**OTHELLO**

OR

THE MOOR OF

*VENICE*

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| A2 F663 REVISION WORK BOOK |



***What do I need to do to revise this play for a closed text exam?***

**ACTION PLAN CHECKLIST - ✓ WHEN COMPLETED**

**🞐 - READ THE TEXT AGAIN**

**🞐 - READ THE NOTES IN THE EDITION OF THE TEXT YOU ARE STUDYING**

**🞐 - REVIEW YOUR NOTES – WHAT DO YOU NEED TO ADD?**

**🞐 - QUOTATIONS – HAVE YOU SELECTED THEM TO SUPPORT A RANGE OF POINTS?**

**🞐 - QUOTATIONS – HAVE YOU LEARNT THEM?**

**🞐 - CRITICAL OPINIONS – HAVE YOU GOT A VARIETY OF VIEWS? DO YOU KNOW WHAT EACH CRITIC IS ARGUING? WHAT IS YOUR VIEW? HAVE YOU CONSTRUCTED A COUNTER VIEW?**

**🞐 - READ OVER YOUR ESSAYS – WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS? WHAT ARE YOUR WEAKNESSES?**

**🞐 - MAKE USE OF LISTS OF ESSAY QUESTIONS TO PLAN AND PRACTISE YOUR ESSAY WRITING.**

**🞐 - CONSIDER WHAT OTHER TASKS YOU MAY NEED TO DO TO IMPROVE YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE TEXT. LIST THEM AND COMPLETE.**

**🞐 - WATCH A VERSION OF THE PLAY. WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THIS STAGING?**

**🞐 - HOW HAVE DIFFERENT VERSIONS BEEN PRESENTED?**

**🞐 - HAVE YOU REVISED CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ISSUES?**

**🞐 - HAVE YOU REVISED THE KEY FEATURES OF THE GENRE?**

**🞐 - REVIEW ADDRESSING THE ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES AND HOW THEY ARE WEIGHTED IN THIS PAPER?**

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| AO1 | Communication and Presentation Articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression | 10% |
| AO2 | Demonstrate Knowledge and Understanding Demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, from and language shape meanings in literary texts | 15% |
| AO3 | Analysis and EvaluationExplore connections and comparisons between different literary texts, informed by interpretations of other readers | 20% |
| AO4 | Demonstrate Knowledge and Understanding Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood | 15% |

### MY ACTION PLAN

### My current grade is …………………………

### My target grade is …………………………..

### Use your marked essays and test pieces to help you to reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses. It is particularly useful to consider the EBI advice and any comments that your teacher has made in the body of your work.

### WHAT DO YOU NOW NEED TO DO TO IMPROVE?

### MY SMART TARGET (S) – it is advisable to have no more than 3

### 1)

### 2)

### 3)

### PRACTICE ESSAY TITLES

1. “At its heart, this is a play about the relationships between two couples.” How far can you support this view? (30)
2. “This is not a play about Othello but about Iago.” Evaluate the truth of this statement. (30)
3. “Iago ‘rewrites’ *Othello*: a play which begins as a romantic comedy, but which ends as a tragedy.” Evaluate the relationship between tragedy and comedy in *Othello* in the light of this comment. (30)
4. Othello has been described as “fatally self-centred” and “lacking in self-knowledge”. Evaluate Shakespeare’s presentation of Othello in the light of this view. (30)
5. “A play primarily concerned with various kinds of chaos.” Examine Shakespeare’s presentation of chaos in this play. (30)
6. “Iago is a successful villain; Othello and Desdemona innocent victims. Such characters are too simplistic for interesting drama.” Consider how far you support this view. (30)
7. “If that the earth could teem with woman’s tears, Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile.” Examine Shakespeare’s presentation of women in this play. (30)
8. “The play is literally framed by its imagery of black and white.” Discuss Shakespeare’s examination of racial conflict in this play. (30)
9. “We must never forget that Othello, Iago and Cassio are soldiers and the action takes place in a military context.” How far does this advice aid our understanding of this play? (30)
10. “In this play, Shakespeare explores the nature of social prejudice.” How far does your reading of *Othello* support this view? (30)
11. “As always, women are victims of men.” How far do you agree with this interpretation of Shakespeare’s presentation of the sexes? (30)
12. “In *Othello* we are shown extremes with a kind of blank between.” How far do you agree with this analysis of the structure of the play? (30)
13. *“*Both Othello’s jealousy itself and the speed with which it develops are absurd.” Discuss the validity of this view of the play (30)
14. “Men are the sport of circumstances when/Circumstances seem the sport of men.” How far is this true of *Othello*? (30)
15. “Othello loves emotion for its own sake, luxuriates in it.” Do you think there is any truth in this accusation? (30)
16. “The enduring interest of the play is its treatment of race and the outsider.” Do you agree? (30)
17. “Othello was not jealous, he was trustful.” How far do you find that this is Shakespeare’s view of this man? (30)
18. “This play is a beautifully contrived arrangement of patterns.” How far do you support this assessment of the tragedy? (30)
19. “The main theme of *Othello* is not jealousy but honour.” Discuss this description of the play. (30)
20. *“*The action of *Othello* is no less than the Fall of Man, the failure of humanity.” Examine and evaluate this proposition. (30)

CHARACTERISATION

By this stage of your study of the play you will have lots of information about the characters and what they do. To keep your revision fresh, try to think about Rossiter’s comments that the relationships in the play are “infernal trigonometry” meaning hellish triangles.

OTHELLO

“Valiant Othello” 1 iii

h

“I am not what I am” 1 i

“I am not merry.” 2 i

**OTHELLO**

DESDEMONA IAGO

*How would you make links between these characters?*

Make up as many triangles as you can to connect the characters according to events, feelings, attitudes or behaviour and explain the connections in each case. Have you got supporting quotations and critical opinion to add weight to your points?

Here are some triangles to get you thinking:-

* Othello, Iago, Cassio
* Othello, Iago, Roderigo
* Desdemona, Emilia, Bianca
* Othello, Desdemona, Cassio
* Iago, Roderigo, Desdemona
* Othello, Iago, Desdemona
* Desdemona, Bianca, Cassio

Additionally, you may find it useful to make lists of similar and opposite pairs and to consider how they may illustrate key themes or aspects of the plot.

It may be helpful to find similarities between characters.

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| --- | --- |
| **similar** | **reasons** |
| OTHELLO and CASSIO | Concerned with honour; given to excess and anger |
| OTHELLO and IAGO | Men of war; sufferers from jealousy |
| OTHELLO and BRABANTIO | Owners of Desdemona; deceived by her |
| OTHELLO and RODERIGO | Foolish and credulous victims of Iago; desirers of Desdemona |
| DESDEMONA and EMILIA | Wronged wives |
| IAGO and RODERIGO | Rejects; racists |
| IAGO and CASSIO | Rivals for promotion and Othello’s patronage |
| CASSIO and RODERIGO | Naïve suitors to Desdemona |

You may find it useful to think of how characters differ from each other.

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| --- | --- |
| **contrasting** | **reasons** |
| OTHELLO and IAGO | Moral and amoral |
| OTHELLO and CASSIO | Physical appearance and familiarity with women |
| OTHELLO and BRABANTIO | Culture and background; attitude to marriage conventions |
| OTHELLO and DESDEMONA | Race, age and experience |
| DESDEMONA and EMILIA | Different perceptions of morality; men, love and marriage |
| DESDEMONA and BIANCA | Perceived whore; real whore |
| IAGO and CASSIO | Prosaic and poetic; misogynist and admirer of women |
| IAGO and RODERIGO | Clever and foolish |

[](http://www.google.co.uk/imgres?q=iago&um=1&hl=en&sa=N&qscrl=1&nord=1&rlz=1T4ADFA_enGB392GB393&biw=1366&bih=520&tbm=isch&tbnid=izYWRTc5mPEzuM:&imgrefurl=http://sentientonline.net/?p=2136&docid=SeqpFrwkYGs9sM&imgurl=http://sentientonline.net/wp-content/uploads/othello-iago.jpg&w=468&h=307&ei=PdMqT5fFLtDO-Qbd9OWpDg&zoom=1)WHO IS THE REAL IAGO?

Iago is a Spanish name, a version of James and in Spanish Catholicism, James was the saint known for his slaughter of the Moors, so Iago immediately would have alerted a knowledgeable audience to his potential danger to Othello, as a Moor killer. He is also known as an “ancient” or ensign, a junior infantry officer whose traditional duty is to be the standard bearer. He had to go to the front in battle to carry the flag for other soldiers to follow. Therefore, he had to be brave and to know where to go and how to get there. He is a brilliant psychologist and a gambler. He is Satanic in his energy and quick-thinking. He has a sense of humour and an intelligent understanding of people. As a gambler he will take risks but he has contempt for goodness and he “believes in nothing, and least of all other human beings.” He is on stage for 1,097 lines and so, dominates the action.

Why does Iago behave the way that he does? At the start of the play Iago has already been extorting money from Roderigo. He may have become jealous of Othello months before as he suspects him of sleeping with Emilia and the news of Othello’s elopement with Desdemona may present Iago with a chance to destroy him. Also, he has been overlooked in promotional opportunities and has lost out on the lieutenancy to Cassio, so he may well be very resentful of his higher status. Another question that must be considered is why Othello did not promote Iago. Iagon seems to have served Otehllo for many years and expected the promotion but Othello may not trust him, or he may not see him as suitable, since he does not have the manners of a gentleman. Cassio has served as a go-between during the months of Othello’s courtship of Desdemona. He has proved discrete, loyal and silent and also, he is a member of Desdemona’s social class, so Othello may feel that he will be better representing him than the less sophisticated Iago. Perhaps, Othello, who seems to believe that Iago is honest, does not truly trust his ambition and he does not want to promote him.

When we consider the way that Othello relies totally on Iago later, we must consider that he may feel guilty for having not promoted him, so instead of trusting his own judgment he gives too much credit to what he says to reiterate that he truly trusts him. Iago’s apparently honest face, is ironically the only thing which Othello feels able to trust and which belongs to his past before Venice and the sudden change in his life. Iago appeals to Othello’s logic and rationality, while actually manipulating him psychologically and emotionally, until he creates a dependency in Othello. Othello believes that Iago is sympathetic to his cause, and when Iago swears to do anything Othello asks of him to show his support Othello allows him to replace Desdemona in his esteem and affection, as his confidant and soul mate.

Iago states in Act 3, sc. Iii (the harbour scene) that he thinks that all women are hypocrites, deceivers and strumpets who “beguile” men. He does not think that they have the right to know or to speak and most of his exchanges with his wife, Emilia take the form of him telling her to keep quiet. He blames courtesans for the desires of their clients and for selling their bodies for food and clothes. Soldiers live in an exclusively male and undomesticated world and are therefore not exposed to the opposite sex except to buy their services in war zones. Iago is proud of his robust, manly life and despises women for not being soldiers; he regards men who behave like women, by being emotional as effeminate, which include all the other male characters. He thinks that he understands women but he is caught out by his own wife.

Modern critical analysis identifies a strong homo-eroticism in Iago’s intense feelings for both Othello and Cassio and he seems to both despise and envy. **Bradley** says that Iago has “a keen sense of superiority” and his guiding resentment is of “Othello’s eminence, Othello’s goodness and his own dependence on Othello” and that “his thwarted sense of superiority wants satisfaction” so he makes his superiors his puppets. Though racial hatred applies to Othello, there is equally strong misogyny to account for his need to defeat Desdemona. In Cassio, who has a “daily beauty in his life”, Iago finds most to threaten his position and self-esteem, as he can be compared directly with him and found wanting as a fellow soldier, white man, male and lover. However, by the end of the play anyone who stands in his way has become his target.

At twenty eight, Iago seems quite young to be so hardened and cynical but it also may explain why other characters do not see through him as it seems he cannot have had enough disillusionment to have become so bitter. Like Edmund, in *King Lear* Iago is dedicated to the ruthless, amoral aspects of Nature. Similarly, in *Hamlet* a play which deals with madness and mental health there are many references to weeds and gardens, Iago will plant seeds that bear monstrous fruit watered by chance, fate and time.

As Othello is absent for half of the time of the play, Iago is able to seduce the audience. He foists his monstrous vision on the audience and presents it as a rational one by basing it on things which are proven untrue, such as Venice is a virtuous city. Under a sophisticated surface lies primitive instinct; that Nature is unnatural; that fortune favours evil; that nobility means foolishness; and that white is black. He manipulates characters and situations so deftly that no-one can see the truth**. Coleridge** believed that Iago shows “how a wicked man employs his real feelings as well as assumes those most alien from his own, as instruments of his purpose”. He has proved that there are no heroes or heroines motivated by a noble cause and that the experience of the characters and most of the audience will be of betrayal. Iago produces his the play’s action from his own imagination, a story which for once makes him the hero and victor, but which leaves us wondering which is the true version and which the false.

Iago also seems to be incredibly lucky. Brabantio warned Othello that Desdemona would deceive him. The battle for Cyprus required the immediate attention of Othello but which took the couple away from Venice and separated characters in different ships, making it possible for Cassio to arrive before Othello and be found with Desdemona; Cassio and Montano declining to speak after the fight; Cassio choosing to sneak away from Desdemona in Act 3; Desdemona dropping the handkerchief; Emilia finding the handkerchief and Bianca returning the handkerchief while Othello is watching. Add to this, Cassio’s drunkenness and liking for pretty things; Desdemona’s pleading for Cassio’s reinstatement; Emilia’s desire to please him; Roderigo following his orders; Othello’s excessive jealousy and capacity for murder.

**Bradley** says Iago has a general “spite against goodness in men” so while any virtue exists he attempts to eliminate it, as if he is suffering from a disease or addiction, or controlled by an external force; his appetite for sadistic enjoyment and power grows from what it feeds on. **Hazlitt** claimed that Iago destroys himself, since he “is himself the dupe and victim of his ruling passion ~ an insatiable craving after action of the most difficult and dangerous kind”. Although, Emilia cannot save Desdemona and Emilia’s death may not have been part of the plan, Iago’s refusal to speak at the end still leaves him in a position of control, which he seems to value more than anything else and in that sense he has triumphed. His final word is “word”. What does this suggest?

He regrets nothing, so there is nothing to say. He cannot offer any satisfactory explanations or mitigating circumstances for what he has done, nor words to express it or else he believes the characters did it to themselves. He does not believe that anyone has the right to ask him or to judge or punish him. His defiant stance is consistent with his view at the start of the play and shows he has not changed at all. He conveys an inhuman self-command which frightens the audience as well as the characters. Unlike the other tragedies, Iago the villain here is left alive at the end but the audience cannot feel confident that he will receive his just desserts. Venetian law will protect him so that not even Desdemona’s relatives can kill him as punishment. Symbolically, Iago can represent, like the perpetual barbarian threat, an invincible force for evil which can be temporarily defeated but never exterminated. Othello kills himself but he fails to destroy Iago. It could be argued that Iago is seen as the spirit of democracy or socialism as he tries to overturn a system of privilege and complacency but he may be a victim of class prejudice, deprived of any beauty in his life and as the bullied become bullies in their turn, he may be passing on his own unjust suffering.

## Study Iago’s Soliloquies -key to his thinking

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| --- |
| ACT 1 – SCENE 3 – lines 377-98 |
| ACT 2 – SCENE 1 – lines 277-303 |
| ACT 2 – SCENE 3 – lines 44-59 |
| ACT 2 – SCENE 3 – lines 326 -52 and 371 -77 |
| ACT 3 – SCENE 3 – lines 318 -26 |
| ACT 4 – SCENE 1 – lines 93-103 |
| ACT 5 – SCENE 1 – lines 11-22 |

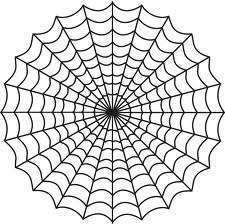
1. Study each of the seven soliloquies. Summarise and paraphrase each soliloquy. Underline key words and comment on aspects of the language, so that you can add to your list of quotations and add to your knowledge for AO2.
2. Say what each soliloquy seems to reveal about Iago’s character.
3. Make sure that you know what the alleged reasons for his behaviour are according to what he says. Which seems true and which dubious? Why?

## The Art of Persuasion

In Act 3, sc. iii, Othello is persuaded within 150 lines not only to doubt his wife’s fidelity but to have her spied upon; within another 240 lines he has bonded himself to Iago and a few minutes later he has sworn to murder Desdemona that same evening.

It is worth studying how Iago accomplishes this. Remind yourself of what happens by reading again Act 3, sc iii – Act 4, sc i line 211 and find examples of each of the persuasive techniques listed below.

1. Seed-sowing – planting a suggestion to bear fruit later
2. Avoidance – refusing to give answer to create anxiety
3. Insider knowledge – implying there is a secret the speaker is privy to
4. Unwelcome knowledge – to bring up a forgotten fact or painful idea
5. Telling lies – falsehood
6. False praise – giving the impression of being well-disposed
7. Gross image – providing an irremovable disgusting picture
8. Questions – implying and leading
9. Echoing – repeating the words just spoken
10. Blocking – answering a question with another question
11. Delaying tactics – changing the subject
12. Fake reluctance – pretending not to want to tell something
13. Implication – choice of a suggestive word
14. Fake indignation – pretending to be annoyed
15. Use of fiction – power of narrative and alleged quotation
16. Complicity – pledging support
17. Strong imagery – evocative similes and emotive diction
18. Self-denigration – to give impression of honesty and humility
19. Imperatives – putting the speaker in control
20. Incitement – encouraging the other to act

**[](http://www.google.co.uk/imgres?q=spider+web&um=1&hl=en&sa=N&qscrl=1&nord=1&rlz=1T4ADFA_enGB392GB393&biw=1366&bih=520&tbm=isch&tbnid=cuC_XA-0Jj_lNM:&imgrefurl=http://www.squidoo.com/spider-photos&docid=5WpxlrXBb45PsM&imgurl=http://www.wpclipart.com/animals/bugs/spider/spider_3/spiders_web.png&w=507&h=506&ei=4iIrT4HdEM-U8gO_iKT9Dg&zoom=1)**

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## Although Othello is on stage much less than Iago and to some audiences, he is less interesting than the villain, Othello is intended to be the main character of the eponymous play because Iago does not undergo change during the drama but Othello does, and to a great extent. Although it is caused by Iago, the focus of the dramatic interest is Othello’s unravelling mind and whether he and Desdemona can survive Iago’s hate campaign. The audience can relate to Othello, although he is more distant and mysterious in many ways, better than we can relate to Iago, who eludes our understanding.

There is an ambiguity about Othello, personified by the two Othellos we see in this play: although he is a servant to white masters and has primitive origins, he has a high rank, an aristocratic bearing, the civilised skills of rhetoric and the trust of the Venetian Senate. He may have come from Spain, perhaps as a Morisco, a Moor who was forced to become a Christian in order to participate in society but who was never truly seen as European. The question which has taxed critics about this character is whether he is a noble hero deceived by the devilishly cunning Iago or a deeply-flawed egotist responsible for his own downfall. Iago claims in Act 4, sc 1, 272 that “He’s that he is.” meaning violent, irrational and unable to control his passions – he is suggesting the Moor is basically a savage.

Is it possible that Shakespeare created Othello and Iago as the two faces of man, the good and the evil in human nature and that they both suffer from the same psychological weakness triggered by jealousy. Another possibility is that Othello is a mass of inconsistencies, and falls back on his buried childhood self when threatened and under pressure, as people tend to do. The title “noble Moor” may be misleading and one-dimensional.

Othello is forty two and in Shakespeare’s time this would have been seen as quite old. Shakespeare only lived to fifty two. So, according to **Honigmann,** he has impaired vision and there is a possibility that the non-consummation of his marriage is due to impotence. It is of course, possible that he is the epitome of military fitness and that the Senate have confidence in his ability because he remains fit and see him in Act 4, sc i, 267 “all-in –all sufficient.”

**A.C.Bradley** presented the case in 1904 for Othello being a noble hero worthy of our sympathy who, without Iago’s interference, would have led a blameless life**. F.R.Leavis** in 1952 argued against this view of Othello, asserting that Othello is neither noble nor a hero, that Iago could not have had an effect if the weaknesses were not already there, and that therefore Othello cannot be admirable. Because Bradley claimed that the proof of Othello’s nobility lies in his capacity for absolute trust, the debate focuses on whether Othello really trusts Desdemona, as he claims to when he swears “My life upon her faith!” Act 1, sc iii 291. But for it to evaporate so quickly suggests he never really trusted her; or that like religious faith and love – which are also irrational – trust, when put to the test, can go as suddenly as it comes; or that jealousy is stronger than trust and will always defeat it. A trust which can be destroyed in less than twenty minutes (in the unbroken Act 3, scene iii) is obviously flawed in some way, however, and by contrast Desdemona never loses hers.

Othello seems volatile which would not be consistent with the contemporary view of how a noble character would behave. He also appears to have no sensitivity when dealing with the feelings of others. There are elements of excess in his make-up and he could be accused of excessive love for Desdemona. Brabantio charges him as a “foul thief” and it is open to debate about how noble it is to marry in secret. Othello’s self-dramatisation is fitting for a swaggering soldier; Iago says Othello won Desdemona by “bragging and telling her fantastical lies.” Act 2, sc I 217. This Braggadocio was well-known in Elizabethan literature. When he hits his wife in public and exclaims “Cuckold me!” there is a strong element of pride. He also commits the sin of wrath (one of the seven deadly sins) and deprives Desdemona of the chance of the Sacrament of Confession. These are not the actions of a Christian let alone a loving husband. In his Moslem culture killing a woman for fornication may have been acceptable but in Christianity there is the account of how Christ refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery but Othello does not pause to consider any of this once he has decided to act.

He also appears to only believe in the world as he perceives it. He told Dedemona of lands where there were men “whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders”, he demanded “ocular proof” and his headache seems to be caused by the imagined weight of his cuckold’s horns. He does not like to doubt and he would rather believe what cannot be true than have to take time to think.  **F.R. Leavis** says he is stupid because he is credulous but **Chapman** says, “noblest natures are most credulous.”

As you revise this character, ask yourself what do you feel about him as a man, a lover, a leader? Is he mentally unbalanced? Is he a victim of racism with very low self-esteem such that he never truly believes his opinions matter and that others such as Iago are wrong? Why is he the main character of this play?

As you form your thinking, try to ensure that you have evidence to support your ideas. In the Heinemann Edition of the text that we use there is an excellent section beginning on page 269 – 275 that examines the character of Othello. Use it to help you to consolidate your thinking.

DESDEMONA

Desdemona, presumed to be still a teenager is friendless and motherless. She has led a sheltered life of domestic duty under the watchful eye of her father, Brabantio. Her name, which is Greek means “unfortunate” and if she is played as a teenager, she sits alongside other Shakespeare heroines such as Ophelia and Juliet. They are controlled by their fathers and their own urges but unable to determine a satisfactory outcome to their stories. However, as in the BBC production of the play, if she is played by an older actress such as Penelope Wilton was, the effect is even more disturbing. Why does Desdemona marry Othello? It is clear that she has had other suitors and to Brabantio’s annoyance she has “shunned the wealthy curled darlings of our nation” Act 1, sc ii 69 so what is it in her character that made her rebel against her father but did not drive her to fight for her life when Othello attacked her? Of course, it is now recognised that psychologically some victims, especially females attacked by men they know or love, react in a state of complete inaction. They freeze and cannot fight back because they are so shocked by what it appears that their beloved is going to do to them. Does this mean that they are complicit in their own suffering?

A very harsh fact according to the psychotherapist, Denise Cullington, that in any relationship breakdown is the monstrous thought that both parties contributed to it going wrong. If this is so, what do you think that Desdemona did wrong? Whilst it may be unfair to judge Desdemona’s actions by the expectations of our time, it is also true that she seems to very readily become a victim and that Shakespeare does not really give her any fire with which to fight back. Why?

Is she an example of a Christian martyr who is prepared to die, pure, chaste and devoted to her lord and husband because she has the virtues of faith, hope and charity? Is she really an example of an abused child? Is she just a literary device so that Shakespeare can resolve dramatic problems of his narrative? She is a stereotype of a motherless girl who seems to know very little of the world beyond her house. She does not realise that there are unfaithful wives and she truly does not perceive the danger that lies in her own bedchamber. She is associated with the “light” but for much of this play, she is in the dark. Is she not truly the embodiment of **Robert Graves’** assertion that “Men do, women are,” until men decide that they should die.

To begin your revision of this key character, you may find it useful to read an essay that starts on page 294 of the Heinemann Edition. This is followed by an analysis of the key points and a critique for improvement.

Consider what you know of Desdemona. How would you prove your points? What other information do you need to find out?

Also, consider Desdemona in relation to other women in the play. How does she compare to Emilia and Bianca?

Does her tragedy move you? Try to analyse your reaction and consider what it may suggest about the way that Shakespeare portrays her.

PARADOXES AND IRONIES

A paradox is a statement which seems to contradict itself. It suggests that two aspects of something may be opposite to each other but are still true. Paradoxes create irony. Irony is one of the characteristics of tragedy, since it makes the outcome of the play seem unfair and unnecessary, unacceptable yet inevitable.

Some paradoxes can be created by events. Some events can be seen as honourable and dishonourable such as:-

* the elopement
* Cassio’s drinking to the health of the newly-weds
* Desdemona bullying Othello to reinstate Cassio
* Othello’s murder of Desdemona
* Roderigo’s giving information against his partner in crime
* Othello’s suicide

Paradoxically characters achieve the exact opposite of what they wish to achieve. Brabantio loses the daughter he has tried to keep close to him; Othello wants to kill the two people who love him most, Desdemona and Cassio. Cassio wants to impress his general and do well in his new job but loses it in disgrace. Emilia loves her mistress enough to die for her but is the thief who stole the missing handkerchief which condemns Desdemona to death. The watch, supposed protectors of the peace cause a drunken street brawl, break the curfew and rouse the residents.

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| OXYMORONIC PHRASE | REFERENCE |
| Divinity of hell! | Act 2, sc iii 340 |
| Excellent wretch | Act 3, sc iii 90 |
| Fair devil | Act 3, sc iii 475 |
| This sorrow’s heavenly | Act 5, sc ii 21 |
| An honourable murderer | Act 5, sc ii 291 |
| Honest Iago | Act 1, sc iii 293 |

1. How would you prove that Othello is a noble character?
2. The Elizabethans were familiar with the “overreacher”, a dramatic character who aims too high and therefore falls below human level. How might this apply to Othello?
3. What do you think Othello’s first error of judgement is? Explain your choice.

Turn your page to landscape layout and draw a continuous line, which represents your sympathy for Othello during the course of the play. Label the high points, when you feel sympathy and the low points, when you have no sympathy. Record the words or actions that make your position clear.

LOOK AT WHAT OTHELLO SAYS

Read again Act 1, sc iii here Othello seems very proud and confident. What do you think of him at this point in the play? Now reread Act 5, ii, 334 -52 and consider what he says. **T.S.Eliot** claimed that here Othello has not achieved “greater self-knowledge” but was trying to reassure himself that he was right. What is your view?

## THEMES

Here is a suggested list of themes in this tragedy. Make sure that you make notes to support each one and consider what is suggested by each theme.

|  |
| --- |
| DIVISION |
| FOOLISHNESS |
| COURTESY |
| PERDITION |
| TELLING TALES |
| SUPERSTITION |
| DECEPTION |
| BETRAYAL |
| EXCESS |
| AWAKENINGS |
| CHAOS |
| SERVICE |

## IMAGERY

Imagery is figurative language, using similes and metaphors, which conveys emotions and ideas linked to the main ideas of the play.

Use this list of images to help you to think about the characters most associated with them, find examples and quotations to add to your notes.

* ANIMALS
* WORDS
* TURNING
* LYING
* EATING
* POISON
* JEWELS
* PREGNANCY
* SEA
* BEDS
* TRAPS
* GARDENING
* HELL
* BLOOD
* EYES

## THE CHAIN OF BEING

## [http://t2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQCzueiVdYLwb7NQ83ZdlGk5MjxyetB5D7ia-FJzmJZzS0LtQHifg](http://www.google.co.uk/imgres?q=the+chain+of+being&hl=en&sa=X&rlz=1W1ADFA_enGB392&biw=1366&bih=520&tbm=isch&prmd=imvns&tbnid=TSf-SshH3RynNM:&imgrefurl=http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Evolution.htm&docid=4sdKBKo7SO5LFM&imgurl=http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/images/HierarchicalScale.gif&w=343&h=400&ei=6DYtT9-LAZOE8gOduMSQDw&zoom=1)

**For Medieval and Renaissance thinkers, humans occupied a unique position on the Chain of Being, straddling the world of spiritual beings and the world of physical creation. Humans were thought to possess divine powers such as reason, love, and imagination. Like angels, humans were spiritual beings, but unlike angels, human souls were "knotted" to a physical body. As such, they were subject to passions and physical sensations—pain, hunger, thirst, sexual desire—just like other animals lower on the Chain of the Being. They also possessed the powers of reproduction unlike the minerals and rocks lowest on the Chain of Being. Humans had a particularly difficult position, balancing the divine and the animalistic parts of their nature. For instance, an angel is only capable of intellectual sin such as pride(as evidenced Lucifer’s fall from heaven in Christian belief). Humans, however, were capable of both intellectual sin and physical sins such as lust and wrath if they let their animal appetites overrule their divine reason. Humans also possessed sensory attributes: sight, touch, taste, hearing, and smell. Unlike angels, however, their sensory attributes were limited by physical organs. (They could only know things they could discern through the five senses.) The highest-ranking human being was the king.**

**This form of thinking shows that in Shakespeare’s play a human who falls below the level of man into the realm of bestiality is labelled a monster.**

During your revision create your own chart to show the Chain of Being and plot on it where each of the characters will be.

**What is Shakespeare telling us in this play about the nature of good and evil?**