

Othello

The Single Text

The Single Text is examined on Paper 2 of the English Leaving Certificate Course. It is worth 60 marks. A choice of two questions will appear on the paper and students complete one of these. Most teachers will elect to study the prescribed Shakespearean text with their students. For examination in 2027, the prescribed Single Text is Othello.

Areas for Examination

The following are areas that could be examined:

- Characters, their strengths and weaknesses, their role in the play and their relationships with one another
- Themes such as jealousy, appearance versus reality, prejudice and gender
- Imagery and symbolism in the play
- Tragedy as a genre and the tragic elements of the play
- The relevance of the play 400 years later

Advice on answering the Single Text

- Choose your question carefully. Ensure you are able to engage with all aspects of it and are able to provide suitable reference in each paragraph to support your central points.
- It is a good idea to consult marking schemes for guidance on coding. Getting used to coding questions will ensure you engage with all aspects of a question.
- Only use reference that is relevant to the question being asked
- Form a central argument within the parameters of the question. This should be addressed in every paragraph.
- A topic sentence relevant to the question should begin every paragraph.
- You should spend around 60 minutes answering this question. This includes time for planning.

Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespeare drew inspiration for his tragedies from Greek tragedy. 400 years later, his characters and themes remain relevant and thoroughly engaging. His most famous tragedies, which include Othello, typically contain the following elements:

- Tragic hero

The tragic hero is generally a character who comes from a position of privilege. They are often of noble birth or enjoy a high social status. The key thing to remember is that they possess enough redeeming qualities to have potential for achieving greatness.

- Tragic flaw (Hamartia)

This greatness, however, will not be realised due to the Tragic Hero's tragic flaw, or hamartia. In the case of Othello, this flaw is a combination of his gullibility in trusting Iago's lies and his excessive jealousy. Shakespeare will often combine several elements to bring about the Hero's downfall such as fate, the supernatural, the presence of evil and influence or just plain bad luck!

- Tragic act

The Hero's flaw will inevitably lead him to committing a tragic act from which there is no return. In Othello's case, this is the murder of his wife, Desdemona.

- Tragic reversal

While the Hero may initially enjoy a rather privileged and elevated position, his actions will have inevitable consequences and he will experience a change in his fortunes. This is due to Shakespeare's respect for a structured social hierarchy.

- Downfall

Eventually, the Hero must face the repercussions of his actions and order must be restored. Often, there is a moment of tragic recognition from the Hero where he realises his mistakes too late. His downfall typically ends with his death.

- Catharsis

Although tragic, there is usually a level of cathartic release for the audience. Despite the tragic and often violent events of the play, the Tragic Hero's downfall means justice has been served and order has been restored to society once more. Although not always an ideal resolution, there is a relief in the resolution itself.

Note: While Shakespearean tragedies are heavy and dramatic, there are moments of light comic relief. This is to offer some relief to the audience in the midst of the tragic events occurring throughout the play.

Othello: Context

- The play was written in 1603 but is set during the Turkish-Venetian War (The War of Cyprus) fought between 1570-73. The Turkish side (the Ottomans) won the war, gaining control over Cyprus which belonged to the Venetians (who were Italian).
- It is important to note that Othello is neither Turkish nor Venetian but is a general in the Venetian army. Othello's race has been debated and discussed for centuries. In the play, he is described as a 'Moor', which separates him from his Venetian peers.

Central Characters

Othello- Othello is the play's tragic hero. He is a Moor and stands out in Venetian society, but he is respected and admired as a general in the Venetian army. He marries the younger Desdemona, but he is manipulated by his ensign, Iago, into believing she has been unfaithful to him with Michael Cassio.

Iago- Iago is Othello's ensign (flag-bearer). He is a soldier and close subordinate of Othello's. He is envious that Othello chose Michael Cassio as his lieutenant over him. He plots both Othello and Cassio's downfalls. He is married to Emilia.

Cassio- Cassio initially holds the rank of Captain but is promoted to Lieutenant in the Venetian army. He is presented as polite and charming but he reacts very poorly to alcohol. His dismissive treatment of Bianca is problematic. Cassio is chosen to lead Cyprus as Governor. He is the victim of an attack but he survives and is ultimately left to punish Iago.

Desdemona- Desdemona is the young wife of Othello. She is presented as virtuous and pure, although she has married Othello in secret. She comports herself admirably when called upon to support her husband. She appears to act in everyone's best interests.

Desdemona represents the Elizabethan ideal of spousal obedience and fidelity and her innate goodness makes Othello's crime all the more evil. She remains loyal to him even after he smothers her.

Emilia- Iago's wife and Desdemona's maidservant- plays an important role in the plot as the person who picks up Desdemona's handkerchief- loyal to those she loves but not unquestioningly so- stands up for what is right- plays a key role in revealing Iago's deception, ultimately a victim.

Bianca- A courtesan who is in love with Cassio. She is used as a plot device in framing Cassio as handsome and charming, also used to further Iago's plans. She is also used to reinforce the theme of jealousy.

Roderigo- Roderigo is used to further Iago's schemes and he is easily manipulated as he is in love with Desdemona.

Brabantio – Desdemona's father, who is disgusted by her marriage to the older and foreign Othello, it is his line that Iago takes particular note of 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see...' Note that Brabantio dies offstage and this is mentioned by his brother.

The Duke – Duke of Venice, a respected and authoritative presence. He is genuinely fond of Othello and fairly hears him out at the beginning of the play.

Gratiano –Brabantio's brother- He announces his death in Act 5- He passes a rather insensitive remark following Desdemona's death. He also provides obvious commentary to the audience

Montano- Former Governor of Cyprus- He is attacked by Cassio to the embarrassment of Othello- his function is to show Cassio's flawed behaviour when intoxicated.

Lodovico – A kinsman of Brabantio's (so, Desdemona's cousin) who leads the Venetian party to Cyprus to announce Cassio as the new governor- **He gives a voice to the audience's shock at Othello's physical violence directed at Desdemona.** He survives at the end to share the story and bear witness to the closing events of the play.

Plot Overview:

Act I –

- **Setting:** Venice.
 - Iago, angry that Othello chose Cassio as his lieutenant instead of him, begins plotting revenge. He feels he is far more deserving of the role, due to his extensive military experience.
 - Iago allies with Roderigo, who is in love with Desdemona and upset that she married Othello.
 - Late at night, Iago and Roderigo wake Desdemona's father, Brabantio, to tell him she has eloped with Othello, a Moor. Iago uses racial and sexual language to enrage Brabantio.
 - Brabantio, incensed by this news, accuses Othello of bewitching his daughter.
 - Othello is summoned before the Duke and the Venetian Senate to defend himself.
 - Desdemona publicly confirms her love for Othello, and the Duke supports the marriage.
 - Othello is ordered to Cyprus to command the defense against the Turks; Desdemona asks to go with him.
 - Iago reveals in a soliloquy that he plans to manipulate Othello into thinking Desdemona is unfaithful with Cassio.
-

Act II –

- **Setting:** Cyprus.
 - A storm destroys the Turkish fleet and thus the military threat is gone.
 - Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Cassio, and others arrive in Cyprus.
 - Iago starts sowing the seeds of distrust, noting how fond Desdemona seems of Cassio.
 - At a celebration, Iago gets Cassio drunk and provokes a fight between him and Roderigo. Cassio wounds Montano, who aimed to intervene in the scuffle.
 - Othello, awakened by the commotion, dismisses Cassio from his post.
 - Iago encourages Cassio to seek Desdemona's help in getting his job back, planning to use her intercession to make Othello jealous.
 - Iago outlines his next move: using Desdemona's kindness and the handkerchief (a love token) to arouse Othello's suspicion.
-

Act III

- **Setting:** Cyprus.
 - Cassio pleads with Desdemona, who promises to speak to Othello on his behalf.
 - Desdemona's repeated pleas to Othello to reinstate Cassio make Othello begin to doubt her loyalty and serve to reinforce his insecurity and jealousy.
 - Iago preys on Othello's insecurities, suggesting that Venetian women are unfaithful and Cassio is too familiar with Desdemona.
 - Othello demands "ocular proof" of her infidelity.
 - Emilia (Iago's wife and Desdemona's maidservant) picks up Desdemona's handkerchief, which she dropped, and gives it to Iago.
 - Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings as false evidence.

- Iago lies, saying he saw Cassio with the handkerchief and heard him talk in his sleep about Desdemona.
 - Othello, enraged and broken, vows to kill Desdemona. He kneels and swears vengeance with Iago, who is promoted to lieutenant.
-

Act IV

- **Setting:** Cyprus.
 - Othello, now consumed by jealousy, suffers an epileptic fit.
 - Iago stages a conversation with Cassio about Bianca (Cassio's lover), but Othello, eavesdropping, believes they are speaking of Desdemona.
 - Iago arranges for Othello to see Cassio laughing and holding the handkerchief.
 - Othello strikes Desdemona in public and accuses her of infidelity.
 - Lodovico, an envoy from Venice, witnesses Othello's violent behavior and is shocked.
 - Emilia defends Desdemona's innocence, but Iago dismisses her.
 - Othello interrogates Desdemona, who is confused and heartbroken.
 - Othello decides to murder Desdemona that night in bed.
 - Iago tells Roderigo to kill Cassio that night, promising it will help him win Desdemona.
-

Act V

- **Setting:** Cyprus.
 - Roderigo attacks Cassio in the dark, but fails. Cassio wounds Roderigo. Iago stabs Cassio in the leg and kills Roderigo to keep him quiet.

- Othello enters Desdemona's bedchamber. He confronts her, accuses her of betrayal, and despite her pleas of innocence, smothers her to death.
- Emilia arrives and discovers the murder. She reveals Iago's plot and how he obtained the handkerchief.
- Iago stabs Emilia to silence her. Montano and Lodovico arrest him.
- Othello realizes too late that Desdemona was innocent. Overcome with guilt, he delivers a final speech and stabs himself.
- Cassio is appointed governor of Cyprus. Iago is taken away to be tortured and executed.

Characters:

Othello

- Initially, Othello is presented to us as a respected and authoritative figure who commands respect despite his status as an outsider in Venetian society. The Duke refers to him as 'valiant Othello.' Montano states 'for I have served him, and the man commands like a full soldier.'
- Early in the play, Othello speaks in controlled, poetic blank verse that reflects his dignity and composure. As jealousy takes hold, his speech becomes fragmented and filled with violent, bestial imagery, echoing Iago's earlier racist language. This linguistic breakdown mirrors his moral and psychological collapse.
- Othello remains calm in the face of Brabantio's accusations, and he tells Iago before he is confronted that 'my parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly.' He attempts to calm the atmosphere of violence, stating 'you shall more command with years than with your weapons.'
- Othello is truthful in his account of his marriage to Desdemona, telling the Duke 'she loved me for the dangers I had passed and I loved her that she did pity them.' He is initially very trusting of her, stating 'my life upon her faith' when her father warns Othello of her potential treachery.
- Desdemona sincerely loves Othello, telling the Duke 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.'
- Despite the respect Othello receives from others as General of the Venetian army, he is also a victim of racism. Roderigo refers to him as 'thick lips' and Iago refers to him as an 'old black ram.' Brabantio believes that Othello has bewitched his daughter and tricked her into marrying him. Othello himself seems to internalise this racism, stating 'Haply for I am black, and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have.' His otherness in Venetian society is a source of insecurity to Othello.

- This sense of insecurity is manipulated by Iago, who plots to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity: 'yet that I put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure.' He attempts to convince Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair.
 - Othello is overly trusting of Iago, referring to him repeatedly as 'honest Iago.' He appears to place great value on Iago's opinions, telling him 'I know, Iago, thy honesty and love doth mince this matter' following Cassio's drunken outburst.
 - While Othello does trust Iago, he still requires 'ocular proof' of his wife's infidelity. He tells him 'I'll see before I doubt.'
 - He becomes beset by doubt and mistrust, proclaiming 'thou hast set me on the rack.'
 - Othello's intense jealousy eventually consumes him and his trust in his wife is completely eroded by Iago's scheming. His language becomes increasingly more violent, as he states 'I'll tear her all to pieces' and 'O blood, blood, blood.' His language towards Desdemona also changes, as he calls her a 'strumpet' and a 'whore.'
 - Othello completely loses his composure, striking Desdemona and calling her 'devil' in front of Lodovico, who has been sent from Venice.
 - He is convinced by Iago to kill Desdemona in their marital bed. He is motivated not just by his own jealousy and rage, but by a dubious sense of duty: 'Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.' Despite her pitiful protests, Othello callously smothers his wife.
 - He remains resolute in his decision until he learns of Iago's duplicity. Othello chooses to die by suicide, asking his peers to remember him as a man who 'loved not wisely, but too well' and who was 'not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplexed in the extreme.'
-

7. Othello as a Tragic Hero

Othello fulfills Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero:

- **High rank:** A celebrated general in the Venetian army.
- **Hamartia (fatal flaw):** His flaw is his intense jealousy and his misplaced trust in Iago
- **Peripeteia (reversal):** Once he believes that Desdemona has been unfaithful, he plots her death
- **Anagnorisis (recognition):** Realises his mistake too late.
- **Catharsis:** Audience experiences a sense of regret and sadness

Iago

Central points:

- Contempt for Othello is clear from the beginning
- Some motivation for his scheming is provided, but we remain sceptical of his motives
- Duplicitous - lies with seeming impunity
- Discusses sex in very crude terms- ties in to his misogyny
- Opportunistic
- Exploitative
- Manipulative
- Diabolical
- Extremely cruel
- Completely remorseless and unrepentant/determined to see his plot to the end
- Remains enigmatic until the end- he refuses to speak once apprehended

Overall analysis: A completely diabolical villain who exploits characters' weaknesses and seizes any opportunity to create discord. He remains one of Shakespeare's most heinous villains.

- Iago's contempt for Othello is established from the beginning of the play. In his discussion with Roderigo in scene one, he openly admits that he is merely waiting for an opportunity to destroy Othello 'I follow him to serve my turn upon him.' The audience knows, right from the beginning, that Othello cannot trust Iago.
- We are never made entirely aware of Iago's exact reasons for committing such immoral scheming, but we are provided with some of his motivations. Iago is resentful that he was passed over by Othello for a promotion to the role of lieutenant as he feels he is better suited to the role, stating 'I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.' He is deeply critical of Michael Cassio, the man appointed to the role, stating that he is '...a fellow almost damned in a fair wife that never set a squadron in the field nor the division of a battle knows.' As well as this he suspects that both Cassio and Othello have been intimate with his wife, informing us in Act 1 'I hate the Moor and it is thought that 'twixt my sheets he has done my office.' Although Iago's resentment over being shunned for a promotion might seem valid (he is more experienced than Cassio), his claims about his wife and the men remain unfounded.
- Iago's duplicitous nature is evident from the beginning. Iago is unapologetically deceptive and cunning, proudly stating in his first soliloquy 'I am not what I am.' He is aware that by being duplicitous, he has a better chance of advancing his evil plans- 'I must show out a flag and sign of love which is indeed but sign.' He knows that the more he can convince Othello that he is honest and trustworthy, the better opportunity he will have to influence him.

- Although Iago is capable of being charming and affable to those around him, his language surrounding sex and women is coarse and vulgar. His imagery is dominated by animals, disease, and corruption, reflecting how he views human relationships as filthy and debased. This contrasts sharply with Othello's early poetic language of love and honour. When informing Brabantio of Othello and Desdemona's relationship, he states 'an old black ram is tupping your white ewe.' Indeed, it is this crude imagery that will ultimately have the biggest influence on Othello. Lacking any real evidence that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair, Iago fills Othello's mind with coarse and vulgar sexual images. When Othello wonders if Cassio has lain with Desdemona, Iago responds 'With her, on her, what you will'. Even publicly, though disguised as playfulness, Iago is quite misogynistic. It is clear that his view of women is clouded by mistrust, as he tells Desdemona 'your are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, wildcats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, plays in your housewifery and housewives in your beds.' Thus, it is evident to the audience that Iago deeply mistrusts women, whom he views as hypocritical and deceptive.
- Perhaps Iago's most discernible trait is his opportunism. Iago is fortunate in the play in that he is presented with many opportunities to wreak havoc with the characters' lives. He uses Roderigo not only to attack Cassio but also for his money, scornfully commenting 'thus do I ever make my fool my purse.' As well as this, he sees an opportunity to get Cassio drunk, leading to him losing his rank as lieutenant. While Iago does scheme in the play, his greatest strength as a villain is seizing opportunities that land in front of him. This is perhaps best conveyed to us through Desdemona's handkerchief, which, when it falls into his possession, Iago uses as the 'ocular proof' Othello has asked for. While some critics consider Iago lucky in the play, he certainly makes the most of any chance he receives to scheme and plot.
- Iago is brilliantly able to exploit the other characters' various weaknesses. He is easily able to exploit Roderigo's love of Desdemona, eventually persuading him to attack Cassio. He is also able to exploit Cassio's love of women and his drunkenness to further his plans. Most significantly, however, Iago is able to exploit not only Othello's deep-seated insecurities about his age and race, but also his inherently trusting nature, commenting 'the Moor is of a free and open nature that think men honest that seem to be but so and will as tenderly be led by th' nose as asses are.' We know that Othello's unquestioning trust of Iago is a huge mistake that he will later deeply regret.
- To further his own selfish aims, Iago manipulates those around him in a subtle but significant manner. When he sees Cassio avoiding Othello, he comments '...I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty like, seeing you coming.' He engages in a clever balancing act with Othello; on the one hand telling him to 'beware my lord of jealousy/it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meet it feeds on' but also filling his mind with crude sexual imagery of Cassio and Desdemona. In this way, he is a master of manipulation, influencing Othello so profoundly that he will wind up murdering his wife.
- It is rare in Shakespearean literature that a villain is so unapologetically diabolical. In his soliloquies, Iago provides us with an insight into just how evil he truly is. He admits that he will 'pour this pestilence into (Othello's) ear that (Desdemona) repeals him for her body's lust.' He also tells us 'so I will turn her virtue into pitch, and out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all.' His diabolical scheming

is unrestrained and dangerous, but a source of fascination to the audience, firmly placing Iago at the top of the list of Shakespeare's most notorious villains.

- Not only is Iago a diabolical schemer, he is capable of great cruelty. He kills his own wife without question, stabbing her as she reveals his lies. He is also the person to suggest that Othello smother his wife 'Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed even the bed she hath contaminated.' Iago's cruel streak serves to make him an even more intimidating villain.
- Notably, and in contrast to Edmund in *Lear*, Iago remains remorseless and unrepentant. In Act 4, he states 'thus credulous fools are caught and many worthy and chaste dames even thus all guiltless meet reproach.' In Act 5, he remains determined to see his plans through, noting 'this is the night that either make me or fordoes me quite.' For Iago, there is no moment of repentance or doubt and he never seeks nor is given any form of redemption.
- Indeed, Iago remains enigmatic right to the end. His last words in the play are 'demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time, I will never speak word.' Iago is unwilling to provide the audience with any deep insights into his motivations and, although frustrating, is no doubt one of the many reasons for his enduring appeal as a Shakespearean villain.

Cassio

- Cassio is introduced to the audience through Iago's conversation with Roderigo in the opening scene, where he expresses his jealousy at Cassio's promotion to the rank of lieutenant in the Venetian army. Iago appears frustrated at what he feels is Cassio's unsuitability for the role, referring to him mockingly as an 'arithmetician', stating 'one Michael Cassio, a Florentine, / A fellow almost damned in a fair wife, / That never set a squadron in the field, / Nor the division of a battle knows.'
- Similarly to Othello, Cassio is presented as an outsider, as he is from Florence.
- Despite his status as an outsider, Cassio is presented as polite and courteous. Iago describes him as a 'proper man' and it is made clear to us that he is handsome and charming.
- This charm is alluded to by Cassio himself, who states 'tis my breeding that gives me this bold show of courtesy.' It is this charm that Iago expertly exploits, using it to convince Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona.
- Despite Cassio's positive attributes, he possesses significant flaws. His treatment of the courtesan, Bianca, appears dismissive at best and misogynistic at worst. He is aware of her love for him, but he speaks poorly of her: 'Alas, poor rogue! I think, i' faith, she loves me.' This contrasts significantly with the way he speaks about Desdemona, whom he describes as 'most exquisite' and 'indeed perfection.' He describes her as '...so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested.'
- Cassio also admits that alcohol does not agree with him: 'I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking.' In Act 2, Cassio drunkenly wounds Montano, leading to his dismissal by Othello. He is horrified by the damage done to his public image,

stating 'Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.'

- Cassio is the victim of a failed assassination, but survives. He is present at the death of Othello, and is made Governor of Cyprus. It is fitting that he will be the person to punish Iago at the end of the play.

Desdemona

Desdemona is presented as the epitome of loyalty, kindness and spousal obedience but there is more to her character than what we discern at first glance. Desdemona has admirable morals and attempts to stand up for what is right, even when it may lead to conflict. She remains one of Shakespeare's most tragic figures, as she remains entirely faultless for her death.

- Our first impression of Desdemona is entirely positive, as she articulately describes her love for Othello, explaining how and why she fell in love with him. While she remains respectful to her father, she bravely defends her marriage to Othello. She tells her father 'My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty'. She continues 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honour and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.' She remains resolute and firm in her defence of Othello.
- Her love for Othello is made clear as she asks to accompany him to Cyprus. While waiting for him, she engages in witty repartee with Iago, and she shows herself more than capable of challenging him, as she chides him 'These are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i' the alehouse.' She jokes with Emilia 'Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband.'
- Following Cassio's dismissal by Othello, Desdemona vows to help him, stating 'assure thee, if I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it to the last article.' Desdemona is therefore presented as a loyal and principled friend, who attempts to make amends between her husband and his friend, which she believes is for the greater good. Her persistence, which arises from good intentions, is unfortunately misinterpreted by her increasingly jealous husband. Therefore, her unwavering loyalty to her friend inadvertently brings about her downfall. She begs Othello to consider her defence of Cassio: 'Why, then, to-morrow night; or Tuesday morn; On Tuesday noon, or night; on Wednesday morn.'
- Despite Othello increasing frustration towards his wife, Desdemona remains obedient and patient with him. When he instructs her to leave him alone, she replies 'Shall I deny you? no: farewell, my lord.' She is incredibly bothered at the loss of Othello's handkerchief, stating that she is 'most unhappy in the loss of it.'
- We feel great sympathy for Desdemona as Othello publicly strikes her. She responds to this humiliation simply, but rather powerfully, stating 'I have not deserved this.'
- Desdemona attempts to defend herself in Act 4, Scene 2 against Othello's accusations, aiming to reassure him of her love, responding when asked who she is: 'Your wife, my lord; your true and loyal wife.' She attempts to remain as calm and composed as she was with her father in Act 1, stating simply 'by heaven, you do me wrong.'

- Othello's actions do not diminish Desdemona's love for him, as she tells Iago '...his unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love.'
- Desdemona's death is incredibly tragic, as she feebly begs her husband for her life: 'kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight.' He refuses to hear her pleas, and she dies, in her own words, 'a guiltless death.'
- It is also incredibly significant that even as Desdemona dies, she attempts to shift the blame for her death from her husband, conveying an intense loyalty to him even after he has smothered her.

Emilia

Similarly to Desdemona, Emilia is a loyal and mostly submissive wife for the majority of the play, aiming to please her scheming husband. In contrast to Desdemona however, she expresses deep cynicism towards patriarchal structures and eventually unmasks her husband's trickery and deception, resulting in her cruel death. In many ways, Emilia serves as a proto-feminist character.

- Emilia's loyalty and submission to her husband are made clear- she gives him Desdemona's handkerchief
- Despite this, she appears jaded and cynical about the patriarchal society she lives in. Emilia's jaded outlook on love and fidelity is shown when she claims, "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food." This remark reveals both her awareness of male hypocrisy and her weary acceptance of it.
- She plays a central role in her husband's scheme, albeit unwittingly.
- She is incredibly loyal to and protective of Desdemona.
- She bravely challenges her husband at the end of the play, and exposes his deceit. This unfortunately results in her death.

Themes

Otherness and Prejudice

Othello powerfully explores the theme of otherness through multiple characters who exist on the margins of Venetian society.

Racial Otherness: Othello

Othello's social status is mired in paradox and inconsistency: he's simultaneously valued and marginalised. Venice depends on his military prowess, as he is told 'Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / Against the general enemy Ottoman', yet he remains fundamentally "other." The Duke respects him professionally but patronises him personally, saying 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black', which seemingly compliments Othello while reinforcing racial categories.

Othello's status is consistently emphasised through racially charged language, particularly by Iago and Roderigo. Even before Othello appears on stage, he is referred to in overtly bestial terms: 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe'. Roderigo refers to him as 'thick lips.'

This animalistic imagery reduces Othello to his race and sexuality. Iago continues this pattern, telling Brabantio that 'you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse', framing the marriage as bestial rather than romantic. Such language reflects a culture that defines Blackness through fear, desire, and moral corruption.

Tragically, Othello internalises this otherness. Initially confident in his status, he gradually absorbs the racist attitudes around him. Under Iago's manipulation, he begins to see himself as the outsider others perceive:

'Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have, or for I am declined / Into the vale of years.'

Here, Othello attributes Desdemona's supposed infidelity to his own racial differences, internalising the very prejudices he initially transcended.

The theme of otherness also fuels Othello's jealousy: convinced he can never truly belong in Desdemona's world, he mistakes insecurity for betrayal. Thus, prejudice becomes the root cause of both personal and societal collapse.

Social Otherness: Cassio

Cassio represents a different form of otherness—he's a Florentine in Venice, an outsider to Venetian military culture despite his position. Iago exploits this, noting 'He hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected, framed to make women false'. Cassio's "foreignness" makes him suspect, and his refined manners are reinterpreted as deceptive courtliness. Indeed, Cassio himself acknowledges this, stating 'tis my breeding that gives me this bold show of courtesy.'

To compound this, Iago also comments negatively on Cassio's education, referring to him as a 'great arithmetician' and engaging in 'mere prattle without practice.' This aligns with a contemporaneous view of Florentines as intellectuals, as it was a centre of Renaissance learning. Iago does not present this as complimentary, however.

More significantly, Cassio's disgrace over drunkenness reveals his tenuous social position. When he loses his pristine reputation, he laments: 'Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.' As an outsider without Othello's military achievements, Cassio's reputation is all that secures his place in Venetian society.

Gendered and Class Otherness: Bianca

Bianca embodies multiple forms of otherness as a courtesan—she exists outside respectable society due to both her profession and gender. Cassio treats her with casual

contempt despite her genuine affection for him, mocking her to Iago: 'She is persuaded I will marry her, out of her own love and flattery, not out of my promise.'

When the handkerchief plot unfolds, Bianca becomes an easy scapegoat precisely because of her otherness. Iago immediately accuses her: 'This is the fruit of whoring' while Emilia calls her 'strumpet.' Her marginal status makes her simultaneously invisible (she is dismissed by Cassio) and hypervisible (she is immediately blamed for violence). As she protests, 'I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you that thus abuse me' but her voice carries no authority in a society that has already prejudged, categorised and dismissed her.

Jealousy

Jealousy is presented as a wholly destructive force in the play. It distorts truth and reason, and it is used by Iago to incite chaos and violence. It is an emotion that seduces Othello, as he succumbs completely to it and abandons his humanity. Shakespeare chooses to look at personal, professional and romantic jealousy.

Bianca

Bianca's jealousy in the play arises from her love for Cassio and her insecurity around his relationships with other women as well as his casual and dismissive treatment of her. In Act 3, Scene 4, she expresses her jealousy at the handkerchief, stating 'this is some token from a newer friend.' Cassio correctly deduces that she is jealous, stating 'you are jealous now that this is from some mistress, some remembrance. No, by my faith, Bianca.' She confronts Cassio once more about the handkerchief, stating 'this is some minx's token.' In contrast to Othello, Bianca's jealousy stems from an insecurity that is somewhat justified, as Cassio clearly does not respect her and tells Iago 'she haunts me in every place.' Thus, we feel more pity for Bianca, as she appears to be a victim of Cassio's insincerity.

Iago and Othello

Iago's jealousy is cold, calculated, and rooted in pride and resentment, whereas Othello's is emotional, irrational, and ultimately self-destructive. Shakespeare contrasts Iago's manipulative control with Othello's loss of control, revealing jealousy as a form of madness that warps perception.

Iago's jealousy stems from both a personal and professional hatred of both Othello and Cassio. His manipulation of Othello centres around jealousy- it is both his motivator and the tool he will use to ruin his rivals.

We learn in the opening scene that Iago's resentment towards Othello stems from his decision to promote Cassio to the rank of lieutenant instead of him. He feels that he is more deserving of the role, stating that Cassio 'never set a squadron in the field nor the division of a battle knows.' Iago claims that he is 'worth no worse a place.' He provides us with some

motivation for his plotting in the opening scenes, as he states in his first soliloquy 'it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets he has done my office' referring to his belief that Othello has been intimate with his wife. He expands on this during his second soliloquy, where he states that his 'revenge' is motivated by his belief that 'the lusty Moor hath leaped into (his) seat' and he adds 'nothing can or shall content my soul till I am evened with him, wife for wife.' He plans to 'put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgement cannot cure.'

Iago's manipulation of Othello is masterful- he provokes his jealousy patiently yet mercilessly, weaponising both Cassio's charm and good looks and Othello's insecurities. He vows to 'pour this pestilence into (Othello's) ear.'

In Act 3, Scene 3, he uses Cassio's hasty exit as an opportunity to arouse Othello's suspicions, stating 'I cannot think it that he would steal away so guiltylike, seeing your coming.' He ironically warns Othello of jealousy, stating 'O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.' He tells Othello to watch Desdemona and Cassio together with eyes that are 'not jealous nor secure.'

The handkerchief that is dropped becomes a catalyst for Othello's jealousy and bitterness. It becomes the 'ocular proof' that Othello demands. He desperately demands Desdemona to produce it in Act 3, Scene 4, with Emilia aptly noting 'is not this man jealous?' His language becomes increasingly desperate and violent, as he claims 'I'll tear her (Desdemona) all to pieces' and 'arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!' He states that 'within these three days let me hear thee say that Cassio's not alive.' He also vows to consider how he will have the 'lewd minx' Desdemona killed, stating 'I will withdraw to furnish me with some swift means of death for the fair devil.' Following this, Iago provokes Othello's jealousy even further. He makes reference to Cassio and Desdemona having sex, by stating that Cassio has lain 'with her-on her-what you will.' This causes Othello to fall into an epileptic seizure. Following this, Iago engineers a situation where he prompts Cassio to speak disparagingly about Bianca but convinces Othello, who is eavesdropping, that he is speaking about Desdemona. Othello has now decided that 'she shall not live.' Iago convinces him to 'strangle her in her bed.' Following this conversation, we see Othello's jealousy physically manifest itself, as he strikes his wife in public. He refers to her as 'a whore' and 'a strumpet.' Finally, Othello murders his wife in her bed convincing himself by stating 'yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.' His jealousy has completely consumed him, and he commits the ultimate act of evil, manipulated by Iago's schemes. He chooses to die by suicide, conceding that he has been tricked and convinced of his wife's innocence.

Appearance versus Reality

Appearance versus reality is a complex theme in the play. In Act 3, Scene 3, Othello simply states 'men should be what they seem', but we know that this is indeed not the case in the play. The theme is explored through Othello's misplaced trust in Iago, through Iago's diabolical scheming and through Othello's distorted view of Desdemona.

Iago's scheming:

In the opening scene, Iago discusses his intention to deceive Othello by being false, telling Roderigo: 'I follow him to serve my turn upon him.' He explains that by serving Othello and

appearing loyal, he is really acting in his own self-interest 'in following him, I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty.' He expresses his belief that honesty makes one vulnerable and weak, stating 'but I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at.' He finishes by saying 'I am not what I am.'

Following his rousing of Brabantio, Iago cleverly steals away, stating 'yet for necessity of present life, I must show out a flag and sign of love- which is indeed but sign.' Indeed, in the following scene he appears to have Othello's best interests at heart, advising him to avoid Brabantio and telling him 'he comes to bad intent.' In Act 1, Scene 3, we are given a deeper insight into Iago's plans, as he expresses his plan to use Roderigo for financial gain and to make Othello mistrust Cassio. He states 'the Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem so, and will as tenderly be led by th' nose as asses are.' He vows that he will turn Desdemona's 'virtue into pitch' and 'out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all.'

Othello's trust:

Othello's blind trust in Iago is one of the most significant contributing factors to the tragedy of the play. Indeed, Iago is aware of this trusting nature and uses it to his distinct advantage throughout the play. Othello frequently refers to Iago as 'honest' and he tells him 'I know thou'rt full of love and honesty and weigh'st thy words before thou giv'st them breath.' He also ironically states 'for such things in a false, disloyal knave are tricks of custom.' Once left alone with his thoughts, he reflects on what Iago has told him about Desdemona and Cassio, stating 'this fellow's of exceeding honesty, and knows all qualities with a learned spirit of human dealings.' Although Othello is deeply troubled by what Iago has told him, he is determined to find out the truth, demanding 'ocular proof' of Iago's claims and asking for a 'living reason' for his accusations. Iago uses the handkerchief as physical evidence of his claims, and before Othello investigates this properly, he appoints Iago as his lieutenant. As Iago further provokes Othello's jealousy, Othello seems to gain even more admiration and respect for him, calling him 'wise.' Such is Othello's trust in Iago's judgement that he enlists his assistance in arranging the deaths of both Cassio and Desdemona, with Iago advising Othello to strangle his wife in their marital bed. Before Othello leaves to commit this deed, he refers to Iago as 'brave...honest and just.' Once Othello realises that he has been tricked by Iago, he tasks Cassio with figuring out his motive, asking 'will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?' Othello dies in the knowledge that he blindly trusted Iago.

Desdemona's Misrepresentation and the Corruption of Truth

In the play, Desdemona is the victim of misrepresentation. She is mischaracterised as unfaithful and deceptive and is allowed very few opportunities to defend her honour.

The audience is acutely aware of Desdemona's purity and sincere love for her husband. Despite this, her fidelity to her husband and indeed to her friend Cassio is distorted by Iago to portray her as duplicitous and disloyal. She marries Othello without her father's consent, and he warns Othello 'look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see, she has deceived her father, and may thee.' Indeed, Iago expresses a similar sentiment, extending it to describe all women, albeit seemingly playfully, as he states 'you are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, wildcats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries...' Despite these statements, the

women in the play appear submissive and loyal to their partners. Initially, Othello refuses to believe that Desdemona could be unfaithful to him, telling Iago 'nor from my own weak merits will I draw the smallest fear or doubt of her revolt, for she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago, I'll see before I doubt.' Iago counters that Desdemona 'did deceive her father' by marrying Othello. Once Iago secures the 'ocular proof' that Othello has requested, Othello loses all trust in his wife, referring to her as a 'strumpet' and a 'whore.' This contrasts significantly with what we know of her character, as she has demonstrated admirably honesty in the play. She did not deny her marriage to Othello once confronted by her father, and calmly defended her decision. She also vowed to Cassio that she would plead with her husband to have him reinstated. She is deeply troubled by the loss of her handkerchief, telling Emilia 'I had rather have lost my purse full of crusadoes.' We feel great pity for her as she is publicly stuck by her husband, as we agree with her statement that she did not deserve it. As Othello plans her murder, he acknowledges how sweet she appears, telling Iago 'she will sing the savageness out of a bear.' In Act 4, Othello aggressively interrogates his wife, although he does not acknowledge her repeated protestations of innocence, stating 'heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell.'

In Desdemona's closing scenes, she remains consistent in her protestations of innocence and it is deeply tragic that Othello does not believe her. She remains one of the most morally courageous and honest characters in the play, yet she arguably suffers the worst fate. Othello's perception of her is one wholly distorted by his own insecurities and Iago's scheming.

Imagery and Symbolism - Key Quotes

The Handkerchief

Function: The handkerchief is a plot device, used as the 'ocular proof' demanded by Othello to prove his wife's infidelity. It is initially a symbol of marital love but it becomes a catalyst for the jealousy and violence that characterises the end of the play as it serves as physical proof of Desdemona's alleged affair with Cassio.

"That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give; / She was a charmer, and could almost read / The thoughts of people: she told her, while she kept it, / 'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father / Entirely to her love; but if she lost it, / Or made a gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies."
(Act 3, Scene 4)

Thus, Othello's demand for "ocular proof" reveals the danger of valuing appearance over reality, a central idea in the play.

Othello explains the magical origin of the handkerchief, making it a symbol of his love and Desdemona's fidelity. Losing it or giving it away is framed as a betrayal. The "Egyptian" story heightens its mystical importance and sets the stage for Iago's manipulation. It links to exoticism and racial 'otherness' — the handkerchief mirrors Othello's outsider status in Venetian society. This deepens the symbolic connection between love, race, and magic.

"That's a fault: that handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give; / She told her while she kept it, 'Twould make her amiable.'" (Act 3, Scene 4)

Othello repeats the significance of the handkerchief when he notices Desdemona does not have it. The repetition underscores his obsessive attachment to symbols of fidelity, making him more vulnerable to jealousy. This scene marks the move from trust to fixation. Note how his language grows ritualistic and controlling, echoing Iago's manipulation of religious imagery ("proof," "damnation," "holy writ").

"Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ." (Act 3, Scene 3)

Iago emphasises how minor signs, like the loss of a handkerchief, can inflame Othello's jealousy. While not directly naming the handkerchief, this speech foreshadows the manipulation surrounding it.

"I am glad I have found this napkin: / This was her first remembrance from the Moor. / My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it; but she so loves the token, / For he conjured her she should ever keep it, / That she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to." (Act 3, Scene 3)

Emilia finds the handkerchief and notes Desdemona's attachment to it. The theft allows Iago to manipulate Othello's perception, making it proof of infidelity. Emilia's theft introduces the theme of female complicity and victimhood — she becomes an unwitting agent of Iago's plan. This deepens the feminist reading of the play, highlighting how women are used as pawns.

"I gave her such a one; / 'Twas my first gift." (Act 3, Scene 4)
"Get me some poison, Iago; this night: / Iago, look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio; / Wear your eye thus, not jealous, nor secure."

Othello links the handkerchief directly to Desdemona's fidelity. Its absence becomes the "evidence" that convinces him of her supposed betrayal.

"Fetch me the handkerchief: my mind misgives." (Act 3, Scene 4)

This simple line highlights Othello's obsessive fixation on the handkerchief as proof of Desdemona's loyalty or lack thereof. Its symbolic power dominates his thoughts.

"I like not that." / "I saw it not; but I know 'tis hers." (Act 4, Scene 1)

The handkerchief appears with Cassio and Bianca, further misleading Othello into believing Desdemona gave it to Cassio, cementing his jealousy.

The Willow Song

The **Willow Song** in *Othello* (Act 4, Scene 3) is a short, melancholic folk song that Desdemona sings just before her death. It serves multiple dramatic, thematic, and symbolic functions in the play:

It foreshadows Desdemona's death:

The lyrics of the Willow Song are full of loss, sorrow, and forsaken love, mirroring Desdemona's own impending fate. By singing it, she unwittingly foreshadows her murder:

- The imagery of a woman abandoned by her lover parallels Desdemona's situation with Othello, who has been led to believe she is unfaithful.
- This moment also reflects Elizabethan gender expectations — women were valued for obedience and silence, making Desdemona's gentle self-expression through song all the more tragic.
- It heightens the audience's sense of tragic inevitability. We are aware that she is in danger.

It is reflective of Desdemona's troubled emotional state

- The song gives insight into Desdemona's deep sadness and premonitions of doom, revealing her emotional vulnerability.
- She sings it after discussing her domestic duties with Emilia, subtly acknowledging her own isolation and the fragility of her position in a male-dominated world. This moment also reflects Elizabethan gender expectations — women were valued for obedience and silence, making Desdemona's gentle self-expression through song all the more tragic.

It symbolises female suffering

- Willow trees in folklore are associated with grief, loss, and forsaken women. By singing the Willow Song, Desdemona embodies these themes.

It adds to the rising tension and suspense

- The song's mournful tone creates a poignant, somber mood on stage.
- It prepares the audience emotionally for the tragic climax in which Othello kills Desdemona.
- The contrast between the domestic, gentle act of singing and the horror to come heightens the tragedy.

It reinforces the theme of appearance versus reality

- The song underscores the contrast between outward appearances and hidden truths: Desdemona appears calm and obedient, but the song reveals her inner despair and the reality of her tragic situation.

Quotation (Act 4, Scene 3):

"The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree, / Sing all a green willow; her hand on her bosom, / Her head on her knee, sing willow, willow, willow."

- This evocative description emphasizes Desdemona's melancholy and the symbolism of the willow tree as a sign of mourning and forsaken love.

Animal imagery

Function: Animal imagery is used to represent the most fundamental and basest human behaviours; it is used to present Othello as sexually aggressive and mindlessly violent.

Initially, animal imagery is used by characters to debase Othello and Desdemona's physical union as bestial. This portrayal arises from the racist attitudes of these characters, who view Desdemona as a victim of Othello's lasciviousness. As well as this, Iago uses it to crudely discuss sex, aiming to provoke Othello's jealousy even further. As the play progresses, Othello begins to abandon his humanity, as he succumbs to Iago's manipulation and his language becomes far more violent and animalistic.

Quotes:

'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe.' -Iago

'You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse. You'll have your nephews neigh to you.' -Iago

'I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs'- Iago

'Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon.' -Iago

'Drown thyself? Drown cats and blind puppies!' -Iago

'With as little a web as this I will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio'- Iago

'And will as tenderly be led by th' nose. As asses are.' -Iago (on Othello)

'Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial'- Cassio

'I had rather be a toad
And live upon this vapour of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in a thing I love
For others' uses.' - Othello

'What shall I say? where's satisfaction?
It is impossible you should see this
Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
As salt as wolves in pride;' - Iago

'Oh, she will sing the savageness out of a bear!' -Othello (on Desdemona)
'They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; To eat us hungrily, and when they are full,
They belch us'- Emilia

'I'll tear her all to pieces'. -Othello

Short-Answer Questions

1. What is Othello's tragic flaw (hamartia) according to Aristotle's model of tragedy?

Answer: Othello's tragic flaw is his jealousy and gullibility, which make him easily manipulated by Iago and lead to his downfall.

2. How does Iago manipulate Othello into believing Desdemona has been unfaithful?

Answer: Iago uses suggestion, lies, and planted evidence — especially the handkerchief — to provoke Othello's jealousy and convince him Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio.

3. Why is the handkerchief such an important symbol in the play?

Answer: The handkerchief represents love and fidelity, but becomes a symbol of betrayal when Iago uses it to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity.

4. In what ways is Othello portrayed as an outsider in Venetian society?

Answer: Othello is a Moor and faces racial prejudice. Despite his military success, he is viewed as different and never fully accepted in Venetian society.

5. What event leads to Cassio's demotion from lieutenant?

Answer: Cassio is provoked by Iago into a drunken fight with Montano, which causes Othello to strip him of his rank.

6. How does Desdemona demonstrate her loyalty and innocence throughout the play?

Answer: She remains faithful and loving toward Othello, defends him before her father and the Duke, and even as she dies, says she is guiltless and forgives him.

7. What is the significance of the "Willow Song" in Act IV?

Answer: The song foreshadows Desdemona's death and symbolises female sorrow and betrayal, expressing her sadness and resignation to her fate.

8. How does Emilia's character challenge the gender roles of her time?

Answer: Emilia defies her husband and speaks out against male dominance, famously saying, "Let husbands know their wives have sense like them." She exposes Iago's deceit, showing courage and moral integrity.

9. What role does jealousy play in driving the tragedy of Othello?

Answer: Jealousy is the central destructive force — it consumes Othello, poisons his love, and leads him to murder Desdemona. It also motivates Iago's plotting.

10. How does Shakespeare explore the theme of appearance versus reality in the play?

Answer: Through Iago's deceit and Othello's misplaced trust, Shakespeare shows how seeming honesty can hide evil — Iago appears loyal while secretly scheming.

11. What does Iago mean when he says, "I am not what I am"?

Answer: Iago is admitting his duplicity, revealing that he hides his true motives behind a façade of honesty and loyalty.

12. How does animal imagery contribute to the play's themes of dehumanisation and jealousy?

Answer: Characters like Iago use animalistic imagery ("an old black ram is tupping your

white ewe”) to degrade Othello and to reflect how jealousy reduces people to their basest instincts.

13. In what way does Othello’s language change as he becomes consumed by jealousy?

Answer: His speech shifts from noble and poetic to chaotic and violent, filled with anger and animalistic imagery, mirroring his loss of control and humanity.

14. What is Othello’s moment of recognition (anagnorisis) near the end of the play?

Answer: Othello realises Desdemona was innocent and that he was deceived by Iago. Overcome with guilt, he takes his own life.

15. How does the play achieve catharsis for the audience despite its tragic ending?

Answer: The audience experiences pity and fear, but also emotional release, as justice is restored — Iago is exposed, and Othello’s death brings tragic resolution.