

Love through the ages: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 1, Section A)

This resource is an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 1.

Paper 1, Section A, Band 4

Sample question

Read the passage from 'Othello' provided below, and respond to the following:

How does Shakespeare present aspects of love in this passage?

Examine the view that, in this passage and elsewhere in the play, Desdemona is presented as a 'typically naïve young woman whose love is little more than hero worship'.

Sample response

The extract is taken from Act 1, Scene 3 of the play. It is an important extract in the play as it is the pivotal moment when Desdemona makes the decision to travel to Cyprus, a country struck by war with Othello, ultimately deciding the young couple's tragic fate.

At the start of the extract we see Othello seeking to ensure that Desdemona receives the best treatment whilst he is away. He says: "I crave fit disposition for my wife". On one hand we could infer from this that he deeply loves Desdemona. This is supported by the fact that he says "I love the gentle Desdemona" earlier in the play when he tries to prove to Brabantio his love for Desdemona. On the other hand it could be argued that the fact he is so eager to leave his wife to go to war so soon after their marriage suggests that he cares more about his identity as a soldier than his love for Desdemona. We learn in the play that Othello is a mercenary soldier paid to kill and it is in his nature to be violent. In Act 3 he starts to get confused between his identities as a lover and a soldier, saying "farewell" to all of his wrong things.

In addition, we see Brabantio's paternal love for Desdemona in this extract. Near the beginning of the play we learn that he is distraught at the news that Desdemona has married Othello. An example of this is when Roderigo tells him that Desdemona and Othello are "making the beast with two backs". He does not seem to believe that Othello is the right husband for his daughter Desdemona.

and says, when the Duke suggests that Desdemona should stay at her father's house whilst he is away: "I'll not have it so".

Furthermore, Desdemona's explanation in the extract of why she should travel to Cyprus with Othello could be said to support the suggestion that she is young and naïve and that her love for Othello is little more than hero-worship. She suggests that her love for Othello is genuine, and that she looks past his ethnicity seeing his "honours" and "valiant parts". Throughout the play Desdemona and Othello are subjected to a lot of discrimination with characters like Iago questioning whether Desdemona can love "the Moor". This links to the fact that, at the time, black men would have been seen as lower class citizens. For this reason it would have been frowned upon for a black man and a white woman to marry like Othello and Desdemona. However, it could be argued that the fact that she seems to admire Othello's good qualities so much suggests that she idolises him. And her love for him is more hero-worship than romantic.

In addition, the suggestion that Desdemona does not really love Othello is supported in the extract by the fact that she seems to be attracted to the excitement of war, a thing normally only accessible to men. She argues that, if she is left behind "a moth of peace" whilst he goes to war, the "rites for which" she first was attracted to him will be denied to her. On the other hand, words such as "bereft" support the fact that she loves Othello: "my downright violence and storm of fortunes may trumpet to the world". Here she seems to be acting strong and standing up for what she believes in. However, we could infer from this that she is being very naïve.

At the end of the extract, after the decision has been made that Desdemona will accompany Othello to Cyprus, the audience starts to feel a sense of tension. Desdemona refers to Othello as "my lord" which supports the suggestion that she seems to worship him. However, it could be argued that she is so deeply in love with him that she does not know what she is doing. This moment in the couple's relationship could be seen as significant, as it is the start of the downfall of Othello and the couple's relationship. This links to the fact that the play is a tragedy and it is typical of a tragedy to have a high-ranking character that late falls down as a result of their hamartia which is often hubris.

Examiner commentary

This is a Band 4 answer, lower rather than middle. It is coherent and thorough overall and clearly addresses both bullet points of the question. It is certainly shaped and often purposeful. There are some slight lapses in coherence at times however.

A01- This answer demonstrates a logical and thorough argument. Ideas are debated with some convincing support and depth. Expression is accurate and there is some appropriate use of terminology. Occasionally quotations do not convincingly support points or need more development.

A02- There is some thoroughness in understanding of and engagement with authorial methods. Language and structure are effectively analysed in places. Although there is relatively limited reference to the dramatic elements, this is a play to be staged.

A03- A thorough and coherent consideration of significant contexts such as gender, class, setting and race begins to emerge.

A04 and A05- There is some evidence of a logical and consistent connection to the tragic genre and there is a thorough engagement with the debate set up in the task. The way the candidate sustains focus on the critical view is a clear strength of this answer.