

Aspects of tragedy - specimen question commentary

This resource explains how a question taken from the specimen assessment material addresses the assessment objectives, with some suggestions of how the task might be approached. This explanation is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every point that could be made but the explanation will provide a workable way into the question and the intention is to offer some support for teachers preparing students for the examination.

Paper 1A, Section B - *Othello*

Section B questions on Paper 1 are similar in construction to the Section B questions on Paper 2. However, in thinking about them here students do not have access to their texts and although there should still be quotations, it is likely that students will be referring to their text (in this case *Othello*) more broadly at times. Students should spend about one hour on this question. For each text there will be a choice of two questions. The questions will focus on a critical viewpoint about the play with a focus on an aspect of tragedy for 1A or comedy for 1B. Students will be asked 'to what extent' they agree with the given view and they will be reminded to include comment on Shakespeare's dramatic methods. In their chosen question, students can show how their text can be interpreted in different ways and they can also offer a strong personal view which is rooted in the text.

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.

How the question meets the Assessment Objectives:

In this question, as throughout the paper, the assessment objectives are all assessed and it is very clear what the students have to do.

AO1 will be tested through the way the students construct their arguments and express their ideas. **AO2** is set up in the requirement for students to comment on Shakespeare's dramatic methods and in doing this they will show how these methods shape meanings. Here students will need to address dramatic method in a specific way and include relevant comment on the play's settings, its structure, exits and entrances, stage action, soliloquies, dialogue, language, etc. **AO3** will be addressed through the students' writing about valour, in terms of the context of war and soldiership, and virtue in terms of the moral context. As students focus on whether *Othello's* virtue and valour 'ultimately make him admirable', students will be engaging with and demonstrating understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts of when the play was written and how it has been received. In writing about *Othello's* virtue, students will be connecting with the tragic concepts of morality and the potential moral goodness of the tragic hero; in writing about 'valour' students will be thinking about how far *Othello* is impressive and worthy (how brave he is in the face of danger): the tragic idea that tragic heroes are essentially noble. In debating these aspects of tragedy, students will be connecting implicitly with concepts of the wider tragic genre. **AO5** will be addressed when students assess the viewpoint of whether or not *Othello's* virtue and valour ultimately make him admirable. It may well be that students will question whether he is indeed valiant or virtuous. As students are thinking about how Shakespeare shapes meanings, they will be deciding on what extent they agree with the given view.

Possible content:

The opening statement at the start of this task provides plenty of opportunity for students to engage in debate. Focus is likely to be on the key epithets of 'virtue' and 'valour' and students can easily demonstrate the existence of those qualities in Othello if they so choose. They may consider the impact of the opinions of the Duke, members of the senate and those who serve under Othello in the army. They may write about Othello's delayed entrance and his first appearance, how he is addressed by other characters and how he presents himself, including the stories he tells of his life in the tented field. There could be discussion of Othello's early speeches when he tells of his virtue in overcoming adversity, his valour of fighting for Venice and civilisation. Some students might focus on his conduct when he is pursued in the night by Brabantio's friends, when he is calm and courageous in spite of Iago's attempts to unsettle him. Reference might well be made to Othello's conversion to Christianity and his pride in adopting European values. Discussion might also focus on the depth of his love for Desdemona and how this helps to establish him as virtuous. Some students may focus on Desdemona's admiration of his valour and virtue, her endorsement of him in her account of his stories and how her voice shapes the judgements of audiences.

There may be specific focus on the contextual background of war and how Othello is employed as a General to defeat the Turkish enemy which is on its way to Cyprus. In this respect he might be implicitly linked with other tragic heroes who are renowned for their virtue before their tragic falls. Although the audience does not see Othello in action as a soldier, there is much that could be said about his leadership qualities, his attitudes to war and duty, his courage that is outlined in the accounts of his past. Some may also see virtue and valour in the way he takes his own life, a minister of justice of sorts re-enacting his taking a heathen Turk by the throat and killing him when he also brought shame upon the state. As students select specific sections of the text to refer to, they should comment on Shakespeare's dramatic methods. For example, in relation to his suicide, students might comment on the language used in his final speech, the way he commands his stage audience and his actions as he stabs himself.

Some students will question Othello's virtue and valour, perhaps arguing that elements of one make him admirable but also thinking about the absence of the other quality. It could be said that his eloping with the young Desdemona is not virtuous, any more than his reason for loving her (he loves her because she pities him). It might also be said that once Iago's poison starts to work on him, Othello's behaviour is despicable, contemptuous and not virtuous at all, especially from a 21st century perspective. Some might comment on his eavesdropping, his physical and mental abuse of his wife, his neglecting of his official duties, his ridiculous dependency on Iago.

Since the question asks to what extent students agree that Othello's virtue and valour 'ultimately make him admirable', attention should be given to the students' judgements. Is Othello ultimately admirable? Here there is an expectation that there is some standing back and thinking about 'ultimate' judgements. It could be that students agree that Othello is valiant and virtuous but since he prides himself on these qualities, since he celebrates and admires himself so much, this casts against him and that he is not 'ultimately ' admirable. There may well be discussion here of his overweening pride, his self dramatisation and his failure finally to fully understand what he has done. It may be suggested that no man who distrusts his wife in the way he does, who plots the death of his friend and then strangles his wife in her bed can ever be considered admirable.

The most confident students will really engage with what being 'admirable' means to them and draw upon relevant sections of the play to support their views. They will see that this question is about how they assess the tragic hero and they may well chart Othello's decline and his loss of valour and virtue. Some may see a restoration of virtue and valour at the end of the play and write about catharsis.

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-specimen-question-commentary&secret_key=43f16644b1d90a692c3fe8c90d5b168a&use_print_media=1&document_name=AQA-Aspects-of-tragedy---specimen-question-commentary%2Epdf&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-specimen-question-commentary&secret_key=43f16644b1d90a692c3fe8c90d5b168a&use_print_media=1&document_name=AQA-Aspects-of-tragedy---specimen-question-commentary%2Epdf&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-specimen-question-commentary&secret_key=43f16644b1d90a692c3fe8c90d5b168a&use_print_media=1&document_name=AQA-Aspects-of-tragedy---specimen-question-commentary%2Epdf&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-specimen-question-commentary>

Last updated 20 Oct 2015

© AQA