

# Aspects of tragedy - exemplar student response and commentary

**Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section B question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.**

## Paper 1A, Section B - *Othello*

### Sample question

'Othello's virtue and valour ultimately make him admirable.'

To what extent do you agree with this view?

Remember to include in your answer relevant comment on Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

### Band 5 response

It is true that in Act 1 of the play, Othello's actions and behaviour, his virtue and valour can be seen as admirable. He is after all a tragic hero, and his position in the tragedy demands that he begins in a position of greatness before he suffers his tragic fall. Shakespeare establishes Othello's greatness through focusing on his military prowess and his valour at the start of the play before charting his hero's descent as he tumbles into chaos. Othello is a soldier for whom the 'big wars' make 'ambition virtue'. By Act 3, however, there is little in him to admire: his valour belongs to a seemingly different world and there is nothing virtuous about a husband who colludes in a plot to destroy his wife.

Although Iago is used by Shakespeare at the start of the play to cast doubt on the magnificence of Othello and to test his virtue, when Othello appears he is impressive. Iago tries to persuade him to run away from the raised father whose daughter Othello has married, but Othello has full confidence in himself and the virtue of his actions. In rhythmic and controlled language he tells Iago he must be found: 'My parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly'. Although it could be claimed that this smacks of arrogance, Othello commands the stage and perhaps the audience's admiration. When Brabantio comes with bad intent, accusing Othello of theft and witchcraft, Othello is unperturbed; he tells his pursuers and accusers to put up their swords for the dew will rust them; they shall command more with their years than their weapons. His measured language is a sign of his confidence, self-discipline and virtue.

When Othello appears before the Duke he is equally impressive. Shakespeare uses the senators to counteract Iago's attempts to defame Othello, by having them refer to the general as 'valiant' (reminding us of his exploits in the field) and the Duke anyway has more interest to employ Othello against the general enemy Ottoman than listen to Brabantio's claims of sorcery. Even so, Othello's virtuous defence of himself and his love for Desdemona is all the more admirable (and certainly from a feminist perspective) because he asks that Desdemona be called to speak for herself. If Othello is found foul in her report, he says, the Duke should not only take away his trust and office but that sentence should fall upon his life. By twenty first century standards, Othello's affording Desdemona a voice and showing her unwavering respect, is virtuous indeed. There is also perhaps something if not admirable then at least mesmerising in his declaration of love and his story of how he wooed her:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
And I loved her that she did pity them.

However, when Shakespeare shifts the scene to Cyprus and the influence of the Venetian state diminishes, Iago, the tragic villain, is able to work his poison on Othello and expose his weaknesses, those aspects of his character that are far from virtuous. Othello's trust in Iago, the ancient he overlooked for lieutenant, shows a terrible lack of

judgement. Iago persuades him that Cassio is unworthy and then that Desdemona is unfaithful and from the point that Iago says 'I like not that', Othello's insecurities, raging jealousy and barbaric inclinations are exposed. Having swallowed Iago's poison, Othello damns Desdemona, threatening to 'tear her all to pieces'. It is interesting here to note the dramatic contrast Shakespeare sets up between Othello and the Duke. In Act 1, in Venice, when the Duke is called upon to exercise judgement, he listens to both the accounts of Brabantio and Othello. Here in Cyprus at the outpost of civilization, Othello listens only to the lies of Iago.

There is dramatic contrast too in the different ways Othello speaks. Othello's earlier speeches which contain so much gravitas are now worn down. His love, 'the fountain from the which [his] current runs' is degraded into a 'cistern for foul toads/ to knot and gender in'. He falls under Iago's spell, pulled into the orbit of Iago's filthy linguistic energies and there is not much that is virtuous about his behaviour from now onwards and not much to admire.

His humiliation and public striking of Desdemona and his cruel murder of her are all too terrible to forget in the final judgement of him. It is true that when he strikes her there are reminders of his valour and virtue in Lodovico's surprise that he could have misjudged Othello's character so greatly in thinking him good, but these reminders simply intensify the repugnance felt at Othello's actions. It is also impossible to admire the man who strangles his wife believing that he is an honourable murderer. His pride at enacting the hand of Justice makes him detestable – at a point when he hesitates, he blames her balmy breath for almost persuading Justice to break its sword.

His final speech, when he perhaps understands the appalling consequences of his folly, is seen by some critics as cathartic, a return of the virtuous and valiant Othello of Act 1. Interestingly, in this speech when he judges himself (and tries to shape how others might think), Othello seems to underplay the significance of his valour and contribution to the state. Though he reminds his stage audience that he has done the state some service, he quickly says 'no more of that'. However, it is clear that as the speech goes on, his assessment of himself is ultimately coloured by his pride and his highly developed sense of self worth and, although he has some dignity, there is not ultimately much honour. His concern at the end is for his public image and, as he has done from the start, he uses language to construct an artifice of his own identity. He speaks of himself as if he were legendary or part of a defined myth. The use of the definite article is instrumental in achieving this effect – 'the base Indian', 'the Arabian trees'; only fragments of detail are supplied here but he conveys the idea that these images are huge and famous. His final speech is calm and controlled, but it reaches a crescendo of dramatic impact when he does the most dramatic thing he can do, transferring his construction of his identity of himself into the here and now, and suddenly and climactically ends his life. This is the self dramatizing that Leavis so condemns.

So, while it is true that from the moment Othello first appears he is attractive, by ever increasing degrees as the plot develops, he becomes repellent. As we stand back to make our final judgement on whether his valour and virtue ultimately make him admirable, it is surely not possible to overlook his despicable behaviour. What perhaps should be done in the final evaluation is to reconsider the nature of his virtue and valour at the start of the play and question whether it was always founded on sand. From his words early on 'I fetch my life and bearing/ from men of royal siege' to his final words of the play, 'to die upon a kiss' his sense of his own significance is overwhelming. Othello is certainly not 'ultimately' admirable and the question must be asked, is he ever?

It is also important to note that even when he is most glorious – and apparently admirable, there are many who cannot countenance his 'pride, pomp and circumstance'.

## Examiner commentary

This is a very confident and accomplished response, and although the ideas are a bit overpacked at times and the argument a little overdone, the candidate writes in an assured way.

### A01

The response is well structured and the task is always in the candidate's mind. The candidate argues perceptively with a strong and assured personal voice. There is a confident use of literary critical concepts and terminology and the written expression is very secure. Quotation is neatly woven into the argument.

### A02

There is perceptive understanding that Shakespeare has constructed this drama to shape meanings. Comment here is often implicit, but there is valid discussion of the structure of the play in relation to the task and on language choices.

## A03

Contextual understanding is clear with a sharp focus on military and gender contexts. These are well linked to the tragic genre.

## A04

As the candidate fully engages with the task and valour and virtue, there is perceptive exploration of the tragic genre thereby implicitly establishing connections across literary texts.

## A05

There is perceptive and confident engagement with the debate here and the candidate clearly knows the text well and selects appropriate material for the argument. The candidate is really thinking about the task and offers some complexity in the answer, well aware of the ambiguities that the play and task set up.

This response seems consistent with the band 5 descriptors.

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## Specifications that use this resource:

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