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

Below you will find 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**

Throughout the play Othello, Shakespeare presents many different aspects of love between the characters, especially romantic and dutiful. In this extract, there is clear evidence to show that Shakespeare portrayed the love between Othello and Desdemona as romantic due to the idealistic tone they use when addressing each other. Many would argue, though, that Desdemona is presented as naïve and typically young, and therefore her love little more than 'hero-worship'.

Shakespeare presents the idea of romantic love in this extract through the ways in which Desdemona and Othello address each other. Desdemona describes Othello as her “most gracious Duke”. This is the first way he is addressed in the extract and therefore creates a positive image of him. The adjective “gracious” has connotations of heaven, which was highly regarded in Shakespeare’s times due to their reliance on religion. This adjective shows how much Desdemona loves Othello, as she has described him in the highest way possible, and this is an example of romantic love. This is then reinforced by the next line which describes Othello as “prosperous”, another adjective which suggests Desdemona’s high opinion of her husband. Some may argue that this shows how young and naïve Desdemona is, as she has referred to him by his title of ‘duke’, which would suggest that she has idealised him because of his status, and not because of their love. This could be backed up by the fact that Othello explained that Desdemona fell in love with him because of his ‘stories’, instead of for him.
Othello uses heavenly lexis throughout the passage when talking of love and of Desdemona. “And heaven defend your good souls” is one example of this. Shakespeare presents love as being something that has connections with heaven or religion. This idea is used to present romantic love between Othello and Desdemona as it is “heavenly” and has connotations with religion. Another example of heavenly lexis is “When light-winged toys of feathered Cupid”. This reference to Cupid again implies romantic love, as love produced by Cupid is idealised.

Another aspect of love presented by Shakespeare is paternal love. Brabantio is shown in this extract as wanting the best for Desdemona, because he loves and cares for her. When Brabantio says “I'll not have it so”, he is doing what he believes is best for his daughter, and as Othello is black, and therefore lower in the divine order of being, depriving her of the marriage is what he thinks will be best for her. On the other hand, Desdemona goes against her father’s wishes when she says “like my mother” she will choose the marital love over the paternal love with her father, disagreeing with the idea that she is naïve and her love is only ‘hero-worship’.

Shakespeare presents the ‘marital’ aspect of love in this extract. When Othello and Desdemona get married, they promise to stay together until death, and this promise is reinforced when Desdemona says that if Othello is to “go to war”, then “let me go with him”, proving that her marital love is true. Not only does Desdemona see “Othello’s visage in his mind”, which implies romantic love or perhaps lust, but she is willing to sacrifice for him. On the other hand, many would argue that Desdemona’s willingness to follow Othello when he leaves for war proves her innocence and how naïve she is, as it isn’t a practical or sensible idea or action, later on in the play.

Shakespeare shows how love conformed to the patriarchal society he lived in. Desdemona is forced to ask her father for permission to be with Othello, as in Shakespearean times, women did not have the right to decide for themselves as they belonged to their father. Also, Desdemona continually refers to Othello by his status, “my lord”, “most gracious duke”, proving that he has power and authority over her due to the fact that he is not only a man, but because he is of high status. Othello says “let her have your voice”, where the declarative “her” proves that the men in the passage hold control over Desdemona, even though they both love her.

Another way in which Shakespeare shows a link between love and society is the use of the word “moor”. This derogatory term used to describe black people shows the way in which society affects the way that those in love are perceived. Othello and Desdemona’s love is restricted by the fact that Othello is black, because their society ranks black people below white people. Shakespeare shows that even though Desdemona is accepting of Othello, as she openly talks of his appearance and refers to him as “the Moor”, it is clear that this factor still affects their relationship, as they’re restricted. Many would argue that this
shows independence, as Desdemona has fought society’s expectations and boundaries because of her love for Othello, proving she is not naive.

Shakespeare has presented many different aspects of love between the characters, mainly romantic love between Desdemona and Othello through heavenly lexis, but also suggests how love was perceived and restricted by the harsh boundaries of society and its expectations. Othello and Desdemona, in this passage and throughout the play, push through these boundaries, proving their independence and determination, and also the strength of their love which is not just ‘hero-worship’.

Examiner Commentary

This is an inconsistent response. There are perceptive and assured aspects to the answer suggesting Band 5 qualities, but the persistent misreading of Desdemona’s use of language is a serious misunderstanding. On several occasions the candidate misreads Desdemona’s references to the Duke as references to Othello. The candidate fails to see that Othello and Desdemona are seeking public approval from both the Duke and Brabantio.

On balance, this answer is placed in the middle of Band 4.

AO1– The argument is mostly logical, thorough and coherent. There are mature and assured aspects to the answer. It is accurately written using appropriate register and terminology.

AO2– There is some thorough understanding and engagement of authorial methods as demonstrated in the exploration of language and structure. A greater sense of this as a drama extract would be helpful.

AO3– There is some thorough and coherent application of contexts such as gender, genre and race. Discussion of the latter can be a little simplistic at times.

AO4 and AO5– The candidate shows a logical and consistent awareness of connections to other love texts in their approach to AO4. There is also a thorough and engaged approach to the debate set up in the task.