



### Othello by William Shakespeare (1604)



#### Assessment: Paper 2 Varieties in Language and Literature

Section B – Prose Fiction and Other Genres: one comparative essay question on *The Great Gatsby* (anchor text) and *Othello*

(30 marks) 1 hour 30 minutes

##### AOs

AO1 Apply concepts and methods from integrated linguistic and literary study as appropriate, using associated terminology and coherent written expression

AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in texts

AO3 Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which texts are produced and received

AO4 Explore connections across texts, informed by linguistic and literary concepts and methods



#### Context

##### Playwright

Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays between the late 1580s and 1613, as well as contributing to plays by other dramatists. His career was highly successful. He made enough money to buy land around Stratford-upon-Avon, as well as a large house in the town.

The primary source of *Othello* was the *Hecarommithi*, a collection of tales by the Italian writer Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi. Shakespeare compresses the timescale of the original story to heighten the emotional impact of the events and makes use of two contrast locations, Venice and Cyprus.

##### Historical

The Renaissance (literally 'rebirth') saw a revival of artistic and intellectual endeavour, which began in Italy in the fourteenth century. Sir Thomas Moore and Sir Thomas Wyatt are credited with launching the English Renaissance with their writings which focused on challenging old assumptions and traditions. Classical texts and the culture of Ancient Greece and Rome were rediscovered and, with this discovery, the 'Golden Age' of English literature began, of which Shakespeare's plays are part.

When *Othello* was written, England was increasingly hostile to foreigners. London had witnessed several riots against foreigners and artisans. Equally, Elizabeth I's attitudes towards those of African descent well documented with various sources showing her intention to expel 'blackamoors' from England. Coupled with commonly held prejudices against those deemed 'moors' by the populace, it is safe to assume that Shakespeare's contemptuous audience would have shared some of the racist and xenophobia attitudes displayed by Iago and others in the play. Other plays of the period - including Shakespeare's - had black characters and tended to portray race negatively.

Women's lives were controlled by Patriarchy during the Renaissance. They expected to be ruled by men and had very few legal rights. Many men saw women as possessions, and fathers expected to choose husbands for their daughters. Women rarely received an education and were considered as incapable of rational thought. Assertive and argumentative women were seen as a threat to the social order and were punished for their behaviour.

##### Literary

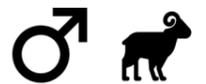
Shakespeare's plays are innovative and challenging in exactly the way of the Renaissance. Although his plays conclude in the restoration of order and stability, Shakespeare subverts traditional values, as we see in *Othello* where the tragic hero is a black man and the heroine is an assertive young woman. Renaissance dramatists were heavily influenced by Seneca, the Roman playwright whose tragedies are characterised by long narrative accounts and long reflective soliloquies.

There are a number of malcontent and Machiavellian villains in Renaissance drama who share Iago's cynicism and abuse others to get what they want. *Othello* can be compared with other Renaissance tragedies where the hero is tempted into evil and some critics have suggested that Shakespeare borrows stock characters from Medieval morality plays.

#### Themes, symbols and motifs

##### Race and otherness

Symbols, motifs and imagery: black and white, animals and insects, Hell and the devil.



##### Sexual jealousy

Symbols, motifs and imagery: the handkerchief, consumption, poisoning.



##### Love and relationships

Symbols, motifs and imagery: entrapment and enslavement, chaos and order, hands and hearts.



##### Masculinity

Symbols, motifs and imagery: the sea and military heroism, animals and insects, cuckoldry.

##### Status and social position

#### Wider Reading/Further Study

##### Books

Fraser, Antonia 'The Weaker Vessel'

Kermode, Frank 'The Age of Shakespeare'

Kermode, Frank 'Shakespeare's Language'

Smith, Emma 'Shakespeare'

Palfry, Simon 'Doing Shakespeare'

Shakespeare, William 'Titus Andronicus'

##### Podcasts

Smith, Emma 'Approaching Shakespeare' <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/othello>



#### Past Paper Questions (comparison with *Othello*)

##### SAMS

Evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used by the writers of your two studied texts **to present individuals as outsiders from society**. In your response you must consider the use of linguistic and literary features, connections across texts and relevant contextual factors.

##### 2017

Evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used by the writers of your two studied texts **to present the ways in which social constraints affect the behaviour of individuals**. In your answer you must consider the use of linguistic and literary features, connections across texts and relevant contextual factors.

##### 2018

Evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used by the writers of your two studied texts **to present individuals who observe or experience significant change**. In your answer you must consider the use of linguistic and literary features, connections across texts and relevant contextual factors.

##### 2019

Evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used by the writers of your two studied texts **to explore how an individual's identity is shaped, or revealed, by their interactions with other people**. In your answer you must consider the use of linguistic and literary features, connections across texts and relevant contextual factors.

**2020** Evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used by the writers of your two studied texts to present individuals who are very contented, and/or very discontented, with their place in society.