

# OTHELLO

A pair of dark-skinned hands is shown from the wrists down, palms facing each other and slightly cupped. Between the hands, a single white rose is held, with several petals falling away from it and drifting downwards. The background is a solid, deep black, which makes the skin tones and the white rose stand out prominently. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the delicate structure of the rose.

**AQA A Level English  
Literature (B) – Tragedy**

# Othello: introduction to the course

**Othello** remains one of Shakespeare's most relevant, yet ambiguous, plays. The story of the doomed love of a black military general for the Venetian lady Desdemona not only captures our attention due to its emotional poignancy, but also because of the complex and difficult issues it raises. Shakespeare's exploration of race, gender, and power resonates through the centuries and, in a time when the Black Lives Matter campaign features on all our television screens and news feeds, **Othello** reminds us that prejudice and xenophobia have been a long-standing and deeply destructive aspect of European culture. **Othello** also teaches us that such oppression and judgemental behaviour inevitably leads to social, emotional, and personal chaos and despair. Yet, whilst the play ends in the death of two individuals who thought they could make a stand against the bulwark of social power, its ultimate message is potentially one of hope; in Act 1 Othello and Desdemona show us that there is a better way to live, and Desdemona sustains her belief in this possibility until the bitter end.

We study **Othello** as part of the AQA A Level in English Literature (B). At the end of the course, you will complete two essay questions on this play:

- Extract analysis: identify and explore aspects of tragedy in the play (25 marks, 45 mins)
- An essay responding to a strong opinion about the play (25 marks, 45 mins)

Although an extract is provided for the first question, this paper is **closed book**.

Assessments
<b>Paper 1: Literary genres</b>
<b>What's assessed</b>
Choice of two options
Option 1A: Aspects of tragedy
Option 1B: Aspects of comedy
Study of three texts: one Shakespeare text; a second drama text and one further text, of which one must be written pre-1900
<b>Assessed</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• written exam: 2 hours 30 minutes</li><li>• closed book</li><li>• 75 marks</li><li>• 40% of A-level</li></ul>
<b>Questions</b>
Section A: one passage-based question on set Shakespeare text (25 marks)
Section B: one essay question on set Shakespeare text (25 marks)
Section C: one essay question linking two texts (25 marks)

Our expectations of you:

- Be on time, prepared and equipped for every lesson;
- Engage in discussion and class activities;
- Respectfully listen to others' opinions;
- Have a go at everything – it doesn't matter if you make a mistake;
- Complete all independent learning tasks in detail and on time;
- Ask for support if you are finding the course challenging;
- Conduct independent wider reading (see next page);
- Use your knowledge organiser to consolidate core knowledge.

# Knowledge Retrieval Questions

**Use the questions below to create flashcards to commit the core knowledge to memory.**

Keep your flashcards simple, writing a question on the front and the answer on the reverse.

You will be tested on your knowledge at the start of each lesson. Questions will be interleaved across knowledge retrieval tests.

**FRONT:**

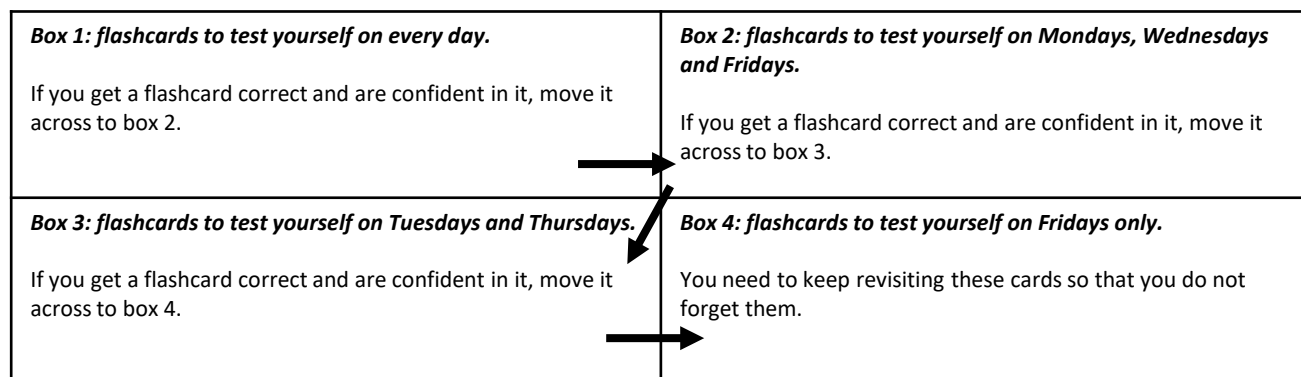
What does the storm in Act 2 Scene 1 symbolise?

**BACK:**

The storm symbolises the increasing chaos in the play, and the fact that the characters are subject to forces beyond their control (e.g. nature, fate).

**Use the Leitner method to learn the information on your flashcards.**

For this, you will need a box with four sections (or, for example, four labelled plastic pockets, plastic pencil cases...). Once you get used to this method, it should take around 15 minutes per day.



Test number	Knowledge retrieval questions
1 – “character” section of your knowledge organiser	1. Describe Othello 2. Describe Iago 3. Describe Desdemona 4. Describe Emilia 5. Describe Cassio 6. Describe the Duke of Venice 7. Describe Roderigo 8. Describe Brabantio 9. Describe Montano 10. Describe Lodovico 11. Describe Gratiano 12. Describe Bianca
2 – aspects of tragedy	13. Define tragic hero 14. Define hamartia 15. Define peripeteia 16. Define hubris 17. Define anagnorisis 18. Define pathos 19. Define catharsis 20. Define denouement 21. Define fate 22. Define inevitable
3 – aspects of tragedy	23. Define tragic villain 24. Define external pressure 25. Define Machiavellian 26. Define tragic victim 27. List the 5 sections of a tragedy

Test number	Knowledge retrieval questions
4 – historical context (racism)	28. Define the Great Chain of Being 29. Define xenophobia. 30. Define post-colonial literary theory. 31. Define the “other”. 32. Define antithesis. 33. Define stereotype. 34. What type of language does Iago use to describe Othello? 35. What is the impact of racism on Othello?
5 – historical context (gender)	36. Define subservient. 37. Define domestic sphere. 38. What stereotypes of women were prevalent in the Renaissance period? 39. Define ideology. 40. How was the Renaissance period a time of change for women?
6 – Act 1 Scene 1	41. Summarise what happens in this scene in one sentence. 42. What does Venice symbolise? 43. What does animal imagery symbolise? 44. What derogatory words does Iago use to describe Cassio? 45. Complete the quotation: “I follow him to...” 46. Complete the quotation: “I am not...” 47. Complete the quotation: “Poison...” 48. Complete the quotation: “an old black...” 49. Define meritocracy. 50. Define duplicitous. 51. Define debased value system. 52. Define prejudiced.

Test no.	Knowledge retrieval questions
7 – Act 1 Scene 2	53. Summarise what happens in this scene. 54. What does disease symbolise in the play? 55. What does the use of misogynistic language show? 56. Complete the quotation: “Tis better...” 57. Complete the quotation: “My services...” 58. Complete the quotation: “I love...” 59. Complete the quotation: “I won...” 60. Complete the quotation: “Hath boarded...” 61. Define rational. 62. Define noble. 63. Define integrity. 64. Define misogynistic.
8 – Act 1 Scene 3	65. Summarise what happens in this scene. 66. What does the council chamber symbolise? 67. What does the marriage symbolise? 68. Complete the quotation: “most potent...” 69. Complete the quotation: “a round...” 70. Complete the quotation: “she loved me...” 71. Complete the quotation: “I do perceive...” 72. Complete the quotation: “She has deceived...” 73. Complete the quotation: “The Moor is of...” 74. Complete the quotation: “I have it...” 75. Define: Sprezzatura. 76. Define self-possessed. 77. Define precarious. 78. Define embittered. 79. Define malevolent. 80. Define complicit.
9 – Act 2 Scene 1	81. Summarise what happens in this scene. 82. What does the storm symbolise? 83. What does Cyprus symbolise? 84. What does the sea symbolise? 85. Complete the quotation: “Our great Captain’s...” 86. Complete the quotation: “My soul’s...” 87. Complete the quotation: “If it were now...” 88. Complete the quotation: “You are well tuned...” 89. Complete the quotation: “I do suspect...” 90. Define bawdily. 91. Define courteous. 92. Define laudatory. 93. Define infatuated. 94. Define amorous 95. Define marginalised.
10 – Act 2 Scene 2	96. Summarise what happens in this scene. 97. Complete the quotation: “Our noble...”
11 – Act 2 Scene 3	98. Summarise what happens in this scene. 99. What does the drunken brawl symbolise? 100. What does the shift from blank verse to prose symbolise? 101. Complete the quotation: “My blood begins...” 102. Complete the quotation: “Never more be...” 103. Complete the quotation: “All’s well...” 104. Complete the quotation: “Reputation...” 105. Complete the quotation: “Divinity...” 106. Complete the quotation: “I’ll pour...” 107. Complete the quotation: “the net...” 108. Define dissipated. 109. Define opportunistic. 110. Define base instinct. 111. Define stage manager. 112. Define voice of order. 113. Define diminutive. 114. Define dishonoured.
12 – Act 3 Scene 3	115. Summarise what happens in this scene. 116. What does the handkerchief symbolise? 117. Complete the quotation: “Whatever you be...” 118. Complete the quotation: “Beware, my lord...” 119. Complete the quotation: “when I love thee...” 120. Complete the quotation: “I had rather be...” 121. Complete the quotation: “I’ll tear...” 122. Define aesthetic delight. 123. Define credulous. 124. Define myopic. 125. Define conciliatory. 126. Define misconstrued. 127. Define disorder.

Test no.	Knowledge retrieval questions
13 – Act 3 Scene 4.	128. Summarise what happens in this scene. 129. What does the monstrous imagery symbolise? 130. Complete the quotation: “my noble Moor...” 131. Complete the quotation: “a young and sweating...” 132. Complete the quotation: “they are all but...” 133. Complete the quotation: “a monster...” 134. Define: cynical. 135. Define ensnared. 136. Define accusatory. 137. Define accident of birth.
14 – Act 4 Scene 1.	138. Summarise what happens in this scene. 139. What does the epileptic fit symbolise? 140. What does striking Desdemona symbolise? 141. Complete the quotation: “The raven...” 142. Complete the quotation: “Lie with...” 143. Complete the quotation: “Let her rot...” 144. Complete the quotation: “Is this the noble...” 145. Define moral commentary. 146. Define irrational. 147. Define brutality.
15 – Act 4 Scene 2.	148. Summarise what happens in this scene. 149. What does water symbolise? 150. Complete the quotation: “I durst, my lord...” 151. Complete the quotation: “My lord, what...” 152. Complete the quotation: “the cunning...” 153. Complete the quotation: “the fountain from which...” 154. Define isolated. 155. Define callous. 156. Define inhumane. 157. Define contemptuous. 158. Define relentless.
16 – Act 4 Scene 3 (the Willow Scene)	159. Summarise what happens in this scene. 160. What do the wedding sheets symbolise? 161. Complete the quotation: “The world’s a huge...” 162. Define melancholic. 163. Define disillusioned. 164. Define pragmatic.
17 – Act 5 Scene 1	165. Summarise what happens in this scene. 166. What does the darkness symbolise? 167. Complete the quotation: Cassio “hath a daily...” 168. Define mastery. 169. Define triumphant.
18 – Act 5 Scene 2	170. Summarise what happens in this scene. 171. What do the white objects symbolise? 172. What does light symbolise? 173. Complete the quotation: “I’ll not shed...” 174. Complete the quotation: “I know not where...” 175. Complete the quotation: “Some bloody...” 176. Complete the quotation: “May his pernicious...” 177. Complete the quotation: “From this time...” 178. Complete the quotation: “I have done the...” 179. Complete the quotation: “Of one that loved...” 180. Define passive. 181. Define seeking retribution. 182. Define automaton. 183. Define self-aggrandising. 184. Define tormented by remorse. 185. Define heinous. 186. Define irrefutable. 187. Define evasive.
19 – Big ideas A	188. What is the tragedy about? 189. What concept does Shakespeare use Othello to communicate? 190. What concept does Shakespeare use Iago to communicate? 191. What concept does Shakespeare use Desdemona to communicate? 192. Define quintessence. 193. Define amorality.
20 – Big ideas B	194. What concept does Shakespeare use Emilia to communicate? 195. What concept does Shakespeare use Bianca to communicate? 196. What concept does Shakespeare use Cassio to communicate? 197. What concept does Shakespeare use Lodovico to communicate? 198. What concept does Shakespeare use Brabantio to communicate? 199. Define reprehensible. 200. Define materialism.

# First impressions

**Scenario:** You have just discovered that your boyfriend / girlfriend of several months has been seeing someone else. How do you respond?

- *How do you feel?*
- *What actions would you take?*
- *Who would you trust to talk to and advise you?*

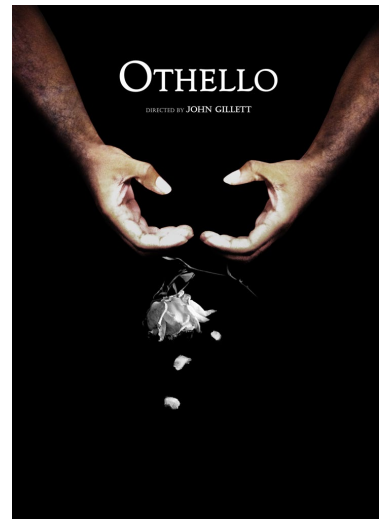


**This is the basic premise of *Othello*, a play which explores these themes:**

- **Jealousy:** is this a basic human emotion? And how powerful can jealousy be?
- **Trust:** how do you know you can trust someone?
- **Betrayal and Infidelity:** what proof would you require, and what would you do if you found out someone had been unfaithful?

**Choose one of the posters for *Othello*. Consider how these themes of jealousy, trust, betrayal and infidelity are represented. What do you notice about:**

- The symbolism of objects
- Placement of characters
- Costume
- Facial expression
- Colours
- Lighting
- Fonts and placement of letters





# Introducing key characters

Using the knowledge organiser, put these events in order:

Numbers 1-10 here:

- Othello has secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of a senator in Venice.
- Desdemona pleads with Othello to give Cassio his job back. She does this innocently but Othello takes this as proof of her feelings for Cassio.
- Othello goes to Cyprus and takes his new wife Desdemona with him, together with Iago and Michael Cassio.
- Iago is angry that Othello, the general of the army, has promoted Cassio to be his lieutenant instead of Iago.
- Iago begins to plant seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind about his wife's relationship with Michael Cassio. Iago gets hold of a handkerchief belonging to Desdemona and hides it in Cassio's room pretending it is proof of Desdemona's unfaithfulness.
- Iago tells Desdemona's father about the secret marriage to cause trouble for Othello.
- Iago's wife, Emilia, tells Othello that Iago has lied. Othello realises his tragic mistake and commits suicide over the body of his wife as Iago is arrested.
- Desdemona's father makes a formal complaint about Othello's behaviour to the Duke of Venice. His complaint is ignored and the Duke sends Othello to Cyprus to continue fighting in a war.
- Iago encourages Cassio to get drunk whilst on duty. Cassio ends up in a drunken fight and is demoted from his position as lieutenant.
- Iago continues to manipulate Othello to the point where Othello murders his new wife as punishment for her supposed unfaithfulness.

Use your knowledge of the play to annotate these characters.



Why have the characters been placed in these positions on the graph?

# Aspects of tragedy

## The foundations of tragedy: Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322BC) was a Greek philosopher and one of the founding fathers of modern literary theory. His writings on different types of literature have shaped our understanding of genre.

### Why tragedy?

- The aim of tragedy is to bring about **catharsis** in the audience – that is, to create sensations of pity and fear, and to allow the audience to **purge** themselves of these feelings at the play's **denouement**.
- Tragedies should leave the audience with a greater understanding of the complexities and fragility of the **human condition**. Tragedies ask *are there reasons for suffering?* And *are humans able to make choices in life, or are their lives determined by fate?*
- Aristotle's favoured pattern of tragedy moved from **order** to **chaos**, to the **restoration of order** at the end. By doing so, tragedies depicted a threat to the structure of society which was then vanquished removed, thus promoting the values of rationality, morality, and strong leadership.

### The Three Unities

According to Aristotle, tragedies should be based on the **three unities**:

- **TIME** – the action of the play should take no longer than 24 hours, and preferably the length of time of the play.
- **PLACE** – the tragedy should take place in a single location.
- **ACTION** – the tragedy should have one principle action / series of events.

Shakespeare rarely (if ever) follows these unities. In comparison to Greek tragedy, his plays appear more firmly located in the social and political context of the day – as well as articulating universal truths about the human condition, they comment on specific aspects of the Jacobean society (e.g. racism, tyranny, gender inequality).

### The Tragic Hero

For Aristotle, the ideal protagonist is a man who is **highly renowned** and prosperous, but one who is **not pre-eminently virtuous** and just, whose **misfortune**, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some **error of judgment or frailty**; a personage like Oedipus.

That is, the tragic hero should be like all of us – flawed and imperfect. This helps the audience sympathise with the protagonist's downfall. The protagonist also had to be of high status so that his tragedy affected those around him and the fabric of society.

On one level, Othello fulfils all of Aristotle's requirements for a tragic hero, as he is a character of noble status who falls from that position of power to one of shame because of his **hamartia**. Moreover the plot of *Othello* contains a powerful **catharsis** through its murderous climax and conclusion, and an **anagnorisis** when Othello realizes that he has been manipulated by Iago. However, Othello differs from the typical tragic hero because his family background would have been relatively unimportant in Europe – his race meant that he had to earn a noble position not by birth, but by **merit** (the social structure of the play can therefore be considered a **meritocracy**). Part of the play's **pathos** derives from our awareness that Othello loses the status that he has worked and suffered for.

### Hamartia

The most distinctive feature of the Aristotelian tragic hero is **hamartia**; his downfall must be brought about by a character flaw or flaw in judgment that leads to his destruction. In Othello's case, this could be jealousy; his blindness to the inherent racism of his society (symbolised by Iago); impulsive behaviour; or his faith in the honesty of human nature.

**Hamartia** is more than a moral weakness; it is a crucial mistake on the part of the tragic hero that causes him to plunge from greatness to grief. Othello's mistake as a tragic hero is believing Iago's treacherous lies about Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Instead of investigating the matter further, Othello rashly jumps to the worst conclusions about his wife and believes every lie that Iago whispers into his ear.

**Categorise the underlined words under these headings:**

Personal qualities	Audience reaction	Structure of the play	Society



**Literary critic Kim Hall said "Othello might just be Shakespeare's most agonising play."**

- Which aspects of the plot make this play "agonising"?
- What is the impact of this "agonising" atmosphere on the audience?
- What message is Shakespeare communicating by presenting Othello's situation as "agonising"?



# Settings – Venice

1. What do Venice and Cyprus make you think of in the modern world?
2. What are the differences between England – where Shakespeare’s audience lived – and Cyprus?
3. Why might Shakespeare have set the play so far away from London?



**Read the historical sources about Venice and respond to the questions.**

1. How is Thomas criticising the Venetians’ method of bringing up children?

**Willian Thomas, *Historie of Italie* (1549)**

But surely many of them trade and bring up their children in so much liberty that one is no sooner out of the shell but he is hail fellow with father and friend, and by that time he cometh to twenty years of age, he knoweth as much lewdness as is possible to be imagined. For his greatest exercise is to go amongst his companions to this good woman’s house and that, of which in Venice are many thousands of ordinary less than honest.

2. What was the generally-accepted Renaissance stereotype of Venice – from an English perspective?

**David McPerson, ‘Othello and the Myth of Venice’ (1990)**

Iago is a true son of his native land, or at least of the negative stereotype of his native land. ... Iago nearly always uses sexual imagery to manipulate Roderigo.

The reputation of Venice for courtesans rubbed off to some extent on the decent women of the city. ... [Because of this] wives and daughters were indeed kept virtual prisoners [to protect their decency].

**The History of the Government of Venice (1677)**

...’tis a common thing to see the Father courting his Concubine, and treating the other instruments of his Debauchery in the presence of his Son, who perhaps learns to act, before he understands the evil...

**Ayanna Thompson, *Introduction to The Arden Shakespeare* (2016)**

Venice was both lauded and reviled in the early modern English imagination. It was lauded for being a cosmopolitan and diverse city; for establishing a formidable maritime power; and for enabling most of Europe’s trade with Africa and the East. Venice was a cosmopolitan city in which people from different races, ethnicities and religions lived and worked together... Venice was also admired for its complex political and social structures. ... Yet Venice also became a symbol of hedonistic excess in the early modern English imagination. ... Associated with the goddess of love, Venus, Venice fascinated the early modern English because of the city’s more liberal treatment of sexual relations where prostitution was actually regulated by the state and involved thousands of women.

3. How does this writer judge the Venetians’ morality?

4. What positives would the English Renaissance audience have associated with Venice?

5. What does “hedonistic excess” mean?

# Settings – Cyprus

**Read the source about Cyprus and respond to the questions.**

**Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare* (2016)**

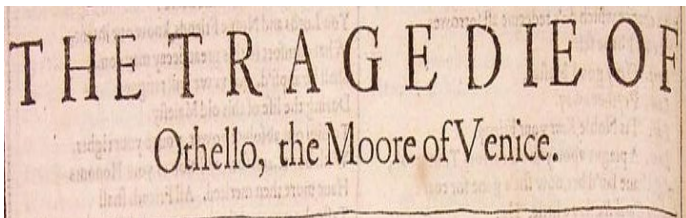
This type of geographic split usually emphasises the licensing freedom that is enabled outside of the city walls. ... In *Othello*, Cyprus looks as if it will represent the opposite of Venice: the margin instead of the centre. Cyprus is after all an island at the far east of the Mediterranean, marking it as closer to the religions and cultures of the East than to those of the West. Cyprus is the territory over which empires clash, it is the colony and not the empire itself. But as is true of so many of Shakespeare's plays with split geographies, the centre and margins end up bleeding together in significant ways. In *Othello* there is the uncanny sense that Venice and Cyprus are related in their mythological associations with Venus: Cyprus is thought to be Venus's birthplace (and another of Venus's names is Cypris). Cyprus is the contested ground over which empires battle, but it also serves to highlight the problems inherent in those empires. After all, the Turkish threat is destroyed by the natural forces of a storm, but the island releases the violence lurking beneath the surface of the Venetian defenders of the Christian faith. The play seems to be asking if the violence was inherent to them in the first place, or if there was something about Cyprus that made them change.

1. In what ways is Cyprus the opposite of Venice?
2. Why might Cyprus be connected with the theme of chaos?
3. Why might Cyprus be connected with the idea of infidelity and unfaithfulness in love?

**Make notes on these discussion questions**

1. In the English imagination, Venice was associated with hedonism and sexual impropriety. Why might Desdemona's Venetian heritage contribute to Othello's growing suspicions of her?
2. Whilst Venice was cosmopolitan, it was also predominantly white. How would this have influenced attitudes to Othello and his role in this society?
3. Why is Cyprus an appropriate location for Shakespeare to set his tale of suspicion, jealousy, relationship and social breakdown?

## Theme of race – historical context



**What did Shakespeare mean by the term “Moor”?**

**Read this response from Spark Notes, a revision website:**

The question of Othello's exact race is open to some debate. The word Moor now refers to the Islamic Arabic inhabitants of North Africa who conquered Spain in the eighth century, but the term was used rather broadly in the period and was sometimes applied to Africans from other regions. George Abbott, for example, in his *A Brief Description of the Whole World* of 1599, made distinctions between “blackish Moors” and “black Negroes”; a 1600 translation of John Leo's *The History and Description of Africa* distinguishes “white or tawny Moors” of the Mediterranean coast of Africa from the “Negroes or black Moors” of the south. Othello's darkness or blackness is alluded to many times in the play, but Shakespeare and other Elizabethans frequently described brunette or darker than average Europeans as black. The opposition of black and white imagery that runs throughout *Othello* is certainly a marker of difference between Othello and his European peers, but the difference is never quite so racially specific as a modern reader might imagine it to be.

1. What racist stereotypes or preconceptions of black people were the Renaissance audience familiar with?
2. What does Othello and Desdemona's marriage symbolise within the world of the play?
3. Why do you think Shakespeare depicted the marriage of Othello and Desdemona? Why would he present the audience with what was – at the time – a provocative and controversial plotline?

Literary critic **Dickenson** explains that “there was a strong tradition on the Elizabethan stage of black characters being played as snarling villains...[and] anxiety about black immigration into Britain was such that Elizabeth I issued several proclamations ordering the expulsion of ‘blackamoors’ from her realm.”

**Extract from “Racism, misogyny and ‘motiveless malignity’ in *Othello*” (Kiernan Ryan, 2016 – published on the British Library website)**

Anyone who doubts that Shakespeare's greatest tragedies were written from an imaginative standpoint far ahead of his time need only think of *Othello*. The basic idea of the play is so well known that it's easy to forget the startling boldness of Shakespeare's decision to take Cinthio's brief tale of a doomed mixed-race marriage and transform it into a heart-breaking tragedy. In a country where few people outside London would ever have seen a black person, and centuries before the problems that fuel the tragedy became as ubiquitous and pressing as they are today, Shakespeare produced in *Othello* a searing critique of racial and sexual injustice, which is more powerful now in the 21st century than it could ever have been at the dawn of the 17th.

The tragic sequence of events is triggered by the elopement of Othello and Desdemona. The fact that they are obliged to elope makes the illicit nature of their relationship in the eyes of Venice immediately clear. But in their eyes and in Shakespeare's there's nothing illicit about their love, to which they regard themselves, and the play regards them, as fully entitled. Undeterred by the paternal wrath and widespread disapproval they are bound to incur, Othello and Desdemona act as if a black man from Africa and an upper-class white woman from Venice have every right to fall in love, marry and be left to live happily together. They act, in other words, as if they were already free citizens of a truly civilized future, instead of prisoners of a time when racial prejudice and sexual inequality are so ingrained that even their heroic hearts are tainted by them.

As a result, Othello and Desdemona find unleashed upon them, in the shape of Iago, the venomous rage of a society whose foundations are rocked by the mere fact of their marriage. ‘For if such actions may have passage free,’ Brabantio warns the Venetian Senate, ‘Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be’ (1.2.98-9). Brabantio perceives at once that there's much more at stake in this interracial union than the violation of his honour as Desdemona's father. If we turn a blind eye to this outrage, Brabantio argues in effect, we're treating our inferiors as our equals, which means there's nothing to stop the subhuman underclass or the heathen outcasts of society taking our place and having power over us. Shakespeare makes it plain from the start that it's not just Iago the newly-weds are up against, but the status quo and a view of the world which Iago merely embodies in its most lethal form.

4. In the RSC production of *Othello*, two black actors were cast in the roles of Othello and Iago. Why might the director have made this decision?

# Attitudes to women – Act 1 Scene 1

Bullet point summary:

## Historical Context: Gender in the Renaissance Era

Elizabethan society was patriarchal, meaning that men were considered to be the leaders and women subservient to them. Women were regarded as "the weaker sex", not just in terms of physical strength, but emotionally too. The roles of women in society were very limited; there were very clear expectations of men and women, and in general men were expected to be the breadwinners and women to remain in the domestic sphere. Working class women could work in domestic service as cooks, maids, etc. Women were also allowed to write works of literature, providing the subject was suitable for women: mainly translations or religious works. However, women were not allowed to act on the public stage or write for the public stage as this was considered dishonourable for women.

A man was considered to be the head of a marriage, and he had the legal right to chastise his wife. However, it is important to understand what this "headship" meant. It did not mean, as if often supposed, that the husband was able to command his wife to do anything he pleased. He was expected to take care of her, make sure she had everything she needed, and most importantly to love her and be a good father to any children they had. If a husband felt the need to chastise his wife, then he was not allowed to be cruel or inflict bodily harm. If he did abuse his wife, then he could be prosecuted or prevented from living with her. There was no divorce: marriage generally lasted as long as the couple both lived.

On average, a woman gave birth to a child every two years, but as a lot of babies and children died from sickness, families were not always large. Childbearing was considered a great honour to women, as children were seen as blessings from God.

The Renaissance audience may therefore have perceived the women in *Othello* according to the Madonna/whore paradigm. Wealthy women like Desdemona were kept sequestered within their homes, preparing for the marriage their father would plan for them. Such women were supposed to be innocent and have no sexual knowledge – even within marriage, this would be seen in a negative light. In contrast, men were able to seek sexual satisfaction from the many courtesans in Venice. For a woman like Desdemona, loss of reputation could be catastrophic for marriage prospects, and thus for financial stability.

Yet Desdemona does rebel against these restrictions and she asserts her own sense of agency by marrying Othello. And Shakespeare's plays are full of female characters who refuse to conform to expectations – Lady Macbeth is a perfect example. Even Lady Macduff – the innocent, submissive victim of male violence – is not afraid to take a verbal stand against her attackers. So why was Shakespeare so interested in the figure of the rebellious woman? In his book *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life*, Fintan O'Toole explains that in Renaissance England "there are two value systems, two world views in competition, and this is the essential context in which to understand Shakespeare's tragedies". There had been, after all, a powerful female queen on England's throne for a number of decades; Elizabeth I demonstrated that patriarchal values did not have to remain. And this is the predicament Desdemona finds herself in; she is caught between the traditional, patriarchal value system, and the hope that society has changed enough to give her some autonomy.

New vocabulary + definitions:

**Read Act 1 Scene 1 from line 118 to the end. In this section, notice how the characters speak about Desdemona and the elopement.**

**Identify 2 mini-quotations which demonstrate a patriarchal attitude towards women.**

1.

2.

## Summary:

- Roderigo and Iago wake Brabantio to tell him of Desdemona's elopement. Iago uses debased language to describe the sexual relationship between Desdemona and Othello, revealing his degraded attitude to love and to women.
- Initially, Brabantio is incredulous; Desdemona could not have been stolen from under his nose without him waking.
- When he realizes that Desdemona has left of her own free will, Brabantio is horrified at this violation of his power. He calls for arms and goes to find the couple.
- Iago says he needs to leave as he must continue the pretense of being Othello's loyal servant.

**"The central dramatic function of the opening scene is to establish the inherent racism and sexism of Venetian society." Create a list of 5 points and evidence to support this statement.**