

'OTHELLO' A-LEVEL REVISION:

CONTEXT:

Historical:

- Set during a state of war, which enables chaos and passion to be unleashed and thus further perpetuate the downfalls and demises of characters.
- Written between 1602 – 1604 (17th century)
- The tragic hero's downfall, demise and the destruction of law and order against the backdrop of the Turkish conflict.

Cultural:

- Italy was associated with villainy, decadence and corruption – associated with revenge tragedies.
- Venice was the embodiment of Western civilization, power and culture. Symbolic of law, justice and order - hence the characters are presented as noble and virtuous.
- Cyprus: symbolic of disorder and chaos, but also the island of love.
- During Renaissance, Venice was seen as a place of personal advancement - where you could better yourself- this is why Iago wants to advance through the ranks of the army.
- Venice was also seen as a place of sensual pleasure- possibly chaos. Shakespeare presents Venice as a place where order goes into disorder: ideas of what's right and wrong and peoples' place and position in society.
- The Elizabethans believed in witchcraft and the supernatural.
- Cyprus was a developing city - didn't have many rules - so Iago's plans can take more effect as the legal and social structured are less established.
- Cyprus associated with isolation, hostility and conflict: "this warlike isle". In the 17th century was seen as the outpost of civilisation – hence Cyprus' trouble mirrors the domestic trouble of Othello's marriage.

Social:

- During the Renaissance/ Elizabethan Era, black people were excluded from the white dominated society and a different race was seen as mysterious, dangerous and threatening. Othello's race forms the basis for Iago's mistreatment of Othello.
- In the Renaissance, the view was held that Africans were descendants of Noah's son Ham, who was cursed by his father - it was therefore held that all Africans were an accursed race. Othello, as a black character, goes on a journey from respected hero to mad-driven, murdering, jealous husband.
- Women had a traditional role - they were considered inferior to men, particularly socially and politically.
- Women were believed to be evil - tempt men into doing wrong. Is Desdemona the cause of Othello's downfall? Iago criticises women with his misogynistic perceptions.
- The conflict of Othello presents the inability of different cultures to coincide during the 17th century.
- During the Renaissance, assertive women were thought to be a threat to the social order, and hence all women in the play possess submissive, objectified and powerless roles.

CRITIC'S QUOTES:

F.R. Leavis:

- "Iago is not much more than a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism"
- "The tragic protagonist was responsible for his own downfall"
- "Iago's role is subordinate and merely ancillary"

Liz Lewis:

- "Her identity disappears as Othello's jealousy becomes more defined"
- "Iago's manipulation of Othello occurs because of the views on women the Moor already possesses"

R. Gibson:

- Othello "proved a significant symbol in the struggle for black emancipation"
- "Frequently deceitful and manipulative in order to gain personal profit or pleasure"

Ania Loomba:

- 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"
- Othello is a "victim of racial beliefs because he is an agent of misogynistic ones"

A.C. Bradley:

- "helpless passivity...nature so sweet, love absolute"
- Labelled Othello as 'blameless'. Othello is noble, as he 'inspires passion of mingled love and pity' which none of Shakespeare's other heroes aspire.
- 'Othello's nature is all of one piece. His trust where he trusts is absolute...Othello decides and acts instantaneously.'
- Argues that Iago is motivated by pride, as he is in need to prove "his power and superiority".
- Bradley states that tragedy doesn't only bring about "sympathy and pity, but admiration, terror and awe"

Marilyn French: "Desdemona accepts her cultures dictum and becomes "self-denying in the extreme"

William Hazlitt: "We see into the hollowness of Iago's heart"

Sean McEvoy: "audience become complicit in Iago's intentions...share Iago's delight"

Leonard Tennenhouse: (about Emilia) "Her death is the silencing of a rebellious female voice"

T.S. Elliot: "Othello is a "terrible exposure of human weakness" as he spends the final scene "endeavouring to escape reality"

Stephen Greenblatt: "Shakespeare's characters are frequently haunted by the sense that their identity has been lost or stolen"

LINKS WITH OTHER TEXTS:

- The tragedy genre conventionally presents villains as cynical atheists, who take advantage of others for their own needs.
- King Lear: Ambitious Edmund exploits women in the same way as Iago – sense of a revenge tragedy.
- Hamlet: Claudius poisons his brother and marries his widow, Gertrude – sense of sexual corruption.
- Both Hamlet and Othello have an existential crisis, as the world they knew and trusted breaks down.
- Like Hamlet, Othello takes revenge, yet on his wife for her supposed adultery, rather than for his father.
- ‘Othello’ and ‘Hamlet’ are private tragedies about domestic breakdown where tragic heroes are deceived by those around them.
- Claudius killed Hamlet’s father by pouring poison in his ear just like Iago who metaphorically pours poison in people’s ears because of his lies and manipulation.
- Hamlet’s flaw is his constant thinking and inaction and Othello’s is his gullibility and trustworthiness.
- ‘Othello’ is I flouted by the conventions of Greek tragedy due to the inclusion of a clear conflict and the protagonist’s error of judgment.
- In Titus Andronicus- Aaron the protagonist is black and he is synonymous with evil. However, Othello is different from this because he is presented as a tragic hero whose downfall the audience can partly sympathise with.
- Aaron shares similar villainy characteristics with Iago – silences other characters and catalyses other’s downfalls and demises. Typical portrayal of black characters in Renaissance plays – similar evil traits of Aaron in “Titus Andronicus” Black people in Renaissance England were seen to be mysterious and exotic. In 1590 Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare fulfilled the black stereotype in his characterization of Aaron as a villain.
- Emilia is presented as a powerful woman just like Lady Macbeth, yet with a strong moral compass unlike Lady Macbeth’s immorality.
- Common theme of witchcraft is also present in Macbeth.
- Macbeth becomes a monomaniac just like Othello.
- Lady Macbeth inspires Macbeth and urges him on his quest for kingship. Iago does the same for Othello on his jealous quest to stop Desdemona’s adultery.
- Iago is a Machiavellian villain just like Richard III – no sense of right and wrong.
- Othello’s and Desdemona’s relationship mirrors the doomed love of Romeo and Juliet and therefore Shakespeare adheres to a sense of tragic inevitability, where happiness is eliminated.
- Othello and Desdemona’s idealistic conceptions of love could be compared to the naïve love of Hero and Claudio in “Much Ado About Nothing”.
- Role of women is similar to “Taming of the Shrew” of the due to the concept of “serve, love and obey”.
- The playwright plays on the Elizabethan patriarchal concept, which is prevalent in all his other tragedies.
- Struggle of good + evil -tragic waste – Claudius + Hamlet die.

PLAYWRIGHTS’S INTENTIONS:

- Shakespeare challenges stereotypes and values of the Renaissance era – Emilia overturns the stereotype of women being submissive, with little rights and no voice – Othello initially breaks the conventions of black people being perceived as dangerous, lustful predators.
- Shakespeare utilises comedy to heighten the tragedy of the play and further mocks his characters through dramatic irony, asides and soliloquies.
- Shakespeare was fearful of extreme passions and hence jealousy and madness are the main themes of the play.
- Shakespeare invites pity and pathos, as the tragic hero sacrificed himself for the common man – modern tragedy.
- Shakespeare reveals a society corrupted by sexism, racism, and immorality.
- Shakespeare puts trust and betrayal at the forefront of the play as the characters cannot recognise evil.
- Shakespeare subverts the stereotype that black people were only fit for slavery during the Renaissance in his depiction of his noble Moor.
- At the end of the play, Othello isn’t a story of racism or prejudice; it’s about the traits of envy and jealousy that can cross race and nationality.

ASPECTS OF TRAGEDY:

- the type of the tragic text itself, whether it is classical and about public figures, like Lear, or domestic and about representations of ordinary people, like Tess
- the settings for the tragedy, both places and times
- the journey towards death of the protagonists, their flaws, pride and folly, their blindness and insight, their discovery and learning, their being a mix of good and evil
- the role of the tragic villain or opponent, who directly affects the fortune of the hero, who engages in a contest of power and is partly responsible for the hero’s demise
- the presence of fate, how the hero’s end is inevitable – absent sense of control.
- how the behaviour of the hero affects the world around him, creating chaos and affecting the lives of others
- the significance of violence and revenge, humour and moments of happiness
- the structural pattern of the text as it moves through complication to catastrophe, from order to disorder, through climax to resolution, from the prosperity and happiness of the hero to the tragic end
- the use of plots and sub-plots
- the way that language is used to heighten the tragedy
- ultimately how the tragedy affects the audience, acting as a commentary on the real world, moving the audience through pity and fear to an understanding of the human condition.
- Othello’s potential which is destroyed
- Significance of greed and ambition
- Significance of loss, love, suffering, disguise and deception
- Victimhood - Treatment of female characters

TRAGIC CONVENTIONS:

- The play begins with the tragic villain, Iago, which is unconventional of tragedy, yet allows Shakespeare to comment on how he becomes the main catalyst to Othello's rapid mental deterioration, as the tragic hero is disturbed by Iago's accusations.
- It is a tragedy of a fairly ordinary man with differences and subethnicities, where...
- Othello is domestic tragedy in which love is destroyed by hate, as Othello's obsession with his masculine honour allows him to 'fall' under the influence of Iago, perpetuating his destruction.
- Othello's tragic stature and pride, initial control and restraint are conventional of a tragic hero and therefore generate pity throughout the play – conventional of modern domestic tragedy.
- Othello's hamartia becomes his outsider status, as he cannot cope with what was accepted and thus, he perpetuates his own downfall due to his irrational behaviour which is based on his inherent drive.
- Iago is conventionally driven by hate and obsession for revenge, allowing Shakespeare to portray his tragic villain as a malcontent.
- Free will is insisted upon, as the protagonist must always be able to back out of a situation or to redeem themselves, but always leads towards their inevitable doom.
- There is a sense of inevitability about Othello's downfall as he arrives to Cyprus and declares he "feels to much joy". Shakespeare ominously foreshadows a tragic end – conventional of classical tragedies.
- The play ends with the death of numerous characters including the title character, the tragic protagonist who is admirable, but flawed, with the audience able to understand and sympathize with the character – conventional of classical tragedies.
- Shakespeare presents a complex and exaggerated relationship between Desdemona and Othello in order to accentuate the audience's feeling of catharsis.
- 3 unities of tragedy as posed by Aristotle, compresses the play's action into a short time frame, emphasizing Othello's rapid and sudden downfall.
- Othello does live in a flawed world but he is the one ultimately responsible for his own downfall due to his irrational actions – conventional of Greek tragedy.
- Certainly, for a 21st century, the pathos of the play comes from how preventable, yet inevitable death is within the context of society and tragic structure of the play/plot.
- Ironically, Othello, an ethnic minority/racial outsider is portrayed as a noble and civilised hero whilst Iago, a white man, as immoral and destructive – subverts stereotypes.
- It is the tension between Othello's victimization at the hands of a foreign culture and his own willingness to torment himself that makes him a tragic figure rather than simply Iago's ridiculous puppet.
- A modern audience may ironically point out that Desdemona asserts her power to be Othello, yet essentially becomes his possession.

LANGUAGE, STRUCTURE AND FORM:

- Iambic Pentameter, Blank Verse, Caesura, Rhyme, Hyper syllabic lines, Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance, Prose, Shared line, Soliloquy, Antithesis, Paradox, Literary allusion.
- Shakespeare frames much of Othello through the perspective of its antagonist, which amplifies the play's dramatic tension and irony - first character we see onstage, and we initially sympathize with him, as he's just been passed over for a promotion, but this is quickly changed - the only character with substantive asides and soliloquies, providing an insider perspective from which to view the unfolding events.
- The term 'honest' is repeated fifty-two times in the description of the villain, leaving the audience fearful of what danger such a misconception could cause.
- The dramatic irony of the play derives largely from the audience's knowledge of the villain's duplicity and Othello's lack of it - tragic protagonist's obviousness to his villainy, makes the play somewhat farcical.
- The Switch between blank verse and prose reflects the duplicitous nature of Iago.
- Othello's blank verse mirrors his heroism and his prose encapsulates the grand influence that Iago has on him.
- The juxtaposition of appearance vs reality in the play present the themes of evil and jealousy – Iago's evil energy persists.
- The battle between good and evil is dramatized by using images of light and dark - when he is on stage, the mood becomes darker, tension - and suspense created.
- Scene 1 begins in media res – sense of anticipation for audience
- Act 3 Scene 3 becomes the play's pivotal climax, as Othello switches in alliance from Desdemona to Iago - comical in some aspect.
- Othello: emotive, heroic language, dignified blank verse, Imagery concerns sea or heavens – reflects propensity toward chaos/uncertainty, bombastic.
- Yet, becomes fragmented and broken and he uses more obscenities - prone to violent outbursts.
- Iago: Manipulative, manufactures expressions for persuasive effect, Imagery is terse and dry, bestial images, images of base physical functions, Images of money and trade, reflects the depravity of his mind.
- Anti-Heroic Language – plain, direct, ironically understated. Iago remains in control of language throughout the play. He skilfully uses insinuations, subtle hints, questions and indirect accusations.
- Othello's language starts to become more depraved as his jealousy grows – he then starts to use Iago's imagery (e.g. bestial, diabolical)
- Both characters use images of war and soldiers – Othello sees the glory of war, Iago views war as an economic venture. This shows Othello's courage and idealism in contrast to Iago's self-interested character.
- The play's action is compressed, as typical for a tragedy, into a short time frame, contributing to the claustrophobic effect of tragedies.