

AQA English Literature A-level

Othello: Context

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What does context mean for your exam?

AO3

Writing about **context** and **background information** is the third of your five assessment objectives. Across the two papers, it counts for approximately **24%** of the marks so is not to be overlooked. Examiners are looking for you to demonstrate an “**understanding** of the **significance** and **influence** of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received”, i.e. the **relationship between the ideas** in the text and the **context** in which it was written.

Context can be a variety of different factors, including:

- Details about the **author's background** and **life**.
- The **historical context** in which they lived and wrote, and (if it is different) the historical context in which the text is set.
- How the text was **received** when it was first published or performed.
- **Literary contexts**, for example which **genre(s)** the author uses in the text. In *Othello* you could consider Shakespeare's use of **Greek tragedy**.
- The contexts in which a text is engaged with by **different audiences** through the ages. This can be especially useful for Shakespeare's plays, which are more than 400 years old. For example, the Victorians would have had a different opinion compared to contemporary audiences
- **Performance history** (for a play), for example how it would have been first staged, and various different performances through to the present day.

Context is assessed **throughout the paper**. It is important that you have a thorough knowledge of a text's context in order to understand it fully. This is especially true of Shakespeare's plays, which were written in the **late 16th** and **early 17th centuries**, a time very different to our own. It is important to understand what Shakespeare's original audience would have known or been thinking about as they watched the play, as these are the people for whom he was writing. This will give you a **subtler understanding** of the text, and allow you to make sense of some of the references within it.

AO3 Tip

The most important thing to remember about context in your exam essay is that it needs to be directly relevant, rather than 'bolted-on' to the end of a paragraph or essay. You should include relevant context throughout to illustrate and develop your answer to the question. The examiner doesn't want to read everything you know about Shakespeare and Jacobean England!



Background Information

Shakespeare's Life

Shakespeare is widely thought of as England's **most famous playwright** and poet ever to have lived. But despite his **global reputation** and **influence** on writing and culture around the world, relatively little is known about his background and personal life. He was born in **April 1564** in **Stratford-Upon-Avon** (his birthday is celebrated on the 23rd April, although the exact date is unknown) to glove-maker John Shakespeare and his wife, Mary. He would have attended the **grammar school** in his borough, where he would have learned **Latin**, and read some classical writers such as **Virgil** and **Ovid**, and studied some **drama**. We can see the influence of these writers in his plays and sonnets. When he was 18, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman from a nearby village. He died in 1616, also on 23rd April, aged 52.

We know that, at some unknown point, he went to **London** and had garnered a reputation as an established playwright by 1592. He wrote his plays for the acting troupe the **Lord Chamberlain's Men** (later the **King's Men** when their patron became King James I) and their leading actor **Richard Burbage**. He stayed with and wrote for this troupe for nearly 20 years. His plays are generally divided up into 3 genres: **Histories** (e.g. *Henry V*), **Tragedies** (e.g. *Othello*), and **Comedies** (e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The first recorded performance of *Othello* was in **1604**, and it is generally thought that it was written in **1603**.

The Renaissance Period

Theatre performances were a **very popular** form of entertainment in the late Elizabethan / early Jacobean periods, and **Elizabeth I** herself was a generous **patron**. Shakespeare's company was often invited to perform at court for her in the 1590s.

Shakespeare was writing during the **English Renaissance** period, which lasted from the 15th through to the mid-17th century. The Renaissance was a **cultural movement** which saw the flourishing of **Latin** and **Ancient Greek philosophies** and knowledge in Western Europe. Shakespeare draws on Renaissance ideas in his work. For example, he draws on **Greek** and **Roman classical writing** in his use of **genre** and **references**, and he explores the **psychology** of his characters in depth (this was also typical of the Renaissance period). The flourishing of literature and culture can also be seen in the very **vocabulary** of Shakespeare's writing: Many words and phrases are recorded in writing for the first time in Shakespeare's works. Although this does not necessarily mean that he coined these phrases himself, it does demonstrate the **development** and **flourishing of language** in this period.

Shakespeare's sources for *Othello*

Despite Shakespeare's fame as a playwright, he drew a lot of the inspiration for the plots of his work from older sources. The main story of *Othello* comes from ***Gli Hecatommithi*** by **Cinthio**, a collection of short stories written in **Italian** and first published in **1565**. It tells the story of **Disdemona** (the only named character) and a Moor captain. In this version, the Moor's Ensign falls in love with Disdemona and, when she rejects him, plots to tell the Moor that she has cheated



on him with the Corporal. The plot proceeds very similarly to that in Shakespeare's *Othello*, until in Cinthio's version the Moor kills Desdemona by beating her with a sand-filled stocking. The Moor and the Ensign turn on each other, and the former is tortured and then killed by Desdemona's relatives.

What does this say about Shakespeare's *Othello*?

You should consider which aspects of the story Shakespeare uses directly, and which he alters or adds in. We can conclude that the aspects Shakespeare adds in or alters are of **key importance**, and this could be very useful as **contextual evidence** in your essays. Shakespeare's Iago is far more **ambiguous**, and therefore seems more **evil**, than Cinthio's Ensign. Shakespeare gives more time to **Iago's soliloquies**, and although we never truly know his **motives**, it is clear that Shakespeare intended for Iago to be **bloodthirsty** and **merciless** for seemingly little reason.

Shakespeare fleshes out the plot by adding more **characters**, including **Brabantio** and **Roderigo**. The addition of Brabantio adds more **depth** to Othello's situation: Desdemona's father being entirely opposed to their marriage offers us another reason for Othello's **insecurities**, and a potential reason why he so easily succumbs to Iago's manipulations. The addition of Roderigo, on the other hand, adds more **depth** to Iago's character. It is another character for him to **manipulate**, and so we have a greater impression of Iago's **web of authority**, and the extent to which he will go to ruin Othello.

Textual history: different versions of the same play

The **First Folio** was published in **1623**, seven years after Shakespeare's death. It is a collection of **36** of his works, compiled by two of his friends, John Heminges and Henry Condell. Prior to this, some of Shakespeare's plays had been published in **quartos**, cheaper individual editions. However, not all of Shakespeare's plays were published individually and, without the First Folio, approximately half of them would have been lost.

You don't need to know a lot of contextual information about the different editions of the texts, but it is worth bearing in mind that **two separate versions** of *Othello* exist. The Folio edition is about **160 lines longer**, and we do not know why this discrepancy exists. Most editions that we read today follow the Folio version, although you may see notes in your copy of the text that points out where there is a difference with the Quarto edition.

Production history

Although Shakespeare's plays were enjoyed by **high society**, including the **monarch**, they were watched and loved by the **working classes** as well. At the **Globe Theatre** in London, those who could not afford a seat would pay one penny to stand in the pit of the theatre; these audience members are known as **'the groundlings'**. Whilst we read and understand Shakespeare from a **critical** and **academic** perspective, it's important to remember that the plays were primarily written to be watched and enjoyed by all.

Often, Shakespeare's plays feature a **comedic subplot** which would include **bawdy** and **crude jokes**, intended to entertain the groundlings and the lesser-educated audience members. These



scenes can also serve to **mimic** and **undermine** the main plot, and provide some **comic relief** from the main plot's intensity. However, this is not the case in *Othello* as the play remains **sombre** throughout, with an **intense focus** on Iago's evil manipulations and Othello's subsequent breakdown.

The first recorded performance of *Othello* was in **1604** at the **Banqueting House**, James I's London palace. It would also have been performed at the open-air Globe Theatre. There is a record of the play being performed by Shakespeare's company, **the King's Men**, in **1612** at the **wedding** of Princess Elizabeth (daughter of James I) and Frederick V. of Whilist little is known about the initial reception of the play, the fact that it was performed at this important wedding is a testament to its **popularity** and **success**.

The cast would have been entirely **male**, including the female roles which were played by **young boys**. The role of Othello was almost undoubtedly first played by **Richard Burbage**, the leading actor in Shakespeare's company. He would have performed in **black make-up** and a **wig** made of black lambswool. **Ira Aldridge** is the only actor of **African heritage** to have played Othello in Europe in the 19th century, and he did so several times. Otherwise, the role was taken by **white men** in make-up, for example in the early 19th century, English actor **Edmund Kean** took on the role wearing light brown make-up, suggesting an interpretation of Othello as **North African**. Only in the **20th century** and onwards did black actors more commonly take up the role, and that remains the case today.

The fact that the role of Othello, a character of **African origin**, was written by a **white Jacobean Englishman** for another white Englishman to portray wearing black make-up alters our perception of race in the play. This **undermines** the **credibility** of Othello's characterisation, and we question to what extent he is a **stereotype** of a Moor, or whether he is a depiction of a genuine black man. We do not know if Shakespeare knew any black or African people, or what stereotypes he and his audience believed about people of African descent. This can be an important factor for actors considering taking on the role today. **Hugh Quarshie**, who played Othello in the RSC's 2015 production, initially expressed his **hesitancy** about the role. He questioned whether he should "accept that a play written over 400 years ago by a white Englishman for another white Englishman in blackface make-up is an **authoritative** and **credible profile** of a **genuine black man**" (['Playing Othello'](#), [British Library](#)).

By the 21st century, there had been several different global takes on *Othello*. Indian director **Vishal Bhardwaj** produced a **Bollywood** version titled *Omkaara* in 2006, which is set in Western Uttar Pradesh. By transposing the play to an Indian setting, Bhardwaj was able to explore **colourism**, the **caste-system**, and **cultural** and **religious** differences in India. Othello and Desdemona are both Indian, but Desdemona is light-skinned whereas Othello is darker. White actor **Patrick Stewart** played Othello in an otherwise **all-black performance** in the United States in 1997. This version allows us to think about the text as a play about **outsiders** and **cultural difference**, rather than specifically **anti-blackness**. These different international adaptations of Shakespeare's text allow us to see it from **different perspectives** and in a new light.



Setting

Othello begins in **Venice**, but by Act II the action has moved to a Venetian war outpost in Cyprus. In England in the 16th and 17th centuries, Venice had a reputation as a **cosmopolitan** and **diverse** city, full of **wealth** and **political stability**.

Venice was a rare example of a **contemporary republican government** for Shakespeare's original audience. The **Republic** style was a **continuation** of the **Ancient Roman** tradition. There was a fascination among Renaissance viewers with the republic. This is because the end of the Tudor era was rapidly approaching and there was no indication of who would succeed the **heirless Elizabeth I**, so there was widespread interest in Elizabethan England with potential **alternative forms of rule**, and the successful and unique Republic of Venice therefore caught general public attention.

Venice was also known for the **diversity** of its population: it was home to people from a variety of **cultural** and **ethnic backgrounds**, including those like Othello who had **immigrated** and adopted Venetian (and Christian) values. It was a place bustling with **trade** and **opportunity**; although several **Ottoman-Venetian Wars** raged throughout the 16th century (one of which is the backdrop of *Othello*), there was still trade and cultural exchange between the Venetians and the Turks. This was another reason for Western European fascination with Venice: it was **geographically familiar**, being situated in Europe, but also **exotic** as it had close trading ties with North Africa and the Middle East.

In the minds of Shakespeare's English audience, Venice was therefore a place simultaneously associated with **exotic excitement** and **dangerous otherworldliness**. It seems **alluring** and almost **mystical** in its exoticism, but also a place on the **edge of 'civilisation'** and therefore something to be feared. We see this attitude in *Othello* as well, especially in Shakespeare's treatment of his protagonist. On the one hand, Iago uses **anti-black derogatory language** to describe him, but the white Venetian characters are also very intrigued by him and his backstory. I

Desdemona in particular listens "**with greedy ear**" to Othello's speech in Act I Scene III, in which he details "**the story of my life**". Othello repeatedly told the story of his past to Brabantio. Although the Venetians seem to **hate** and **fear** Othello, they are simultaneously **fascinated** by his backstory and '**exotic**' upbringing and experiences.

Why did Shakespeare set *Othello* abroad?

Venice is therefore a place which is both **familiar** and **exotic**, and in this respect it is an ideal setting onto which **English anxieties** and **preoccupations** can be **projected** and **explored**. Literary critic Andrew Hadfield called Venice "a critical utopian space", a seemingly ideal society where tensions are brewing beneath the surface ('Republicanism' in [The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare](#), 2012). This is certainly true: Othello is a senior military officer, so on paper is happy and successful despite being an **outsider**, but he is also the subject of **hate** from Brabantio and Iago. The **racism** and **fear** of outsiders that we witness in the play, such as Iago's derogatory language, is most likely a reflection of English fears and behaviours, as well as those of the Venetians.



Despite the fact that *Othello* features a set of Venetian characters, much of the play's action is actually set in **Cyprus**, at a **war outpost**. This setting is even further removed from the English audience, both **geographically** and **symbolically**. Whilst Venice sat at the **edge of 'civilisation'**, Cyprus was even more **unknown**, therefore more **dangerous**, and closer to the **Arab** and **Turkish** world. The further the play is removed from Western Europe, the more civilisation and honour break down.

Race

Our exploration of setting leads on to a discussion of **race** and **otherness**. Shakespeare uses Venice as a space in which he can explore the concerns and preoccupations of his own society, including **interracial** and **intercultural encounters**. For example, we can assume that the white Venetians' treatment of Othello would have mirrored English people's behaviour.

There are **records** of some Africans living in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example a **trumpeter** at the **court** of **Henry VII** who is pictured on the **Westminster Tournament Roll** of **1511**. Shakespeare (and his audience) therefore could have known some black people, although we are unsure whether he did or not. Although there were people of colour living in Tudor England, they were a very **small minority** and for the most part their lives and stories are **unknown**.

It is not possible to define Othello's race for certain, and it is questionable if this is something we should be attempting to do. Although today we might assume that the term '**Moor**' refers to an **Arab** inhabitant of **North Africa**, in Shakespearean England the term had numerous definitions and could also describe people from any region in Africa. In some senses, pinning down Othello's specific race is unimportant. His **precise origins** do not matter to the other characters: they are aware of his **Otherness**, and the very fact that he is not white and European is enough to set him fully apart from them.

He is repeatedly described as **black** throughout the play, most often by Iago. Remember that to Shakespeare's audience this does not necessarily mean he is of sub-Saharan African origin; to them, his blackness simply means that he is not white. In the 16th and 17th centuries, black could refer to both **morality** and **race**; white stood for **purity** and **innocence**, and black was the **antithesis**. For example, the quote "**when devils will the blackest sins put on**" (Act II Scene III) explicitly confirms the association in the audience's mind between morality and blackness because the very worst sins are the very "**blackest**". This association of **blackness with evil** is one reason why Othello and his 'otherness' are feared by white Venetian society.

Iago's references to Othello's blackness are therefore loaded with **moral undertones**: as well as describing his physical appearance, he is also calling him **evil**. Even the Duke of Venice defends Othello's marriage to Desdemona by saying "**Your son in law is far more fair than black**" (Act I Scene III). On the one hand, this suggests that the Duke has to **look past** Othello's **colour** in order to describe him as a good, moral person - he behaves as if he were "**fair**", i.e. white. This quote also indicates the constant **conflation** of **blackness** and **evil** that Shakespeare's audience as well as his characters would have assumed.



Othello is treated with a mixture of **respect**, **fear**, and **fascination** and this all plays into his race. Despite the fact that he is **respected** as a **military leader**, he is ultimately **purged** from the white European society to which he only ever partially belonged. But as an **ethnic minority**, Othello is also a source of **fascination** for the European characters. This is most strongly seen in his speech when he recounts his backstory in Act I Scene III: everyone **eagerly** listens to the story of **faraway** and **unknown** places.

Dramatic context

We should also consider how Moors and people of colour were generally depicted **on-stage** in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and to what extent the characterisation of Othello conforms to or contrasts this.

The general dramatic convention was that Moors were **menaces** intent on **destruction**, and when they appeared on stage it was seen as a **threat** to the **moral**, **social**, and **political** order. We see this in the character of **Aaron**, a Moor in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Aaron is a force of **pure evil** who takes pleasure in causing **pain** and **suffering**. He confesses "**Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly, / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed / But that I cannot do ten thousand more**" (*Titus Andronicus*, Act V Scene I). He is a **caricature** of **remorseless evil**, almost comically so in the **extremity** of his characterisation. This is, however, a **typical depiction** of Moors on the **Elizabethan stage**.

Othello's character is clearly starkly different from this: he is the play's **protagonist**, and initially is a **noble** and **honourable** man. In some ways Shakespeare's characterisation of him certainly contrasts a stereotypical depiction. However, we can still see **echoes** of this typical characterisation of a Moor in Othello, for example when he very quickly succumbs to a **jealous rage**, and ultimately **murders** his innocent, white, and pure European wife. It is up to you to decide and argue how you think Shakespeare characterises Othello: is he a noble man who is reasonably led astray by Iago's manipulations, or does he succumb to jealousy too easily because Shakespeare in part follows the typical characterisation of a Moor on the Elizabethan stage?

Religion: Christianity and Islam

Othello explores the relationship between **Christians** and **Muslims** in the **late 16th century**. It is set against the backdrop of the ongoing **wars** between the **Christian Republic of Venice** and the **Muslim Ottoman Empire** which raged throughout the 16th century and this is another key aspect of the play's religious elements.

We are informed at the beginning of Act II that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed by a storm, and so the Venetian forces have been successful. Shakespeare's source material for *Othello* was set in Florence rather than Venice / Cyprus, so his decision to set the play specifically during these wars was deliberate. This **religious conflict** is an important background to a play whose protagonist is a **convert** to Christianity from Islam. The wars are a subtle **reminder** of the **conflict** between Christians and Muslims, and yet another reminder of how Othello stands **apart** from his society. Although his fighting against the Ottoman Empire indicates his **dedication** to Christianity,



his **Muslim background** is another cause of the Venetians' subtle **distrust** of him. **Religiously-fuelled hatred** is perhaps another motive for Iago's destructive manipulations.

One other key concept of the Elizabethan / Jacobean period that is grounded in religion is the **Great Chain of Being**. This concept informs several of Shakespeare's works and it is the notion of a **hierarchy** of all creation, from God at the very top, down through the angels, to kings and other men, to animals, and then plants. In *Othello* specifically, this hierarchy informs Iago's **derogatory** descriptions of Othello. He frequently compares him to an **animal** ("**black ram**", "**Barbary horse**", "**the beast with two backs**" (Act I Scene 1)). Since we know that animals were considered **lower** than humans in the Christian hierarchy ordained by God, Iago perceives Moors and people of African descent to be **less than human** in his eyes, and in the eyes of God as well.

Women and Marriage

Women were **subordinates** to men during the 16th and 17th centuries, and we see this manifested in *Othello*. When they married, everything they owned became their husband's possession; wives themselves were even considered one of their possessions. Fathers were expected to choose a husband for their daughters, as Brabantio expects to do for Desdemona. He also considers her to be under his ownership and accuses Othello of being a "**foul thief**" (Act I Scene II) who has stolen her.

EXAM TIP

You can consider the position of women in society, and in a marriage, when answering a question on love and relationships.

Desdemona has few rights and is subordinate to her husband. In her first lines in the play, she says that she is "**bound**" to both her husband and her father, and owes him a "**duty**" (Act I Scene III). Although Desdemona is **strong-willed** and does **defy** Othello when convincing him to forgive Cassio, she is ultimately a **passive** character who is **powerless** in the face of her husband's anger.

Emilia is another important female character. She is even more **oppressed** than Desdemona: by her husband, her mistress, and to an extent Othello as well as she serves under him. She is **powerless** throughout most of the play. Despite her **distrust** of her husband - she knows that he is "**wayward**" (Act III Scene III) - she still takes Desdemona's **handkerchief** as he demanded because, as his wife, she is **bound** to him according to the social order. However, by the end of the play, Emilia speaks the **truth**. She **exposes** Iago's manipulations, insisting that "**I am bound to speak**" (Act V Scene II), even when he threatens and eventually stabs her. By the final Act of *Othello*, the normal social order has been so disrupted by Othello's murder of Desdemona, Emilia is now free to speak up for herself and to **contradict** the **patriarchal hierarchy**. However, her exposure of the truth comes too late to achieve any real change: Desdemona is dead, Othello kills himself in regret and grief, and Emilia herself is killed by Iago for her disobedience.

One other point to bear in mind when considering the position of women in society is the particular **stereotypes** of Venetian women. Venice was thought of as a city famous for the freedoms and the liberality it offered its inhabitants, and as a result of this reputation it was thought of as a place of **sexual freedom** as well. This manifests in *Othello* when the male characters are quick to assume that their wives are unfaithful: Othello quickly believes that Desdemona has cheated on him and in fact calls her the "**whore of Venice**" (Act IV Scene II), and Iago is also suspicious that Emilia has



slept with Othello. The reputation of Venice as a hub of prostitution and sexual freedom may be one contributing factor as to why they believe this.

