

✕ Refers to links on www.crossref-it.info

Othello: (b) Structure, pace and tension

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** To explore the play's structure and consider the devices Shakespeare employs to build and maintain pace and tension.
 - ❖ **Opening exercise:** Use **Student worksheet b)i Tragic structure** (ideally enlarged to A3) to talk students through the structure of a tragedy
 - Students then add the key events from each act of *Othello* onto the diagram.
 - To what extent does *Othello* fit the expected model of a tragic play?
 - ✕ *Othello* > The structure of Othello > The shape of a tragedy)
 - ❖ **Textual examination:** Explain that *Othello* is celebrated for its capacity to continuously capture the audience's attention. Unlike other Shakespearean tragedies, the time scale is short (some argue as little as thirty-six hours), and the pace is fast, with scenes full of intrigue and events which move the plot forward. Its playing time is also shorter than other 'great' tragedies - around three hours, whereas *King Lear* lasts four and *Hamlet* five (uncut)! *Othello* contains changes of setting, plotting, extreme emotion and excitement for the audience.
 - ✕ *Othello* > The structure of Othello > The changes of location and pace
 - Which scenes in particular engage the audience and why? Take suggestions.
 - Allocate (some or ideally all of) the following scenes to groups/pairs of students, and ask them to consider:
 1. Where on the Tragic structure diagram does the scene come, and therefore what tension/emotion should we expect from it?
 2. Which events in the scene create particular interest/emotion/pace/tension for the audience?
 3. How might an audience respond to the scene?
- Act 1, Scene 1 (opening scene, darkness, plotting, elopement, threats to the title character)
 - Act 1, Scene 3 (threat of war, immediate action/movement needed, relationship between Othello and Desdemona, more plotting)
 - Act 2, Scene 3 (drunken fighting, Iago's plots start to work)
 - Act 3, Scene 3 (Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's adultery, handkerchief dropped, Othello vows revenge)
 - Act 4, Scene 1 (Iago tortures Othello, Othello has a fit, Othello plans to murder Desdemona)
 - Act 4, Scene 2 (Othello confronts and insults Desdemona)
 - Act 4, Scene 3 (willow scene)
 - Act 5, Scene 2 (end scene, Iago arrested, multiple deaths)
- ✕ *Othello* > Synopses and commentaries
 - Feed back to add detailed notes onto the Tragic structure diagram.
 - Discuss the emotional demands of the play on the audience (for example,
 - From the first scene there are threats to Othello's marriage
 - From the first act there is urgency and a quick pace is set and a new setting
 - From Act 3, Scene 3 onwards Iago's plans seem to be working and Othello is on a downward spiral
 - Acts Four and Five are full of tension and high emotion.)

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- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** In pairs/small groups, discuss examples - and the effects - of the structural features below, and especially how they affect the audience's experience of watching the play:
 - Use of parallels (Othello/Iago, Desdemona/Emilia)
 - Use of contrasts (personal/private, black/white, loyalty/disloyalty, order/disorder)
 - Use of repetition (themes of jealousy, betrayal, patterns of language)
 - Use of subplots (Roderigo, Cassio, Bianca)
 - Use of soliloquies
 - ✕ Othello > The structure of *Othello*
 - Feedback to create a class mind-map of the structural techniques Shakespeare employs and the effects created.
- ❖ **Recreative task:** The script skips over several events mentioned in the plot, often to maintain pace, for example:
 - Othello and Desdemona's wedding
 - The journeys to Cyprus
 - Cassio's developing relationship with Bianca
 - Brabantio's death.
 - Working in groups, students create a 'missing scene'. Present this to the class
 - Discuss the impact on the play's overall pace and structure should the scene be included
 - Consider why Shakespeare decided not to show the events to the audience.
- The conventions of tragedy
- The impact and message Shakespeare's final scene has.
- ❖ **Critical task:** Plan or write an essay addressing the following:
 - 'The most finely crafted of Shakespeare's tragedies'. Explore the ways in which Shakespeare has structured and arranged *Othello* for maximum interest and excitement for the audience.
- ❖ **Extension task:** Research and compare how other tragedies use structure, specifically:
 - What was the classical (Aristotle's) model for the structure of a tragedy?
 - How does this compare to *Othello*?
 - To what extent does *Othello* fit with Aristotle's idea of the unities?
 - ✕ Impact of classical literature > Tragedy, comedy and the unities
 - What can you find out about the structure of other Shakespearean tragedies, and how do they compare to *Othello*?
 - How do modern tragedies differ from the Shakespearean model of tragedy?
 - ✕ Repositories > A-Z: General definitions > Tragedy