

Studying OTHELLO



TOP TIP

1

Watch and learn!

As with any text, it is necessary to **read** *Othello*, in the first instance. It's simple: the better you know the text, the easier you will find it to **quote** from, **reference** and **remember**.

Remember, though, that *Othello* was written to be **performed**! So, another great way to 'bring the play to life' is to **watch it**. Shakespeare can

be demanding, but nothing will help more than seeing the play **acted in front of you**.

Whether it's in the West End or a local performance, try and see at least one production live on stage. It will aid your **understanding** and may even **transform** your view of certain characters, key themes or the plot.



TOP TIP

2

Demystify Shakespeare's language!

Shakespeare's language can be daunting! Knowing the **plot** and the **characters** inside out is an important step towards cracking the language.

When tackling a difficult piece of language it can be helpful to think about **who** is saying it and **why**. Luckily, *Othello* is full of famous sayings that we still use today! Learn a few of these to enhance your understanding of the text.

REMEMBER: You don't need to understand absolutely everything you read, so focusing on **key passages** and the **way that the play is written** will help you to **unlock** it.

TOP TIP

3

Express yourself effectively!

Students often **describe events** rather than **comment** on **why** they are important/significant/relevant to the essay title and the point they are making.

Avoid re-telling the story at all costs – it won't get you any extra marks and will take the punch out of your essay! Make your essay as easy to

follow and **engaging** as possible by **signposting your ideas**. There are many phrases that you can use to guide the examiner through your argument, such as: 'On the other hand ...'; 'This idea is explored by ...'; 'It is important to remember that ...'; 'There is one other factor to consider ...'; 'Conversely ...'; 'One could argue that ...'

REMEMBER: **Always** keep the essay title in mind! After each paragraph, ask yourself, 'Does this answer the question?'

TOP TIP

4

Speak Greek!

Othello, arguably, fits the mould of **Greek tragedy** in a number of ways. If you want to discuss this, make sure you use the correct **technical terms**, derived from the **Greek language**:

- ✓ Othello is descended from a line of kings, as is typical of tragic **protagonists**.
- ✓ Othello's **hamartia** is trusting and confiding in **Iago**, his **antagonist**.
- ✓ Does Othello suffer from **hubris**? Think about his marriage to Desdemona – could this be conceived of as ambitious? What other evidence of his **hubris** is there?
- ✓ Does Othello's downfall emulate those of Greek tragic heroes? Is **pathos** created at the end? How?

However, remember also to look at the ways in which *Othello* is **atypical**, both in relation to Shakespearean tragedy and Greek tragedy.

TOP TIP

5

Textual analysis

Demonstrate your knowledge of key dramatic devices and language by using **carefully-chosen quotations** and **close textual references**. The wonderful thing about Shakespeare's language is that just one line can contain **layers of meaning** ripe for analysis.

Do not make sweeping statements such as, '*Shakespeare uses imagery that relates to evil and jealousy and therefore ...*', without evidence to back this up!

Instead, **learn** some **key quotations** and practise unpicking them to **analyse** what's going on, making sure you use the **correct terminology**. Close reading is key to a more **sophisticated** and **focused** answer!



TOP TIP

6

Get to know the characters

Othello is brimming with **imagery**, with a recurrence of certain images linked to specific **characters**. For example, what images are associated with **Iago**?

Does the imagery associated with him correspond to **Elizabethan expectations** of a man in his position, or reflect the other **characters' conception** of his **true nature**? What about Othello? Does the imagery associated with Othello change in the second half of the play? What role does the imagery of **animals** and **insects** play in charting Othello's downfall?

REMEMBER: To get a **high grade**, consider the way in which images are used **to evoke particular audience responses** – do they repel or inspire pity?

TOP TIP

7

Know your literary criticism!

Whether you use **postcolonial theory** or you apply a **feminist reading** to the play, make sure you are aware of the critical debates that surround *Othello*.

Try and group together different critical perspectives on the play – perhaps using a spider-diagram to organise the different

opinions for each school of thought!

REMEMBER: Literary criticism can be used to **bolster** your argument as well as providing something to **argue against**! Be brave and argue well!

TOP TIP

8

Key critics are theatre critics!

Do not forget that *Othello* is a **play**, and therefore designed to be **witnessed** by an **audience**. **Theatre reviews and critics** are crucial when examining the **play in performance**.

Articles, reviews and interviews with actors and directors are readily available on the internet. Don't just opt for the big West End performances – why not scour local or regional newspapers for reviews of fringe productions?

This approach should give you an idea of how twenty-first-century audiences have reacted to *Othello*, and reveal any trends in how tragedies, including Shakespeare's, are being **staged** today!

TOP TIP

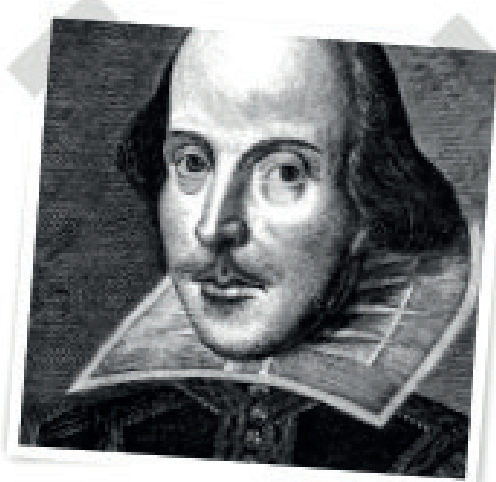
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Race relations

Understanding **contemporary perspectives** on race will help you with this key issue in the play. Think about the **anxieties** of many Elizabethans in England at this time, including the paranoia surrounding foreigners, and how these anxieties become conflated with other issues within the play.

Where does the animosity come from? Clue: look at conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and the maritime states of Europe. As a Moor, does Othello embody a threat that goes far beyond his race and the prospect of interracial marriage?

For an extra layer of interpretation, think about why might a **postcolonial** reading of the play be relevant here. Or, try researching the way race is explored in Shakespeare's **other plays**. *Titus Andronicus* also presents a Moor – Aaron – for example.



TOP TIP

10

Get literary!

Context can be **literary** too. Here are some ideas for literary perspectives to explore:

- ✓ Aside from **Greek tragedy**, ensure you can discuss *Othello* alongside other **Revenge Tragedies**, both by Shakespeare (e.g. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*) and his contemporaries (e.g. Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*).
- ✓ Can you discuss **Machiavellian** villains in **Renaissance drama**? Who mirrors **Iago's cynicism** and **cruelty** in both Shakespearean drama (e.g. Richard III from *Richard III*; Edmund from *King Lear*) and other dramatists (e.g. Barabas from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*; Lorenzo from Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*; Flamineo from Webster's *The White Devil*)?
- ✓ Look at the way the themes of **jealousy/corruption/human nature** are portrayed in different plays from the period.

REMEMBER: Don't shoehorn **contextual references** in to an argument – only mention them if they are **relevant** to your essay title!