdemona. What is it that he objects to so strongly when he looks at Othello and Desdemona together? Why does Iago wish to get between them? The text suggests that there is something very complicated going on. Iago's responses to the feminine reveal a mixture of fear and loathing. Part of his contempt for Othello is located in his fear that Desdemona has power. Iago has been sidelined. We know from his mocking reference to Desdemona as Othello's 'general' (2.3.310) that he cannot bear the fact that a female exerts influence. Iago despises Othello for giving in to love, which he sees as a feminine, unworthy emotion. Iago's derision of love and the female is also illustrated when he sneers about Desdemona being able to 'play the god' with Othello (2.3.342). Iago loathes the idea of a man being in thrall to a woman, believing Othello is weakened and trapped by love. Othello's soul is 'enfettered' to Desdemona's love, so much so that 'she may make, unmake, do what she list ... With his weak function' (2.3.340–3).

Iago responds to this by denigrating Desdemona and by making her voice seem unreliable. The power struggle comes into sharp focus when we consider the vow Iago makes to Othello at the end of Act 3 Scene 3: 'I am your own for ever' (line 482). Iago's fake love destroys Othello's real love. Othello begins to assert his masculine power in an overbearing way because he believes that Desdemona has begun to assert herself sexually. To any Renaissance husband, this would be unacceptable. We might see the events of Acts 4 and 5 as an attempt by Othello to reassert his own power over Desdemona. Because of this we come to associate masculine love with violence. Iago's misogyny triumphs.

## Attitudes towards love and sex in Othello

Which of the characters show the following attitudes towards love and sex?

| Attitude   | Character(s) | Evidence and analysis |
|--|--------------|-----------------------|
| Love is really just lust – an expression of our base animal nature   |              |                       |
| True love can grow from mutual admiration and appreciation – a reciprocal relationship in which each fulfils the other |              |                       |
| Some women should be respected, almost worshipped, while others may be treated as sexual playthings                    |              |                       |
| A woman should show her love by being meek and obedient to her husband, however he behaves                             |              |                       |
| Women are exploited and abused by men, and should stand up to them   |              |                       |

Which of the attitudes above do you think would be seen most differently by a Jacobean and modern audience? Explain your choice.

## **Jealousy**

### **Jealousy and destruction**

Jealousy is a form of tyranny in *Othello*. It destroys love, honour and nobility in those it afflicts. It makes both male protagonists murderous and violent. It also seems that it is the nature of jealousy not to be satisfied. Iago continues plotting against Cassio after he has disgraced him and is not content with disturbing Othello's peace of mind: he must continue until Desdemona is dead. Othello's jealous thoughts are characterised by references to acts of violence against Desdemona. He says he will 'tear her all to pieces!' (III.3.434) or 'chop her into messes' (IV.1.197). Othello also wants to torture and kill his supposed rival Cassio. Once his jealousy has been proved false, Othello turns his sword on himself. Jealousy has destroyed him. It also destroys Iago, whose torture is fitting punishment for his jealous crimes.

### **The imagery of jealousy**

The imagery associated with the central theme jealousy suggests the destructive, terrifying and perhaps unnatural qualities of this emotion. It is 'the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on' (3.3.168–9), 'a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself' (3.4.161–2). There is a strong sense of devouring and being devoured in these images, which fits in with Iago's description of Othello as being 'eaten up with passion'. These lines suggest the exact quality of Othello's monumental jealousy; once he becomes convinced that his wife is unfaithful, his jealousy does indeed feed itself, leading the hero to behave monstrously. Jealousy is also deeply humiliating in *Othello*; Iago is correct when he says that it is 'A passion most unsuited such a man' as the noble Moor of Venice (4.1.78).

### **Sexual jealousy**

There are three examples of sexual jealousy in the play, all of them unfounded. Bianca, Iago and Othello all believe that they have been betrayed by those they love, and they are all wrong. Does sexual jealousy turn Iago into a villain? Iago's aim is to make Othello and Cassio suffer as he suffers because he fears he has been cuckolded. Unlike Othello, Iago is cool and calculating when he chooses to act on his suspicions, suggesting jealousy follows on naturally from hatred in his characterisation. This is not the case with Bianca and Othello. Their sexual jealousy is a response to feelings of genuine love when they believe their partners have been unfaithful. Perhaps Othello's insistence on proof might suggest that this jealous husband is a nobler man than Iago.

Iago's sexual jealousy is prompted by rumours that 'the lusty Moor/ Hath leaped into my seat' (II.1.293–4). These words suggest sexual jealousy is prompted by competitiveness, as well as possessiveness. This is something we see again when Othello's overpowering jealousy takes hold. Othello cannot bear the idea of Desdemona's 'stolen hours of lust' (III.3.341). He feels he has been 'robbed'. In *Othello* sexual jealousy seems to be the 'flipside' of boundless love. What Othello shares with Iago is covetousness: both men feel jealous because they have lost possession of something that they held dear.

Finally, *Othello* suggests jealousy is ridiculous and humiliating, as well as terrifying and corrosive. Iago's motives for revenge are inadequate, and the proofs he provides flimsy. It is horribly humiliating that Othello, a renowned and experienced soldier, should kill his wife and himself because of a handkerchief, which has absurdly come to symbolise his own and Desdemona's honour.

**Complete the table below to show the view of jealousy that Shakespeare presents in each of these quotations and how the imagery used contributes to this.**

| Quotation  | View | Analysis of imagery |
|--|------|---------------------|
| <p>Iago:<br/> <b>O beware, my lord, of jealousy!</b><br/> <b>It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock</b><br/> <b>The meat it feeds on</b></p>   |      |                     |
| <p>Othello:<br/> <b>I had been happy, if the general camp,</b><br/> <b>Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,</b><br/> <b>So I had nothing known</b></p>   |      |                     |
| <p>Desdemona:<br/> <b>... and but my noble Moor</b><br/> <b>Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness</b><br/> <b>As jealous creates are, it were enough</b><br/> <b>To put him off ill-thinking</b></p> |      |                     |

# Quotations about love in Othello

## Love and sex

"I have a thing for you" (3.3.301)

"They are all but stomachs, and we all but food/ They eat us hungrily, and when they are full/ They belch us" (3.4.98-100)

"I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip" (4.3.36-7)

"But I do think it is their husbands faults? If wives do fall" (4.3.86)

"Pour our treasures into foreign laps" (4.3.86)

"Their wives have senses like them: they see, and smell,/ And have their palates both for sweet and sour" (4.3.90-1)

"And have not we affections/ Desires for sport" (4.3.96-7)

"The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (4.3.99)

## Marital love

"I nothing but to please his fantasy" (3.3.301)

"I have a thing for you" (3.3.301)

"Who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for't" (4.3.372-3)

"Tis proper I obey him, but not now" (5.2.195)

## Romantic love

"But that I love the gentle Desdemona" (1.1.25)

"She loved my for the dangers I have passed/ I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.166-7)

"I have but an hour/ Of love, of worldly matters and direction/ To spend with thee" (1.3.294-6)

O, my fair warrior!" (2.1.175)

"It gives me wonder as great as my content/ To see you here before me" (2.1.175-6)

"O, my soul's joy/ If after every tempest came such calms" (2.1.176-7)

"If it were now to die/ 'Twere now to be most happy" (2.1.181-2)

"It is too much of joy" (2.1.189)

"Sweeting: come away to bed" (2.3.233)

"Sweet Desdemon" (3.3.55)

"I will deny thee nothing (3.3.76 & 83)

"But I do love thee; and when I love thee not/ Chaos is come again" (3.3.91-2)

"Tis not to make me jealous/ To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company/ Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well" (3.3.185-7)

"Where virtue is, these are more virtuous" (3.3.188)

"I do not think but Desdemona's honest" (3.3.227)

"If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself/ I'll not believe it" (3.3.280-1)

"Chuck" (3.4.45)

"When my fate would have me wive/ To give it her" (3.3.60-1)

"A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!" (4.1.169-170)

"O, the world hath not a sweeter creature!" (4.1.174)

"O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (4.1.178-9)

"Yet I'll not shed her blood/ Nor scar that whiter skin of her than snow/ And smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.3-5)

"I know not where is that Promethean heat/ That can thy light relume" (5.2.12-3)

"O, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade/ Justice to break her sword!" (5.2.16-7)

"I would not kill thy unprepared spirit/ ... I would not kill thy soul" (5.2.31-2)

"I would not have thee linger in thy pain" (5.2.88)

"Of one that loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.340)

"Of one whose hand/ Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/ Richer than all his tribe" (5.2.342-4)

## Jealousy

"O beware, my lord, of jealousy/ It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on" (3.3.167-9)

"Thinks thou I'd make a life of jealousy" (3.3.179)

"Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio" (3.3.199)

"I do not think but Desdemona's honest" (3.3.227)

"That we can call these delicate creatures ours/ And not their appetites" (3.3.271-2)

"Fear not my government" (3.3.258)

"I had rather be a toad/ And live upon the vapour ,of a dungeon/ Than keep a corner in the thing I love/ For other's use" (3.3.272-5)

"Trifles light as air/ Are to the jealous confirmations strong" (3.3.323-4)

"Thou hast set me on the rack" (3.3.336)

"What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?" (3.3.339)

"I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips" (3.3.342)

"I had been happy if the general camp/ Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body/ So I had nothing known" (3.3.346-8)

"Be sure to prove my love a whore" (3.3.360)

"Give me the ocular proof" (3.3.361)

"I think my wife be honest, and think she is not" (3.3.385)

"Her name, that was fresh/ As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/ As mine own face" (3.3.387-9)

"Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!" (3.3.476)

"For here's a young and sweating devil here" (3.4.38)

"Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak; is't out of th'way?" (3.4.76)

"The handkerchief" (3.4.85 & 88 & 89 & 92)

"Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm?/ It is hypocrisy against the devil" (4.1.5-6)

"Lie with her? Lie on her?" (4.1.35)

"So, so, so, so: they laugh that wins" (4.1.119)

"That should be my handkerchief" (4.1.151)

"To be discarded thence/ Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads/ To knot and gender in!"  
(4.2.58-60)

"Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (5.1.36)

"I saw the handkerchief" (5.2.66)

"Cassio did top her" (5.2.137)

"Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought" (5.2.341)

### **Love and cruelty/violence**

"O, monstrous, monstrous!" (3.3.428)

"I'll tear her all to pieces!" (3.3.432)

"All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven/ 'Tis gone" (3.3.446-7)

"O, blood, blood, blood!" (3.3.453)

"Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace/ Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble  
love" (3.3.458)

"In the due reverence of sacred vow/ I here engage my words" (3.3.462-3)

"Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!" (3.3.476)

"For the fair devil" (3.3.479)

"This hand is moist" (3.4.32)

"For here's a young and sweating devil here" (3.4.38)

"How should I murder him Iago?" (4.1.162)

"I would have him nine years a-killing" (4.1.169)

"I will chop her into messes" (4.1.188)

"Cuckold me!" (4.1.188)

"Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.195-6)

"The justice of it pleases" (4.1.197)

"Devil [He strikes her]" (4.1.230)

"O devil, devil!" (4.1.234)

"Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on/ And turn again" (4.1.243-5)

"And she's obedient; as you say, obedient/ Very obedient" (4.1.246-7)

"This is a subtle whore" (4.2.20)

"Impudent strumpet" (4.2.80)

"What, not a whore?" (4.2.85)

"I took you for that cunning whore of Venice/ That married with Othello" (4.2.88-89)

"Yet she must die, or else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6)

"Put out the light and then put out the light" (5.2.7)

"I will kill thee/ And love thee after" (5.2.18-9)

"Out Strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face" (5.2.78)

"Down, strumpet" (5.2.79)

"Twas i that killed her" (5.2.131)

"I kiss thee ere I kill thee: no way but this/ Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (5.2.354-5)

## **Love and regret**

"But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!" (4.1.184-5)

"When I have plucked thy rose/ I cannot give it vital growth again" (5.2.13-4)

"My wife, my wife! What wife? I have no wife" (5.2.98)

"Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse/ Of sun and moon, and th'affrighted globe/  
Should yawn at alteration" (5.2.100-3)

"Sweet love grows harsh" (5.2.117)

"O! O! O!" (5.2.197)

"Cold, cold my girl,/ Even like thy chastity" (5.273-4)

"Roast me in sulphur!/ Wash me in the steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (5.2.277-8)

"O Desdemon! Dead Desdemon! Dead! O! O!" (5.2.279)