

*Answers to questions on drama should address relevantly the central concern(s)/theme(s) of the text and be supported by reference to appropriate dramatic techniques such as: conflict, characterisation, key scene(s), dialogue, climax, exposition, dénouement, structure, plot, setting, aspects of staging (such as lighting, music, stage set, stage directions . . .), soliloquy, monologue . . .*

1. Choose a play in which a central character is heroic yet vulnerable.

Show how the dramatist makes you aware of both qualities and discuss how they affect your response to the character's fate in the play as a whole.

\* \* \*

William Shakespeare's "Othello" is a play in which the titular central character is shown to be heroic yet vulnerable. His heroism is unquestioned at the beginning of the play, the Moor hired by the Venetian's to command their army and respected by the Venetian nobility. His heroism wins him the most beautiful woman in Venice, Desdemona, but the villainous Iago uses their mismatched marriage and Othello's misplaced faith in him to stir feelings of insecurity, anxiety and, ultimately, jealousy – Othello's fatal flaw – resulting in the tragic deaths of the couple. Shakespeare's expert characterisation of Othello in many key scenes of the play skilfully reveals to the audience both his heroic and vulnerable qualities.

As the audience is introduced to Othello for the first time, he presents himself as a man of honour and dignity, demanding to be respected for his background and his past deeds. As Iago tells him to hide from Brabantio, the father of Othello's new wife Desdemona, Othello refuses stating that his reputation and honesty will stand up to any accusations. These are undoubtedly heroic qualities, however, the audience can begin to see his vulnerability in his unwavering faith in a man's outward appearance and reputation.

"My parts, my title, and my perfect soul  
Shall manifest me rightly."

Othello introduces himself to the audience as a noble character and a man who believes he deserves the respect of those around him. He is very proud of his "royal" background and believes that this should earn him the esteem that should come from such a position. He craves the regard of the Venetian nobility. Othello is proud of the services he has provided for the Venetian state and believes that he will be judged on their merits. His word choice exudes self-confidence, referring to his "parts," "title," and "perfect soul." Ultimately this demonstrates a flaw in Othello's character, an arrogance and belief that men are judged, and can be judged on their actions and reputation. This makes him susceptible to "honest" Iago, a man who openly admits, "I am not what I am." It is this vulnerability that Iago is able to capitalise upon, using his duplicitous nature to appear to advise Othello in his best course of action, all the while plotting against him.

As the play continues, Iago convinces Cassio that they can afford to celebrate the scattering of the Turkish fleet and the end of the conflict. Despite Cassio's protestations that he cannot cope with the effects of alcohol, Iago convinces him to have a drink. This leads to Cassio brawling with both Roderigo and Montano. Othello tries to display his heroic qualities and decisive leadership as he commands the men to stop. However, the audience can see another vulnerable quality in his character in the rash decisions he makes.

"I know, Iago,  
Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,  
Making it light to Cassio. Cassio, I love thee,  
But never more be officer of mine."

This is an early example of Iago gaining power over Othello. Othello believes Iago to be honest and is taken in by Iago's claim that he does not want to get Cassio in trouble. The dramatic irony of the phrase "mince this matter" is obvious. Othello believes that the story Iago tells is only part of the truth. This is correct, however, Othello believes the truth to be that Cassio has more involvement than is being told. The reality is that what Iago leaves out is his own meddling in affairs which lead to the brawl. At the end of this speech, one of Iago's aims has been achieved – to discredit Cassio in the eyes of Othello. His brief and bold judgement, "never more be officer of mine," is a show of authority by Othello which he believes demonstrates effective and authoritative leadership and sound judgement. However, here the audience can see that Othello is rash and quick to judgement, believing what he hears rather than discovering for himself. While his every command is obeyed and respect for him from other characters absolute at this point, the audience is introduced to a vulnerability which becomes increasingly important as the play progresses.

One of the most important scenes of the play is Act 3 Scene 3, where Iago manipulates Othello into believing that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. Iago uses subtle suggestions and exploits Othello's insecurities about his marriage to Desdemona, making Othello reach the conclusion of the affair on his own. Othello makes one last effort to fight off the idea that has begun to surface in his thoughts. He desperately attempts to convince Iago (and himself) that he is a man who judges based on what he sees, and is then able to make rational decisions. However, his earlier actions with Cassio and his faith in Iago show that these are qualities Othello does not have. It is also here that Othello's fatal flaw of jealousy is introduced.

"Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy [...]  
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;  
And on the proof there is no more but this:  
Away at once with love or jealousy!"

The dreadful irony of Othello's belief he would never "make a life of jealousy" is soon to play itself out on stage. His jealousy has been awoken by Iago's mere suggestion and word play, conveying to the audience his deep rooted insecurities. Othello again tries to suggest that he is a rational character who does not "doubt," but relies on what he can "see" and "prove." He tries to convince himself that it is this rational thinking that guides his decisions. However, he is actually rash and judges based on what he hears. He acts quickly as he believes this makes him appear authoritative. The last line of this speech suggests that Othello also believes he can be dispassionate and emotionless in disregarding his two defining emotions. Tragically, he can disregard neither and his jealousy overwhelms him forcing him to destroy his love.

Iago's plan to have Othello see Cassio with Desdemona's lost handkerchief works perfectly as Act 4 begins. Iago prompts Othello to hide himself while he questions Cassio about the affair. At that very moment Bianca enters and throws Othello's stolen handkerchief at Cassio. The proof Othello demanded is delivered. His rage is uncontrollable as he wishes to kill Cassio and Desdemona. His earlier heroic qualities and strength as a warrior are now being used against his own wife, a result of the jealousy that has been aroused by Iago.

"Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated."

Iago is now so confident in his hold over Othello he can even direct him in the manner of Desdemona's murder. Othello's sickening pleasure in response to this command is the thrice repeated "good," which suggests he is taking pleasure in the thoughts of his revenge. His madness is also demonstrated here with his reference to the murder being an act of justice. This idea is laden with dramatic irony as the audience is fully aware that both Desdemona and Cassio are completely innocent. The vulnerable qualities of Othello's character are now propelling him inescapably to the tragic climax of the play.

As the play comes to its tragic close, one more tragedy is heaped on the audience. Having already watched Desdemona and Emilia killed and the villain of the piece survive, Othello attempts to regain some of his lost reputation and pride before he himself commits suicide.

"Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme"

Othello attempts to regain some of his former pride and authority in his final speech. He begins by referring to his heroism for the state but quickly realises that those deeds are irrelevant. He asks for fairness in the picture that is painted, asking for the nobles to leave nothing out, but to blow nothing out of proportion. At last, Othello seems to recognise his flaws as a character. He refers to himself loving “not wisely, but too well,” clearly referring to the misplaced trust he put in Iago and the lack of faith he put in Cassio and Desdemona. He also recognises his fatal flaw of jealousy and realises the tragedy it has brought upon him. The audience clearly sees a character with heroic qualities who tragically has succumbed to his vulnerable characteristics, namely his faith in the honesty of men and his insecurity and jealousy surrounding his relationship with Desdemona.

“Othello” by William Shakespeare is a play where the eponymous central character is both heroic yet vulnerable. His heroic qualities of trust and honesty are exploited by the duplicitous villain, Iago, who takes advantage of the fact that Othello judges men on their outward appearance, just as he would on the battlefield. This makes him vulnerable to the devious schemes of Iago and allows the audience to see his fatal flaw of jealousy and the resultant tragedy that flaw brings to Othello and Desdemona.