

# Getting to grips with the Moor

***Othello* is one of Shakespeare's darkest works, and a well prepared answer on the tragedy will reap dividends in the English paper**

**Question:** "The act of reading or seeing a performance of the play *Othello* can be a horrifying as well as an uplifting experience." Discuss this statement in the light of your study of the play *Othello*. Make reference to or quotation from the play in your answer.

**Answer:** This statement has a certain amount of truth to it. Although the experience from reading or seeing a dramatic performance of this play is largely frightening and horrifying, there are certain elements in the play that tend to make it an uplifting or enriching experience. For the most part, however, *Othello* is a chilling insight into some very evil aspects latent within humankind.

Shakespeare works into the fabric of his tragedy a strong pattern of good and evil-doing. This pattern governs the plot of the play and also the motivations of the main protagonists or characters. In this particular tragedy, the dominant tone is dark and terrifying, and this seems to percolate through much of the action. The root of this darkness lies in the representation of Iago, a character governed by a deeply insidious pattern of evil behaviour.

He is one of Shakespeare's most heinous villains, whose actions and nature leave a strong impression on the mind of an audience or reader. His real lack of motivation in evil-doing within this play makes his behaviour even more terrifying. Admittedly, he does try to offer some tenuous motivations for his plots in some of his soliloquies. He claims that Othello has had a brief affair with Emilia, "twixt my sheets/He's done my office". This is a flimsy claim and is certainly not substantiated within the play's dramatic structure by any substantial evidence. In fact, the impression that is largely gained of Othello's character is that he has a deep-seated naivety and inexperience in the ways of this world. His speech of vindication before the Venetian court highlights this inexperience: "Rude am I in my speech, . . . And little of this great world can I speak,/More than pertains to feats of broil and battle." Tragically, this is true, and this does contribute to making the drama a really horrifying experience to watch or read.

The fact that Iago the villain is gifted with supreme powers of self-control, discipline, and mental agility, together with the fact that he is an expert when it comes to assessing characters and their real nature, all serves to intensify the horror of this amazing drama. His soliloquies provide an open ground where he manages to generate his diabolic and wicked plans. Here in the soliloquies Iago outlines the flaws of his victims. Othello, he tells us, is deeply naive and gullible: "The Moor is of a free and open nature/That thinks men honest that but seems to be so." Iago is able to use the virtues and strengths of people in order to facilitate his devious plot and wreak havoc in the lives of all. This becomes strikingly evident when, on speaking about Desdemona's exceptional goodness, Iago explains how, "I will turn her vir-

tue into pitch,/And out of her own goodness make the net/That shall enmesh 'em all." Indeed, one of the most horrifying aspects of this play is that Iago does manage to do this.

However, as in all Shakespeare's plays, there are always some elements or aspects that show the more positive features of human nature, and in a sense these could be said to be morally uplifting in consequence. The representation of Iago's wife, Emilia, in the play certainly would enable an audience or reader to see how a character can change for the better morally and this is an uplifting and stimulating experience. Shakespeare manages to draw a strong realistic picture of a woman who initially is shallow and worldly-wise, and yet who changes because of friendship with Desdemona.

Emilia seems to be unaware of the real depths of evil and malignancy that exist within her husband's nature. She is the attendant or assistant of Desdemona, and in this role acts as a useful though unwitting agent to facilitate her husband's demonic plot. Emilia spends a good deal of time with Desdemona and begins to understand her temperament and depths of goodness. Emilia is set in dramatic contrast to the good and virtuous Desdemona. She is much more shrewd and cynical about life and humankind. There are many conversations where she speaks about the fickle quality of humankind and about her own ability to compromise herself in the interests of success or money.



Jonny Phillips as Iago and Nonso Anozie as Othello in a Cheek by Jowl production of Shakespeare's tragedy. Photograph: Keith Pattison

Shakespeare manages to frame a conversation between Emilia and Desdemona towards the conclusion of the play. Both women are speaking about marital infidelity and betrayal. Desdemona, a model of absolute virtue and goodness, declares emphatically that she would not commit adultery for the whole world. Emilia, in contrast, would certainly be prepared to risk infidelity if she could make her husband a monarch.

The significance of this conversation and of the profound changes within Emilia's nature only emerge shortly after Desdemona has been murdered by her husband. Emilia, who knows the nature and mindset of Desdemona, is very quick to vindicate her virtue and innocence and attack Oth-

## Three month study plan

### March

Use this month to learn from your mistakes in the mock exams and to write down clearly all the areas of English that you need to revise and know better.

When you get your papers back from your mock exams, you may be tempted to dump them in the nearest rubbish bin. Don't do that. Hold on to them even if they are a disaster, and keep them up to June. You can use some of the answers as a gauge to see how you are improving from now until June.

### April

This is a good time of year to revamp, now that mocks are well over and Easter is out of the way. Days are brighter and your own outlook on the exam should also be smarter. Plan your work early on in the week and try to come to terms quickly with the areas of the course you have not yet tackled.

Spend time writing up essays or sample answers on

questions in your own style and using your own quotations. You can use some of the material from these in June.

### May

May is a good time to see the whole course in perspective and hopefully you will begin to see everything fitting into place for you. Have one or two essays prepared in different styles – maybe one short story and one persuasive piece that you can use.

Prepare short pieces on the poets you are studying and see how you can use these in the exam.

Now is a good time to watch those videos again – maybe the Shakespeare play or if you are studying video in your comparative section.

The important thing is to keep a clear head and to try to relax as much as possible.

English is a very obvious place where nerves become apparent and they really affect your writing style.

Good luck and enjoy.