

'For a hero, Othello is too easy to pity, too hard to like'
To what extent do you agree with this view of Othello's character?

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

A01- Articulate informed, personal and creative **responses** to literary texts, using associated **concepts** and **terminology**, and coherent, accurate written **expression**. (28%)

A02- **Analyse** ways in which **meanings** are **shaped** in literary texts. (24%)

A03- Demonstrate **understanding** of the **significance** and **influence** of the **contexts** in which literary texts are written and received. (24%)

A04- Explore **connections** across literary texts. (12%)

A05- Explore literary texts informed by different **interpretations**. (12%)

To begin with, universally it is known that every tragic hero has a fatal flaw. In Othello's case, his flaw is a combination of naive trust, overweening pride and the lack of reasonable perception in front of a situation. This leads to the idea that as a character in the play, he can be sometimes easily seen as pathetic due to his faults, and his faults are hardly likeable. At all the points in the play when Othello makes mistakes; not seeing through Iago's manipulation, being quick to judge Desdemona, not listening to Emilia, not trusting his best friend Cassio and finally killing his wife and himself, all demonstrate how as a hero, how really fallen from grace and piteous he is.

Othello, being a strong commander, prestigious soldier and extremely experienced on the plain of war, is presented by Shakespeare as valiant, brave and wise in the first Act especially. Othello uses words related to the semantic field of battle and servitude through war, for example; "honour", "royal siege" and "fortune". His ideas about honour and dignity, being conveyed so early in the book almost foreshadow the reasons behind Othello's future decisions and mind-set. The fact that Othello talks about "royal siege" suggests that he glorifies the thought of battle, showing how the way he acts in his life will always be due to how he is trained; which being in a war is the only thing he knows how to deal with. It is interesting that Shakespeare uses the word "fortune" when Othello speaks, describing not only Othello's achievements, but also linking to the idea of tragedy in this novel as a whole. Here, Othello can be seen as likeable for his apparent never-shaking honour and valour, but at the same time many dislike him due to how he manages to fall from such a valiant, noble character to a violent murderer.

On the other hand, from a more cultural angle in terms of Othello being easy to pity and hard to like, his character completely opposes this. He is from a strange, foreign land, with different colour skin, different views on the world and a different culture from everybody else. However, this does not stop him from making his way up by working hard in the army, serving others and making a name for himself, even when he gets rejected by others now and again. We learn to admire Othello for his stamina and stability when faced with judgements due to his skin. For example, in Act 1, Scene 2, Brabantio accuses Othello of using "witchcraft" to capture his daughter, "foul charms" and talks about Othello's

“sooty bosom”. These are all related to the context at the time when the play was written, as back then, people saw black people as to having strange ways of life, and due to their unfamiliarity that some white people saw in them, they were associated with evil, darkness and enchantments. Even though Othello is accused of these things and had his race and differences pointed out to him, he still replies to Brabantio with respect, allowing him here to be seen as likeable and not easy to pity.

Conversely, when it comes to Othello’s gullibility, he is very hard to like and quite easy to pity, as he makes himself such an easy open target to Iago’s manipulation. For instance, in Act three, scene three when Iago first makes a hint to what he wants Othello to believe, Othello is quick to forget his wedding vows and his jealousy overcomes him. Iago here almost seems to plant a seed that grows rapidly and cannot be weeded from Othello’s mind. Shakespeare uses rhetorical questions and repetition in Iago’s speech to Othello; “Indeed?” “Honest, my lord?” and “Think, my lord?”. This, to many people’s point of view could be seen as a clear provocation that suggests Iago’s manipulation. Othello’s inability to realise things and to think rationally is shown here, because he never even considers Iago’s motive to why he is telling him these things. Some may find it hard to like Othello in moments of the play like this one, not because of his wrongdoings, but due to the consequences of his personality. Iago in the play overall is made as a foil for Othello, and the fact that he is always hovering near him like a wasp or latched onto his feelings like a leech is frustrating for the audience as everyone can see this, except for the one who needs to see it the most. Othello’s weaknesses make him sometimes easy to pity.

Consequently, Othello is seen as blind in the play. Blind to all the evidence that will save both his wife and his own fate, blind to the clear signs of true loyalty in his friends and blind to the manipulation that drives him insane. The topic presented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge concerning Iago, ‘Motiveless Malignity’, covers the idea unlike the previous paragraph, that Iago has no motive to lie, betray and manipulate. Iago here is portrayed as the villain with no reason for his pull towards creating destruction, but also highlighting the true essence of Iago; evil. In terms of the play, if we read it according to the theme of ‘Motiveless Malignity’, it makes us question Othello as a tragic ‘hero’ and Othello as a good, noble person. This is because as the protagonist, it is expected that they would almost sense all things evil, be wary of it and defeat it like a true hero. Coleridge makes prominent the notion that Iago’s ‘motives’ cannot be motives due to his malignant impulses, meaning that Iago has nothing to lose. This makes these motives not causes for action, but simply rationalisations. Some argue that the only difference between Iago and Othello is that Othello has a reason for his actions, these reasons though are questionable. Others even say that Othello knew subconsciously of his wife’s innocence and his actions were not driven by Desdemona’s hypothetical adultery, but by his uncontrollable thirst for power.

Furthermore, in this play, the protagonist and antagonist are both continually presented together, and instead of repelling each other like most heroes and villains, they seem to attract each other right up until the last scene. So what makes the honourable Othello so different from the cheating Iago? Maybe not much, as in the play we see that it is Othello who strikes Desdemona, who orders his best friend’s death and who kills his own wife. If there is a supposed ‘good force’ in this play, we would assume it is Othello being the tragic

hero and protagonist, but apart from serving his country, he makes mistake after mistake, suggesting he cannot be a 'hero' in every sense, especially his weakness to give in at the smallest obstacles, like words. Iago in total, has more lines than Othello in the story, suggesting that he has more control over both characters and outcome. With this idea, it is easy here to doubt our protagonist's true purpose in the play; good and repenting, or evil and unforgiving? The uncertainty of Othello being a tragic hero and good person makes his character sometimes hard to like.

However, it is known that Othello is so used to being a leader, commander and a soldier that we learn to recognise why he acts the way he does. He is not experienced on the field of marriage, and as a foreigner, it makes it even more difficult for him. We learn to appreciate Othello's grit and endurance in the sense that no matter what he does wrong and who opposes him, his attitude to carrying out situations is always honourable. Many see this as a good point to the protagonist as he is always influenced by his foundations of living, which are dignity and valour. For example, in Act one, scene three when Othello is faced with the Venetian court and his wife's father, he never loses his sense of dignity and calm. Shakespeare writes Othello's speech to have words related to the semantic field of righteousness and bravery. For example, even Othello's mode of address "most potent, grave and reverend signiors" shows how the importance of respect is recognised by him, and also the realisation that approaching obstacles with serenity, not anger and craziness is better. Also, the words "blest", "peace" and "love" are all positive words mentioned by Othello, which allows him to be seen here as likeable, as these words have obvious significance to him. We do not pity Othello here because we can see the mind which these beautiful words have come from, when explaining his battle and journey to achieve his love. Shakespeare uses imagery as well, as Othello says the words "nine moons", "charms" and "mighty magic", which all help to demonstrate an almost fantastical and surreal side of the journey to win Desdemona, that helps the audience to recognise an element of wonder in Othello when perceiving his wife, which lets us like him more and admire him for all that he has sacrificed.

Meanwhile, the idea of Othello's trust seems to be another subject of reasons to dislike and pity him. Along with his weaknesses, the trait of lack of trust in Othello's personality highlights the fact that he is not strong enough to see evil, and too weak to be humble. We can see examples of this when Othello and Emilia have a conversation about Desdemona's loyalty, and being Desdemona's closest servant, Emilia tells him firmly "Never", more than twice being questioned about whether she has seen anything. Othello at this point is well beyond reasoning with and only acts upon what he wants to hear, even though this current source knows the most about what really happens in Desdemona's life. We pity Othello here because of his inability to make sane decisions. This shows how easy it is to get inside Othello's mind and makes prominent the fact that Othello has a weak armour and mind, opposing this idea of Othello the soldier and commander.

However, at the end of the play after the great fall from grace, Othello valiantly and dignified, picks himself up off the floor and admits to his faults. Some may see this as weak and an excuse for his previous damaging behaviour, but others see this as very brave. Othello here realises that it takes more courage to live than to die. Even though this idea is hard to understand, Othello

recognises that he does not deserve to live and condones himself to what his judgement shows him to do; to die. He knows he is a coward, and even though committing suicide is not moral nor honourable, Othello sees himself as a monster at the end of the play and all he does is slay the beast that has truly taken over him. Othello describes himself as 'the circumcised dog', again contributing to the idea that he is a beast. Although he never reaches his previous state of nobility at the end of the play, Othello has yet more beautiful, heart-wrenching lines to say, especially in his last speech when he uses imagery and metaphors. Here, we see that ghost of what this honourable creature once was. In this last part of the play, Othello can be seen as easy to pity, yet not hard to like due to the echo of his past almost divine state.

To conclude, there are many opinions on Othello's worth as a character and how much we like or dislike him. Othello, being a human is prone to mistakes, but some argue that he is particularly prone to the manipulation that causes these mistakes for him to not be pitied or disliked. Othello's nobility, unlike his weaknesses, is very admirable which allows most audiences to like him at least because of this. Overall, Othello is a complicated idea as a subject, but a simple person, whose love was more powerful than his mind.