

# 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 4 response

I agree with this assessment of Othello as much as I would agree with a statement decreeing that it gets dark when the sun rises. Othello's virtue and valour do not 'ultimately make him admirable'. I am not even sure that he has valour and virtue and if he has those qualities they certainly do not cancel out his atrocities and make him admirable. The statement above is the kind of thing Othello himself would believe, the kind of thing he says in his last speech of the play. It is only at the end that we can make any judgement about 'ultimately'.

He has apparently been valiant in battle. The Duke calls him valiant – as do the senators, and certainly he sees himself as such, but Shakespeare does not show him engaged in any fighting. True he confronts Brabantio at the start of the play but that is only to tell him to put away his weapons and anyway this is a confrontation with an old man. He can't show valour against the Turks in Cyprus as fortunately for him they are drowned in the storm.

As for his virtue. It is doubtful that he has any. Virtue is about goodness and purity; it is what tragic heroes are supposed to have in some form. Macbeth has it in that he knows what he throws away when he kills Duncan. Othello is all about himself. Everything he does is for the greater glory of himself. His pride is insufferable. From the start he plays the Othello music at full blast. We cannot help but hear it in all its noisy nonsense. It is true he has some defenders – Bradley for example. Those defenders take Othello's side and presumably start to sing along. Bradley's opinion of Othello is Othello's opinion of Othello – an opinion shown in the nineteen lines of ego inflating, trumpet blowing eulogy that Othello would like on his grave stone. Others are less forgiving, like Leavis, for example, who completely understands Othello's lies and apparent 'understatements'.

In his final speech – which surely Shakespeare intends us to take note of when we judge how admirable he is – Othello offers an assessment of himself. He tries to show himself as valiant and virtuous. He says he is 'not easily jealous'. This is utter nonsense. Surely no-one could be that ignorant to believe that he is anything but insanely jealous, murderously jealous. The reason? Iago found a handkerchief. Even before such damning evidence is revealed, Othello is frothing at the mouth, quite literally. Before I discuss the jealousy and how it came about, I must pose the question, if Othello thinks he is 'not easily jealous' then why has he killed the wife whom he loved 'too well'? It is hard to see how anyone could judge Othello admirable at the end of the play and especially not when he is strangling his wife in her bed.

Othello is not really concerned with evidence. He asks for 'ocular proof' but is easily satisfied with seeing the handkerchief, largely because by the time Iago produces it, Othello has already persuaded himself that his wife is an adulteress. Getting Othello to this point was relatively easy for Iago. In what has strangely been dubbed 'the great temptation scene', Iago feeds Othello titbits, letting Othello do all the work. Othello's swallowing of the titbits is hardly the admirable behaviour of a virtuous and valiant hero. Iago plants the seed in Othello but he is only partly

responsible for its turning into a mighty oak. Othello starts to ask questions after Iago's innocent enquiry about whether Cassio knew of Othello's love.

'Why do you ask? '

Iago responds with teasing emptiness – 'But for a satisfaction of my thought, no other reason'.

During Iago's continued diversions and false sign posts, Othello is had in a way that is anything but admirable. From the point when he calls Desdemona an 'excellent wretch' stating how much he loves her to his cursing marriage, because he believes she is having an affair, only about one hundred and fifty lines have passed. Not very long for a man who loved 'not wisely, but too well'.

He wooed Desdemona with tales of adventures and Anthropophagi. He was telling stories. He did not know her and she did not know this 'wheeling and extravagant stranger'. This was never a good foundation for a long term commitment – certainly not very 'virtuous' on his part. Neither was it virtuous that he ran off with her – he may have presented it as romantic but this was not expected behaviour in the 17th century as we can see from Brabantio's reaction. The married couple have little, if anything in common. His place is on the 'thorny couch of war' and hers is amongst the 'super-subtle Venetians'. So in this respect he did not love wisely so there is not much to admire there either. When Othello is cursing marriage and wishing he were a toad rather than a husband, it is not the lack of wisdom in his love that he thinks about. He thinks he loves with all his heart an adulterous whore. He loves her so much that he has to kill her, for herself (he wants her to pray before she dies so that she can go to heaven), and to prevent her betraying more men. But more importantly he kills her for himself– the angel of death, and he thinks he is representing Justice itself. The murder is shown on stage (unlike Macbeth's murder of Duncan) so it is hard to see that Shakespeare wanted us to admire him. Not virtuous or valiant - especially since later he speaks of his murdering Desdemona as an unlucky deed.

'Unlucky deed'! This man kills his wife because he suspects her of having an affair (It is interesting to note that Iago said that he was destroying Othello because 'it is suspected abroad that 'twixt my sheets he's done my office'. It is interesting too that Iago destroys Othello rather than Emilia – perhaps Othello should have gone for Cassio, in which case he would have been the same as Iago, not worse) and he describes it like he has just stepped into a puddle. A greater understatement would be difficult to discover. Does this not indicate that Othello is mad – or at least self deluded right to the end.

His madness is compounded in his final speech when he goes on to talk absolute nonsense about India, Arabia, pearls and circumcised dogs. So how far do I agree with the given statement that Othello's virtue and valour make him ultimately admirable? He does show some valour perhaps when he does the state some service (I don't think the Duke would lie about that) and he was chosen to head the troops in Cyprus. That is how far I agree with the statement. The more the play goes on, the more he speaks, the more deranged and obtuse he becomes until finally the Othello music is turned off.

## Examiner commentary

This is a lively response that certainly engages with 'To what extent'. It is an interesting answer and has qualities from different mark bands. The answer is coherent but perhaps not as thorough as it might be. It is relevant though it mainly focuses on Othello's last speech and this somewhat limits the answer. It is clear that the candidate knows the play and selects appropriately though quotation is not always accurate. This is the kind of response that would elicit a lot of different judgements from examiners.

### A01

The response is well structured and well argued in its own terms. There is a strong personal voice which drives this argument forward. Ideas are logically put together and there is some depth. However, at times the candidate asserts rather than argues. There is some inconsistency in the quality of the written expression. At times it is rather colloquial – though here it works, and at times there is some sophistication.

### A02

There is an understanding that Shakespeare has constructed this drama but sometimes the candidate writes about Othello as if he is real. There is relevant comment on the play's structure – the candidate sees the structural significance of Othello's last speech in the shaping of meaning and in relation to the task. There is also some apt

comment on language and staging.

### A03

There is a straightforward understanding of historical attitudes to marriage as represented in the play and some understanding of the military and moral contexts that connect to the tragic genre.

### A04

As the candidate engages with the task and ideas about valour, virtue and admiration, there is some straightforward exploration of the tragic genre thereby establishing connections across literary texts. The references to Macbeth, although not required by the task, work here.

### A05

There is a confident engagement with the task and with some critical views; the candidate clearly has a view and is prepared to argue in a personal and forthright way. The candidate is really thinking about this task and seems to enjoy writing this response.

It would seem appropriate to award this response a best fit mark at the lower end of band 4.

This resource is part of the [Aspects of tragedy resource package \(https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b/teach/tragedy-resource-package\)](https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b/teach/tragedy-resource-package).

## Specifications that use this resource:

- › [AS and A-level English Literature B 7716; 7717 \(https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-7716-7717\)](https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-7716-7717)

---

 [View page as pdf \(https://api.pdfplayer.com/api/convert?access\\_key=c82fdeb2d0043b60d0b722ae15a07965&document\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aqa.org.uk%2Fresources%2Fenglish%2Fas-and-a-level%2Fenglish-literature-b%2Fteach%2Ftragedy-b-exemplar-student-response-commentary-band-4&secret\\_key=5e7b273a2a1f4723c306abdd2f1065e3&use\\_print\\_media=1&document\\_name=AQA-Aspects-of-tragedy---exemplar-student-response-and-commentary%2Fpdf&inline=1&ttl=86400&footer\\_text=\[page\]\)](https://api.pdfplayer.com/api/convert?access_key=c82fdeb2d0043b60d0b722ae15a07965&document_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aqa.org.uk%2Fresources%2Fenglish%2Fas-and-a-level%2Fenglish-literature-b%2Fteach%2Ftragedy-b-exemplar-student-response-commentary-band-4&secret_key=5e7b273a2a1f4723c306abdd2f1065e3&use_print_media=1&document_name=AQA-Aspects-of-tragedy---exemplar-student-response-and-commentary%2Fpdf&inline=1&ttl=86400&footer_text=[page]}) 

---

**Document URL**

<https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b/teach/tragedy-b-exemplar-student-response-commentary-band-4>

**Last updated** 20 Oct 2015

© AQA