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| **Writer’s Intent** | **Aspects of Tragedy** | **Key Tragic Terminology** |
| *Othello* was written by **William Shakespeare** in **1603/4** and is one of his most well-known **tragedies**. Written around half way through his extraordinary career as a playwright, the play explores mature themes of **race, jealousy, identity and gender**. While we cannot know for certain what Shakespeare’s **intent** was in writing the play, there have been a plethora of different interpretations of the play. Initially dismissed as a farce (Thomas **Rymer**, 1693), other critics such as **Coleridge** and **Honigman** have focused on the motivation for Iago’s psychopathic hatred of Othello, while others (**Bradley, Leavis, Loomba**) have explored alternative explanations for Othello’s own actions. In adapting **Cinthio Giraldi’s** original tale of *Othello* Shakespeare adds layers of depth and nuance to the characterisation (see **Emma Smith** on Shakespeare’s ‘**strategic opacity’**) that have ensured both the play’s longevity and its potential for reinvention for each new era of viewers. | We study *Othello* as part of the ‘**Aspects of Tragedy’ Paper**. This means that we study the play through the lens of Tragedy. It is very important that you know these ‘aspects of tragedy’ off by heart.* **The role of the tragic hero or heroine** and their trajectory throughout the text, especially their **journey towards death**
* The type of the tragic text: is it a **public or a domestic tragedy?**
* **Tragic settings**
* The role of the **tragic villain**
* The role of **fate**
* The role of **violence and revenge**
* The use of **tragic structure and tragic language within the text**
* The role of **tragic sub-plot**
* The **effect of the tragedy on the audience** (**catharsis** etc)
 | Here is a non-exhaustive list of key terminology that you must master for the ‘**Aspects of Tragedy’ Paper**: * **Tragic Hero**
* **Tragic Villian**
* **Tragic Victim**
* ***Hamartia*** (fatal flaw/error of judgement)
* ***Hubris*** (excessive pride)
* ***Catharsis***(feeling of relief)
* ***Pathos*** (pity)
* ***Peripeteia*** (reversal)
* ***Anagnorisis*** (self-realisation)
* ***Machiavel*** (character prepared to act immorally for self-gain)
* ***Malcontent*** (character left unsatisfied by perceived unfair treatment by protagonist)
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| **Key Characters** | **Key Context for *Othello*** |
| * Shakespeare based his *Othello* on **Cinthio Giraldi’s *Hundred Tales* of 1565** but changed many of the key details, such as giving Iago a name and making Othello and Desdemona newlyweds. In the Giraldi version, Othello is killed by Disdemona’s family.
* Shakespeare set *Othello* against the epic backdrop of an ongoing religious conflict between **Christian Republic of Venice and the Muslim Ottoman Empire**. This conflict had raged off and on since the mid-fifteenth century, and by the time the play premiered at the beginning of the seventeenth century, four Ottoman–Venetian wars had already taken place. The most recent bout of violence, which occurred between 1570 and 1573, was known as the War of Cyprus. Shakespeare situated the events of *Othello* (Acts 2-5) in the midst of this war (**circa 1570-71**).
* The question of Othello’s exact **race** is open to some debate. The word **‘Moor’** (which appears in the play’s subtitle, ‘The Moor of Venice’) 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. There is evidence of **racial prejudice** against African people in general in documents from England (even though it is set in Venice and Italy, Shakespeare wrote this play for an English audience) this time (see the work of **Leo Africanus**, c1550). Racial prejudice is exhibited by some characters in the play, such as Iago and Roderigo who refers to Othello as ‘thick lips’.
* *Othello* must also be seen against a backdrop of **sexism and misogyny** within Elizabethan and Jacobean society (see the work of John Knox, for example). This is reflected in the treatment of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca by some of the male characters.
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| * **Othello**: The **tragic hero** of the play. He is a **respected general** in the Venetian army but is also referred to as **‘Moor’** throughout the play, suggesting his **African origins**. He begins the play as a dignified figure, newly wed to Desdemona. He ends the play a broken murderer, who has allowed Iago to manipulate him via his **tragic flaw of jealousy**.
* **Iago**: The villain of the play. He is Othello’s ensign and from the outset, makes his hatred of both Othello and Cassio (who was promoted over him) clear to Roderigo and the audience. To all other characters he is ‘honest Iago’. He uses his intelligence and reputation for honesty to spin a web of lies which results in the tragic deaths of Othello, Desdemona and Roderigo.
* **Desdemona**: Othello’s faithful wife who is strangled by him on account of her ‘infidelity’ in Act 5.
* **Cassio**: Othello’s lieutenant. A Venetian nobleman who is ensnared in Iago’s plot and is accused of infidelity with Desdemona
* **Emilia**: Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s faithful servant. She eventually uncovers Iago’s evil schemes.
* **Roderigo**: hapless Venetian nobleman who loves Desdemona and allows Iago to manipulate him into playing a part in his evil schemes. Is killed by Iago in Act 5.
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| *Othello* Plot Summary |
| Act 1 | Exposition: Act 1.1 The play opens in Venice with Iago and Roderigo discussing Iago’s hatred of his general, Othello. We learn that Othello has recently promoted another officer, Cassio to be his lieutenant, a role that Iago had coveted. We also learn that Othello has eloped with, the wealthy Brabantio’s daughter, Desdemona. Iago and Roderigo go to Brabantio’s house under cover of darkness and tell him, in racially charged language, that Othello has run off with his daughter. Brabantio resolves to find Desdemona and have Othello arrested.Act 1.2 Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is after him (but doesn’t tell Othello that it was him that told Brabantio about Othello and Desdemona’s elopement). Cassio comes to fetch Othello who is wanted at the Venetian council to discuss war with the Turks. Brabantio and Othello bump into each other on their way to the Council and exchange words. Act 1.3 Othello is ordered by the Duke of Venice to go to Cyprus (a Venetian colony) to protect it from a Turkish invasion. Only Othello is trusted with the mission. Brabantio brings his case against Othello before the council. He argues that Othello has ‘bewitched’ his daughter but he is dismissed by the Duke and the marriage is allowed to stand. Desdemona and Othello talk of how they fell in love and Desdemona successfully argues that she should be allowed to go to Cyprus with her new husband. At the end of this long scene, Iago and Roderigo return to their plotting about how to bring down Othello. Roderigo is motivated by his own love of Desdemona but Iago’s hatred of Othello is more opaque.  |
| Act 2 | Rising Action: Act 2.1 & 2: Act 2 opens with the news that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed. The war is won! Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, Iago and Roderigo arrive in Cyprus on the same boat from Venice and they all end up in bawdy (rude) conversation. Iago notices that Cassio is very attentive to Desdemona and resolves to use this information to try to hurt Othello. Othello arrives on a different boat and proclaims his joy at the victory against the Turks and his love for Desdemona. At the end of the scene Iago convinces Roderigo that Desdemona is fickle and actually loves Cassio. He persuades Roderigo to challenge Cassio to a duel that night. Iago gives another soliloquy in which he accuses Othello of sleeping with his wife Emilia, but this claim is never backed up with any proof. Act 2.3 Iago orchestrates the first major step of his plan to bring down Othello. He manages to get Cassio, who can’t hold his drink, very drunk. Roderigo attacks him offstage and Cassio fights back. Montano, another officer, tries to intervene and Cassio fights him too and injures him. Iago goes to fetch Othello who is furious with the lack of discipline shown by his soldiers, and especially Cassio. Othello sacks Cassio from his job as his lieutenant and Cassio is devastated. Iago pretends to be his friend and tells him that the way back into Othello’s good books is via talking to Desdemona and persuading her to argue his case on his behalf. He ends the scene plotting to take Othello to see Cassio ‘soliciting’ his wife. |
| Act 3 | Climax: Act 3.1 Cassio goes to see Emilia (Desdemona’s lady-in-waiting) to ask if he can have a private word with Desdemona. Act 3.3 Desdemona accepts Cassio’s request to put his case to Othello on his behalf. Iago asks Othello if he saw Cassio talking with Desdemona in order to plant the seed of doubt in his mind. Iago then proceeds to skilfully manipulate Othello into believing that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. By the end of the scene, Othello has vowed to kill them both. As he becomes more murderous and convinced that Iago is right, Othello starts to mimic Iago’s course language. In the middle of the scene, in a break in the main action, Emilia gives the handkerchief that Desdemona dropped to Iago, who says he will put it in Cassio’s room. The handkerchief becomes a key part of the plot in later scenes.Act 3.4 Desdemona tries to speak to Othello about Cassio’s job again. Othello and Desdemona argue over the Desdemona having lost the special handkerchief that he gave her. Desdemona and Emilia are shocked by Othello’s sudden anger and jealousy. They can’t understand why he is so angry because they do not know what Iago has been saying to him about Desdemona and Cassio but the audience do (dramatic irony). At the end of the scene Cassio meets up with his mistress (Bianca) and he gives her Desdemona’s handkerchief that he found in his room and asks her to ‘copy’ it for him as he likes the pattern. |
| Act 4 | Falling Action: Act 4.1 Othello and Iago discuss Desdemona’s ‘infidelity’ and Othello has a fit due to the emotional stress. When Othello comes around, Iago tells him to wait around the corner and observe while he questions Cassio about Desdemona. In fact Iago initiates a bawdy conversation with Cassio about Bianca. It looks to Othello as if Cassio is talking in a lewd way about his affair with Desdemona. Then Bianca comes in with Othello’s handkerchief, which makes Othello even more determined to kill both Cassio and Desdemona on account of their perceived ‘disrespect’ towards him. Lodovico arrives from Venice with orders for Othello to return home to Venice. Othello hits and verbally abuses Desdemona in front of Lodovico and he is visibly shocked, by the change in Othello’s behaviour. Act 4.2 Othello and Desdemona argue again, with Othello once again accusing Desdemona of betrayal and dishonesty, calling her the ‘cunning whore of Venice’. Desdemona vehemently protests her innocence but also remains completely devoted to Othello. Roderigo tries to leave Cyprus but Iago persuades him to stay and kill Cassio (as Othello has ordered him to do).Act 4.3 Othello orders Desdemona to go to bed and she sadly agrees, singing the ‘Willow Song’, which her mother’s maid had sung as she died of a broken heart. Emilia and Desdemona discuss the deficiencies of men in general. |
| Act 5 | The Denouement, Act 5.1 As planned, Roderigo attempts to kill Cassio and Iago kills Roderigo in revenge for this seemingly random attempted murder (again, dramatic irony, as the audience know that Iago has set the whole scenario up and now needs to kill Roderigo to cover his own tracks). Cassio survives but is badly wounded. Iago tries to blame the killing on Bianca.Act 5.2 After a famous soliloquy in which Othello sets himself up as a purveyor of justice, Othello strangles the sleeping Desdemona in punishment for her ‘infidelity’. Desdemona, who briefly regains consciousness, protests her innocence. Emilia also protests Desdemona’s innocence and raises the alarm that Othello has murdered her. When Gratiano arrives, Emilia, who has finally realised what Iago has done, tells Gratiano. Iago stabs Emilia and escapes. Lodovico sends his men to capture Iago, who is brought back to Othello’s lodgings but refuses to explain his actions (‘From this time forth, I never will speak word’). Othello realises that he has been completely duped by Iago and that Desdemona and Cassio were innocent all along. After a final soliloquy, he kills himself.  |