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CHARACTERS

Othello

Who is Othello

- Othello is a Moor, and a successful mercenary general who works for the state of Venice.
- He is a middle-aged bachelor who elopes with and marries a wealthy young Venetian, Desdemona.
- Othello is posted to Cyprus as governor during the Turkish conflict.
- In Cyprus, Othello believes Iago's false tales of his wife's adultery and smothers her, afterwards killing himself.

Othello: first impressions

Before he appears on stage we are led to believe by Iago that Othello is bombastic, conceited and personally lascivious. But Othello's appearance in Act I Scene 2 contradicts Iago's assessment. Instead we see an impressive figure who displays a number of fine qualities: openness, sincerity and a natural authority. Unlike Shakespeare's other tragic protagonists, Othello is not a monarch (King Lear), an aspiring monarch (Macbeth) nor a displaced prince (Hamlet). However, he is a worthy figure and Shakespeare stresses his nobility. The Moor is the descendant of a royal line of kings (Othello refers to his birthright when he defends his right to marry Desdemona) and has been an impressive military commander.

'Valiant Othello' (I.3.49) commands the respect of figures of authority (the Duke of Venice, Governor Montano and even Brabantio). Although we do not see much evidence of his leadership in Cyprus, we know Othello is a conscientious soldier. He attempts to ensure that the carousing at his wedding festivities does not get out of hand and inspects the fortifications in the town in Act III Scene 2. Othello speaks and acts powerfully and in a way that inspires confidence in his character throughout the first two acts of the play (for example his dignity in front of the senate in Act I Scene 3). Othello's positive attributes indicate that we should view him as a hero, as does his customary mode of speech. (Othello speaks in **blank verse** early in the play and is a fine rhetorician, despite his protestations to the contrary.)

Study focus: Othello and opposition

A02

Othello is a play about opposites and opposition, and the many contradictions contained in the play are embodied in the tragic hero. All the characters hold specific, and often opposing views of the Moor. We have to judge Othello in the light of the evidence they present, whilst also taking into account the hero's words, actions and idea of himself (which change). The hero's two contradictory roles also need to be considered. Othello is both military man and lover-husband. There are other contradictions to think about. Othello occupies contradictory personal and political positions. He is a trusted foreign servant (an outsider), wielding power on behalf of the Venetian state, who seeks to become an equal member of and participant in that society through marriage. He is also, of course, a black man in a white world.



Othello's tragedy: a domestic tragedy?

The focus in this play is, as has often been suggested, domestic. Othello's previous history, the Turkish invasion and machinations of the Venetian state provide the backdrop to an essentially private **tragedy**. However, while the play focuses on the tragic consequences of sexual jealousy, we must not ignore the wider worldly or political dimension of Othello's tragedy. Othello is proud of his profession and his reputation as a soldier is an essential part of the hero's conception of himself. Othello's desire for revenge is prompted by his need to recover his reputation. A **Jacobean** audience would have understood the weight Othello attaches to his reputation: a man's honour was important and his wife's chastity was an integral part of it. When Othello fears that he has been cuckolded the hero doubts himself and is forced to accommodate a new role, that of duped husband, which his pride will not allow him to accept. It is possible to argue that Othello's marriage is a political act; a black soldier marrying a white aristocrat cannot be viewed in any other way, according to the views of the time.

Othello's race

Othello's race is a significant part of his **characterisation**. Othello is not the stereotypical immoral, lustful Moor of much Renaissance drama. He is portrayed as such by other characters – notably Iago – but we realise that we cannot trust the judgement of those who make negative comments about Othello's race. Shakespeare encourages the audience to view the Moor's race positively, as Othello does himself in Acts I and II. Race is not an issue for the heroine: as Othello reminds Iago, 'she had eyes and chose me' (III.3.192). Does Othello's race trouble him later in the play? It may make a modern audience uncomfortable, but it seems so. When his mind is poisoned by Iago, Othello comes to doubt his attractions. Othello mentions his blackness, his unsophisticated manners and his advanced age in a speech which suggests diminishing self-confidence as a husband (see III.3.262). Has Iago's prejudice infected the noble hero? Even if it has, we will never feel that Othello becomes jealous and murderous because he is black. His negative emotions and actions are a result of being 'Perplexed in the extreme' (V.2.344) by Iago, whose discrimination is a part of his evil, just as Othello's blackness is portrayed by Shakespeare as part of his nobility. (For further comments on Othello's race, see **Part Four: Language**.)

Study focus: Othello and slavery

A02

Critics have suggested that Othello became 'tawny' rather than black in stage productions in the 1800s. This was to prevent the role from being linked to the idea of slavery. At the time that *Othello* was first performed, the African slave trade was already established. In the 1550s, Elizabethan adventurers had set out to the coast of Africa, where they raided the villages and kidnapped some of the inhabitants, bringing them back to England. Othello himself describes how he was briefly imprisoned as a slave.

Othello: lover and husband

The difficulty for an audience comes in accepting Othello as a perfect wooer, lover and husband, partly because Othello married Desdemona in secret – a covert act that sits uncomfortably with Othello's protestation that he has nothing to hide after the marriage. However, we are not encouraged to dwell on the elopement itself because it becomes clear that Desdemona was 'half the wooer' (I.3.176) and the couple speak clearly and honestly

A05 KEY INTERPRETATION

The philosopher Stanley Cavell says that 'tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences or price'. How does this statement apply to *Othello*?

A05 KEY INTERPRETATION

Ania Loomba ('*Othello and the Radical Question*', 1998) 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?

EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses.

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follows up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't always be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked about the following question:

'Tragedy is concerned with loss and waste.' To what extent is this true of *Othello*? Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

In *Othello*, Shakespeare explores the tragic consequences of the hero's loss of honour, and the terrible waste of human potential. Othello himself sums up his tragedy in Act V when he asks plaintively before he dies, 'why should honour outlive honesty?' So, how and why does Othello lose his honour, and what exactly is 'wasted'?

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, *In Act I of 'Othello'....*
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' or 'play', rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about jealousy in the play:

explicit meaning

inferred meaning, with literary term used appropriately

Iago starts to poison Othello's mind by warning him against 'the green-eyed monster' jealousy, which he says 'doth mock' the meat it feeds on.' By anticipating Othello's reactions, he effectively invites him to indulge them, the metaphor suggesting a terrible hunger for revenge.

short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

Remember – quotations can also be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Aristotle') but make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view (such as 'Iago is a typical villain because he's evil'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

Iago has some of the typical qualities of the Machiavellian villain of Jacobean revenge tragedy. For example, he is discontented, cynical and self-serving. He is able to disguise his villainous intentions behind a facade of honesty.

EXAMINER'S TIP

It's important to remember that *Othello* is a text created by Shakespeare – thinking about the choices Shakespeare makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, Desdemona) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as Othello). Or they write about one aspect of the question (for example, 'moral corruption') but ignore another (such as 'the source of evil'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.