# Othello: THE BONES

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QUICK QUIZ

1. Who tells Brabantio that Othello and Desdemona have eloped?
2. Of what does Brabantio accuse Othello?
3. Who 'saw Othello's visage in his mind'?
4. What military rank does Othello hold?
5. Why do the Venetian senators not interfere in Othello's marriage to Desdemona?
6. What military rank does Iago hold at the beginning of the play, and to what rank does he aspire?
7. Which two people does Iago suspect of having had affairs with his wife?
8. Why do the Turks not invade Cyprus as had been feared?
9. Name the man who intervenes between Cassio and Roderigo in their brawl, and is himself injured.
10. What does Desdemona agree to do for Cassio after he is demoted?
11. Name Cassio's mistress.
12. Who says of whom:
   "He has a daily beauty in his life,
   That makes me ugly?"
13. What 'ocular proof' does Iago offer Othello of Desdemona's infidelity?
14. What is the relationship between Desdemona and Emilia?
15. Who says, of whom:
   "This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
   And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,
   Of human dealings."
16. In front of whom does Othello strike Desdemona?
17. Describe the notorious handkerchief.
18. What does Desdemona first imagine is the cause of Othello's anger towards her?
19. Who first sang the 'willow song' which Desdemona sings on the night of her death?
20. What does Desdemona use to kill her husband?
22. Who is the first person to realise that Iago is not as honest as he seems?
23. Complete Othello's words:
   "then must you speak
   Of one that lov'd ......................................
   Of one not easily jealous, ........................
   ……………………………………………………..;"
24. Who is placed in command in Cyprus after the tragedy?
25. What punishment is Iago to undergo at the end of the play?
THE PLOT

This chapter includes the following sections to help you revise the story of Othello.

★ SUMMARYs of each Act
Of course, we would strongly suggest that you read (or re-read) the play itself if time permits; or at least watch a video of a good production of the play. But the summaries included here will give you a sound knowledge of the important events in the play.

★ YOU NEED TO KNOW THAT...
Point form notes on the essential issues and events from the Act.

★ PASSAGES TO NOTE...
While we can't point you to every possible passage in the play that may be set as a contextual, we have highlighted those excerpts from each Act which we feel deserve particularly close study in order that you have a good grasp of the play. We suggest that you at least read these sections of Othello. (All line references are to the Arden edition of the play.)

REMEMBER: For a closer and more detailed reading of the text Act by Act, you can't do better than looking at the Macrat Matric Success STUDY MANUAL on Othello: the 'First Encounters' chapter.
**ACT ONE**

**Summary**

The play opens to reveal Iago and Roderigo in discussion: obviously an event of some importance has occurred. We later learn that the senator Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, has eloped with one of the generals from the Venetian army: a man called Othello, of African (Moorish) descent. Roderigo had hoped to marry Desdemona himself, despite her father's disapproval of him. It is clear from Iago's words that he has a deep and abiding hatred of Othello, because Othello has failed to give him the promotion he believes he deserves: Othello has given position of lieutenant in the Venetian army to Cassio. Iago intends to make mischief for the general in any way he can.

Iago and Roderigo awaken Brabantio with the news of his daughter's flight; he is horrified, and believes that the Duke and his fellow-senators will agree that Othello has bewitched his daughter. However the Duke has other matters of importance to consider: a Turkish fleet is bound for Cyprus and the Venetians are eager to send an army to defend the island. Othello, given his experience, skill and valour, would be the obvious choice to lead such an army. Thus when Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to win Desdemona's affections, the Duke is less than sympathetic. Othello recounts his version of their courtship, and when Desdemona is called, she publicly announces her allegiance to her new husband and her passionate love for him. The Duke tries to comfort Brabantio, and then hastens on to the urgent matters of state which call for Othello's immediate departure for Cyprus. Iago is entrusted with escorting Desdemona to join her husband later. When he and Roderigo meet at the end of the Act, it is clear that Iago has some diabolical plan to bring harm to Othello and Desdemona; Iago wishes to gain revenge for the perceived 'wrongs' which the general has done him.

**Passages To Note:**

1. Othello's tale of his courtship: I iii ll. 128 ff.: 'Her father lov'd me ... Let her witness it.'

2. Desdemona's declaration of love: Iiii ll. 248 ff.: 'That I did love the Moor ... Let me go with him.'

3. Iago's conversation with Roderigo, and his first soliloquy: Iiii ll. 305 ff.: 'I will incontinently drown myself ... this monstrous birth to the world's light.'

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You Need To Know That...

- Iago hates Othello - for reasons which *never* become entirely clear, but at this stage because Othello promoted Cassio instead of him - and wants to harm him.
- Iago dominates Roderigo totally: he is later to make use of him in his plans against Othello.
- Othello is a proud man of royal stock, who at this stage of the play has no doubts about his worthiness as a husband for Desdemona.
- Othello and Desdemona, in deciding to elope, are obviously aware of the consternation their marriage will cause among the Venetian community.
- Iago is viewed by everyone, including Othello and Desdemona, as entirely honest and trustworthy.
- Othello and Desdemona love each other very much, despite the differences in their ages and race.
- Othello is a respected and admired General in the Venetian army, but he is NOT accepted as 'one of them' - he is black and his marriage to Desdemona is only allowed because the Senate need his military skills to fend off the Turks in Cyprus.
- Cyprus (whence the characters are headed) is an outpost of the Venetian Empire, and as such is far removed from the stability and civilisation of Venice. Here Iago will have much more scope to work his villainy.
- Iago plans to corrupt Othello's love for Desdemona by making him suspect that his wife is having an affair with Cassio.

What do you think of Brabantio's behaviour in this Act?
ACT TWO

Summary

The act opens on the shores of Cyprus, as three local men look with amazement on the storm which is raging. The Turkish fleet is destroyed, and war averted. Despite the tempest, Cassio has arrived safely on the island, followed soon after by Iago with Desdemona and finally Othello himself. The lovers' reunion is blissful; but it is soon clear that Iago plans to lose no time in putting his evil schemes into action. At the revels which follow that night, in celebration of the destruction of the Turkish fleet, Iago encourages Cassio to drink too much. With the help of Roderigo, Iago sets up a street brawl in which Montano is wounded by the drunken Cassio. When Othello demands to be told the person responsible for the fight, Iago reluctantly points to Cassio, who is immediately stripped of his lieutenantship: the Venetians are supposedly in Cyprus to bring peace and protection, not to create further disturbances. Iago promises to help Cassio regain his lost favour with Othello, and by so doing plans to set in motion the catastrophe which will destroy those whom he hates. Iago tells Cassio to ask Desdemona's help in begging Othello to reinstate him: this is a particularly diabolic move, since every time she asks Othello to be lenient on Cassio, the suspicions of infidelity which Iago plans to plant in Othello's mind will be reinforced.

Passages To Note:
Othello and Desdemona's reunion: III ii. 182 ff: 'O my fair warrior! ... as honest as I am'.
Iago's soliloquy: III ii. 327 ff.: 'And what's he then that says I play the villain ... That shall enmesh them all.'
You Need To Know That ...  

− The destruction of the Turkish fleet means there is now no outside threat to the safety of the characters in the play: Iago is free to work his malignant mischief unheeded.
− Othello is highly respected among the military as a man and a soldier.
− Othello acts exactly correctly in demoting Cassio for the brawl (which, of course, was set up by Iago.) We do not see him behave in such a soldier-like manner again until the end of the play.
− There has been NO TIME for Desdemona and Cassio to have had an affair up to this point, nor is there any real opportunity later.
− Cassio is a 'ladies' man' by reputation, making Iago's later insinuations about him and Desdemona a bit more credible.
− Cassio obviously admires and respects Desdemona greatly.
− Iago has very little respect for women.
− Iago has a talent for using both his victims' WEAKNESSES (Cassio's weak head for drink) and their STRENGTHS (Desdemona's loyal friendship) for his own ends.
− Iago always appears to be concerned about his victims - the advice he gives to Cassio seems to be given out of loyalty and friendship, when in reality Iago is acting out of hatred.
− Iago's 'honesty' and 'loyalty' are again unquestioned by any of the characters in the play.

Do you think that anyone as evil as Iago could exist in real life? Or is Shakespeare overdoing his villainy?
ACT THREE

Summary

The act opens with Cassio instructing some musicians to play music for Othello; he then asks Emilia to help him in making suit to Desdemona, in the hope that Desdemona will be able to put things right between him and Othello. In the pivotal third scene of this act, Iago goes to work in earnest to destroy Othello, Desdemona and Cassio. He communicates his suspicions to Othello that Cassio is sleeping with Desdemona, and plays on the emotions of Othello with terrible cruelty. Othello, accustomed to trusting Iago in all things, believes him and is further convinced of Desdemona's unfaithfulness by the 'proof' which Iago brings him. This supposed proof is Iago's own fabrication: firstly that he has heard Cassio talking in his sleep about Desdemona, and secondly that he had seen Desdemona's handkerchief - a gift from Othello - at Cassio's lodging. In fact, Emilia had taken the handkerchief when her mistress dropped it accidentally, and given it to Iago; the story of Cassio's sleeptalk is simply a lie. Once convinced of Desdemona's infidelity, Othello vows revenge, and Iago vows to help him. Meanwhile Cassio has asked Desdemona to help him regain Othello's love and trust: this she promises to do, unwittingly fueling Othello's jealous suspicions that she loves Cassio. Desdemona cannot understand Othello's angry and harsh treatment of her. In fear, she denies to Othello that she has lost the handkerchief he gave her. If only she had not lied! In deep distress, she discusses Othello's cruelty with her lady-in-waiting: Emilia is convinced that he is jealous. In the final scene of the act we meet Bianca, a prostitute who has fallen in love with her sometime customer Cassio, who complains that Cassio has been neglecting her. We will later see how Iago makes use of Bianca too.

Passages To Note:

NOTE: Act III, sc iii is known as the Temptation Scene, and is a pivotal point in the play. We suggest you look at it closely, particularly the following passages:
Iago sows doubts in Othello's mind: III iii ll. 91 ff. 'Excellent wretch .... For too much loving you.'
Iago strengthens Othello's doubts III iii ll. 335 ff.: 'Look where he comes! Not poppy, nor mandragora .... I am your own forever.'
You Need To Know That ...

- Cassio is desperate to regain his lost position, and deeply distressed that he has disappointed ‘so worthy a commander’ as Othello. Thus he is likely to badger Desdemona for her help, playing into Iago's hands.
- Desdemona's own loyalty and abiding friendship are her own worst enemies from this point on, because they cause her to keep begging Othello for Cassio's reinstatement even when he seems angry with her, and make Iago's lies seem true.
- Othello begins to lose control in this act: he is no longer rational and Iago knows best how to drive him to madness by his insinuations.
- Everyone still trusts Iago, and believes that he has their best interests at heart.
- Iago causes Othello to feel vulnerable in his relationship with Desdemona: he reminds Othello that he is a foreigner unused to the sophisticated customs of Venice, that he is inexperienced with women and that he is much older than Desdemona.
- Othello begins to doubt that Desdemona could truly love him, a black man, seeing her love as a revolt of natural taste: 'And yet, how nature erring from itself...'
- Othello begins to feel the demon of jealousy, and once he loses faith in Desdemona, chaos is unleashed. He becomes completely irrational, and his language deteriorates from the beauty of the earlier scenes to violence and obscenity.
- Desdemona's gentle nature is easily quelled by anger and she makes the fatal mistake of lying to Othello about the handkerchief.
- Othello vows to seek revenge for the perceived wrong which Desdemona has done him.

Why is Othello so quick to doubt Desdemona? (Or is he really quick to doubt himself?)

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ACT FOUR

Summary

Iago torments Othello further with thoughts of Desdemona and Cassio as lovers, to the extent that the general actually falls into a fit. When Cassio comes, Iago determines to provide proof of his heartlessness by making it seem that Cassio is laughing and scorning Desdemona for her love for him. Othello hides and watches while Iago talks to Cassio about Bianca. Thinking that Desdemona is the subject of the conversation, Othello is driven into a further frenzy of fury and revenge. When Bianca confronts Cassio with the handkerchief, it seems to Othello irrefutable proof that Iago has told him the truth. Lodovico, a kinsman of Brabantio's from Venice, has been sent from the Duke with a letter recalling Othello to Venice and deputising Cassio to stay in his place. When Desdemona again mentions that she hopes for a reconciliation between Othello and Cassio, Othello loses control completely and strikes her in front of Lodovico. By now Othello is so poisoned against his wife that he will not listen to any words in her defence, either from Emilia or from Desdemona herself. Emilia believes that someone has deliberately poisoned Othello's mind against the innocent Desdemona. Othello berates his wife for being a whore and a strumpet; she is overwhelmed by his cruelty, but nevertheless still affirms her love for him. When Iago comes, she begs him to help her win back Othello's affections, for she still loves him despite everything. Meanwhile Roderigo is becoming tired of Iago's promises that are never fulfilled; Iago manages to get him to agree to one more task which he says will bring Desdemona to him. In the final scene as Desdemona prepares for bed, she sings a sad song which her mother's maid Barbara sang as she died of a broken heart. She is clearly fearful for her life; perhaps she already suspects that Othello's jealous rage will drive him to kill her. She and Emilia discuss infidelity in marriage. Desdemona cannot believe any woman would willingly cuckold her husband, but Emilia has a more earthy view of the act of adultery.

Passages To Note:

Othello strikes Desdemona: IV i ll. 212 ff.: 'God save the worthy general! ... I am sorry that I am deceived in him.'

Othello confronts Desdemona: IV ii ll. 19 ff.: 'Bid her come hither, go ... that cunning whore of Venice that married with Othello.'
You Need To Know That ...

- Othello's behaviour is becoming less and less controlled - he falls into a fit, and then skulks in the shadows spying on Cassio. A far cry from the noble and admirable Othello of the first act.

- Bianca's confronting Cassio with the handkerchief is a piece of luck that plays into Iago's hands - as is Othello's falling into a trance just as he could have asked Cassio for the truth. Iago seems to have the gods on his side against the hapless Othello.

- Othello's striking of Desdemona publicly is an indication of just how uncontrolled he has become. His jealous passion has overridden his reason completely.

- Part of Othello's anguish is injured pride - he cannot bear the idea of being a cuckold and thus a laughing stock to others. Equally, his deep love for Desdemona makes the thought of her unfaithfulness devastating to Othello.

- Desdemona turns to Iago for help - thus ensuring that no help will be forthcoming; again, luck is on Iago's side.

- Desdemona's love for Othello remains strong, despite his terribly cruel and humiliating treatment of her.

- Emilia comes close to the truth when she suspects that some 'busy and insinuating rogue' has poisoned Othello's mind against his wife. But she has no idea that this villain is actually her own husband.

Othello is ‘on the rack’: literally tortured by jealousy.

Why is this emotion so hard to control?
**Summary**

In the final act, Iago's evil plan comes to fruition. In the opening brawl (in which Roderigo had been ordered to attack and kill Cassio), Iago kills Roderigo, making one less 'loose end' for Iago to tie up. Roderigo has become a little too suspicious, and knows too much about what Iago has done. In the final scene Othello, in a state of almost religious calm, determines to sacrifice his wife to atone for her perceived sins. He is deaf to any pleas for mercy, and stifes her with a pillow. Emilia then enters, bringing news of the brawl in which Cassio has been injured and Roderigo killed. She discovers what Othello has done. When he reveals Iago's part in the tragedy, Emilia is astounded, but bravely refuses to be silenced: when her husband enters, with Gratiano and Montano, Emilia soon pays for this act of loyalty to her mistress with her own life. When Othello realises what he has done, he is moved by a great sense of remorse and self-hatred. Iago, recovered and brought in as a prisoner by Cassio and Lodovico, refuses to say a word and we are left to wonder what motivated him to do the great evils which he committed. After attempting to explain to the others (and to himself) what has led him to kill the person he most loved in the world, Othello kills himself. Iago is taken away to be tortured.

---

**Does Othello succeed in regaining your sympathy in this final scene, or do you see him as simply a murderer seeking excuses for his wicked actions?**

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**Passages To Note:**

The murder: Vii ll. 1 ff.: 'It is the cause ... I would not have thee linger in thy pain. So, so.'

The realisation, and Othello's suicide: Vii ll. 260 ff. 'Behold I have a weapon ... For he was great of heart.'
You Need To Know That...

- Iago's cynical killing of Roderigo is further evidence of his complete heartlessness. Later, he kills his own wife to prevent her from betraying him.
- Othello murders Desdemona for 'the cause': for justice, not revenge. He sees himself as an executioner who must take Desdemona's life as a sacrificial offering to atone for the wrong she has done. He is deadly calm.
- Desdemona's dying words try to clear Othello of her murder - she still loves him.
- Not even his own wife, who one would assume knew him best, could believe the extent of Iago's infamy.
- Emilia shows great courage in this act, first in denouncing Othello's actions and then in refusing to be silenced about Iago's role in the tragedy.
- Othello regains some of his nobility in this final act - in turning his sword upon himself, he plays judge and executioner again, with his own life being the penalty exacted for his crime.
- Iago's refusal to speak leaves us - and centuries of Shakespearean critics - debating his motives. Why did he do it? You must decide for yourself...
OTHELLO:
His Descent into Jealous Rage; and Out Again.

RATIONAL

Heroic, admired general
Affirms his love for Desdemona after their separation
Dismisses Cassio
Listens to Iago's insinuations
Believes false 'proof' of Desdemona's infidelity
Loses control, raging against Desdemona
Hides and watches Iago talking to Cassio
Strikes Desdemona publically
Realises his tragic error and kills himself

BESTIAL

ACT ONE ACT TWO ACT THREE ACT FOUR ACT FIVE
THE CHARACTERS

In this section each important character in the play is dealt with in the following way:

★ Aspects of Action: What that character actually does in the play - his or her role and actions.

★ Aspects of Character: A short resume of the important character traits of the person under scrutiny

★ Quotes to Note: These quotes from the text will come in handy when writing essays - a sure way to impress your examiners!

★ Points to Ponder: These questions highlight issues of debate around each character; the answers to these are for you to think about.

The minor characters are also discussed briefly in terms of function and character.

If you wish to find out more detail about the characters discussed here, refer to the Macrat STUDY MANUAL on Othello.
OTHELLO

Othello is a romantic hero in the true sense, a soldier who has travelled the world, seen amazing sights, been commended for his great valour and who finally has found love and happiness in a relationship which is as surprising and romantic as the rest of his life has been. But he is also a simple man, a soldier, whose own principles of loyalty and honesty make it hard for him to perceive malice in others.

As the critic A.C. Bradley wrote: 'His tragedy lies in this: that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to deception and, if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner possible.'

Shakespearean Tragedy p.182

Aspects of Action

As the hero of the play, most of the action revolves around Othello. It is his elopement with Desdemona that begins the play, and makes possible Iago's plan to bring about his downfall. The following actions are taken by Othello as the play unfolds:

- Promotes Cassio to lieutenant over Iago, thus earning the hatred of the ensign.
- Elopes with Desdemona
- Leads Venetian army to Cyprus to defend the island against the Turkish threat.
- Demotes Cassio for brawling on the island
- Starts to believe Iago's lies that Desdemona is unfaithful
- Swears revenge, and seeks for 'ocular proof'
- Confronts Desdemona about the lost handkerchief
- Refuses to believe in his wife's innocence
- Kills Desdemona
- Realises the truth - that he has been misled by Iago, and has murdered an innocent woman
- Kills himself
Aspects of Character

**The General:** Soldiering is Othello's life, and he has been an excellent soldier, as is evidenced by the fact the Venetian Senate are so reliant on him to lead the campaign against the Turks. As a soldier he would have a rough-and-ready sort of approach to life, plain-speaking, reliable, courageous and perhaps above all, honest.

**The Nobleman:** At the outset of the play, Othello sees himself as worthy company to those of the highest social standing in Venice: "I fetch my life and being From men of royal siege, and my demerits May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune As this that I have reached." [I, ii, 21-4]. He is very sure of Desdemona's love for him: "My life upon her faith" [I, iii, 294]. He is proud and self-confident.

**The Moor:** It is indisputable that Othello is a black African: "I am black" Othello, III, iii, 267, "begr'm'd, As mine own face" III, iii, 393. Othello's blackness plays an important role in the play because it highlights the fact that he is not a native-born Venetian, and thus cannot understand local custom. His blackness makes Othello vulnerable - he is foreign, other, not 'one of us' say the Venetians. Iago is able to play on this vulnerability in making Othello believe Desdemona could not really love him.

**The Lover:** Othello's deep and tender love for Desdemona is central to understanding his character: he would never have done what he did if he had not loved his wife most dearly; her supposed betrayal hurts him unbearably.

**The Friend:** The fact that Iago is able to turn Othello from his wife is explained partly by the fact that he and Iago have been trusted brothers-in-arms for some years while he has had very little time to come to know his wife. The friendship of Othello is also something which Cassio values highly.

**The Poet:** The critic Wilson-Knight has referred to the 'Othello music'; the beauty of Othello's spoken words at the start of the play. As Iago goes to work on Othello, this poetic language becomes degraded and broken, reflecting the way in which Othello has lost his sense of reality and values.

**The Cuckold:** When Othello believes himself betrayed, he feels deeply humiliated: but, alas, to make me / A fixed figure, for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at.. oh oh. / (IVii 54-6) He responds to this by seeking a bloody revenge: 'I will chop her into messes; cuckold me!'

**The Murderer:** Othello feels the necessity to murder Desdemona because she has supposedly violated justice: 'It is the cause'. Her murder serves as a symbolic execution or sacrifice. Othello refers to himself as 'an honorable murderer', and it does appear that he acted from honour, rather than hatred. But perhaps his morals and beliefs, being of noble character, could not admit to mere revenge as a sufficient motive for what he sought to do. When he realises what he has done, Othello experiences first deep grief, and then denial. Finally, he kills himself. In keeping with his role of judge, the sentence now falls on his own life. Typically, the decision taken, he gives no further thought to the act, but executes the penalty immediately: 'I took by the throat the circumcised dog,/And smote him thus.' (V ii 356-7)

**The Fatal Flaw:** Shakespeare's heroes, like the heroes of Greek tragedy, are all victims of a fatal flaw or 'hamartia' within themselves. In Othello's case, the most obvious flaw in his character is jealousy; but some critics argue that it is not this fault, but his credulity (his willingness to be duped by Iago) that is behind his fall from grace. Perhaps to that may be added a lack of discrimination, and a tendency to act without sufficient thought.

**The Final Word:** After the hero has killed himself, Cassio says that Othello was 'great of heart'. Shakespeare intends his audience to remember that, despite his folly, his misplaced inflexibility and his descent to near-madness, Othello was above all a man capable of great passion, and courage.

Take the first letter of each of the keywords underlined above, and make up a sentence:-

**Character Key:** Generally Not Murderous Loathsome Foolish Crazy Plotter - Magnificent!

You'll easily remember the sentence in the exam!
How Do The Other Characters View Othello?

**Desdemona** loves her husband deeply, to the extent of going against all her society's conventions and marrying him.

**Iago** shows Othello's nobility and openness: he sees Othello as "of constant, loving, noble nature" [II, i, 278 - 281], "of free and open nature" [I, iii, 385 - 8], making it possible for Othello to be "as tenderly led by the nose As asses are" [I, iii, 387-8].

From **Cassio** we gain a picture of Othello's professional excellence. He is devastated to have fallen from the favour of such a general: "I would rather sue to be despis'd, than to deceive so good a commander..." [II, iii, 269 - 270].

**Montano** speaks for those he has commanded: "For I have served him, and the man commands Like a full soldier." [II, i, 35-6]

**Lodovico** speaks for the Venetian Senate, who have placed great trust in Othello's talents: "Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature, Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue The shot of accident, nor dart of chance could neither graze nor pierce?" [IV, i, 260 - 264].

Points To Ponder...

★ Why does Othello trust Iago above his own wife?
★ Could the love between Othello and Desdemona have lasted if there had been no Iago?
★ What do you think was at the root of the tragedy? Othello's jealousy, or his willingness to believe the worst of the woman that he loved?
IAGO

The views expressed about the villainous Iago since Shakespeare first created him have been as numerous as the critics who have written about him. He is a wonderfully conceived and executed character, whose ability to appall and horrify has not lessened with time, even in our cynical age. The Big Question about Iago always remains: why did he do it? What were his motives for masterminding the terrible tragedy which befalls Othello and Desdemona?

Aspects of Action

If Othello is the man around whom the action unfolds, Iago is the man who, working always behind the scenes and out of sight, makes things happen. He is like a spider, weaving a web of intrigue from which his victims will not escape with their lives. He is well aware of (and proud of) his fiendish machinations, as he says of Desdemona:

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

How does he achieve his aims? Look at the following events for which Iago himself is responsible:

- He alerts Brabantio to Desdemona's elopement, in an attempt to upset his General's happiness before it has even begun.
- He keeps Roderigo continually on a string, promising him that he is approaching Desdemona on his behalf, and thus gets money for his schemes as well as a dupe to carry out some of the more dangerous aspects of his plans.
- He orchestrates the brawl in which Cassio loses his lieutenancy.
- He suggests that Cassio go to Desdemona for help - and at the same time suggests to Othello that if Desdemona is too pressing in her suit for Cassio, that there is reason to suspect that the two are having an affair.
- He provides 'proof' - of his own making - to Othello of his wife's unfaithfulness
- He swears to help Othello get revenge for the perceived wrongs which Desdemona has done him - and possibly sows the idea of Desdemona's actual murder in Othello's mind.
- He sets up another brawl in which Cassio is wounded and Roderigo killed by Iago himself.
- After Desdemona's murder, Iago's own wife realises that he is the one who has lied to Othello about Desdemona - he kills Emilia too in a belated attempt to keep her silent.
- He is taken away at the end of the play to be tortured, but refuses to speak and give reasons for his actions.
A Subordinate: As Othello's 'ancient' - the closest contemporary military position being perhaps that of ensign, or aide-de-camp- Iago's pride is constantly smarting at his lack of success in his chosen career. He was a person who was immensely frustrated in his position, and lacked the ability, and social birth, to work his way out of it in an 'honest' fashion. His very real talents thus became perverted.

An 'Honest' Man: Almost every character in the play refers at some point to Iago's honesty: this reputation is pivotal in the success of his plot, since it is all a web of lies and insinuations, which in anyone less well-trusted would not have been believed in the first instance. He is, of course, the least honest of all the characters; his life is a constant pretence.

A Clever Strategist: Often the simplest and easiest way to inflict harm on others is to do so using the strength of the opponent: Iago uses the moral strengths and weaknesses of his victims to bring them down. Iago's plan for the undoing of Cassio and Othello is to make Othello believe that Desdemona has fallen in love with Cassio. This will ruin Othello and Cassio's previously close relationship, lead to Cassio's demotion and put an end to Othello's happiness.

A Pragmatist: His use of the hapless Roderigo in the furthering of his plans indicates that he will use anything that comes his way to achieve his own object. Eventually, when Roderigo is becoming dangerous because of what he knows, Iago kills him.

A Cynic: Shown in his treatment of Roderigo, and also in his attitude towards his wife Emilia, whom he treats with scant respect. This cynicism counts against him in the end, since Iago cannot understand how anyone could be motivated by love or loyalty to do something which is not in their own interests. Thus he completely discounts the possibility that Emilia, out of love for Desdemona, would put herself at risk in telling the truth about the handkerchief, thus sealing her husband's fate.

An Egotist: he is unable to give anything to others and is thus incapable of love. 'Love' for Iago is equitable with 'most useful'. When the use ceases, therefore, so will the 'love'. His entire "reason to be" is to further his own position.

Profane: Iago's profane language (e.g. in his discussions with Roderigo and Cassio about Desdemona) crosses the borderline between being witty and merely distasteful and is further evidence in Iago of a complete inability to feel or even recognise love as separate from sex.

An Opportunist: Iago uses opportunities as they present themselves - e.g. the lost handkerchief, Bianca's anger towards Cassio.

A Manipulator: Each of the characters in the play is manipulated by Iago, as if by a puppetmaster holding invisible strings.
* Othello sense of honour, usually regarded as a strength, is turned in on itself, forcing him to act against the woman he loves, and his close friend.
* Cassio's innate innocence and trust is exploited, as is his weak head for drink and his heedless attitude towards Bianca.
* Desdemona's loyalty to her friends, usually a strength, is exploited, turning it into her greatest weakness in Iago's scheme.
* Roderigo's albeit apparently inappropriate love for Desdemona, and consequent jealousy of Othello, is tailor-made for Iago's manipulations.

Make up your own Character Key sentence for Iago:

Character Key: S H S P C E P O M

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Points To Ponder...

★ Why did he do it?
★ Did he intend Desdemona to be killed?
★ Is he a realistic character – could someone seemingly this evil actually exist?

Was Iago Motiveless?

The poet Coleridge wrote of Iago words which have become famous with regard to this character – he refers to Iago’s soliloquies as ‘the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity.’ What did make him do it?

Movies suggested by Iago himself are:

* jealousy of Cassio’s appointment
* anger with Othello for overlooking him in this appointment
* jealousy of Othello, in the sense that Othello was held in such high esteem in Venice, whilst he felt his own talents and ability went unrecognized
* humiliation over the rumours that Othello and Cassio have seduced Emilia

Other suggestions have been

* that he enjoyed the danger and thrill of the web of intrigue which he set in motion;
* that he was unable to accept his own mediocrity and sought a way to make himself important;
* that he enjoyed exercising power over others;
* that he was innately evil, and
* that he was insane.

You must decide for yourself.
DESDEMONA

Desdemona is one of Shakespeare's gentlest heroines, caught up in a vortex of violent passion against which she is powerless to act, because she cannot understand its cause. Some have criticised her for being too passive; perhaps her real 'fault' is being so good that a man like Iago can use her unsuspecting virtue and loyalty to weave a web of deceit which brings about the downfall of those he has chosen to hate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desdemona is gentle, but there is strength of character evident in her, particularly when she elopes with Othello in defiance of her society's conventions.</td>
<td>Elopes with Othello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is young - much younger than Othello - which makes her less able to stand up for herself when her husband starts to suspect her.</td>
<td>Speaks openly of her love for him to the Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is innocent, and incapable of understanding or perceiving that Iago is intent on harming her.</td>
<td>Follows her new husband to Cyprus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is a loyal friend: an attribute of which Iago makes use to 'prove' her unfaithfulness through her commitment to Cassio's reinstatement.</td>
<td>Agrees to help Cassio regain Othello's favour, and continually bothers Othello about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is capable of inspiring great love and loyalty in her turn: from Othello, Cassio and Emilia.</td>
<td>Lies about the handkerchief in fright at Othello's harsh treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is faithful - even to the extent of attempting to shield Othello when he has murderously attacked her.</td>
<td>Seeks help from Iago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tries in vain to defend herself against Othello's accusations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is killed by Othello</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quotes To Note:

*I saw Othello's visage in his mind,*  
*And to his honours and his valiant parts*  
*Did I my soul and fortune consecrate.*  
*(Desdemona IIIii 247-253)*

*...she is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested.*  
*(Iago, of Desdemona IIIii 287...)*

*Iassure thee,*  
*If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it*  
*To the last article: ... therefore me merry, Cassio;*  
*For thy solicitor shall rather die*  
*Than give thy cause away.*  
*(Desdemona IIIii 20-28)*
MINOR CHARACTERS

Cassio

Michael Cassio is Othello's newly-appointed lieutenant, a promotion which has aroused Iago's wrath against him. He is a young and handsome soldier, popular and deeply loyal to Othello. But he is by no means perfect, and Iago is able to make masterful use of his weaknesses. By becoming drunk and getting involved in a brawl (which Iago set up) Cassio loses his position. Again at Iago's suggestion he goes to Desdemona to ask her help in getting back into Othello's favour. He is thus an unwitting party to Iago's plan to make Othello suspect him as Desdemona's lover.

Emilia

Iago's wife and Desdemona's lady-in-waiting, Emilia truly comes into her own during the final act of the play. She is no virtuous maid, and her worldliness provides a foil for Desdemona's purity and innocence, much like the down-to-earth Nurse in Romeo and Juliet acts as a foil for Juliet. Her loyalty to her mistress, for which she gives up her own life, leads to Othello's realisation of the truth and Iago's undoing.

Brabantio

Desdemona's father, the senator Brabantio is only seen in the first Act, when he approaches the Senate in an attempt to prove that Othello has bewitched his daughter. His main function in the play is to highlight the racial attitudes of the Venetians, who seem to hold to the view that while it is quite acceptable to have a black man around to dinner, you wouldn't want him to marry your daughter... He is deeply upset by the marriage between Desdemona and the Moor; indeed, he dies soon after the group left for Cyprus, perhaps of a broken heart.

Roderigo

Roderigo is a young nobleman who is in love with Desdemona. Iago makes use of this gullible and unintelligent young man to almost ridiculous extents, particularly as a seemingly inexhaustible supply of money. When Roderigo eventually starts to suspect Iago's good intentions, he kills him in cold blood. Again, Iago uses his victim's weaknesses - his vanity and stupidity - to manipulate him.
The Web of Intimacy in *Othello*

No other Shakespearean tragedy has as few characters as *Othello*. There are only twelve named characters in the play, and of these arguably only five are developed to any great extent: the hero himself, Desdemona, Iago, Cassio and Emilia. Compare *Macbeth*, where there are twenty named characters, and *Hamlet* where there are eighteen. The relationships of the few main characters in *Othello* are so closely interwoven that it is not surprising that one feels, as one watches the play, a kind of claustrophobia. This contributes markedly to the pressure that is built up as the play progresses. Study the diagram below which illustrates the closeness of these interrelationships.
THE THEMES

In this chapter, three of the important themes from the play are covered. As an approach which we feel will be most useful to you in your revision, we have structured these around general essay topics on each theme, and provided you with the 'shell' of an essay in each case.

★ Jealousy: a full essay plan
★ Racial Prejudice: a table detailing differing attitudes to Othello as a Moor from which you can construct your own full plan.
★ Loyalty and Betrayal: a mind-map / brainstorm from which you can construct your own full plan.

Some of the plans can easily be adapted to fit other essay topics: we suggest that you try structuring plans for some of the other topics on page 39: this is an extremely effective revision activity.
(For further help in how to go about planning an essay, refer to the chapter in Bones called The Exam: p. 31)
JEALOUSY

'Discuss the theme of jealousy in Othello.'

When asked to discuss a theme of this nature, around an abstract noun like jealousy, pride, ambition etc, a useful organizing device is the three Cs: discuss the CAUSES, CHARACTERISTICS and CONSEQUENCES of the topic noun as they are illustrated in the text.

INTRODUCTION
Jealousy is defined in the Pocket Oxford as 'fear, suspicion or resentment of rivalry in the affection of a spouse.' In Othello, the irony is that the hero becomes jealous through the machinations of a man who is himself deeply envious of Othello's success and nobility. The theme of jealousy in the play will be discussed in terms of its causes, characteristics and tragic consequences for the characters of Othello.

MAIN SECTION

Causes
- **Iago**: manipulates Othello into 'a jealousy so strong/That judgement cannot cure' (II.2 296-7) - perhaps because Iago himself is jealous of the man who, in every sphere, is so much his superior.
- **Othello's insecurity and vulnerability**: His age and race, being different from Desdemona's, are targeted by Iago so that Othello starts to doubt himself as a worthy husband for his wife. (When you love someone, as Billy Joel says, you're always insecure.)
- **Desdemona's innocence**: At first she refuses to admit that Othello could be jealous, while the more worldly-wise Emilia recognises Othello's symptoms immediately. If she had realised sooner she might have acted to save herself.
- **Lack of communication**: Othello and Desdemona had had little time to get to know each other, and they were unable to confront each other and ask for the truth: if they had, the tragedy may well have been averted.
Characteristics
Shakespeare highlights the following characteristics of jealousy in *Othello*:

- **it is irrational:** If Othello had thought about it he would have realised that there could have been no opportunity for Desdemona and Cassio to have committed adultery, even if they had wanted to. Othello is quite impervious to the defence which Emilia gives of his wife - he simply won't believe the evidence of her supporters, or of Desdemona herself, once he is enflamed.
- **it is cruel:** Othello publicly strikes and uses violent and abusive language against a young and innocent woman who was very much in love with him.
- **it is tortured:** Othello says to Iago: 'Avaunt, be gone, thou has set me on the rack.' (III iii 341)
- **it is isolating:** Othello becomes cut off from those whom he most loves and respects; both Desdemona and Cassio.
- **it produces a loss of faith and confidence in oneself:** whereas before Othello had no trouble believing that Desdemona loved him enough to flaunt all her society's taboos and marry him, once he is jealous all of this faith ebbs and he is left doubting his own worthiness; this enrages him.
- **it produces a desire for revenge:** as in this case, often the revenge is directed against both wife and lover.

Consequences
The protagonists in the play are destroyed by jealousy:

- **Othello:** loses his reason, and finally kills himself after murdering his beloved wife
- **Desdemona:** is the innocent victim of the jealous passion unleashed by
- **Iago:** whose schemes come to nothing. He is led away to be tortured.

CONCLUSION
Is there anything that could have prevented the tragedy? The most important thing Othello and Desdemona could have done to prevent the tragedy was to have been honest with each other, and with Cassio. If Othello had gone straight to his wife after Iago's first attack and 'had it out' with her, the whole affair might well have been solved then and there. Externally, perhaps if they had not gone to Cyprus, which alienated the youthful Desdemona from her familiar surroundings, it could equally have been prevented.
## RACISM & RACIAL PREJUDICE

Use this table to plan an essay discussing racial attitudes in Venetian society, as illustrated in ‘Othello’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Iago</th>
<th>Brabantio</th>
<th>Roderigo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Attitude** | Overtly, profanely racist, although he hides this, seeming to admire and value Othello.  
*Even now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe; (Ii 88-9)*  
*Not to affect many proposed matches Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereeto we see in all things nature tends - Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (Iago III iii 229-233)* | Accepted Othello as valued military leader and dinner guest, but is deeply shocked and distressed by his marriage to Des.  
*For nature so preposterously to err, Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,  
Sans witchcraft could not. (I iii 62-64)*  
*[She never would], to incur a general mock  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight. (I ii 69-71)* | Othello is hated by Roderigo both as a black man and as a rival for Desdemona's affections. It must have been difficult for the vain Roderigo when Desdemona preferred a black man to him, who was Venetian-born.  
*What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe,  
If he can carry't thus! (I i 66-7)*  
*'. the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor...' (I i 126)* |
| **Consequence** | Perhaps an important motive for Iago's plot against Othello may have been racism. That a man of colour could have been so successful must have rankled with the insecure Iago. | Brabantio dies of a broken heart, quite unable to accept his daughter's rebellion. If he had been more accepting he might have been able to help her when she needed him most. | His hatred of Othello leads him to assist Iago in his schemes - and eventually costs this dupe his life. |
What about Othello's own attitudes towards himself?

Initially, Othello has no qualms about his worthiness as a partner for Desdemona:
*I fetch my life and being / From men of royal seige*  Iii 21 - 22). But as Iago goes to work on him, he becomes more and more uncertain of himself, and at times seems to hate himself and his blackness: *Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face.* (III iii 386-388) His own attitudes become shaped by the society to which he tries to belong, but which will never accept him.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senate</th>
<th>Soldiers</th>
<th>Cassio</th>
<th>Desdemona</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Senators would have been much more in sympathy with Brabantio if the Turks had not just threatened to invade Cyprus. But they need Othello now, and all they can say about the marriage is <em>We are very sorry for't</em>. But the Duke's reference to the marriage as a <em>mangled matter</em> implies that he is not wholeheartedly approving. It is clear that Desdemona is defying convention.</td>
<td>Montano and the other soldiers who have served under Othello have nothing but praise for him: <em>'For I have served him, and the man commands Like a full soldier.'</em> (Iii 35-6) However we have no indication of how they view the marriage between Othello and Desdemona.</td>
<td>Cassio is fully supportive of the marriage of his worthy general to Desdemona. He admires and respects Othello greatly, and is devastated by his demotion which has lost him Othello's regard: <em>I will rather sue to be despised than to deceive so good a commander with so slight, so drunken, and so indiscreet an officer.</em> (Iiii 254...) Othello's race is not an issue with Cassio.</td>
<td>She truly loves, respects and admires her husband deeply. While well aware that her marriage to Othello defies all the social conventions of her upbringing, she is prepared to stand up in the Senate and defend her actions courageously. She is 'colour-blind' where Othello is concerned. <em>I saw Othello's visage in his mind, And to his honours and his valiant parts Did I my soul and fortune consecrate</em> (Iiii 250-253)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This luke-warm attitude translates into inaction: the Senate does nothing to either support or stop the marriage. Despite his soldier's respect, Othello still begins to doubt himself. There has been no precedent in his relationships up to this point to prepare him for marriage. Ironically, Cassio's desperation to be admitted again into Othello's favour makes him sue Desdemona for help, and thus play directly into Iago's hands. Desdemona's love and loyalty cause her to refuse to admit that there could be a problem in their relationship until it is too late. A more worldly-wise woman might have understood Othello's insecurities better.
LOYALTY & BETRAYAL

For this theme we have provided you with a ‘brainstorm’ or mind map for an essay on Loyalty and Betrayal in ‘Othello’. Write up the detailed plan on your own, using the diagram to guide you.

INTRODUCTION: Define loyalty and its opposite, betrayal.

Who shows loyalty to whom?

Desdemona, to Othello
Desdemona, to Cassio
Emilia, to Desdemona
Cassio, to Othello

Characteristics of loyalty

→ Unswerving
→ Death-defying

Who betrays whom?

Iago betrays Othello
Iago betrays Roderigo
Iago betrays Cassio
Iago betrays Desdemona
Othello betrays Desdemona

Characteristics of betrayal

Cynical
Self-serving
Uncaring

Tortured - Othello

Consequences of betrayal

Betrayal: destroys relationships → death
subverts natural, hierarchical order

CONCLUSION

Loyalty is a quality arguably essential both in a marriage and in soldiership. In Othello, Shakespeare explores this quality at various levels, leaving us with a terrible picture at the end of the play of the consequences of lost loyalty and betrayal.

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THE EXAM

This section offers you invaluable help in preparing for the finals:

★ Answering an Essay Question takes you through an approach to writing essays in the exam which will work for both English and other content subjects.

★ Essay Topics and Contextuals will give you an idea of what to expect in the final exam.

We strongly suggest that you spend some time working out further essay plans from the topics given - this kind of structured revision is the best way to use your time in the final weeks.
ANSWERING AN ESSAY QUESTION

When you answer an essay question you must spend at least ten minutes thinking about what the question demands and how you will answer it.

*Time spent planning is time well-spent. In fact, organizing your thoughts at the start will save you time in the exam.*

HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT ORGANISING AN ESSAY?

Imagine you have decided to do the following essay on *Othello*:

'Othello gives a very pessimistic view of the human condition: it seems to suggest that people's virtues not only do not protect them from, but actually make them more vulnerable to, the attacks of evil.'

Discuss this view of the play.

Try the following approach:

A. Deciding What The Question Demands

First of all you should note that there are certain key words in the question which tell you:

a. what the *topic* is about
b. what you must do with your knowledge on the topic in order to complete the *task* of answering the question.

*Your teachers will have told you, and we’re telling you again: READ THE QUESTION carefully before you start to answer it!*
There are usually three types of key words in an essay question:

1) **DIRECTION KEYWORDS: (DW's)** - Direct you to what you have to DO (i.e. your TASK (e.g.: describe, compare, show, explain, etc.)
2) **KNOWLEDGE KEYWORDS: (KW's)** - Relate to the area of knowledge required to answer the question - essentially the SUBJECT MATTER of the question.
3) **RESTRICTION KEYWORDS: (RW's)** - Restrict you to SPECIFIC DETAILS or aspects of the subject matter.

Apply this to the essay topic you have chosen:

**DW** = Discuss  
**KW** = people's (characters') virtues  
**RW** = make them vulnerable to attacks from evil

Therefore, in terms of TOPIC and TASK, the question demands the following:

**TOPIC:** People's virtues make them vulnerable to attacks from evil

**TASKS:**
1. Enumerate the virtues (and weaknesses) of each character under discussion: Oth, Des, Cassio
2. Show how Iago (representing evil) uses these virtues (and weaknesses) to bring about the downfall of each character.
3. Give your own opinion on pessimism of the play.

A second example:

'Desdemona is helplessly passive - she can do nothing whatever ... She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute.' (A.C.Bradley)  
How far do you agree with this comment about Desdemona?

**DW** = How far do you agree?  
**KW** = Desdemona helpless because her nature infinitely sweet, love absolute  
**RW** = Helplessly passive

**TOPIC:** Desdemona's character passive and helpless
**TASKS:**
1. Describe Desdemona's character
2. Say whether you agree that she is as helpless and passive as Bradley asserts.
B. Brainstorming Ideas

Your next step is to jot down all the points you can think of about the ways in which Iago uses the virtues (and weaknesses) of the other characters to bring them to harm—in any order. Your rough page will then look something like this:

IAGO ACTS ON HIS VICTIMS’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIRTUES</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Othello: noble, heroic, open,</td>
<td>Othello: quillible, headless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trusting nature,</td>
<td>irrational, Enraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simplicity of mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-reliance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* fail to suspect Iago</td>
<td>Desdemona: passivity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desdemona: loyalty</td>
<td>Cassio: drunkenness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kindness = goodness</td>
<td>treatment of Bianca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>love for Othello</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On balance – virtues more plentiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>than weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pessimism of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>play’s view of the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>human condition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Theme Statement

Now, try and write down in one sentence what the central theme or main argument of your essay will be. This will ensure that your essay has direction.

Example:
Iago uses both the virtues of his victims and their weaknesses to bring about their downfalls: but the weaknesses are small compared with the virtues, so it would seem that Othello does indeed paint a pessimistic picture of a world where virtue cannot guarantee happiness, and is used as a weapon against the virtuous.
D. Essay Plan

Now you plan your essay, organising all your material from Section B (Brainstorming ideas). Fit in all the main ideas first, and then add in the less important ones, as well as examples to back up the main ideas. Thus your plan might look something like this:

INTRODUCTION

In *Othello*, Iago works to bring about the downfall of the characters whom he hates, particularly Othello himself and Cassio. In order to do this, he uses not only the weaknesses of his victims, but their strengths and good qualities: as he says of Desdemona:

> So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
> And out of her own goodness make the net  
> That shall enmesh them all.  

*(Iago II iii 332-5)*

BODY OF ESSAY

A. VIRTUES: Each of Iago's victims has virtues which he uses to undermine them and bring them down:

1. Othello:
   - **Noble, heroic**
   > *The Moor, howbeit I endure him not,*  
   > *Is of a constant, loving, noble nature;*  
   *(Iago, II i 283-4)*
   - **Open and trusting nature:**
   > *The Moor is of a free and open nature,*  
   > *That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,*  
   > *And will as tenderly be led by the nose*  
   > *As asses are.*  
   *(Iago I iii 385-8)*
   - **Simple mind (not devious): fails to suspect Iago:**
   > *This fellow's of exceeding honesty,*  
   > *And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,*  
   > *Of human dealings.*  
   *(Othello, of Iago III iii 258-260)*
   - **Self-reliant:** decides and acts instantly, without reflection

2. Desdemona
   - **Loyalty to friends** - makes her push for Cassio's reinstatement and thus fuel Othello's suspicions of her.
   - **Kindness and goodness** - make her unsuspecting of Iago's machinations
   > *...she is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested.*  
   *(Iago II iii 287...)*
   - **Love for Othello** makes her helpless to escape his revenge:
3. Cassio
- **Social charm and grace**: makes him a fit candidate for Iago's insinuations:
  
  *He hath a person and a smooth dispose
  To be suspected, framed to make women false.* (Iago, of Cassio I iii 383-4)
- **Loyalty to Othello**: makes him unwilling to ask him directly for his reinstatement:

B. **WEAKNESSES**: Iago uses his victims' weaknesses too, so that there is some evidence in the play for each person (with the possible exception of Desdemona) being to some extent responsible for the events which overtake them:

1. **Othello**:
- **Gullibility?** (Although everyone -incl Emilia - trusts Iago)
- **Heedlessness and irrationality**: if Othello had taken time to think, he would have realised there was no opportunity for Desdemona and Cassio to have committed adultery
- **Rage**: strikes his wife publicly (and later kills her?) in an uncontrolled rage.

2. **Desdemona**
- No real moral weaknesses (although she lies about the handkerchief); but her passivity could be held to blame for her fate.

3. **Cassio**
- **Drunkenness**: to lack the control to refuse another drink, and then partake in a drunken brawl (albeit set up by Iago), shows a weakness ill-befitting Othello's second-in-command
- **Treatment of Bianca**: heedless and cruel treatment of this woman allows Iago to set up the scene in which Othello mistakenly assumes that Cassio is laughing and joking about Desdemona's love for him (IV i)

**CONCLUSION** (Using the theme statement)
Iago uses both the virtues of his victims and their weaknesses to bring about their downfalls: but the weaknesses are small compared with the virtues, so it would seem that *Othello* does indeed paint a pessimistic picture of a world where virtue cannot guarantee happiness, and is used as a weapon against the virtuous.

**E. Writing the essay**
Structure your essay into paragraphs in such a way that you devote one paragraph to each main idea. Remember that your essay also needs an opening paragraph which introduces the topic and a concluding one which sums it up. The Introduction may state the theme or topic of the essay - your theme statement from section C proves very useful here. The Conclusion could refer back to the question, or re-state the main idea or theme, or summarise the main points of your essay.
A further example of an essay plan may be of help to you. The question in this case is:

'In his presentation of Othello as a tragic hero, Shakespeare introduces us to a man set apart from others by reason of his nobility of character, position and background; we then see his gradual decline to a bestial level as his vulnerable nature yields itself to corruption, before we are finally shown his slow but incomplete return to dignity and greatness.' Discuss.

**INTRODUCTION:** Othello as tragic hero

- Heroic: courageous, virtuous, noble, well-respected leader;
- Fatal flaw: anger and jealousy (reason overcome by passion)
- Destroys himself and the person he most loves
- Failed to withstand Iago, and allowed his weakness to overcome his strength

Each element of the quotation is now taken and expanded to draw a full picture of Othello's decline from nobility to bestiality, and his return to greatness.

**BODY OF ESSAY:**

1. ... Man set apart by reason of

a) Nobility of character

Othello's nobility recognised by friend and foe alike:

- Venetian society: respected in the Senate; welcomed in homes (Brabantio - at first)
  - leader of Venetian army
  - commander of Cyprus
- Iago: *'The Moor is of a constant, loving, noble nature...'* (II i)
- Desdemona: '... my noble Moor/Is true of mind...' (III iv)

b) Position:

- General of Venetian army
- Respected soldier and commander (Montano, Gratiano, Cassio, the Senate, Iago) eg: 'the man commands like a full soldier..'
- Leadership qualities obvious in: - first encounter with Brabantio
  - calm, reasoned confrontation with Senate
  - quelling of the brawl in Cyprus

c) Background:

- A Moor of noble descent, thus a foreigner and outsider; accepted as a military genius, but NOT as an eligible husband for a high-born Venetian woman.
2. ... His gradual decline to a bestial level

From III iii line 34 (Iago: 'Ha! I like not that.') Othello's decline begins...
- At first, Othello tries to resist Iago's suggestions but because of his insecurity with regard to his love, and because he trusts Iago so implicitly, he believes him, and is set on his way to tragedy.
- His passion consumes him to the extent that he loses self-control completely and drops in a fit.
- Finally, believing himself to be a righteous executor of justice, he kills Desdemona and so destroys himself.
- His bestiality is revealed to us through his choice of words, which begin to echo Iago's profane animal/bestial imagery. ('Goats and monkeys!')
- His thoughts and words become coarse and ugly, and his actions violent: strikes Desdemona publicly, and determines to 'chop her into messes'.

3. ... his slow and incomplete return to dignity and greatness

This begins with the speech: 'Behold, I have a weapon' (V ii)
- acknowledges his error sincerely and with deep regret
- does not bluster or attempt to excuse what he has done
- he is calm and in control of himself, even when he sees Iago
- returns to honour and nobility by killing himself.

CONCLUSION:

Return to discuss the original quotation; Othello as 'a man apart', an outsider, could never feel truly secure in Desdemona's love. This led to the tragedy.

** (With acknowledgement to Rhodes University Academic Support Programme)

Look back to the graph on p. 14 delineating Othello's 'decline to a bestial level'. Do you agree that he is most bestial when killing Desdemona, or did he reach this depth earlier?
ESSAY TOPICS

1. 'The deed [Othello] is bound to do is no murder, but a sacrifice. He is to save Desdemona from herself, not in hate, but in honour; in honour and also in love.' (A.C. Bradley) How far do you agree with this comment about Othello's action in killing his wife?

2. 'In trusting Iago above Desdemona, Othello shows the limitations of his character; his behaviour is simply stupid and obtuse, and he acts rashly and hastily. In fact he is as much to blame for the outcome of the tragedy as Iago is.' Discuss.

3. Demand me nothing, what you know, you know, From this time forth I never will speak word. (Vii 304-5) Iago refuses to reveal his reasons for bringing about Othello's downfall; in your opinion, what made him destroy Othello?

4. 'The love between Othello and Desdemona is a great venture of faith ..... The tragic experience with which the play is concerned is loss of faith, and Iago is the instrument to bring Othello to this crisis in his being.' (Helen Gardener). Show how faith is at the centre of the love between Othello and Desdemona, and how Iago undermines this faith.

5. 'The vision of human nature which the play offers is one of ancient terrors and primal drives underlying smooth, civilised surfaces .. the contrast between surface manner and inner nature.' (Alvin Kernan). In a discussion of at least three of the characters in Othello, show how far you agree with this statement.

6. The poet W.H. Auden notes: 'Everybody must pity Desdemona, but I cannot bring myself to like her.' What are your feelings towards Desdemona? Do they alter as the play progresses?

7. Iago is one of Shakespeare's most controversial characters. Commentators differ widely in their opinions on him. Some feel that he is entirely motiveless and therefore an inhuman abstraction. Others find him a very human villain, far from motiveless.

8. What is your view of Iago? Substantiate your answer by reference to the text.

9. It has been suggested that Othello is a 'domestic tragedy': "It basically deals with the love between two people" (John Kani). Another view might be that, in giving so much space and care to the character of Iago, Shakespeare presents a study in the nature and power of evil in its conflict with good. Which of these views would you support?

10. 'Othello demonstrates that Shakespeare was, with prophetic insight, acutely aware of the complexities and evils of racism.' Discuss the validity of this view in a careful analysis of the attitudes of, for example, Iago, Brabantio, Desdemona, the Venetians in general, and Othello himself.
CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

Home Language Candidates

1. Read the following extract carefully and answer the questions:
   Act V sc ii lines 190 - 241: 'Nay, stare not masters ..' to 'Tis a notorious villain'.

1.1. Emilia is intensely agitated when she utters lines 193-6 and 221-4. Point out two features of her manner of speaking in these lines which convey to us the intensity of her agitation.
   (N.B. You are being asked here to comment on how she speaks, not on what she says.) (2 + 2) (4)

1.2. When Othello falls on the bed and cries out (line 200), is he expressing any feeling of guilt for what he has done? Support your answer by referring to the relevant evidence in lines 190-220. (1+2) (3)

1.3. Othello asserts that Desdemona and Cassio have engaged in adulterous sexual activity 'A thousand times' i.e. very often, over a long period. Explain why this assertion could not possibly be true, even if Desdemona and Cassio had been adulterers. (2)

1.4. 'Cassio confessed it' (line 214)
   What has led Othello to this belief? Explain clearly by specific reference to a moment or moments earlier in the play. (3)

1.5. 'O God! O heavenly God!' (line 220)
   What TWO shattering realisations hit Emilia while Othello is uttering lines 215-9? (2+2) (4)

1.6. 'O thou dull Moor...' (line 227)
   '...coxcomb ... fool...' (line 235)
   Instead of stressing the cruelty of his murdering Desdemona, Emilia three times calls Othello dull, foolish, stupid to have done so. What is her reason for seeing him as above all foolish in killing Desdemona? (3)

1.7. It is in the above extract that Iago is finally unmasked as the real villain of the story.
   a) In what lines or lines is his guilt finally made clear to all the other characters beyond any possibility of doubt? (1)
   b) How is his guilt proved by the words you have just indicated? Explain briefly. (2)

1.8. Line 239 ('Ay, ay, O lay me by my mistress' side') makes it clear that Emilia is gravely wounded. Explain how the seriousness of her injury is revealed by
   a) what she says in that line and (3)
   b) how she speaks in that line. (2)
1.9. If Iago had managed to keep Emilia from speaking out, would he have been safe from discovery as a villain, or would he still have been in danger of being exposed by someone else? Explain (1+2) (3)

First Additional Language Candidates

2. Read the following extract carefully and answer the questions:
   Act I sc i, lines 79-159: 'Awake! What, ho, Brabantio!' to 'And there will I be with him. So farewell.'

2.1. What news do Iago and Roderigo bring Brabantio? (1)

2.2. What does the language which Iago uses to inform Brabantio of this news reveal
   a) about Iago? (3)
   b) about racial attitudes in Venice? (3)

2.3. '..... this is Venice,
       My house is not a grange.' (lines 105-6)
   What does Brabantio take for granted as a resident of Venice? (3)

2.4. What is Brabantio's attitude to Roderigo as evidenced in this extract? (2)

2.5. 'Your daughter, (if you have not given her leave),
       I say again) hath made a gross revolt,' (lines 133-4)
   a) Why is Desdemona's marriage seen as a 'gross revolt' by the Venetians? (2)
   b) How does Brabantio explain this 'gross revolt' against nature to himself later in this scene, and in the scene following? (2)

2.6. Explain why Iago does not stay to join Brabantio and Roderigo in searching for Othello. (2)

2.7. Why cannot the state 'with safety' cast Othello out of office? (line 149) (2)

2.8. What reasons does Iago give at other points in the play for hating Othello 'as I do hell-pains'? (4)

2.9. How is Iago's determination to 'show out a flag, and sign of love/Which is indeed but sign' (line 156-7) to Othello typical of his dealings with others? Refer to at least two other characters from the play in your answer. (6)

CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS – SUGGESTED ANSWERS

Question One

1.1. The two features of Emilia's manner of speaking in these lines which convey to us the intensity of her agitation are:
   i) The many repetitions she makes: Villainy, villainy, villainy! ; 'Twill out, 'twill out (2)
   ii) The way in which her words build up to a climax, particularly in the last two lines of the second quote. The rhythm is so strong that one cannot speak these lines without emotion. (2)
1.2. At this stage Othello is not expressing any feeling of guilt for killing Desdemona. He still believes her to be an adulteress, and explains to Gratiano and Montano why he has killed her: 'she with Cassio the act of shame/A thousand times committed.'

1.3. The assertion that Desdemona and Cassio had committed adultery 'a thousand times' cannot be true because there has been no time for them to do this. Othello and Desdemona have only been married for about a week, and the three have been together on Cyprus for no more than two days. It is simply physically impossible to have had that much sexual activity in so short a time!

1.4. Othello believes that 'Cassio confessed it' because he overheard Cassio talking about Bianca to Iago, and thought he was referring to Desdemona; Othello may also be recalling Iago's story about Cassio talking in his sleep.

1.5. The two shattering realisations that hit Emilia are
   i) that Iago is behind the tragedy
   ii) that her taking the handkerchief for what she thought was a practical joke, has led to her mistress' death.

1.6. Emilia sees Othello as above all foolish in killing Desdemona because she knows, as her mistress' lady-in-waiting, just how much Desdemona despised the idea of infidelity in marriage, and also that, even if she had loved Cassio, there had been no opportunity for the two to commit adultery.

1.7. It is in the above extract that Iago is finally unmasked as the real villain of the story.
   a) Line 238: 'Sure, he hath killed his wife'.
   b) Iago's guilt proved by these words because he would have no reason to kill Emilia unless she was speaking the truth: he kills her in a vain attempt to keep her quiet.

1.8. The line 'Ay, ay, O lay me by my mistress' side' shows the seriousness of Emilia's injury
   a) by what she says: 'lay me by my mistress' side' (so that I can die with her)
   b) by how she speaks: 'Ay, ay' is clearly a cry of pain.

1.9. If Iago had managed to keep Emilia from speaking out, he would not have been safe from discovery as a villain.
   Roderigo tells the truth, firstly in a letter, and secondly by his final words before his death.

Emilia is a strongly drawn character who loves her mistress dearly. Why did she give Desdemona's handkerchief to Iago?
Question Two

2.1. Iago and Roderigo tell Brabantio that his daughter has eloped with Othello.  
2.2. The language which Iago uses reveals that  
   a) Iago has a very cynical and profane (vulgar) attitude to love, and he is a racist. He  
      cannot talk of the elopement between a white woman and a black man except in bestial  
      terms:  
      
      *Even now, very now, an old black ram  
      Is tupping your white ewe;*  
      
      (Iago I i 88-9)  

b) Racial attitudes in Venice are not perhaps very different from the ones Iago holds.  
   Roderigo echoes his companion, talking about *'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor'*;  
   and the sexual and animal imagery which Iago uses seems to be current among  
   Venetians at the time.  

2.3. Brabantio takes for granted that as a resident of Venice his safety and security, and that  
   of his family, will be well guarded. As a member of the city community he does not  
   expect to be prey to thieves and robbers as Iago and Roderigo seem to assert.  

2.4. Brabantio dislikes Roderigo, and views him as an unacceptable companion for Desdemona:  
   as soon as he hears who is rousing him from his bed he says:  
   
   *'The worser welcome;  
   I have charg'd thee not to haunt about my doors;  
   In honest plainness hast thou heard me say  
   My daughter is not for thee.'*  

2.5. a) Desdemona's marriage is seen as a 'gross revolt' because it was deemed to be  
    unnatural for a white woman to love a black man.  

b) Brabantio explains this 'revolt' by charging that Othello has bewitched his daughter  
    with supernatural charms and potions.  

2.6. Iago does not stay to join Brabantio and Roderigo in searching for Othello because he  
    cannot be seen to be against his own commander. For the success of his schemes, it is  
    essential that Othello think him entirely trustworthy and honest.  

2.7. The state (represented by the Venetian Senate) cannot cast Othello out of  
    office because they need his military skills to defeat the Turks who are sailing on  
    Cyprus.  

2.8. The reasons Iago gives at other points in the play for hating Othello are  
    i) that he has given Cassio promotion rather than Iago himself and  
    ii) that he suspects Othello has had an affair with Emilia.  

2.9. Iago's determination to pretend to a love he does not feel is typical of his dealings with  
    others because Iago is throughout the play a master of deception. He is supposedly  
    honest, trustworthy, loyal and a good friend. Actually he is none of these things. He  
    pretends to be Othello's most trusted friend, but all the while is filling his head with lies  
    about the wife whom he loves and who loves him; he pretends to try and help Cassio  
    become reinstated as Othello's lieutenant, but in fact is sowing the seeds of  
    Desdemona's murder; he pretends to be helping Roderigo to win Desdemona's love, but  
    is in fact is simply taking Roderigo's money for himself.
Quick Quiz Answers

1. Iago & Roderigo
2. Witchcraft
3. Desdemona
4. General
5. They need Othello to lead a force against the Turks.
6. Ancient, lieutenant
7. Othello & Cassio
8. The Turkish fleet is wrecked in a storm.
9. Montano
10. Desdemona promises to talk to Othello on Cassio's behalf.
11. Bianca
12. Iago, of Cassio
13. A handkerchief
15. Othello, of Iago
16. Lodovico
17. It is embroidered with strawberries.
18. Some matters of State, possibly Othello being recalled to Venice.
19. Desdemona's mother's maid, Barbara
20. He stifles her with a pillow.
21. Iago kills Roderigo to stop him from telling the truth.
22. Emilia
23. then
   must you speak
   Of one that lov'd not
   wisely, but too well
   Of one not easily
   jealous, but being
   wrought,
   Perplex'd in the
   extreme;
24. Cassio
25. Iago is to be tortured.

How did you score?

22 – 25 = Excellent
16 – 21 = Fair, but there's work to be done
Less than 16 = Thank goodness for Bones!

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