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GRADE 12: EHL

DRAMA: OTHELLO

1. The inherent weaknesses in various characters are manipulated, leading to injustice.

- Othello's weaknesses: his jealousy and a lack of control over his emotions, as well as his insecurities, based on his age and his sense of racial inferiority and foreignness, are exploited by Iago. These will result in a miscarriage of justice: his murder of Desdemona.
- His naive and trusting nature causes him to place his faith in Iago, a grave error.
- His lack of perception and sophistication, his gullibility and his limited experience of female company are all weaknesses that are manipulated by Iago.
- His lack of emotional balance is demonstrated as he descends into primitive/barbaric behaviour and becomes irrational. This state of mind makes him vulnerable to Iago's innuendos, resulting in his obsession with vengeance.
- Othello is self-righteous, believing he is executing justice in punishing Desdemona for her adultery. His act of justice is in fact unjust.
- Desdemona's naivety in believing that Othello is not jealous and her lie to Othello about the handkerchief, lead to her unjust death. Othello physically and verbally abuses Desdemona. However, her loyalty becomes a weakness when she blames herself for Othello's abusive and even murderous behaviour.
- Her loyalty to her friends, usually considered to be a strength, is perverted into a weakness to be exploited by Iago. Her nagging insistence on pursuing Cassio's suit reinforces the belief that she is pleading for her lover.
- Cassio's giving in to peer pressure to accept another drink, then becoming a participant in a drunken brawl, displays a weakness which allows Iago to manipulate events to his advantage. Cassio is dismissed from his position, losing Othello's friendship and trust.
- The callous way in which Cassio mocks Bianca's infatuation, allows Iago to provide the ocular proof demanded by Othello to confirm Desdemona's affair with Cassio.
- Brabantio's prejudice enables Iago to manipulate him into attempting to dissolve the marriage between Othello and Desdemona.
- Roderigo's lack of intelligence, as well as his gullibility and lack of mature morality, allows him to become Iago's dupe. Despite becoming disillusioned with Iago's ability to fulfil his promise, he is easily persuaded to become further embroiled in Iago's plans.
- Emilia is a bullied wife who steals Desdemona's handkerchief because she wants to please her husband. The act of stealing the handkerchief allows Iago to further his plan of sowing discord. Emilia does not question his desire to acquire the handkerchief, proving she is ignorant of his true nature.

- It is Iago's manipulation of the weaknesses of various characters that results in the unjust and tragic deaths.

2. Shakespeare explores the dark side of human nature by focusing on the deplorable qualities displayed by certain characters. These qualities are responsible for the destruction of characters in Othello.

- Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio hold Othello in contempt; their attitudes and derogatory comments are based on racial stereotypes. The veiled racism in Venetian society possibly undermines Othello's confidence and self-esteem, making him more vulnerable to Iago's machinations.
- Brabantio's prejudice prevents him from accepting the marriage, and his rejection of Desdemona results in his heartbreak and ultimate death.
- Iago, Brabantio, Cassio and, later, Othello, display sexist attitudes.
- Cassio's sexist attitude towards Bianca is used by Iago to provide 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's alleged adultery, thus contributing to her death. Cassio's immoral behaviour with Bianca leads to Iago's being able to implicate him in an affair with Desdemona, and contributes to the deaths of Othello and Desdemona.
- Roderigo sees Desdemona as a prize, believing he can woo her with money and jewellery. This enables Iago to exploit him, leading to his financial ruin and, ultimately, his death. His gullibility and belief in Iago blind him to rational thinking, allowing him to become Iago's dupe. When his usefulness is over, Iago disposes of him.
- Emilia's desire to please her husband by stealing the handkerchief betrays Desdemona's trust and has fatal consequences for herself and for Desdemona.
- Iago's ambition and desire for power and revenge lead to his plotting, since he has an innate need to have control over others. He is caught in his own web of deceit.
- Iago's disappointment at not being promoted and his jealousy of Cassio and Othello motivate him to destroy what is good in others because of his own contempt for virtue and his envy of the 'daily beauty' in others.
- Othello's jealousy is aroused when he believes he has been cuckolded, but he is unable to react rationally. His pride and his fear of having his suspicions confirmed, prevent him from questioning the validity of the accusations, which reveals his lack of judgement.
- Othello's actions are motivated by a desire for revenge, although he deludes himself that his actions are just.

3. In 'Othello', Shakespeare depicts how the more deplorable qualities of human nature can destroy people. Critically discuss this assessment of the play.)

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Othello's actions are motivated by a desire for revenge, although he deludes himself that his actions are just.

4. In Act 3 Scene 4, Emilia makes the following statement on jealousy:

*Jealous souls 'are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous. 'Tis a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.'*

Is Emilia's idea of jealousy supported by the play as a whole?

The point that Emilia makes is that jealousy is an inherent character trait and needs no cause. The jealousy that certain characters feel can be attributed to their own analysis of events rather than the truth. The play provides numerous elements that can be used to support or refute Emilia's opinion, depending on the 'spin' put on them.

- **Iago** is jealous of Cassio because he has a 'daily beauty in his life' that Iago can never possess.
- His jealousy is aggravated by his suspicion that both Othello and Cassio have had an affair with his wife, Emilia.
- He does not have any proof, but even though he knows there is no firm evidence, on the basis of mere suspicion, he will seek revenge.
- This reveals his insecurity in his marriage, which is a cause of his jealousy.

- Iago hates Othello's success and power as a militarist, and his good reputation too.
- His jealousy proves to be monstrous because it makes him want to hurt and destroy Othello, Desdemona, Cassio and Roderigo.) (In the process of doing this, he destroys others, such as Emilia.)

- **Othello** is also a victim of jealousy, because he is insecure in his marriage: he is black in a white society, a foreigner, much older than Desdemona, thinks he does not behave like an elegant Venetian gentleman, lacks experience in intimate relationships and is unfamiliar with the complexities of Venetian women.

- Iago produces minimal proof of Desdemona's infidelity (handkerchief; alleged dreams) and Othello becomes completely possessed by jealousy. He dismisses his love for his wife ('All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven').
- He undergoes a radical transformation from referring to Desdemona using imagery of divinity to using imagery of the bestial.
- He is beyond reason in his actions. He loses his ability to think coherently and is so consumed that he cannot see that the 'ocular' proof that Iago provides is not real.
- He fails to even consider Desdemona's possible response to the situation, thus showing his determination to find her guilty.

- Othello's loss of control sees him reduced from a man who is deservedly held in high esteem to a pathetic individual who loses control of his faculties (e.g. falling into a trance).

- **Roderigo** is jealous of Othello because he has married Desdemona, the woman he covets.
- He therefore believes that he has reason to assist Iago in his plans to inform Brabantio of the elopement.
- He is a materialistic fool who believes that if he showers Desdemona with more gifts and pays Iago to mediate, he will still stand a chance with her.
- This makes him jealous of anyone who stands in his way.

- Roderigo becomes jealous of Cassio when Iago convinces him that Desdemona loves Cassio.
- Iago is able to use Roderigo's propensity for jealousy by getting him to kill Cassio (which he fails to do).
- **Iago's jealousy is directed at Michael Cassio**, who is appointed as Othello's lieutenant. In addition, he feels extreme anger against Othello for giving Cassio a position that he himself has coveted.
- He believes that Michael Cassio does not deserve the position: his reasons are that Cassio is a Florentine and an 'arithmetician' i.e. one who knows only theory.

5. Emilia and Desdemona can be held accountable for their own deaths.

When Desdemona is first introduced (in Venice), she is assertive and bold.

- She is a woman who dares to go after what she wants and shows bravery. We see this when she elopes and when she stands up to her father.
- This assertiveness is lost when she later becomes a passive victim of Othello's anger.
- Desdemona is a sensitive woman who is easily moved to tears of compassion – this is what prompts her falling in love with Othello in the first place (she pities the dangers he has experienced).
- Her compassion and sensitivity are traits that Iago uses for his own advantage. She readily falls into Iago's plans about speaking to Othello on Cassio's behalf.
- Desdemona sees only the good and positive aspects of everyone's character. This accounts for her being easily manipulated.
- She views Othello as a flawless man despite his mistreatment of her: for example, when he calls her a whore, she is devastated, but does not assertively object.
- Othello humiliates her in public when he slaps and ridicules her. Her only response is that she doesn't deserve this. She shows no anger whatsoever; instead, she weeps.
- Most of her actions reveal her love for Othello – these account for her spineless acceptance of his abuse.
- The traditional subordination of women in Shakespeare's society would in part also account for Desdemona's failure to fight back in a way we would expect from a spirited woman of our own day.
- She predicts her own demise by believing that she will have a fate similar to that of her mother's maid, Barbary. This approaches being a resigned acceptance of a dreadful fate she does not deserve.

- She orders Emilia to place her wedding sheets on the bed and sings the willow song – again, one would prefer her to rebel against her impending death, but instead she passively accepts it.
- She does not blame Othello for her death.
- She tries to protect Othello from the consequences of his actions by telling Emilia that she is responsible for her own death.
- She remains a loyal wife to the end, but her loyalty under the circumstances is misplaced because it interferes with her taking responsibility for her own life.
- Emilia is not loved by Iago – yet she remains loyal to him.
- Her desperation for love and approval sees her giving Desdemona's handkerchief to him. Her ready compliance with his requests reveals that she readily accedes to his demands without question/suspicion.

6. Othello's demise is as much the result of his self-doubt as it is of Iago's determination to ruin him.

- ☐ It is true.
- ☐ Othello's greatness is only relevant to the military and the battlefield. In his role as husband, however, he is adrift. The confidence with which he handles Brabantio's accusations and the respect he commands from the Venetian court are not enough to ensure domestic confidence and respect. He clearly lacks "those soft parts of conversation" that Venetians, and specifically Cassio, have. So, Othello is an outsider.
- ☐ Othello's self-doubt also stems from his age. He is "into the vale of years". At first, the age difference is not an issue. When Othello has to deal with Iago's slurs about Desdemona's relationship with Cassio, he assumes (incorrectly) that the much younger Cassio has the advantage.
- ☐ Even though it is not clear to Othello himself, this situation is obvious to Iago. He relishes the knowledge that Othello is "rude in his speech", "an erring barbarian" clearly out of his depth in the "super subtle" sophistication of Venetian society.
- ☐ Iago has to do very little to unhinge Othello. He is a "super subtle" manipulator, and influencing an unsophisticated general is not difficult. When Iago produces the ocular proof and deceives Othello into listening to a conversation between Cassio and Desdemona, the damage is done. Othello is incapable of the strategy, decisiveness and control so easy when he is on the battlefield. He has become the pawn to the master Iago.
- ☐ As it is understandable that Othello cannot resist Iago's spiteful and cruel intentions, his persistent debasement of Desdemona is abhorrent. It is this development that proves exactly how successful Iago's plan has worked. Not only has Iago destroyed Othello

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because “I do hate him as I do hell’s pains”, he has also destroyed Desdemona, a happy marriage and the reputation of a remarkable man.

7. 7. In the play, Othello, love and friendship are vulnerable to both internal and external forces.

Critically assess the validity of this statement in a well-constructed essay of 400–450 words (2–2½ pages).

Both internal and external forces are responsible for destroying the bond of love between Othello and Desdemona, as well as the bond of friendship between Othello and Cassio.

- Othello’s insecurities (foreignness, age, race, lack of sophistication) play an important role.
- Othello’s ‘free and open nature’ contributes to Iago’s being able to manipulate him – this accounts for his rash actions.
- His jealousy is aroused, but he does not know how to respond appropriately, since he has never been jealous or in love before.
- His inherent pride, fear of having his suspicions confirmed and his faith in Iago also contribute to his acceptance of Iago’s lies. This clearly reveals his lack of judgement.
- Othello’s vivid imagination serves as fertile ground for Iago’s insinuations.
- Desdemona’s naivety, her total belief in the goodness of people, her loyalty towards Cassio and her conviction that Othello is devoid of jealousy, contribute to the destruction of their marriage.
- Othello and Cassio’s friendship is destroyed by Othello’s jealousy and lack of trust.
- Cassio’s immaturity and weakness allow him to be pressured into drinking. This, together with Iago’s manipulation of Cassio’s weakness, is an external force that destroys the friendship between Othello and Cassio.
- Cassio’s callous behaviour towards Bianca provides Iago with supposed ‘proof’ of infidelity.
- Othello and Desdemona’s love, new and fragile, is clearly vulnerable to external forces, most notably the evil manipulations of Iago, who finds it very satisfying to destroy the goodness of their love.
- Iago has the uncanny ability to seek out the weaknesses in the relationship and to use these weaknesses to destroy it. He realises that Othello has the subconscious fear that he may lose Desdemona and that behind his assertive and confident exterior lie insecurities. Iago proceeds to focus on these in order to convince Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful.

- The friendships between Desdemona and Cassio, and between Othello and Cassio, are exploited and undermined by Iago.
- Othello is consumed by jealousy and plots to murder Cassio when he believes Iago's suggestions of an affair between Desdemona and Cassio. His belief is based upon the seemingly irrefutable 'ocular proof' provided by Iago.
- There is a bond of friendship between Desdemona and Emilia, with Emilia's playing the role of loyal confidante. However, this relationship is undermined by Emilia's wanting to please Iago by stealing Desdemona's handkerchief. She thus unwittingly contributes to Desdemona's destruction.
- Social conventions and attitudes have an effect on Othello, e.g. racism and the norms of propriety.
- Mention might be made of the Iago–Roderigo relationship.
- The movement of the action to Cyprus enables the vulnerability of friendship and love by removing the controls of Venice.

8. Othello is a great leader, a man truly worthy of admiration. To what extent do you agree with the above assessment of Othello?

- Othello is a great man. However, he does have some significant weakness that mitigate his claim to greatness.
- Othello is much admired as a leader on the battlefield.
- He has fought in several wars in various parts of the world.
- Brabantio also admired Othello greatly and this is what prompts him (Brabantio) to invite Othello to his home so that he can listen to stories of Othello's adventures in different parts of the world.
- Desdemona has spurned the advances of eligible young Venetian men, but is captivated by Othello chiefly because of his harsh experiences.
- His leadership ability is so admired by the Venetian state that he is appointed general of Cyprus when it is under threat of invasion by the Turks – an achievement when one considers that he is Moorish and not Venetian.
- He is a noble character who gives his all to any task.
- He is willing to make sacrifices e.g. he leaves Desdemona shortly after their marriage to take up his position as general in Cyprus.
- He is able to make decisions on his own, e.g. the decision to fire Cassio.
- He loves very deeply/passionately, and is also capable of a deep sexual jealousy; this is why Iago is able to manipulate him into believing that Desdemona has cuckolded him.

- His gullibility/trusting nature/inability to judge character is a flaw. He is unable to see through Iago and his plans, or to believe that Desdemona is telling the truth.
- His profound insecurities to do with his colour, his age, and his inexperience of sophisticated Venetian life are crucial.
- The play as tragedy: traditional definition of tragedy – a great man brought to his downfall as a result of flaws in his character.

9. In Act 3 Scene 4, Emilia makes the following statement on jealousy: *Jealous souls 'are not ever jealous for the cause, But jealous for they are jealous. 'Tis a monster Begot upon itself, born on itself.* Is Emilia's idea of jealousy supported by the play as a whole?

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- This reveals his insecurity in his marriage, which is a cause of his jealousy.
- Iago hates Othello's success and power as a military man, and his good reputation too.
- His jealousy proves to be monstrous because it makes him want to hurt and destroy Othello. (In the process of doing this, he destroys others, such as Desdemona and Roderigo.)
- Othello is also a victim of jealousy, because he is insecure in his marriage: he is black in a white society, a foreigner, much older than Desdemona, thinks he does not behave like an elegant Venetian gentleman, lacks experience in intimate relationships and is unfamiliar with the complexities of Venetian women.
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- He believes that Michael Cassio does not deserve the position: his reasons are that Cassio is a Florentine and an 'arithmetician' i.e. one who knows only theory.

10. Both Iago and Desdemona are responsible for the downfall of Othello. Discuss the extent to which you agree with this statement.

Othello, like most of us, has the potential for both good and evil.

- Desdemona can be seen as representing the finer possibilities of human nature (but not everybody agrees that she is flawless morally – some have a problem with her deceiving of her father and/or her lying about what has happened to the handkerchief).
- There are numerous references to her in terms of divinity and other ways of suggesting the wonderfully excellent.
- As long as Othello is happy in his relationship and trusts Desdemona, his diction is suggestive of the noble and refined.
- His behaviour is in keeping with this diction.
- More astute (or better taught) candidates might go as far as asserting that the Desdemona in Othello is dominant at the beginning of the play.
- However, Iago is evil.

- His words/imagery and his actions are devilish and bestial.
- Playing on Othello's insecurities, he poisons the general's mind against his wife.
- Iago manipulates Othello into becoming more like him (Iago): a bloody-minded killer.
- Othello's imagery and other aspects of his diction change and become reminiscent of Iago's: he increasingly uses imagery connected to the hellish and the disgustingly bestial.
- More astute (or better taught) candidates might go as far as asserting that the Iago in Othello is dominant in the later stages of the play.
- At the end, Othello capitulates to Iago and kills Desdemona, in the process figuratively killing the good in himself.
- However, he later tries to kill Iago. He fails: the significance of this failure is debatable in that some might think that his failure to return to his former self is suggested.
- In the end he commits suicide, killing the 'Turk' in himself and executing Venetian justice.
- He dies upon a kiss, beside the body of Desdemona. Perhaps this signifies the final redemption of Othello.

11. Iago lacks any genuine motive for his evil deeds. He is a villain. However, he does have some characteristics that one might be justified in admiring.

Iago does in fact provide a number of reasons for his evil deeds.

- True, he is evil as such, but he is not without motives.
- He resents Cassio's becoming lieutenant and his being overlooked for the post.
- He seems to be a racist and makes comments which suggest that he resents the prestige and authority of a Moor.
- He appears to be insecure about his manhood/ability to hold on to his wife and suspects both Othello and Cassio of cuckolding him.
- Iago does not care whether the rumours of his wife's unfaithfulness are true or not – the mere suspicion is enough to make him want revenge. This suggests a profoundly warped ego.
- He comments viciously on Cassio's aristocratic courtesies: clearly, he resents social advantage such as the attractive upper-crust young lieutenant's.
- He tells us that Cassio 'hath a daily beauty in his life/ that makes me ugly'.
- He 'loves' (for which read 'lusts after') Desdemona himself: sexual jealousy again.
- Iago seems to enjoy the game of dangerous scheming for its own sake ('Pleasure and action make the hours seem short').
- This energetic enjoyment of villainy might appeal to the reckless and darker side of some readers/audience.

- Iago's hilariously vulgar speech (e.g. what he says to Brabantio at the start of the play) would raise many a laugh.
- His ruthless honesty with himself about his own evil might earn him a measure of respect.
- His ability to come up with a good plan to get revenge suggests his intelligence as well as his exceptional understanding of human nature and emotions/human strengths and weaknesses.
- He is single-minded – he does not waver in his determination to get revenge. He makes a plan and then carries it out without being side-tracked by anything.
- He is very persuasive – he can get people to trust him and do exactly what he wants them to do.
- He is more plausible / credible as a human being than any of the other major characters.

NOTE: Some candidates might validly note what there is to admire, but to dismiss such admiration as misplaced because evil should not be condoned or sympathized with.

12. Othello and Iago are more alike than most people imagine. If it were not so, Iago would not be able to manipulate Othello into becoming a bloodthirsty killer, obsessed with revenge. Discuss the extent to which you agree with this statement.

- Othello's vulnerability to evil derives from his insecurities: he is not a native-born Venetian; indeed, he is black in a white society; he is much older than his wife; he is concerned that he lacks the sophisticated manners of Desdemona's fellow upper-class Venetians.
- Iago is also emotionally threatened. He admits that there is 'a daily beauty' in Cassio's life that makes him aware of his inferiority; he is sexually insecure and imagines that Emilia has betrayed him with Othello (an absurd fear); he bitterly resents being subordinated to an aristocratic non-Venetian (Cassio) with no real military experience.
- A crucial point is that Iago is utterly evil, whereas Othello is (like humanity in general, and typically of tragic heroes) of mixed potential.
- The intervention of the devilish Iago is necessary to activate the evil latent within Othello and to defeat the influence of the divine Desdemona.
- Both Iago and Othello are killers. Both have killed in battle.
- However, Iago plots the destruction of innocents in a dreadfully underhanded way.
- Othello would never behave like this, until unhinged by jealousy generated by the working of Iago's lies on his insecurities.
- Iago uses imagery of coarse sexuality, animal images and reference to hellish forces.
- Othello's diction is originally that of a noble gentleman.
- However, as Iago's poison works on him, Othello sounds more and more like Iago, and uses expressions suggestive of vile, bestial behaviour.
- Othello and Iago both swear to destroy Desdemona and Cassio; in this pact, they are very much alike.

13. Characters are damaged or destroyed because of their inability to perceive deception, as well as by Iago's manipulations and fate/opportunity. However, candidates might choose to argue that some individuals are destroyed as a consequence of their own folly.

- Iago plots to exact revenge on Othello and Cassio. He uses Roderigo, Emilia and Desdemona in his deception, resulting in deaths and the destruction of reputations and camaraderie.
- Iago deceives people as to his true nature and intentions, thus ensuring that he is regarded as honest, loyal and trustworthy. Iago employs trickery in suggesting there is an affair between Desdemona and Cassio. His machinations are successful because he knows how people will react.
- Iago plots to use Othello's potential for jealousy. Othello's subsequent irrational behaviour ensures the success of Iago's plans.
- Iago's machiavellism exploits Othello's trusting nature, bringing about his downfall. Iago manipulates Othello by playing on his insecurities.
- Othello and Iago conspire to murder Cassio and Desdemona.
- Iago plays on the importance of reputation to Othello and Cassio.
- Fate ensures that the action moves to Cyprus, aiding Iago's intrigue. It is also due to fate that Bianca arrives with the handkerchief while Iago is questioning Cassio as Othello watches; Desdemona drops the handkerchief where Emilia can find it.
- Misdeeds aside, characters' inherent qualities contribute to their own destruction: Roderigo's gullibility and improper desire; Emilia's desire to please Iago, which blurs her moral sense.
- Desdemona has absolute faith in Iago. Her goodness and naivety ensure the success of Iago's scheming. Ironically, he is finally responsible for the tragedy of Desdemona's death.
- Desdemona and Emilia are also guilty of deception (both lie about the handkerchief), which contributes to their deaths.
- Cassio's weakness for alcohol ensures the destruction of his reputation and his dismissal from his position. Cassio's irresponsibility allows peer pressure to cause him to drink in spite of his poor head for alcohol. Moreover, he is the officer in charge of the watch and should be more responsible.

[Both aspects of the question i.e. deception and conspiracy, must be addressed in order to receive more than 60%.]

14. Characters in the play have different reasons for feeling inferior, all of which lead to tragedy.

- Iago hates everything that is associated with spiritual/moral/emotional beauty. He is jealous of both Othello's and Cassio's status, nobility of character, manners, attractiveness and polish, while Iago, at best, feigns them at times.
- Iago is bitter and envious that he has not been promoted and feels that he has been overlooked because he lacks the social skills and status into which Cassio was born. Iago feels he has been superseded by a member of the privileged class and feels disregarded. This leads to Iago's plotting against Cassio, Othello and Desdemona.
- Iago lacks self-esteem and for this reason suspects that Cassio and Othello both have slept with Emilia. This contributes to his vindictive malice.
- Othello's inferiority stems from the fact that he is black, older and, despite his acumen on the battlefield, feels like an outsider in Venetian society. He is unschooled in its ways and fears that he is socially inadequate. Because he has spent so much time on the battlefield, Othello feels insecure in courtship rituals. These insecurities are exploited by Iago, resulting in tragedy.
- Othello's lack of confidence later contributes to his sensitivity and suspicion. He cannot believe that someone of Desdemona's stature has chosen to marry him and this lack of self-esteem is exploited by Iago.
- Bianca's jealousy stems from her sense of inferiority. She returns the handkerchief to Cassio in view of Othello. He regards this as 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's adultery, resulting in her murder.
- Emilia is subservient to Iago and does not have the courage and self-confidence to stand up to her husband.
- Cassio neglects his sworn duty because of peer pressure. He lacks the self-confidence to do the right thing in this regard.
- Roderigo's constant dependence on Iago shows his lack of self-esteem.

15. A misunderstanding of characters' true natures and intentions, as well as a misinterpretation of events and actions, contributes to the tragedy of Othello. However, Iago, who creates the misunderstanding, is the exception.

Brabantio's misunderstanding of Othello's reason for marrying Desdemona is driven by his bigotry. He misconstrues the depth of their love and assumes that Othello is bewitched by her. This contributes to the tragedy: he breaks ties with Desdemona and dies of a broken heart.

- Brabantio fails to understand Desdemona's character. He thinks she is timid and submissive. He is not prepared for her defiance.
- Characters are unaware of Iago's true nature, regarding him as honest and loyal. They misunderstand his actual intentions. His manipulative nature is so well concealed that not even Emilia has the vaguest notion of his plans. His skilful manipulations win the confidence of everyone, while he carefully plots their destruction. Emilia has no clue about the extent of Iago's evil until the evidence becomes overwhelming.
- Roderigo misinterprets Iago's motives and is unaware that he is being deceived. On more than one occasion he realises that he has been exploited but is convinced otherwise by Iago.
- Cassio is deluded into thinking that Iago is honest. His following of Iago's advice contributes to the tragedy.
- Because of his insecurities, Othello fails to trust Desdemona's loyalty. Iago's constant innuendo lays the foundation for Othello's misreading of the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio.
- Othello is easily convinced of his wife's alleged affair when Iago orchestrates Othello's eavesdropping on the conversation between Iago and Cassio. Othello's misinterpretation results in Desdemona's murder.
- Cassio's possession of the handkerchief so cleverly obtained by Iago, convinces Othello of his wife's infidelity.
- Othello's belief in Iago clouds his mind to such an extent that he loses focus on the true nature of the woman he married.
- Desdemona misinterprets the change in Othello.
- In general, decent people cannot grasp how much evil there is around them. If one has an emotional need not to see the truth, one tends not to: e.g. Emilia can have valid suspicions about Othello's attitude whereas Desdemona finds it difficult to credit such possibilities.

16. Referring to Cassio, Iago says: 'He hath a daily beauty in his life,/ That makes me ugly'. Critically discuss how *Othello* demonstrates that, when characters feel inferior to others, the results are destructive.

Characters in the play have different reasons for feeling inferior, all of which lead to tragedy.

- Iago hates everything that is associated with spiritual/moral/emotional beauty. He is jealous of both Othello's and Cassio's status, nobility of character, manners, attractiveness and polish, while Iago, at best, feigns them at times.
- Iago is bitter and envious that he has not been promoted and feels that he has been overlooked because he lacks the social skills and status into which Cassio was born. Iago feels he has been superseded by a member of the privileged class and feels disregarded. This leads to Iago's plotting against Cassio, Othello and Desdemona.
- Iago lacks self-esteem and for this reason suspects that Cassio and Othello both have slept with Emilia. This contributes to his vindictive malice.
- Othello's inferiority stems from the fact that he is black, older and, despite his acumen on the battlefield, feels like an outsider in Venetian society. He is unschooled in its ways and fears that he is socially inadequate. Because he has spent so much time on the battlefield, Othello feels insecure in courtship rituals. These insecurities are exploited by Iago, resulting in tragedy.
- Othello's lack of confidence later contributes to his sensitivity and suspicion. He cannot believe that someone of Desdemona's stature has chosen to marry him and this lack of self-esteem is exploited by Iago.
- Bianca's jealousy stems from her sense of inferiority. She returns the handkerchief to Cassio in view of Othello. He regards this as 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's adultery, resulting in her murder.
- Emilia is subservient to Iago and does not have the courage and self-confidence to stand up to her husband.
- Cassio neglects his sworn duty because of peer pressure. He lacks the self-confidence to do the right thing in this regard.
- Roderigo's constant dependence on Iago shows his lack of self-esteem.

17. Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, suggests that when people believe they have complete power, they abuse that power. Critically discuss the validity of this statement.

When people feel effectively omnipotent, they abuse their power and manipulate others to satisfy their own needs. Candidates, however, might argue that not all characters with the requisite power abuse it.

- ☐ The Duke does not abuse his power: he displays fairness.
- ☐ Initially Othello is fair and just. However, he later abuses his authority/power.
- ☐ Othello's pride, insecurities and fear of humiliation lead to his abuse of his position as husband. He verbally abuses and eventually murders Desdemona.
- ☐ His denying Desdemona and Cassio the chance to defend themselves also demonstrates his abuse of power. He acts as judge and executioner.
- ☐ Candidates might argue that it is not Othello's abuse of power that motivates him, but his jealousy.
- ☐ Iago's greatest satisfaction comes from asserting his power and superiority over others. He derives sadistic pleasure from the suffering of his victims.
- ☐ Iago's power comes from his superior intellect, his excellent understanding of human nature, and his ability to discern his victims' weaknesses/vulnerabilities, which he then exploits: Cassio's weak head for alcohol and need for popularity/social success; Roderigo's gullibility and lust for Desdemona; Emilia's desire to please him (Iago).
- ☐ Iago taps into Othello's insecurities to drive him mad with jealousy in order to take revenge on him.
- ☐ Iago uses Desdemona's generosity of spirit and loyalty to enmesh her in his plans to destroy her marriage to Othello.
- ☐ Iago abuses people's inaccurate perception of him as honest in order to manipulate them. He plays God by ending their lives once their usefulness to him is over.
- ☐ Brabantio abuses his position as a senator and nobleman in Venice in his attempt to satisfy his desire to have Othello punished.
- ☐ Cassio abuses both his social status and his identity as a man in his mistreatment of Bianca.

18. To a significant degree, Othello deserves what happens to him. Critically discuss the extent to which you agree with the above statement.

Disagree:

- Othello has reached the position of general through sheer hard work, skill and determination despite the odds against him. He is a brilliant soldier and is highly respected.

- He has spent the greater part of his life in the army and as such his unfamiliarity with civilian life provides Iago with the opportunity to manipulate him.
- Iago uses Othello's trusting nature, vulnerability and insecurities to sow seeds of doubt in Othello's mind. Iago's strong manipulative character corrupts Othello's better nature, making Othello a victim.
- As an honourable man, Othello expects others to subscribe to the same values as those to which he does.
- Since he relies increasingly on Iago, Othello becomes isolated and is manipulated by the circumstantial evidence of the handkerchief.
- Cassio's suspicious behaviour unwittingly lends credibility to Iago's innuendos and convinces Othello that his wife is unfaithful.
- Perhaps, since he believes in the concept of military justice, Othello's decision to kill Desdemona might be anticipated.

Agree:

- Othello's flaw is that he is too trusting and allows himself to be manipulated. He is a poor judge of character and so embroiled in his personal anguish that he allows it to cloud his judgement.
- Othello becomes increasingly irrational as he is consumed by his jealousy. He is unable to think clearly.
- His abusive behaviour toward Desdemona and his vulgar language when speaking to or about her cannot be condoned.
- Othello's pride will not allow him to be disgraced; he feels the need to punish those who have tarnished his reputation.
- Othello's failure to listen to Desdemona is a serious flaw, with fatal consequences. His only evidence for Desdemona's supposed infidelity is flimsy.
- When Othello is convinced that Desdemona is unfaithful, he becomes blind to reason. He plots Cassio's death and murders Desdemona. Desdemona's death is tragic and undeserved.

[Credit mixed responses/valid alternative responses.]

19. The problem of making moral choices is a significant issue in the play. Critically assess the validity of this statement.

Characters find themselves in situations where they allow themselves to compromise their morality when it comes to the choices they make.

- Initially, Othello prides himself on his honour and integrity. However, when his love for Desdemona is tested by Iago's innuendos, he chooses to believe Iago's lies. This compromises his morals, as he appoints himself Desdemona's judge and executioner.

His insecurities contribute to his questionable choices. Othello justifies his killing of Desdemona as the actions of 'an honourable murderer' and that he will be making the world a better place.

- Roderigo's choices reveal his flouting of moral standards. He has no qualms about participating in Iago's plot to break up Othello and Desdemona's marriage. He allows himself to be persuaded by Iago to kill Cassio, a treacherously evil act.
- Cassio's decision to give in to peer pressure, even though he knows he is in charge of the watch that night is dereliction of duty. The consequences of his choice are serious as he loses his position as Othello's lieutenant, as well as the trust and friendship of a man he greatly admires.
- When Brabantio learns that Othello and Desdemona have eloped, he allows his prejudice and bigotry to control him. His accusation that Othello has bewitched his daughter has no basis in the truth. When Desdemona chooses her husband over her father, he disowns her.
- Emilia makes a poor moral decision by choosing to keep the handkerchief that Desdemona accidentally loses. Even when she is aware of how devastated Desdemona is by the loss of Othello's first gift to her, she says nothing. Her choice makes her an unwitting accomplice to Desdemona's death. When she does reveal her actions, it is too late.
- Desdemona's passive acceptance of Othello's abusive treatment might also be considered a questionable moral choice. Had she stood up to Othello and challenged him, her fate might have been different.
- The issue of being guided by morals when making choices is of no significance at all to Iago, since he has no moral compass and he hates everything that is good in the world, acting only out of self-interest.

20. In Othello, love and loyalty cannot survive the power of jealousy. Critically discuss the validity of this statement.

It is Iago's villainous nature which destroys love. He is evil and enjoys hurting others.

He uses the trust others have in him against them. He is jealous of Cassio because Cassio received a promotion from Othello that Iago thought he deserved. He sets out to avenge this slight by making Othello suspect Cassio of disloyalty.

□ He is also jealous of Othello because he suspects Othello of sleeping with his wife, Emilia. His duplicity destroys Othello's love for Desdemona and poisons the friendship between Othello and Cassio. Cassio is loyal to Othello and feels terrible for letting him down. He longs to make amends but his efforts are thwarted because Othello has been turned against him.

□ It is ironic that Iago warns Othello of jealousy, 'the green-eyed monster', in Act 3 when he is responsible for making Othello jealous. Iago uses Desdemona's dropped handkerchief to make Desdemona and Cassio appear guilty of having an affair.

- Iago is associated with the devil because of his evil intentions and his manipulations.
- Othello is a calm man who is in control of his emotions and volatile situations. He remains rational when confronted with Brabantio and his followers who are intent on revenge. He does not allow Brabantio to rouse his anger when accused of witchcraft.
- He warns that when his anger is aroused, it will rule his 'safer guides'. He prophesizes 'chaos' if his love for Desdemona were to be meddled with.
- However Othello is easily baited by Iago's insinuations and lured into believing Iago's innuendo. Othello soon becomes passionate and irrational. His language and thoughts resemble those of Iago's.
- Desdemona is a loyal and loving wife. Her innocence and naivety are used against her and her pleas to Othello fall on deaf ears. He is too blinded by Iago's insinuations and too jealous to be able to see how he has been manipulated.
- Emilia is loyal to Desdemona even though she is drawn into the plot of the handkerchief. She had no idea of the reason for Iago's request. Emilia too is pitted against Iago's jealousy and becomes a pawn in his game.

21. Othello is responsible for his own tragic fate. Assess the validity of this statement.

Despite Othello's many admirable qualities, he has serious insecurities that contribute to his tragic fate. His insecurities about his race, his age, his ignorance about Venetian society, especially Venetian women, surface only when his confidence in Desdemona's loyalty/faithfulness is undermined by Iago.

- Othello allows himself to succumb to Iago's lies. He places his complete trust in Iago, allowing him to become his adviser and confidant, thereby compromising his integrity.
 - Although Othello asks for 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's betrayal, he does not question the evidence when it is presented to him.
 - Othello enters into an unholy alliance with Iago to kill both Cassio and Desdemona. This deliberate decision to commit murder compromises his morality and leads to his decision to execute justice on himself.
 - He also agrees to Iago's suggestion that he eavesdrop on Iago and Cassio's conversation, not realising that Iago is deceiving him. His gullibility in this situation contributes to his downfall.
 - Othello allows himself to be manipulated. Iago's suggestion of Desdemona's infidelity provides the excuse Othello needs to justify the destruction of the wife he believes cannot truly love him.
 - Othello's low self-esteem, jealousy and pride make him determined to ensure that Desdemona pays dearly for her supposed transgression.
 - Although Othello calls himself 'an honourable murderer', his actions in refusing Desdemona the chance to defend herself belie this claim.
- Candidates might argue that, rather than Othello's being responsible for his own fate, it is Iago who is the cause of his downfall.

- Iago plays on Othello's insecurities, poisoning his mind against his wife.
- Othello has no reason to disbelieve or mistrust Iago, as Iago is perceived to be 'honest' by numerous characters in the play.
- Iago is an excellent judge of character. He is opportunistic, cunning and evil, and the naïve and unsophisticated Othello stands no chance against Iago's devious machinations.

22. Othello's behaviour throughout the play has unintended consequences. Critically discuss the extent to which you agree with the above statement.

Candidates might argue that this statement is not entirely true and discuss how Othello's behaviour has either intended or unintended consequences or they might offer a mixed response.

- When Othello marries Desdemona, he does not expect Brabantio's extreme opposition and prejudice. Brabantio's warning to Othello about Desdemona's betrayal is later exploited by Iago.
- Othello does not expect Iago's resentment and jealousy when he appoints Cassio as his lieutenant. This spurs Iago's wrath and gives him reason to destroy Othello, Cassio and Desdemona.
- In naively trusting Iago and placing Desdemona in his care, Othello unwittingly plays into Iago's hands, giving him the opportunity to advance his evil plan.
- Othello's gullibility in believing Iago's insinuations about Cassio and Desdemona makes him more inclined to trust Iago, rather than Desdemona and Cassio.
- Desdemona's love is so essential to Othello that her assumed betrayal leads to his uncontrollable jealousy and ultimately destroys his and others' lives. Othello allows his insecurities and emotions to overwhelm his reason.
- Othello's response to the brawl shows Iago how quickly Othello becomes angry and loses control. Othello's dismissing Cassio and appointing Iago as lieutenant, places Iago in a better position to influence and manipulate him.
- Othello's demanding 'ocular proof' gives Iago the opportunity to strengthen his hold over Othello. This has the unintended consequence of Iago's having to adapt his plan to ensure the deaths of anyone who might expose his machinations.
- Othello's fit prevents him from directly confronting Cassio, and gives Iago complete mastery over him, resulting in the unholy alliance to commit murder.
- Othello's eavesdropping strengthens his belief in Desdemona's infidelity. His integrity is called into question and leads to the diminishing of his noble character. Othello's striking of Desdemona leads to his losing the respect of those who previously admired him.
- Othello's behaviour has consequences for others, such as Desdemona's acting out of character by lying about the handkerchief. This hardens Othello's suspicions against her.
- Candidates might argue that toward the end of the play, Othello is very clear in his intention to mete out justice.

- Othello's military background influences his decision to become Desdemona's judge and executioner and to justify himself as an 'honourable murderer'.
- When Othello realises the truth about Desdemona's innocence, he cannot live with his conscience and executes himself.

23.

Desdemona and Emilia contradict the idea that Venetian women are submissive and immoral.

Critically discuss the extent to which you agree with the above statement.

- Venetian women are subject to a patriarchal society
 - and are expected to be submissive.
 - At times, Desdemona and Emilia adhere to the stereotype, while
 - at other times they challenge their society.
 - The perception of women as immoral does not apply to Emilia and Desdemona.
- Brabantio expects
 - Desdemona to be dutiful and obedient.
 - However, she defies him by eloping with Othello.
- Roderigo regards
 - Desdemona as a prize; as someone whose affections can be bought.
 - Desdemona contradicts his view of women by rejecting him and
 - the wealthy Venetian suitors, instead marrying for love
- Iago objectifies women of Desdemona's class
 - as a means of improving one's status.
 - He is a misogynist with no respect for women.
 - As Iago's unwitting tools in his plan for revenge,
 - Desdemona and Emilia passively accept his requests and advice.
 - However, they both ultimately prove that he under-estimates women.
- Initially, it is Desdemona's strength of character that
 - Othello admires; he regards her as an equal.
 - However, Othello's perception of Desdemona and women in general is altered as a result of Iago's manipulation and deception, and his (Othello's) jealousy.
 - He now sees both Desdemona and Emilia as immoral.
- At the beginning of the play,
 - Desdemona is strong and determined.
 - She asserts herself with her father and at the Venetian Senate by courageously choosing Othello.
 - She stubbornly disregards Othello's wishes that she not pursue the matter of Cassio's reinstatement.

- Desdemona defiantly lies about the whereabouts of the handkerchief,
 - thus reinforcing Othello's belief in her immorality.
- Later, Desdemona appears passive and submissive,
 - even blaming herself for Othello's unjust behaviour toward her.
 - Despite Othello's public display of violence against her,
 - she is dignified and justifies Othello's altered behaviour as his being stressed by 'matters of state'.
 - She feels that she has accused him unfairly.
 - Her conversation with Emilia about men's insensitive treatment of women contradicts the stereotype that all women are immoral.
 - She cannot even bring herself to say the words,
 - let alone commit adultery.
 - Desdemona remains devoted and loyal to Othello, even
 - defending him on her deathbed.
- Emilia reveals her non-traditional views on marriage and
 - gives Desdemona worldly advice.
 - Despite her inadvertently betraying Desdemona by giving Iago the handkerchief, she is courageous when she exposes Iago by speaking against him, thus
 - proving her loyalty to Desdemona.
 - She clearly displays the characteristics of a strong-minded woman by
 - exposing her husband and denouncing Othello.
- ❖ Candidates might refer to the men's perception of Venetian women as adulterers.
- ❖ However, both Desdemona and Emilia contradict this view as they are loyal to their husbands.