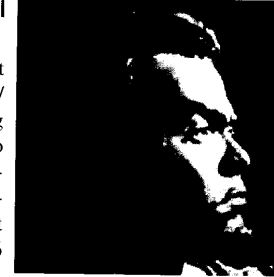


Stage 6
Prel.

Othello – A Story of Love Passion, Envy, Deceit and Death

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Unit Description and Rationale:

- To examine the treatment of themes, genre and character in Shakespeare's *Othello* by way of a selected reading of the text and viewing two versions of the play.
- To compare scripted and film versions of *Othello*. To identify director's interpretation and focus as evidenced in differences and similarities between scripted and film versions of the play.
- Basically, students should develop an appreciation that the script offers freedom for individual interpretation whereas the film provides less freedom by way of presenting a 'neatly packaged' interpretation of the play. The reader of the script is active whereas the viewer of the film is passive.

Genre to be considered: Tragedy

Themes to be considered: Love, Jealousy, Appearance and Reality

Characters to consider in depth: Othello, Iago, Desdemona.

Resources:

1. Text - *Othello*
2. Video - BBC Production of *Othello* (closest to original text).
3. Video - Oliver Parker's *Othello* (Starring Lawrence Fishburne)
4. Video – *Othello – A Critical Guide – The Themes of Shakespeare Series*
5. Notes on tragedy – by C. Dockrill

Work Outline:

Note – This is only a four-week unit. Its aim is to *introduce* students to one of Shakespeare's great plays. **The unit is not designed to be an exhaustive critical analysis of *Othello*.**

Note – Students must read the text of *Othello* by Monday of the second week of this unit. This requires, on average, approximately 30 minutes reading per night for five nights.

Week 1

Periods 1-4 View BBC Production of *Othello*

Periods 4-6 In groups of 3 to 5 students, construct your own story tree on butcher's paper. This 'tree' should repre-

sent the ten most important or main parts/incidents/scenes of the play. During period 6, each group is to report back to class, displaying their diagram and talking to it. (This activity must not extend beyond period 6 in this unit.)

Note: Each student is to make his/her own 'story tree'. This will be the first item in your *Othello* Work Folder which must be submitted at the end of the unit.

Week 2

Period 1 Notes on tragedy – attached. Read and class discussion.

Period 2-3 In different groups of 3 to 5, students are to plot Othello's tragedy, choosing the key scenes throughout the play which trace his decline – Construct outlines on butcher's paper.

Period 4 Groups are to present their findings to the class. Following all addresses, students must make their own notes, clearly outlining their personal views of at least six scenes in the play which portray the decline or tragedy of Othello. This will be the second item in your *Othello* Work Folder which must be submitted at the end of the unit.

Periods 5-6 Preparation for Assessment Task - attached. Students will present their reading performances and discussions of the set scenes during week 4. This will be an assessment task.

Week 3

Period 1 View Video – *Othello – A Critical Guide – The Themes of Shakespeare Series* (30 mins)

Period 2 Students to write their own notes in response to the video. **Finish for homework: Students are to answer questions raised in the video (see attached).** This will be the fourth item in your *Othello* Work Folder which must be submitted at the end of the unit.

Periods 3-6 View Video - Oliver Parker's *Othello*, starring Lawrence Fishburne (approx 2 hrs) **Homework: Written response - Essay – Compare and contrast the interpretations of the play as presented in the BBC production and the Oliver Parker film with your own reading of the play. In particular, you should consider the treatment of love as a major theme in both versions.** This will be the fifth item in

your *Othello* Work Folder which must be submitted at the end of the unit.

Week 4

Periods 1-2 Discussion points – class discussion – see attached.

Periods 3-6 Presentation of group reading performances and discussion.

Discussion Points:

1. What is the difference between love and hate?
2. What are the similarities between love and hate?
3. How are these differences and similarities portrayed through the characters of Othello and Iago?
4. What are the positive aspects of love as presented in the play?
5. What are the negative aspects of love as presented in the play?
6. How does Iago manage to change Othello's love of Desdemona to hate?
7. Did Othello really love Desdemona and if so was it "too much" or too little?

Questions from *Othello* – A Critical Guide

(Note: all these questions are addressed in the video.)

1. What do you consider to be the main themes of *Othello* ?
2. Is *Othello* easily manipulated because he is ruled by emotion rather than logic?
3. What are Iago's motivations? Is he purely evil?
4. How does a modern audience react to the numerous racial slurs on *Othello*?
5. How does Desdemona contribute to her own downfall?
6. In what ways are the women in *Othello* vital to the plot development?

Exercise 2:

Students are to write their responses to the Oliver Parker film. Students are to select one scene from the film on each of the following:

Tragedy, Jealousy, Iago, Othello, Desdemona

For each scene, students are to identify directorial interpretation of the scene and show how this interpretation is linked to other scenes throughout the play. This will be the sixth item in your *Othello* Work Folder which must be submitted

at the end of the unit.

Students are then to choose a different scene from the text and explain their own interpretations of the focus point.

Assessment Task Description:

Weight: 20.65%

In groups of 3-5 (mixed sexes), Each group to be allocated one of the following focus points:

Tragedy, Jealousy, Iago, Othello, Desdemona

Groups to be allocated one scene which relates to their allocated focus point above. Groups to prepare and present a reading of the scene (if students are absent, others must stand in from other groups).

Following the reading performance, each member of the group is to deliver a 2-5 min talk outlining their personal responses to the scene and the significance of the chosen scene in relation to the focus point and the play as a whole.

Note: the presentation must not be based on the film versions' interpretations although, students and groups may share similar and overlapping views.

Groups must establish their own interpretations and each individual must include an explanation of how, why and where their interpretations differ from the film versions. Each student is to hand up his or her paper (transcript of address) at the end of his/her address for marking.

Other group members are not to be in the room until they have delivered their addresses.

(If time permits, groups may play brief extracts from the film version after their own performance to demonstrate the differences in interpretations.)

Each student will also address the following question: How does the scene you have presented reflect of the theme of Love in *Othello*? This question will be addressed in writing as well as in the student's discussion.

Assessment Criteria for Performance and Presentation:

Evidence of development of a coherent interpretation of the scene (15)

Understanding of character in the scene and the play as a whole (15)

Understanding of the significance of the scene in relation to the play as a whole (20)

Understanding of the significance of the scene in relation to the allocated focus point/theme (15)

Ability to show how meaning/s of scene can be altered according to directorial interpretation (15)

Ability to articulate ideas (Including written paper) (20)

The teacher will use students' written papers as a reference for making final decisions on grading of responses to this task.

Assessment Criteria for Performance and Presentation with links to specific outcomes which are addressed in the task:

Evidence of development of a coherent interpretation of the scene (15)

2. Students learn to describe and explain the relationships among texts by:

2.1 identifying and describing similarities in and differences between texts

2.2 identifying and describing the connections between texts

2.3 identifying and describing the ways in which particular texts are influenced by other texts and contexts.

Understanding of character (15)

6. Students learn about the ways in which texts can be responded to by:

6.1 engaging with a wide range of texts in personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts

6.2 relating responses to aspects of human experience

6.3 composing personal responses to texts and considering the responses of others

6.4 discussing and reflecting on the wider issues arising from their engagement with texts.

Understanding of the significance of the scene in relation to the play as a whole (20)

10. Students learn to analyze and synthesize information and ideas by:

10.1 collecting, selecting, interpreting and drawing conclusions about information and ideas in a range of texts in personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts

10.2 making connections between information and ideas and synthesizing these in a range of texts

10.3 developing and presenting information and ideas in a range of texts and in analytic, expressive and imaginative ways.

Understanding of the significance of the scene in relation to the allocated focus point/theme (15)

8. Students learn to compose imaginative, personal and critical texts through:

8.1 engaging with complex texts

8.2 expressing complex ideas for a range of audiences and purposes in personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts

8.4 controlling a range of language features to meet requirements of composing in a range of modes and media

8.5 shaping compositions appropriately to purpose, audience, medium and context.

Ability to show how meaning/s of scene can be altered according to directorial interpretation (15)

1. Students learn about the relationships between composer, responder, text and context by:

1.1 identifying and describing the situational, historical and cultural contexts of responding to and composing particular texts

1.2 changing elements of audience, purpose and context in a range of texts

1.3 explaining the ways meaning is reshaped as a result of the changes in these elements.

7. Students learn to communicate information, ideas and values for a variety of purposes, audiences and contexts by:

7.1 identifying and describing the effects of language forms and features, and structures of particular texts

Ability to articulate ideas (20)

3. Students learn the language relevant to their study of English including:

3.1 its terminology

3.2 language for making connections, questioning, affirming, challenging, speculating about and generalising about texts

3.4 language of critical expression

7. Students learn to communicate information, ideas and values for a variety of purposes, audiences and contexts by:

7.2 composing and adapting texts to address different purposes and audiences.

Scenes for group Assessment Task:

The teacher will allocate specific scenes to groups from the following

Outcomes to be assessed in the task:

Preliminary English (Advanced) Content:

Tragedy: V,ii Lines 198 – 278 (“**Othello**: O, she was foul...
Othello: Dead Desdemona: dead. O! O!”)

Jealousy IV, i Lines 95 – 192 (“**Iago:** Now I will question Cassio ... **Othello:** Wit and invention.”)

Iago: II, iii Lines 302 – 385 (“**Cassio:** I will ask him for my place again... **Iago:** by coldness of day.”)

Othello: IV, ii Lines 1 – 89 (“**Othello:** You have seen nothing? ... **Othello:** That married with Othello.”)

Desdemona IV, iii Lines 11 – 108 (“**Emilia:** How goes it now? ... **Desdemona:** But by bad mend.”)

Checklist for student Othello Work Folders:

Teachers will check to see that the following work has been completed by the end of the week immediately following the end of this unit.

1 Story Tree

2 Othello’s Tragedy

3 Answers to questions from video – *Othello* – A Critical Study

4 **Essay** – Compare versions of *Othello*. (To be marked by grades A-E)

5 Students’ notes on discussion points.

6 Specific responses to questions on the Oliver Parker film.

Added to this will be students’ notes and paper relating to the group presentation and assessment task. Students should note that they will need to use their *Othello* folder as revision material in preparation for the examination which will require students to write a 40-minute essay on *Othello*.

Some general notes on Tragedy By Chris Dockrill

When we talk of Tragedy in a dramatic sense, it is important to understand that we are not talking of the type of tragedy which we may associate with the misfortunes which befall us in our everyday lives such as terrible car or bus accidents, ‘tragic’ drownings of infants etc.

Tragedy in the dramatic sense is a particular type or **genre** of drama.

Tragedy in drama refers to the terrible fate, downfall, decline or end, which befalls a particular character in a play, whom we identify as the tragic figure. Usually, this character falls victim to a series of circumstances or fate and dies a

broken or ruined man.

Shakespeare developed his own type of tragedy which borrowed on and extended from different variations of the genre which date back to the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek Tragedy portrayed humans as being nothing but the playthings of the gods. As such, their fate was determined by the gods and there was nothing they could do to avoid their tragic endings. A perfect example of this is Oedipus in the play *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus was fated by the gods to kill his own father and marry his mother and rule as king of his father’s country. This Oedipus did quite unknowingly. However, when he discovered the truth of his life, he stabbed himself in both his eyes with his toga pins and wandered the country as a blind beggar.

Later, in the Middle Ages, the church was responsible for developing a different type of Tragedy. This was essentially a Christian Tragedy wherein the tragic figure not only suffered on earth but also went to Hell to suffer damnation forever.

Later, up to and including Shakespeare’s time, Revenge Tragedy emerged. This type of tragedy presented the tragic figure as reaping the rewards of some wrong he had committed by suffering either at the hands of one who was taking revenge or (as in the case of Hamlet) dying in the act of taking revenge. In Revenge Tragedy, the tragic figure is actually caught up in the moral obligation to seek revenge for wronged loved one or relative and must act in spite of the danger to himself.

Shakespearean Tragedy draws on all these other forms of the genre. However, what really distinguishes Shakespeare’s Tragedy is the human complexity which he weaves into his plays. Shakespeare, more than any of his predecessors, incorporated complex psychological aspects into all of his tragic figures which makes their actions, their motives and their emotional responses to their changing circumstances all the more enthralling for audiences even to the present day.

Shakespeare openly incorporates some of the common elements of Tragedy into his plays. These elements go right back to the ancient Greeks:



Another element of tragedy is the **tragic flaw** in the tragic figure. All of Shakespeare's tragic figures suffer from a flaw or fault in their characters which drives them to actions which inevitably result in tragic outcomes. This flaw also blinds them to the reality of their situation and to the consequences of their actions. Usually, this flaw is associated with what the Greeks called **Hubris**. Put simply, Hubris is excessive pride. This pride leads characters to want what they should not have, to do what they should not do, to try to alter or control their fates and to try to alter their worlds according to their own desires. Hubris makes these characters easily manipulated and, ironically more certainly doomed in their fate.

In most forms of tragedy, the tragic figure also usually experiences **catharsis**. Catharsis is another Greek word which simply means self-realization. Usually, the tragic figure undergoes a cathartic reaction towards the end of the play where he realizes the absolute folly, evil, sinfulness or immorality of his desires, thoughts and actions.

Tragedy also usually involves the world of the characters in the play being thrown into some form of chaos or turmoil. Usually, this symbolizes the inner chaos and turmoil which is occurring within the central or tragic figure. This sense of chaos reinforces the notion that, when major figures within our community, society or, in Shakespeare's case, kingdom, are experiencing moral and eventual physical decline, so too are those around them. In Othello's case, this point is not as obvious as in other plays such as *Macbeth* or *Lear*. However, Othello, for his part is at least in the center of a storm which does cause an imbalance within his ordered society which directly leads to the death of his wife, Emilia and Rodrigo.

This concept of order and chaos is also closely related to the organic theory of society which the Elizabethans still maintained, because they too were still very much ruled by a powerful monarch. This theory can be traced back to ancient Greek tragedy – (Oedipus' kingdom was in ruins, its crops failed and its people in revolt because the king was 'out of balance'.) In this theory, society is seen as a living organism, something like a 'body'. This theory saw the leader or king as the cerebral part of his/her society. All other people, depending on their rank in the society then serve as functioning parts of the whole body. This is why tragedy is usually concerned with 'great' men – rulers of their states. When the ruler is suffering then it is like the 'head or brains' of the state malfunctioning. Chaos, rebellion and suffering usually follow closely. It is interesting that even today, we look for stability, morality and steadfastness in our leaders (Bill Clinton aside). In Othello's case, he is the acting military

governor of Cyprus. He is the head of this fragile society. He is also the head of his household. In both instances, Othello's behaviour slips further into moral decline.



Lastly, Shakespeare developed an existing philosophy of good and evil which, in his plays adds a further interesting and thought-provoking dimension. Long before Shakespeare's time, dramatists believed that there were forces of good and evil and chaos and order which operate independently of humans and come and go like the seasons. Accordingly, one of the universal themes of tragedy is that we have no power to prevent our microcosmic worlds (or indeed our universe) from slipping into states of chaos and disorder and that we should therefore appreciate the times of harmony and order while we have them. Aligned to this is the theory that evil is an active and palpable force in our universe whereas good is a more passive and predictable force which works in conjunction with order and stability. Evil in

tragedy is best likened to fire. It is indiscriminate in its destructive path, it consumes the lives and order of others, it lives off the loss of others and eventually it consumes itself or causes its own demise by destroying that on which it relies for life. Good on the other hand, suffers the chaos of evil and eventually emerges as dominant after evil has all but destroyed itself. Consider this concept for *Othello*. Many commentators argue that, although we can find many reasons for Iago's actions against Othello, they are, at best, light motives for such dire consequences. If we consider Iago as an instrument of evil and chaos, however, then we see him as an agent for deceit, treachery and murder and nothing more; he is sinister by his very nature and needs no other motives for his action. Thus, by the end of the play, Iago's evil has consumed its reason for living – it has caused the destruction of Othello, Desdemona and his own wife, Emilia. Iago's last words are that his lips will be forever sealed. We can expect no answer from Iago – no justification nor plausible rationale; his actions speak for themselves. (It is interesting to consider that this theory of Good and Evil is replayed in many contemporary films which are not tragedies. *Star Wars* is a perfect example.)

Thus we see that Shakespeare was writing within and at the end of a long tradition of Tragedy. We can see elements of the classical ancient Greek Tragedy in *Othello* as much as we

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can see elements of Christian Tragedy, Revenge Tragedy mixed with the psychological elements of Elizabethan Tragedy of which Shakespeare was indeed the master. The result in *Othello* is indeed a masterful story of the fine line between love and hate, madness bred by jealousy and the urgent and diabolical desire to cause suffering as a consolation for envy.

Additional Exercise

This could be delivered as an Assessment Task to address the listening component of the assessment program.

Students are to listen only to the following extracts from the video. Then they are to

- (i) Paraphrase the dialogue into their own language. Students should focus on what the characters are saying about love.
- (ii) Explain the significance of the scene in the context of the play as a whole.

Exam question: “*Othello* is a love story with a difference.”

Discuss. In your answer address issues of genre, themes and characters in the play.

This unit was originally submitted for publication complete with objectives, outcomes and guidelines for assessment, Teachers are advised to consult the Stage 6 Syllabus.

*Teachers can combine this study of **Othello** with the new film called “**O**” which presents Othello as Odin as an African American football student on a sports scholarship and a feminist play called **Desdemona: a play about a Handkerchief**. email wsimon@ozemail.com.au for further details*