

Edexcel English Literature A-level

Othello: Literary Form

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What does literary form mean for your exam?

What is literary form?

'**Literary form**' is covered by **AO2**, which asks you to "**analyse** ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts". For this assessment objective, you are asked to focus on the **how**, rather than the **what**. The examiners are not looking for you to describe the characters or the plot of *Othello* - instead, they are looking for you to explain **how** and **why** the plot is written. For example, **how** does Shakespeare **create his characters**? How does he **stage** the play? How does he use different **genres**? Most importantly, what is the **effect** of this?

AO2 can include a variety of things, for example:

- **language analysis** and **techniques**
- the **type** of writing (e.g. sonnet, novel, play etc.)
- **structure**
- **genre**.

It is a good idea to learn some **keywords** to help you describe and explain features of a text in your answer, which we will be discussing later on.

AO2 should be **integrated** throughout your essay. You should aim to constantly **analyse** the text, focusing on how and why the author is doing something, and what the effect is, rather than simply what they are doing. By analysing the literary techniques, structure, and genre, you will elevate your exam answer.



Genres

Tragedy

The key genre that Shakespeare draws on in *Othello* is that of **Ancient Greek tragedy**. During the **Renaissance** period in which he was writing, **Ancient Greek** and **Roman** traditions flourished again throughout Europe. Shakespeare uses the conventions of Greek tragedy in several of his plays.

The play follows the typical plotline of a tragedy: a **striking** and **noble hero** suffers a **reversal of fate** due to a key **flaw** or **misjudgement**, which leads to **widespread suffering**. This usually culminates in his own **death** and the deaths of numerous other characters.

A tragic hero typically has a **hamartia**, a primary fatal flaw which is the cause of his downfall. Othello's hamartia is generally considered to be **jealousy**, which enables him to be tricked and manipulated by Iago into doubting Desdemona's faithfulness. This leads to him killing his wife and subsequently himself.

At the end of a classical tragedy, the hero experiences a moment of **anagnorisis**, in which he becomes aware of his mistakes and misjudgements. This is often followed by **catharsis**, an emotional release in which the protagonist realises that his downfall was brought about by his own actions and errors. This is a moment of **cleansing**, and of clearing the soul of wrongdoing; in **spectating** the play, the audience experiences a similar cleansing and feels a strong emotional release as well. This moment of **realisation** always comes **too late**, and this contributes to the tragedy of the situation: the hero is ready to amend but, due to his own actions, this is no longer possible.

Shakespeare's use of the **genre** of tragedy adds a sense of **inevitability** and **hopelessness** to *Othello*. We are aware of Othello's fate right from the beginning of the play: as the tragic protagonist, we know that he is **doomed**. This allows Shakespeare to play with **dramatic irony**, where the audience knows something the characters do not. For example, when Desdemona innocently and repeatedly defends Cassio to her husband, we know that she is sealing her fate and hardening his opinion against her. The audience's **foreknowledge** of how the events will play out increases the sense of tragedy, as we watch Othello make wrong decisions and succumb to Iago's deception.

Travel writing

Another genre that Shakespeare was strongly influenced by was **travel writing**. This was a widespread contemporary genre made popular by European travellers exploring previously unvisited lands and islands, for example the 'New World' of America. They would subsequently write down their experiences, often in a way which **embellished** them and which **exoticised** the people and animals who they encountered. Their excited accounts often **blurred** the line between the **imagination** and **reality**. This genre was strongly established by the time Shakespeare was writing in the late 16th Century; one of the most famous examples of Western travel writing is *The*



Travels of Sir John Mandeville, a medieval text published over 200 years before Shakespeare's birth.

Shakespeare most explicitly exploits the genre of travel writing in Othello's speech about his background (Act I Scene III). A key defining feature of the travel writing genre is that it presented itself as a **first-person eye-witness account**, but it drew on previous writing and **blended myth** with **fact**. Although Othello describes his own backstory, the fact that Shakespeare draws on the genre of travel writing makes us question to what extent he **embellishes** it. For example, Othello describes **wondrous** and **fictional-sounding** encounters, including **"Cannibals"** and **"Anthropophagi"**, **"most disastrous chances, / Of moving accidents by flood and field / Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach"**.

Shakespeare's inclusion of this genre in his play heightens the sense of **mystery** and **exoticism** that surrounds Othello. Even after describing his backstory, Othello remains **unknown**; we know very little about his origins as we do not believe that this story is entirely truthful. Travel writing was a genre based on **exoticising the unknown**, and this speech therefore exoticises Othello even further. We also have a sense that this speech is a **performance**: he has recounted it many times, and he tells it in a **fantastical** way to please the white Venetian audience who keenly listens to him.

Morality play

We can also see elements of the **morality play** genre in *Othello*. This genre originated in the **medieval** period and **taught Christian morals** via its plot. It told the story of a **sinner's journey** from **damnation** through to **repentance** and **redemption**, and along the way he would be **tempted** by **personifications** of **Good** and **Evil**, for example angels and demons. Othello's story is clearly different because it does not have a happy ending of redemption but instead ends in his tragic death. However, Shakespeare nonetheless draws on elements of the morality play genre.

Several of the characters can be said to **symbolise Goodness**. For example, Desdemona is associated with **whiteness** and **purity**, and when she pleads with Othello to forgive Cassio she is encouraging him to show **Christian mercy**. On the other hand, Iago (who is an **embodiment** of **Evil** throughout the play) has **orchestrated** Cassio's demise and **manipulates** Othello, drawing out his **jealousy** and **aggression**. Furthermore, in Act III Scene III when Othello is convinced of Desdemona's infidelity, Iago again represents the forces of **Evil vying** for Othello's soul, whereas **Othello's conscience** represents the forces of **Good** which are attempting to convince him to stay true to his wife. Othello is, of course, ultimately tempted by the lure of evil, and he has no chance of repentance.

Whilst none of the forces of Good and Evil in the play are direct agents of God or the Devil as they are in a medieval morality play, we can certainly see the influences of this genre in Shakespeare's writing. He uses Desdemona, Othello, and Iago to **externalise** the deliberation which is occurring in Othello's mind between staying true to Desdemona (i.e. staying good) and succumbing to a jealous rage (i.e. falling to sin and evil).



Structure

Othello consists of **five acts**. This is typical of a tragedy; across the 5 acts, we track the tragic hero's **rise**, followed by a **reversal of his fortunes** (usually in Act III), leading to his **fall** throughout Acts IV and V, and **culminating** in his **death** at the end of the play.

There are some key **repetitions** across the play that create **dramatic parallels** and draw our attention to how rapidly relationships and characters have deteriorated:

- In Act I, Othello is on **trial** and defends himself and his marriage to the Venetian senators, but by Act IV he is the one who **judges** and **cross-examines** his wife.
- During Act II, Othello and Desdemona run off to bed to **consummate** their marriage. The next time that we see Desdemona in bed, she sleeps in the same wedding sheets but Othello **kills** her.
- The word "**honest**" is repeated **52 times** throughout the play. It is most frequently used by Othello as an **epithet** to describe Iago: "**honest Iago**". Iago also uses it to describe himself, for example "**honest as I am**" (Act II Scene I). There is a sad **dramatic irony** when Othello repeatedly calls Iago honest, as he is utterly convinced of his honesty and cannot see the **deception** that he audience is privy to.

The play narrows as it progresses: it opens in **Venice**, then moves to **Cyprus**. However, the **external plot** of the Venetian-Ottoman War is cut out and the play's focus ultimately comes down to a single **bedroom**. As Othello becomes increasingly **obsessed** with his relationship and with Desdemona's behaviour, all outside forces become **insignificant**. The setting becomes **claustrophobic** for the audience as well as for the characters.

Frequently, Shakespeare's plays feature a **subplot** which **widens** the **scope** and **relieves** some of the **intensity** of the main plot, for example the story of Edgar and Edmund in *King Lear*. However, there is no subplot in *Othello* and the action is instead intensely focused on Iago's manipulations and Othello's reaction to them. This also heightens the sense of **claustrophobia**, because there are no outside forces or interactions to alleviate some of the **dramatic tension** and **intensity**.

We can also consider structure in terms of **how much characters speak**. If one character is particularly **prominent** in a scene, it gives us an impression of their **dominance**. Iago is **structurally dominant** throughout the play. Out of all the characters, he has the most **on-stage** time. Although Othello and Iago both have **soliloquies**, the latter has notably several more. As a result, Shakespeare creates an **impression** of his **power**. His on-stage time **corresponds** to his **importance** and **authority** in the plot.

EXAM TIP

The soliloquy is a dramatic convention in which a character addresses the audience directly, used in Shakespeare's plays to externalise a character's motives and thoughts. Both Othello and Iago are given soliloquies, offering us an insight into the minds of both the victim and the perpetrator. This adds dramatic intensity, as we can observe how Othello reacts to Iago's manipulations. Furthermore, revealing Iago's plans to the audience creates dramatic irony and this heightens our impression of the tragedy of the play, as we watch the inevitable play out.



Language

In your exam answer, it is important to try to always **analyse** language and techniques that Shakespeare is using, for example the **imagery** and **metaphors**. There are also a few general key points to remember about the type of language used in *Othello*.

Words are particularly important in this play because it is Iago's **manipulation of language** and his use of **false words** which lead to Othello's fall. Othello takes Iago's words too **literally**, and **succumbs** to his **deception**.

Shakespeare **constructs** the characters through language, so we can look at what the characters' language and ways of speaking says about them.

For example, much of Othello's speech in the first half of the play is in **blank verse**. This is **unrhymed** lines of poetry which are written in **iambic pentameter**. This means that each line is made up of **10 syllables** (5 sets of 2) and the **stress** as we read these lines is '**dee-DUM dee-DUM**'. For example:

**“And little of this great world can I speak,
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause This measured”** (Act I Scene III).

Each line consists of **10 syllables**. Othello's use of this **measured** and **poetical** form creates an impression of a character who is **stately** and **dignified**. His speech is **elevated** and **authoritative**, as each line is **evenly measured** and the pattern of 'dee-DUM' stresses across the line **steadies** the **pace**. This **impressive** and **powerful** speech is appropriate of a tragic hero at the beginning of the play; he is powerful and dominating.

The **breakdown** of the poetic blank verse as the play progresses **mirrors** Othello's own **mental breakdown**. His sense of self is **fractured** when he believes his wife has cheated on him, and so his language also becomes fractured, for example:

**“--Handkerchief--confessions--handkerchief!--To
confess, and be hanged for his labour;--first, to be
hanged, and then to confess.--I tremble at it.”** (Act IV Scene I)

Othello is no longer stately and dignified, but he **breaks down** and struggles to think clearly. This is represented by the breakdown of his language.

The relationship between Desdemona and Othello **deteriorates** when they can no longer trust or understand the language that the other speaks. For example, Desdemona asks her husband **“what doth your speech import? / I understand a fury in your words. / But not the words”** (Act IV Scene II). The breakdown of understanding and trust between them is what leads to Desdemona's death. She is **smothered**: Othello covers her mouth and nose and she is no longer able to speak. This death is **symbolic** of how she is **silenced** because her husband no longer believes the words that she speaks.



Language is also very important to Iago's character. He frequently slips between **prose** and **verse**, easily **adapting his linguistic style** to suit different audiences and purposes. We never really fully understand Iago because his language is constantly **shifting** throughout the play. He easily **manipulates** his **language** and his **style of speaking**, just as he easily manipulates several characters. He is a **slippery** and **untrustworthy** character, and Shakespeare portrays this through the way that he speaks. For example, his **prosaic** language with Roderigo is **blunt** and **persuasive**: **"If thou dost, I shall never love thee after. Why, thou silly gentleman!"** (Act I Scene III). His **poetic language** with Othello is more **elevated**: **"Though I perchance am vicious in my guess, / As, I confess, it is my nature's plague..."** (Act III Scene III). Iago is also manipulative in his use of **silence** and **reluctance** to speak as well. By feigning reluctance to speak the truth, he catches Othello's intrigue, for example saying **"You cannot [...] Nor shall not"** know his thoughts (Act III Scene III).

