

Othello Knowledge Organiser (A Level English Literature A – AQA)					
Character	Othello: general in Venetian army tragic hero. Despite his elevated status, he is insecure due to his race and age. Consumed by jealousy as the play progresses, he murders his wife, believing she had an affair.		Iago: Othello's ensign and the Machiavellian villain He's manipulative Desdemona: Othello's wife, Brabantio's daughter, tragic victim. Initially determined and outspoken, but becomes more passive. Emilia: Iago's wife and Desdemona's servant. Initially submissive, she becomes more outspoken.		Cassio: Inexperienced, Othello's lieutenant. Iago convinces Othello that he and Desdemona are having an affair. Roderigo: Gentleman infatuated with Desdemona Iago's pawn Bianca: Cypriot courtesan loves Cassio. Montano: original governor of Cyprus.
					Duke of Venice: allows Othello's marriage to Desdemona because he needs Othello to lead the army. Lodovico: related to Brabantio and the voice of reason in the play. Brabantio: Desdemona's father and a Venetian senator.
Aspects of Tragedy – as set out in Aristotle's "Poetics"					Cross Curricular Links
The tragic hero is noble, but with hamartia (fatal flaw) that leads to peripeteia (reversal of fortune). This flaw may be hubris (excessive pride) or blindness to the truth, and leads to the hero's isolation and loss . The hero has a moment of anagnorisis (realisation) before his downfall . This tragic trajectory evokes pathos (pity and fear) for the hero, which is purged in a moment of catharsis (release) at the play's denouement (resolution). The hero is fated to meet his inevitable downfall. The tragic villain exerts external pressure on the tragic hero. He is often Machiavellian (cunning, scheming). The tragic victim suffers and is killed. In <i>Othello</i> , links to society's treatment of women , evoking pathos .					
Historical Context					Prior Knowledge
Race in Renaissance England: global exploration and slavery were in their infancy, racism was rife in England (Elizabeth I ordered that black people should be exiled). There was a belief in the Great Chain of Being , which placed God at the top, followed by angels, white people, black people, and animals. Thus, Iago's animalistic descriptions of Othello reflect contemporary xenophobia. Post-colonial literary theory explores the impact of colonialism on literature. Post-colonial critics argue that in literature people of different races are presented as " other " – different, possibly to be feared. Whilst Shakespeare communicates these racist ideas in 1.1, in 1.2 he presents Othello as the antithesis of such stereotypes, thus exposing the baselessness of racism. However, Othello internalises the racist ideology of those around him, and this leads to the insecurity he feels in his marriage. Thus the external pressures on Othello become internal pressures . Gender and the patriarchy: Renaissance women were expected to be subservient to men and did not have many rights. Many were consigned to the domestic sphere and were expected to provide a stable point of morality and innocence in a chaotic, corrupt world. Othello does not challenge this – rather the fact that he "won" Desdemona shows that he confirms this ideology. A time of change: despite traditional beliefs regarding race and gender, the C17 th was a moment time of change from traditional to modern ideas. Queen Elizabeth had shown that women could hold power. Similarly, emerging sciences challenged belief in the supernatural. Shakespeare's characters are caught in the midst of this change, and whilst they often hope for a different, better world, they find themselves entrapped by the expectations of traditional society.					Gothic traits Y7 & Y8 Knowledge of Shakespeare Y7- intro to Shakespeare, Y8 – the Tempest; Y9 – Romeo and Juliet, Y10 – Macbeth Knowledge of the tragic genre Y9 – Romeo and Juliet, Y10 – Macbeth
					Future Learning
					Shakespeare modules appear on most English university courses. Analytical skills will be useful for an Arts subject and careers such as Law.
Scene	Plot		Symbols		Quotations
Act 1: Exposition – establishing Othello's nobility against a background of xenophobia	1.1	o Roderigo and Iago inform Brabantio of Desdemona's secret marriage to Othello. o Enraged, Brabantio sets out in search of his daughter.	Venice: a bastion of cosmopolitan civilisation and commerce, protecting the boundaries of Europe from the Ottoman Empire. Also corrupted by debauchery. Animal imagery and failure to name Othello: racism and continual dehumanisation of Othello. Disease: uncontrollable spread of evil; one person's evil can infect another		I: Cassio is an "arithmetician" and like a "spinster". I: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." I: "I am not what I am." I: "Poison [Brabantio's] delight...plague him with flies." I: "An old black ram is tupping your white ewe."
	1.2	o Iago warns Othello about Brabantio. o The Duke calls for Othello. o Brabantio accuses Othello of abduction.	Eloquent language: Othello's language is calm and measured. He is confident in his social status. Misogynistic language: is used to objectify Desdemona, suggesting that she is "owned" by her father/ husband. She is diminished to a sexual symbol by Iago. Even Othello refers to her as prize.		O: "Tis better as it is," O: "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints." O: "I love the gentle Desdemona" "I won his daughter." I: Othello "hath boarded a land carrack."
	1.3	o News of Turkish threat to Cyprus. o Othello and Brabantio enter. Brabantio accuses Othello. Des. called to assert her love. o The Duke agrees to the marriage. He orders Othello to lead the fleet to Cyprus. Des. will accompany him. o Iago plots to destroy Othello.	Council chamber: Othello is welcomed into a place of power at the heart of Venetian society. His elevated place in the social hierarchy is confirmed – and political imperatives (war) are judged to be more important in deciding this than personal conflict (his illicit marriage). Marriage: in a world of war, Othello's marriage appears to be an oasis of calm. It offers a possible escape from conflict, and potential reconciliation between different groups. Darkness: Evil and deception. Connection between darkness and the inception of Iago's plan suggests something supernatural in it. He wants his actions to be hidden/ secret. Reminiscent of Macbeth.		O: "most potent, grave, and revered signiors". O: "A round, unvarnished tale will I deliver." O: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them." D: "I do perceive here a divided duty." B: "She has deceived her father, and may thee." I: "The Moor is of a free and open nature." I: "I have it, it is engendered! Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."
Act 2: Rising Action – destabilising the precarious balance of love and	2.1	o Storm destroys Turkish fleet o Des, Iago, Emilia and Cassio arrive at Cyprus. They just bawdily while waiting for Othello. Emilia is teased and berated by her husband, Iago. o Iago hint that Des loves Cassio	Storm: increasing chaos foreshadows the murder of Des. Cyprus: "warlike isle" on the edge of civilisation chaos and society's precarious balance. Aphrodite's birthplace (accused of infidelity). The sea symbolises the vastness of Othello's love, and suggests that the marriage is natural (in contrast to racist beliefs). Yet mankind is at the mercy of currents. Desdemona's authority: Powerful nouns used to describe Desdemona suggesting her status as respected and influential.		C: "Our great Captain's captain." O: "My soul's joy". "My fair warrior." O: "If it were now to die, /Twere now to be most happy" I: "You are well tuned now: but I'll set down / The pegs". I: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards"
	2.2	o There will be free drinks for all, in celebration of the marriage and the victory.			Herald: "Our noble and valiant General."
	2.3	o Iago makes Cassio drunk, and he fights. Othello fires Cassio. o Cassio is distraught. Iago suggests that Des. could plead with Othello to have him reinstated. o Iago outlines his plan.	Drunken brawl shift from political and social order to chaos , just as the natural world has already had a moment of chaos in the storm at the start of Act 2. This shift from blank verse to prose signals increasing disorder . Previously, we have heard Iago speaking in prose and so it is associated with his malevolence and destructive impulses . Later, Othello will also begin to speak in this way. Metaphors depict Iago's plan. Poison motif is repeated. Images suggest entrapment and danger		O: "never more be officer of mine" D: "What's the matter?" O: "All's well now, sweetening." C: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! ... I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." I: "Divinity of hell!" I: "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear." I: "the net...that shall enmesh them all"
Act 3: Climax – the destructive power of jealousy becomes clear	3	3.1: Cassio brings musicians to serenade Desdemona and asks Emilia to let him see Desdemona.	3.2: Othello leaves his quarters to inspect the island's fortifications.		
	3.3	o Des. pleads for Cassio, and Othello listens, but Iago causes Othello to doubt. o Des. loses her handkerchief. Emilia gives it to Iago. o Iago lies, claiming to have seen Cassio with the handkerchief.	Monstrous imagery: the concept of being monstrous refers to unnatural, deviant or immoral behaviour. Iago refers to his plot as a "monstrous birth" and Othello calls Desdemona's alleged infidelity "monstrous". This demonic imagery alludes to complete, unstoppable and almost unspeakable destruction. Animal imagery: Othello's language shifts to mirror that of Iago. References to animals are one example of this shift. Violent verbs: Another shift in Othello's characterisation. He began by eschewing violence and now uses violent verbs to foreshadow his violent acts		D: "Whatever you be, I am obedient" I: "Beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on." O: "when I love thee not / Chaos is come again." O: "I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapour of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses." O: "I'll tear her all to pieces!"
	3.4	o Othello is enraged when he asks Des. for the handkerchief, but she talks about Cassio. o Emilia suggests that Othello is jealous; Des. rejects this idea. o Cassio finds the handkerchief.	The handkerchief is a traditional love token and symbolises Othello and Desdemona's passion. It was also a family heirloom, suggesting Desdemona's acceptance of Othello's different background. It becomes a representation of Othello's jealousy and suspicions of his wife. In some ways, it could represent Desdemona's body, which Othello believes has been handled by Cassio. Consumption: proto feminist argument that men use and destroy women, symbolised here by reference to food		D: "My noble Moor / Is of true mind, and made of no baseness / As jealous creatures are." O: D's hand is "A young and sweating devil, here / That commonly rebels" E: "They are all but stomachs, and we are all but food." E: Jealousy "is a monster begot upon itself."
Act 4: Falling Action – Othello's increasing debasement plunges	4.1	o Iago continues to provoke Othello's jealousy. o Lodovico is horrified when he seeks Othello strike Des.	Images seeing thinking & knowing appear in Othello's linguistic disintegration Repetition of poison motif as deathly climax nears Epileptic fit: this "savage madness" emphasises the tragic hero's lack of power and agency, and his vulnerability to Iago. Othello appears unfit to lead. Striking Desdemona shows the progression from passionate infatuation, to verbal violence, to physical violence. A key turning point in their relationship.		O: "The raven over the infectious house." O: "Lie with her? Lie on her? [...] Zounds [...] Noses, ears and lips. [...] Confess! Handkerchief!" O: "Let her rot and perish and be damned tonight, for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone." Lodovico: "Is this the noble Moor?"
	4.2	o Othello questions Emilia, but refuses to believe her. He confronts Des. o Des. turns to Iago for reassurance, and Roderigo reproaches Iago for unfair dealing; Iago reassures both.	Desdemona's term of address is respectful and passive whereas Othello's is crude, hurtful and untrue. He no longer has any idea who she is. Water symbolises purity and innocence, but is also connected to trade and therefore is a symbol of affluence and cosmopolitan culture. The free-flowing water at the start of the play has now become a foul trickle, showing how Othello and Desdemona's love has been corrupted. Othello's attitude to love had been debased and he is obsessed with obscene physicality.		E: "I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest." D: "My lord, what is your will?" O: "the cunning whore of Venice." O: "The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up ... / Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in."
	4.3	o Des. prepares for bed, singing an old song from her youth.	The wedding sheets symbolise the failure of the marriage become a shroud, foreshadowing Des's death. The willow song heightens pathos for Des.		E: "'The world's a huge thing: it is a is a great price for a small vice."
Act 5: Denouement – Othello's downfall. and an attempt to	5.1	o Roderigo and Iago wait for Cassio; Roderigo injures Cassio. Roderigo killed by Iago.	Darkness: cyclical structure indicates Iago's role as stage-manager, and the inescapability of immorality and chaos. Characters are unable to see (the truth?) Jealousy motif repeated here		I: Cassio "hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly."
	5.2	o Othello is strongly affected by the sight of a sleeping Desdemona, but kills her. o Emilia discovers the murder and proclaims Desdemona's innocence. She reveals what Iago has done. o Iago kills Emilia, and Othello is arrested by Lodovico. o Othello stabs himself. Iago is arrested.	White objects: symbolise unchanging innocence – indicating that Othello desires a wife who can be controlled and will not alter with time or mood. The references to white also indicate how Othello has internalised racist ideas and is preoccupied with Desdemona's whiteness; he believes that she will not love him because of the ethnic differences. Biblical and divine imagery: Othello's reference to Greek divinity could be seen as a reference to the dangers of over-reaching. Othello also acknowledges the limits of his own knowledge and the permanence of the action he is about to take. Emilia instead invokes biblical imagery to depict Iago's evil. The adjective here is particular shows her understanding of his deception and insidiousness. Light: hope, innocence, purity, heavenliness, life.		O: "I'll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster." O: "I know not where is that Promethean heat / That can thy light relume." D: "Some bloody passion / Shakes your very frame." E: "May his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day." E: "I'll speak." I: "From this time forth I never will speak a word." O: "I have done the state some service, and they know it." O: "Of one that loved not wisely, but too well/...not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme."
Big ideas					
o Ultimately, the tragedy is that Othello and Desdemona's optimistic desire for a world in which all races and genders can achieve autonomy is destroyed by forces that wish to maintain the status quo. This is a play about racism and misogyny; but it is also about the failure of the individual to combat oppression . o Othello's assertion of nobility and integrity during the exposition is admirable; through his eloquent speeches, Shakespeare challenges contemporary racist stereotypes . However, Shakespeare also uses Othello to demonstrate the power of such ideologies; Othello's racial identity makes him vulnerable to Iago's schemes, and as he internalises preconceptions of his identity he is shaped into the very stereotype he refuted in Act 1. o Iago is the quintessence of prejudice and discontent; not only does he rail against anyone who is an outsider, but he also attempts to manipulate them to their downfall. His character is used to demonstrate mankind's capacity for evil , something made all the more unsettling when it is set in the context of Iago's apparent amorality. o Initially Desdemona provides a glimmer of hope for women; her outspoken nature and her determination to make her own choices shows that women can have agency. However, ultimately the play suggests that female empowerment is not possible within Renaissance society .			o Emilia's development as a character is the mirror image of Desdemona's trajectory; as Desdemona becomes increasingly passive , Emilia finds her voice. Yet both women face the same fate: death at the hands of their husbands. Within the patriarchal world of the play, women who attempt to assert their views find themselves literally silenced . o The parallels between Bianca and Desdemona suggest that an individual's fate is purely an accident of birth. Shakespeare also uses Bianca's character to suggest that survival is dependent on treading a fine line between maintaining one's integrity and being worldly-wise. o Cassio's character demonstrates that it is possible to maintain one's integrity and morality , even in the face of being reduced to a debased pawn. He becomes a voice of reason and order at the play's denouement. o Lodovico is a voice of reason , provides a moral commentary , highlighting the dramatic shifts in Othello's character. o Brabantio symbolises the traditional values of Venice, and is therefore an embodiment of reprehensible racism and prejudice , as well as of the patriarchy . o Roderigo symbolises the myopic materialism and lust of Venice.		
Analytical Language					
AO1- Argument, Expression, Terminology AO2 – Analysis of writer's methods AO3 – Context of production and reception AO4 – Typicality AO5 – Critical debate	An early example of could be seen as might be important as... At no other point in the play is the idea of displayed than when... There is some importance to... A more significant that reflects the idea of... is that of...		... most significant... Of greatest relevance is... The use of X, unlike Y, suggests... X is typically associated with Y When one thinks of X one imagines This seems almost to capture... This creates an overall impression of... Of greater significance is...		 is far more vital to the play in that... The audience is caught between... By the close of the play, the once...has developed into...is motivated not only by...but also by On the exterior..., yet on the interior, we can infer.... One of the most important aspects of the play is...
REMEMBER! The play is a construct. Shakespeare has crafted the character; they are not real, nor are their actions etc. His name is the one that should be used most frequently in your essay. What choices has he made? Why might this be? What effect does this have on you, the audience? Do you think that was the intention?					