

## Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – *Othello*

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Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *Othello* in relation to the genre of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

*Othello* is a play that is a mainstream Shakespearean tragedy and therefore is an obvious text for Paper 1. It is a play capable of arousing deep emotions in audiences, exciting feelings of pity and terror (feelings that according to Plato ought to be kept in check). It is also politically controversial and dangerous, challenging 17th century European cultural norms of what it means to be noble and moral. It is both a tragedy of love and a revenge tragedy; it is also the tragedy of what happens when soldiers are hotly prepared for war but have no war to occupy them. The play includes many of the generic conventions of tragedy that students might expect to find – a hero who is 'great of heart' but has an overweening pride and makes a fatal error of judgment, a hero who is exploited by an unfathomable villain, a hero who brings about suffering and death to others and a hero who inevitably suffers a tragic fall and dies. In following Othello's tragic path, Shakespeare invites the audience to engage with his hero's reversal of fortunes (is the cause in the stars or man-made?) and make intellectual judgments about his fate, following his journey from ignorance to knowledge as he reaches, in Aristotle's terms, 'Recognition'. Significantly Othello's knowledge comes too late, a key aspect of tragedy.

*Othello* is also a domestic tragedy: the tragedy of marriage. Othello and Desdemona have a passionate love which could be seen as a threat to the rules established by patriarchal order: their intense, emotionally charged and equal marriage challenges ideas about class, race and the conformity of women. The play suggests that ultimately, if the social order is to continue, this marriage and what it represents must be destroyed.

### Settings

The main action of the play is set in Cyprus, away from the known, civilised world of Venice, where capitalism thrives. Venice in the seventeenth century was a republic, controlled by the wealthy merchant classes who bought power, employing mercenary soldiers to protect their colonial exploits. The setting of Cyprus allows Shakespeare to place his characters in a world without the boundaries that would be imposed upon them by an established city state.

Cyprus is a fortified outpost of civilisation, on the edge of Christian territory, a barrier between Christian values and the infidels, the enemies of the true faith. Cyprus is less controlled, a bastion of male power where Desdemona, alone and isolated from her Venetian support system, is vulnerable to the machinations of the arch manipulator Iago. This is a savage, warlike milieu (despite its association with Aphrodite and love) where Venetian soldiers have gone to fight, but because the invading Turks have all been drowned there is no war. As a result the soldiers in their claustrophobic confines have time to turn on each other without the controlling order of Venice. In the first Act which is set in Venice, Shakespeare establishes an ordered world in which Iago's attempts at disruption are easily thwarted. The movement to Cyprus and the re-location of the characters there allows Iago to work more successfully, ensnaring all in the weaving of his plot.

## Othello as tragic hero

Othello's position as tragic hero is interesting and complex. Although, as a general, he holds a high military rank in the Venetian army, in terms of his tragic status he is not a European king or a European nobleman and so in one way is a figure much closer to that of an 'ordinary' man than most of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. Othello has military power but no status in Venetian society because of his colour and race; his 'life and being' is not European. He is a black man, a Moor and was sold to slavery.

However, he fetches his 'life and being/ From men of royal siege'. In this sense, Othello has the required status for a classic tragic hero. He is foreign royalty and has a culture which is exotic, mysterious, and extraordinary, symbolised in part by the strawberry spotted handkerchief with magic in its web. But he is always an outsider to European culture.

Yet, in terms of the tragedy, Othello is a worthy hero, despite Iago's attempts to blacken his name at the start of the play. Although Iago claims Othello loves 'his own pride and purposes' and rails bitterly against what he feels is Othello's poor judgment and mistreatment of him, when the audience meet Othello for the first time he is measured, dignified and commanding.

To elevate his status, Shakespeare gives him musical language. To those who come to arrest him for eloping with Desdemona, Othello says: 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them'. He insists that were it his cue to fight he 'should have known it without a prompter'. He is an excellent general, a point verified by the Duke and the Senate, respects his wife (he gives her voice to speak for herself when confronted by Brabantio and the Duke) and is confident to speak of his love in public ('If it were now to die, 'Twere now to be most happy'). He is, in many ways, noble and admirable. Like other tragic heroes, he also has a fatal flaw – jealousy – which Iago exploits to the full. His flaw connects Othello with audiences who also might have felt the stab of the green eyed monster. Othello's fate is perhaps more likely to inspire pity and fear because of that connection.

Othello's fall from nobility and grace, from articulate general to brainwashed puppet of Iago, speaking obscenely and incoherently (Lie with her? Lie on her...Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!) is the play's driving tragic impulse. Before he dies he understands how he has been wrought upon, how he has trusted the false stories about a strawberry handkerchief and he gains some knowledge of his shortcomings. It could also be argued that his tragic stature rises when he realises what he has thrown away and that he is elevated by the quality of his speech: 'If heaven would make me such another world/ Of one entire and perfect chrysolite/ I'd not have sold her for it'. Before he takes his own life he imagines meeting Desdemona at the last judgment hurling his soul from heaven. He consolidates this vision by committing suicide. He has nothing more to lose. Whether or not audiences and readers finally sympathise with Othello however is debateable. While some mourn his death and see something heroic in the way he acknowledges the shame of his conduct, others, like Leavis, see his final speech as self-dramatising, with its focus, not on his victims, but on himself and how he will be remembered.

## Iago as villain

For many, Iago is the ultimate stage villain – calculating, manipulative, clever and ruthless. Despite Coleridge's claim that Iago's soliloquies reveal 'the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity', Iago's role is more complex. On one level he does have several motives for his actions and is very clear about them – Cassio has been promoted to the post he believed was his, he suspects Othello to have cuckolded him and he is jealous of Cassio who has a daily beauty in his life that makes Iago ugly. However, despite his undoubted cunning and desire for revenge against Cassio and Othello, Shakespeare does not present Iago as having a clear plan from the start of the play: he is more an opportunistic villain whose ideas gather momentum as he tastes success.

What is most disturbing perhaps is that his plotting and the torture he inflicts on others are clearly a source of pleasure to him. He enjoys the sport of the terrible games he plays. He enjoys the destruction of love which he does not understand. It is significant that most of his monstrous activities take place in darkness: he is associated with hell and night. It is possible to read Iago from a theological position and see him as a devil incarnate, with his ancestors in the medieval Mystery Plays. It is also possible to read him as a stage Machiavel, one who tortures and torments those who are good, using their very goodness to 'enmesh them'. Some modern readings also focus on Iago as a vehicle of the state, voicing its patriarchal contempt (and perhaps fear) of outsiders and women. His self-interests are the self-interests of those who govern. He understands Venetian attitudes and he becomes the state's agent in removing those who transgress its unwritten laws. What Iago achieves in the destruction of Othello and Desdemona could be seen as what the state desires.

## Victims

*Othello* is a play with many victims, not least the title character himself who falls victim to Iago's manipulation and his own jealous rage. At the end of the play Othello asks Cassio to demand of the demi-devil why he has 'ensnared' his 'soul and body'.

Desdemona is also a victim, murdered by her husband for a crime she does not commit, and plotted against by Iago, perhaps for challenging the authority of men (she tells Emilia not to 'learn' of Iago though he is her husband). She is often portrayed on stage as a childlike young bride and yet Shakespeare suggests in the first act that she is a woman of spirit and independence who knows her own mind. She defies the expectations and desires of her father to marry a man of his choice. Instead she marries the black soldier Othello and determines to travel with him to Cyprus. There she is manipulated by a series of male figures, and strangled in her bed by Othello. In the end she replicates the fate of Barbary, her mother's maid whose love proved mad and 'did forsake her'.

Emilia is another victim of love and another victim of the abuse of women by men. However, unlike Desdemona, who dies claiming she herself is responsible for her own death and wishing to be commended to her 'kind lord', Emilia unleashes a tirade of rebukes on the 'dull Moor' who has been so gulled and also on her husband, delivering a blow to male authority when she denounces him. However, in true tragic fashion, her rebellion comes too late to avert the tragic outcome.

## Deaths

At the end of the play Lodovico instructs Iago and the audience to 'Look on the tragic loading' of the bed of Desdemona and Othello where the married couple and Emilia lie dead. It is a stark image and completes the tragic pattern. Roderigo has also died, bled dry by Iago and stabbed to death in the dark.

## Resolution

The final judgments rest with the audience. We are left to think about our emotions and about moral, social, political and philosophical issues. Is Othello redeemed? Is there catharsis? Is there a feeling that the world is somehow diminished by his passing? Is there a feeling that there are moral forces at work and the world is striving to become a better place? Cassio will rule in Cyprus so there is restoration of order of a sort. But how comfortable does an audience feel with this appointment? (Certainly his attitudes towards women are questionable). Desdemona had challenged the patriarchal order in marrying Othello, had shown a free and open spirit but she is murdered. The patriarchal attitudes that existed at the start of the play are reinforced by Cassio's appointment. Therefore how safe is the future with him? The tragic villain Iago still lives and defiantly says that though he bleeds he is not killed and that 'from this time forth' he 'never will speak word'. Lodovico sentences Iago to 'cunning

cruelty' and 'torture', though disturbingly perhaps there is still some kind of triumph at his indestructibility. The resolution is uncomfortable and with the deaths of Desdemona, Emilia and Othello, there is a terrible sense of waste.