Coursework Exemplars

English Literature

AS unit 6ET02

Candidate 1

COMPARE THE COURTSHIP OF KATE AND MARLOW WITH THAT OF BEATRICE AND BENEDICK.
WHY DO THESE HEROINES STILL APPEAL TO A MODERN AUDIENCE?

Kate Hardcastle is the heroine and Marlow is the hero of the play '*She Stoops to Conquer*' by Oliver Goldsmith. Kate is a smart intelligent young woman who is able to manipulate the circumstances that she has been put into with Marlow, who is a shy, stuttering, reserved man in front of ladies of the same class as him. However, in front of a lower class of woman he is as sly as a fox in amongst the hens. Beatrice is a main character in '*Much Ado About Nothing*' by Shakespeare. She is an intelligent, sarcastic young woman who is always having arguments with Benedick, who is an intelligent, sarcastic young man, and they argue so much because they are made for each other but don't realize it. The reason both of these young woman still appeal to a modern audience is because both are smart, both use sarcasm in witty jokes and neither of them fit into the traditional idea of the heroine.

The courtship between Kate and Marlow has been set up for them by Mr Harcastle, Kate's father, and Sir Charles Marlow who is Marlow's father. It was very usual for parents to arrange the marriage of their children, sometimes even against the children's wishes, woman who had a marriages arranged for them by their parents do not have to go through with marrying the man if they do not want to. They had the right of veto, so they didn't have to marry, but parents could still put an enormous amount of pressure on their daughter to marry what they saw as a suitable husband. Unusually for the time Mr Hardcastle isn't forcing Kate to marry Marlow, he only wants her to give him a chance. Marlow goes to Mr Hardcastle's home intending to meet with Kate, but he and his companion Hastings get lost on their travels and end up meeting Tony Lumpkin, Mr Hardcastle's step-son. He sends them to Mr Hardcastle's house after convincing them that it is not a house, but an inn:

"You do, do you? – Then let me see. – What if you go on a mile further, to the Buck's Head; the old Buck's Head on the hill, one of the best inns in the whole country? (Act 1 Scene 2: 148-151)

So the two men set off and eventually reach the house under the impression that it is an inn and meet Mr Hardcastle – who Marlow and Hastings believe to be the landlord. After some time Mr Hardcastle is appalled at the ignorance and impudence of both Marlow and Hastings, and reaches the decision that Marlow is not fit for his daughter.

Kate is the kind of young woman who would not be forced into marrying any man that she did not want to and her father isn't the kind of man that would force her to do so, but he does want her to marry a man that he approves of - so they have reached the agreement that he shall choose suitable, possible husbands, Kate will meet with the young gentlemen and decide whether or not she likes him or not.

The problem Kate faces because of Marlow's two sides is that she doesn't like the calm, reserved side of him but her father does – she likes his other side where he isn't reserved and acts like himself, but her father doesn't like that side of him.

Her father says that he will not allow her to marry Marlow if the side that he sees of him is what he is really like, while Kate says that she will not marry him if the reserved side of him is what he is really like.

"If he be what he has shown himself, I'm determined that he shall never have my consent"
(Act 3, scene 1:57-58

"And if he be the sullen thing I take him, he shall never have mine"
(Act 3, scene 1: 59-60

This quote shows the disagreement about what Marlow is like. This is when Kate comes up with the plan to dress up and pretend to be a servant in the inn and encourage Marlow's other side. Her father does not approve of the way he sees Marlow behaving when he thinks Kate is a servant. Kate is able to resolve this problem she has with Marlow's two sides by then pretending to be a poor relative of the family. She manages to make Marlow fall in love with her; at that time someone of Marlow's social position would not be able to marry a woman of a lower class than himself without losing the respect of his peers and possibly his family. However, Marlow says that he is willing to suffer that. At this moment Kate and the audience are able to find out what he is truly like because he finally says that he will marry her, even if she is poor, which suits everybody and we assume they live happily ever after.

In '*Much Ado About Nothing*' by Shakespeare, Beatrice and Benedick aren't like Kate and Marlow for they hadn't met in the play whiles Beatrice and Benedict already know each other very well and spend a lot of time together exchanging verbal insults with one another. It is obvious from the beginning that the two of them are meant for each other as they are so alike – but they do not see it until they are set up with each other by the other characters.

"But are you sure that Benedick loves Beatrice so entirely?"
(Act 3, scene 1, lines 36-37 on page 40)

This quote shows that Ursula is speaking of how much Benedick loves Beatrice so that Beatrice can overhear them speaking and assume that Benedick is in love with her, while Claudio, Don Pedro and Leonato speak to Benedick of how much Beatrice loves him – and that is the plan to try and get them both to admit they love each other.

Both Beatrice and Benedick have independent personalities and both find the ideas of marriage ludicrous, but it is this similarity that will make them perfect for each other as they will never get bored of each other because they disagree over everything and this will allow them debate with each other over every little detail of their chosen subject. Benedick and Beatrice need each other - they would get bored very quickly and somewhat lonely if they didn't have each other around, even if they only were arguing. Their arguing is what puts much of the humour into the play for all they do is trade insults which when understood without needing to be explained can be very humorous.

"I wonder that you still be talking, signor Benedick; nobody marks you."
(Act 1, scene 1, lines 108-109 on page 8)

This quote shows that they aren't really paying any attention to anybody else because they are concentrating on arguing with each other so much, so if one wasn't there to argue with the other, they would get bored very quickly and begin to miss each other, but they would deny this fact with everything they had.

The problems the couple face with each other is that they do not believe in marriage, they do not believe that they like each other and when they admit that they love each other, Beatrice decides that she will only marry Benedick if he duels with Claudio for what he has done to Hero – and because Benedick does love her and wants to marry her, he agrees to challenge Claudio to duel.

"It is in my scabbard; shall I draw it?"
(Act 5, scene 1, lines 124 on page 76)

This quote which is said to Claudio shows that he is prepared to draw his sword from his scabbard and use it against Claudio, even though they were best friends – this is what Benedick is prepared to do for Beatrice.

The problems that they had were resolved when the Friar came up with a plan to say that Hero had died and dress her up to say that she was the son of Leonato and was Hero's cousin when it is actually Hero and then allow her to marry Claudio, which is how the duel was resolved. Then the final problem was to convince Claudio to marry Leonatos daughter Hero, which he does; to make up for falsely accusing Hero and causing her death. . The event that sealed Beatrice and Benedick into getting married was the letters that contained there love for each other, which were when they finally say that they will have each other, and even now they say it they will have each other out of pity for each other trying to keep their pride.

"A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity."

This quote shows even when they are finally admitting that they love each other they are still trying to keep their pride and still find time and pleasure in the exchanging of their sarcastic insults.

In conclusion these two young women still appeal to a modern audience because of their witty, sarcastic remarks to other characters in the play, for their negligence to let a man control them and also because neither of them fit into the traditional idea of the heroine roll – and that is a major part of the humour in both plays.

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INT: Today we are interviewing the two actresses who play Kate Hardcastle and Constance Neville in the recent National Theatre revival of Goldsmith's "*She Stoops to Conquer*", directed by Max Stafford -Clark. Both Monica Dolan, playing Kate and Fritha Goodey, playing Constance said they enjoyed playing these parts despite the difficulty behind their characters background.

You both seem to be full of energy today. Some of the audience seemed to feel that Kate was portrayed as a rather girlish character. They expected her to be more independent. Why was it decided to play Kate like that, Monica?

Monica: It was to show that although she was a very intelligent young woman, she was also very feminine. For example when Mr Hardcastle was describing Marlow to Kate, I thought that she should be very feminine at that point of the play because she is thinking about her future husband.

INT: Fritha, how much of a challenge did you find it playing Constance Neville?

Fritha: Well, it was a big challenge, I wanted to try and portray Constance as a main character and not just a secondary character to Kate. I did this by portraying her as being more independent and by her refusing to give into Mrs Hardcastle's control.

INT: Yes. I think you achieved that. Monica what was the hardest part of playing Kate Hardcastle?

Monica: It was definitely putting on the Northern accent and doing so without laughing that I found the most difficult, but lots of hours practising it made it much easier to do when it was time to do the play.

INT: I was going to ask if that was difficult or not. What do you think of the other actor's performances in the play?

Monica: Their performances were brilliant, we were getting ready behind stage listening to what they were doing and we just couldn't help but laugh.

INT: So that was the reason for the bad hairstyles. Our final question of the interview, it's quite impressive that a play written four hundred years ago is still found funny by a modern audience. Why do you think that is?

Monica: I think the two characters Kate and Constance still appeal to a modern audience because of their independence, and they do things in the play that people do in every day lives that are found funny like when Kate is pretending to be a maid to find out what Marlow is really like. Many people want to find out what their future partners are like before they get intimate with them.

INT: True. Well that concludes our interview with Monica Dolan and Fritha Goodey who had a very tough time playing Kate and Constance in the play "She Stoops to Conquer", but they still managed to do a very good job with it. Thank you very much ladies.

Monica: Thank you.

Fritha: Yes, thank you.

INT: Tune in next week to find out who we will interview. Goodbye and see you then.

Moderator's commentary

The candidate's narrative approach in the Explorative Study means that very low marks are achieved across all the assessment objectives. There is an attempt to capture the register in the Creative Critical Response but, again, there is barely any interpretation of the text itself.

Moderator's marks

Explorative Study
AO1: 3

AO2: 2

AO3: 8

AO4: 4

Creative Critical Response

AO1: 4

AO4: 3

Total 24/80

Candidate 2

In response to literary texts studied and relative interpretations, explore the portrayal of 'outcasts', informed by the contexts in which they were written and received.

Using the "Merchant of Venice" as the core dramatic piece; "The Tempest" to provide contrast, comparison and illumination; and a further text representing critical or cultural comment.

Further Text: Shylock's Physical Interpretation [attached]

Shylock is an antagonist instantly burdened by his Jewish values. Cultural divisions provide Shylock cannot socially involve with Christian practices (I.iii.26-31) and hostility existed mutually: "I hate [Antonio] for he is a Christian" (I.ii.34). The Christian Church publicly endorsed religious anti-semitism in the Elizabethan era, by virtue of the belief that Jews were collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. At writing "The Merchant of Venice" [estimated 1596-98] most Jews had been since expelled from England; with those remaining required by law to conform outwardly to Christianity. Jonathan Miller's production accurately exhibits his societal status as an outcast. Lecturer Emma J. Smith construes his suffering as 'ill-disguised contempt', referring to a refusal by Antonio and Bassanio to shake his outstretched hand. Political criticism considers the impossibility of 'tolerance and equal, permanent status' of Jewry through such upheld prejudice. By contrast Caliban in "The Tempest" is, through action, a deserving outsider. Caliban is a 'deformed, half human' who lacks moral principle and ultimately his endeavour to rape Miranda determines the transition. Formerly Prospero valued his advice: post-exile he is informed of "all the qualities o' th' isle" (I.ii.339) necessary for survival. Withal in Elizabethan society Jewish economic power was, according to Dimont, 'the most important segment' in international trade and consequent rise of merchant capitalism. This reliance on usury therefore dictates the relation between Christian and Jew. Antonio's "fortunes are at sea" (I.ii.176) so on Shylock's "much kindness" (I.iii.146) seals unto a bond. Jewish power relapses as indebted Antonio is released on a legal technicality, in an exhibition of 'merchant-capitalist utopia': whereby merchants exploited Jewish capital.

Both Shylock and Caliban are vulnerable to abuse: Shylock by his faith, and Caliban as a slave. Antonio berates Shylock to deprive him of religious identity – having "spit upon [his] Jewish gabardine" (I.iii.108). It is this remorseless conduct that so clearly reflects Elizabethan perception of the outcast culture; to which a modern audience would resent. Enslaved by sorcerer Prospero, Caliban is physically punished through nature – "to-night thou shalt have cramps ... thou shalt be pinched" (I.ii.327-332). There exists several terms that reinforce prejudice of Shylock as animalistic rather than humane: most explicitly "currish spirit" (IV.i.133), "old carrion" (III.i.29) and "inhuman wrench" (IV.i.4). Caliban is too seldom addressed by name, instead "abhorred slave" (II.ii.353) and "mooncalf" (III.ii.20). Certainly though, his treatment as a slave is to an Elizabethan audience customary; counter to post-colonial attitudes to slavery – the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production is acceptably African-themed. David Malouf interprets Caliban as to represent the 'indigenous people dispossessed by European colonisers'. It is through race – "But thy vile race" (I.ii.359) – and savage nature he is a naturally inferior other. The inferiority of the slave on a basis of ethnicity bears a parallel to that of the Jew on appearance. Effective connections established.

James Bulman considers Judas allegedly resembled the devil by his 'red wig, hook nose, and usurer's bag'. In early performances, the stage reinforced this stereotypical interpretation. It is supposed that sixteenth century Shylock's were portrayed with a red beard and false nose, by Shakespeare contemporaries Burbage [third text] and Kempe respectively. In the text Shylock is verbally equated to the devil, identified in Lancelot's soliloquy as "a kind of devil", "the devil himself" and most explicitly "the very devil incarnation" (II.ii.1-24). These references historically symbolise Jewish 'blood libel' accusations, whereby Jews were thought to slaughter Christian children in Passover rituals. Shylock adheres to his demonic appellation by, as Stirling describes, exposing a 'vibrant blood-lust': in learning of Antonio's financial ruin he asserts "I'll plague him, I'll / Torture him, I am glad of it" (III.i.116-117). "The Tempest" shares a similar interpretation evolved through belief. Prospero claims that Caliban is "got by the devil himself" (I.ii.321) as a descendant of a witch, Sycorax – and it was thought witches copulated with devils. It is only in liberal nineteenth century approaches to interpretation subtly emphasised a more dignified humanity. Kean rallied a Shylock less outcast bu

more conventional to a Christian-based culture, by introduction of a black wig and beard. It does not however conceal the condemnation of the Jew as, early modern and late historical context aside, the text itself is most reminiscent.

Script B

There are perhaps two contexts which must be considered – that at the time of writing the play and that of the audience. It is disputable whether Shakespeare endorsed anti-semitism, but certainly "The Merchant of Venice" represents social assumptions of the period. The play is to some perceived as a more nuanced approach of Christian Marlow's "The Jew of Malta". Marlow's work too explores a plot of Jewish tragedy – though his protagonist dies. Shakespeare's drama, it may be argued, is more conscious of Jewish oppression. Shakespeare has captured anti-semitism from the perception of a Jew; not isolated by Christianity: summarised by Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (III.i.47-66) speech central to the play. In providing a more balanced approach, he differs as an outcast significantly. Jude Kelly argues the play is not anti-semitic, though rather about anti-semitism. Through Shakespeare's awareness of the outcast's social standing, there are glimpses of sensitivity which may be emphasised in Shylock's portrayal. In Michael Radford's version, Pacino especially embraces the scene to draw on audience sympathies. In "The Tempest" we are too invited to sympathize with Caliban. Appearance aside, he equals Prospero in eloquence of mainly verse: "I will kiss thy foot: I prithee, be my god" (II.ii.149). In the RSC production, John Kani as Caliban articulates such text with ease, so as to enhance this link.

It is necessary for the outcast's portrayal to adopt changing attitudes to prejudice. Shylock is pivotal to the interpretation of the play, particularly in the twentieth-century. It is essential for, often to the dismay of critics, the text to be adjusted to fully enact Shylock in another light. Miller's production omitted lines which conflict with Laurence Olivier's sympathetic portrayal. Nunn equivalently betrays Shakespeare's text through extending the play. Kiernan Ryan considers 'the ruthless priority of money values' structural to Venice, and the text implies Shylock values capital like his daughter Jessica: "My daughter! O my ducats! ... She hath the stones upon her and the ducats!" (II.viii.15-22). Nunn provides a poignant scene of Hebrew song to establish Jessica as most precious; and from the audience acquire a more empathetic response to her elopement. But essentially, as Graham Hordess recognises, it is 'impossible to overlook such a presence within the text of an ideology that has proved ... the source of immense cruelty and suffering'. The genocide of European Jewry provides directors are ever more conscious in presenting Jews – particularly as "The Merchant of Venice" was agitprop for the Nazi Party. Shylock therefore tends to be portrayed less a villain but more 'a victim of Christian persecution'. Michael Billington describes Nunn's post-Holocaust Shylock as 'tortured by his own paradoxical impulses' in his abrupt revoke from claiming the forfeiture. This motion signifies an inner conscience and contradicts prior inhumane observations. Unto the denouement, where bound to "presently become a Christian" and surrender "of all he dies possessed" (III.i.383-5) he becomes, as Hoffman describes, 'that which he most abhors'. Postmodern attitudes to colonization affect Caliban's portrayal in "The Tempest". In Thanhouser's silent adaptation (1908) Caliban aspires to be a coloniser so on Prospero's desertion attempts to mount the boat; where in the RSC production (2009) he is rejuvenated having recovered his power and rejects conversion to an insider. It is possible a century later to interpret the outcast as to prevail rather than oppress in the presence of colonising power; and to depict a perspective counter to the play's underlining racist values.

Elliot Krieger interprets the play as to support triumph of the aristocratic class of Belmont 'over the newly emerging bourgeoisie' of Venice. Shylock is resident of the rule-governed, 'mercantile and tumultuous' city of Venice; where Portia inhabits the fictitious and, on the surface, liberal affluence of Belmont. Shylock is an established outcast throughout. Conventionally in Elizabethan drama verse was issued by affluent characters and prose accordingly to the lower class; but his wealth is counteracted by his Jewish heritage, so uses a combination respectively: "I will be assured I may: and, that I may be assured, I / will bethink me" (I.iii.26-27) to Bassanio; "How like a fawning publican he looks" (I.iii.36) to the audience aside. Portia though is an outcast by social conditioning. As the aristocracy, she is instantly without particular freedoms. Women were, in patriarchal societies, outsiders and simply commodities. The 'casket trial' is typical of those with economic and political clout, designed to ensure those of only equal status inherit through marriage – "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours" (III.ii.166). Hence Alonso, King of Naples in "The Tempest", weds his daughter to the King of Tunis on strictly a political basis. In this drama a similar trial is set by Prospero over

Script B

Miranda. Ferdinand is "aus[illegible]d" (IV.i.1) through Prospero's command to pile wood, before earning "a third of [his] own life" (IV.i.1-3). Prospero though seeks to approve the King of Naples' son from more a fathers perspective than on political-economic basis, having inherited already status of a Duke. In contrast, such freedoms are accessible to Jessica in "The Merchant of Venice" who, much to Shylock's discontent, elopes with Lorenzo. Portia as an outcast extends outside Belmont – to the wider Venetian society, dominated by men. It is compulsory to be "accoutred like young men" (III.V.63) to adopt the position of a lawyer: a profession of power, control and authority possessed only by men.

Initially it seems natural to think Antonio, a prosperous merchant, as incomparable to the usurious, vengeful Shylock. He is, in fact, more alike the outcast than one might at first perceive: in religious affiliation, lifestyle and misfortune. Though he is cast an archetypal Christian and Shylock a Jew, distanced by a mutual religious hatred, the bond betrays the very values they represent. Antonio may be considered an outcast through in effect his support of the practice of usury, and consequent nourish of Shylock's Jewish lifestyle – as is Shylock equally content to "supply [his] present wants" (I.iii.136). Shylock's humorous regard as "a merry sport" (I.i.141) fails to conceal the act of disloyalty. They share a lifestyle as debtors; though it is not the loan itself that is a significant similarity, but the purpose in which it is lent. Shylock exerts control over Antonio by means of the bond, as in the trial where despite "thrice thy money offered" (VI.i.223) he, on principle, demands the Christian life. Though Shylock is, from the offset, clear in his intent: "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge" (I.iii.41-2). Andrew Green examines Antonio does 'exert emotional pressure upon Bassanio' in agreeing the terms of the bond, which he exercises through the manipulative letter sent to Belmont: "Sweet Bassanio ... if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" (III.iii.317-20). Perhaps it is this augmented want for authority that leads them to subsequent misfortune. "The Merchant of Venice" is classified as a Shakespearean comedy – defined as 'one that has a happy ending, usually involving marriage'. The melancholic merchant does not, like Bassanio and Gratiano, enter into marriage. Instead it is assumed [in the National Theatre production] from homosexual suggestions – "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" (I.i.1) – that from the loss of his "most noble kinsman" (I.i.57) to Portia, he is outcast to his 'heterosexual' companions. This is clearly a contrived parallel to Shylock's loss of Jessica. If Shakespeare had intended to portray Antonio as such he would, like Shylock, be condemned an outcast.

Shakespeare's outcasts are enclosed in controversy – socially, politically and ethically – as to ones approach to portrayal. I concur, as lecturer James Shapiro writes, that

> "As long as cultural 'difference' – of race, of gender, of religion, of nationality – continues to be the basis of social antagonism and prejudice, *The Merchant of Venice* will ironically fulfil that dictum, that Shakespeare's plays 'were not of an age, but for all time'".

[illegible] 2001, *including quotations*

Script B

View a performance for which there are reviews. Write your own review of the performance in which you give your own views and provide a response to the views expressed by others.

'Watching the film is like seeing a gallery of Renaissance paintings come to life', observes A.O. Scott of The NY Times. Certainly, the authentic perception of Venice in Modern Europe permits accurate interpretation.

Director Michael Radford provides pre-credit historical context, to inform contemporary audiences of treatment which Jews were accustomed in the late 16th Century. Visually, inflamed Hebrew passages and a usurer cast off the Rialto Bridge exemplify the extent of oppression.

'The Merchant of Venice' is centred at the religious-social divide amidst Christianity and Judaism, and its impact upon relations. Radford's main focus is on Antonio with Bassanio, and Shylock with Jessica.

First explored is the implied homoeroticism of Antonio (Jeremy Irons), a merchant and Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes), a youth. In reproach, Antonio cites "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano - a stage where every man must play his part, and mine a sad one" [a resemblance to Jacques' "all the world's a stage" in *As You Like It*]. Radford crafts convincing lust, customary to modern society, to clarify his perception. Bassanio's intimate request for financial aid, within Antonio's chamber, illustrates this.

The subsequent bond is a core device, to mount the affair. BBC critic Neil Smith considers Antonio's 'decision to indebt himself to Shylock is a result of his unspoken homosexual lust'. It is clear the bond represents sacrificial trust. Moreover, Antonio's inability to repay it draws Bassanio from heiress Portia (Lynn Collins); suggesting the prevalent affection.

Productions of Merchant need be mindful of racial prejudice, which Radford moderates accordingly in Shylock's (Al Pacino) portrayal apart to Shakespeare's depiction of anti-semitism. Clearly problematic is the play's distinct tone: Shylock is referred to as "the very devil incarnation", "spurn" and "cur". As a vengeful man of monetary obsession, it is difficult to surpass this stereotype. Though Pacino's execution subtly provides some balance to his woeful wrath; using his daughter's treachery as a deeper aggravation to his religious intolerance, and motive for revenge.

Radford adopts Jessica's (Zuleikha Robinson) betrayal to affirm Shylock's 'humanity'. Shylock's defensive father-daughter nature is familiar to us; yet it is this excessive entrapment that drives Jessica into a Christian's arms, with which we can only sympathize. Jonathan Freedland, of The Guardian, considers: 'Film is an emotive medium, uniquely able to manipulate through lighting and music as well as words'. Though what dominates is lighting. The dark secluded set in which Jessica resides as a Jew, counter to open Christian affluence, as in Belmont, clarifies the social transition.

The court scene endorses the classification as a 'problem play'. Aside from Pacino's intensely plausible "if you prick us, do we not bleed" prose, Shylock's plea far from convinces. His intention to weigh the pound of flesh on scales used previously for kosher meat cannot avoid Jewish 'blood libel' accusations.

Radford provides credible closure to the play. A remorseful Jessica beholds a turquoise ring, once Shylock's; who is seen alone in a Venetian campo – both outcasts to Jewish and Christian societies. Such visionary perceptions enhance this widely acclaimed modern-day adaptation.

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Moderator's commentary

This is perhaps an example of a candidate whose busy engagement with interpretations by other readers is often at the expense of his / her own argument. The result, at times, is a lack of a clear argument and a sense of the candidate's own critical skills. There is nevertheless an excellent understanding of context and of others' critical views.

Moderator's marks

Explorative Study
AO1: 4

AO2: 6

AO3: 34

AO4: 12

Creative Critical Response

AO1: 4

AO4: 7

Total: 67/80

"Shakespeare was a social reformer":
An exploration of social 'outsiders' within *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing*

The idea of Shakespeare, the great bard, being a social reformer may cause bewilderment; after all, this is hardly an attribute commonly given to him. However, looking at his plays, one finds numerous, highly contentious social issues; in both *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, the ideas of gender and class appear, and the former's more specific racial theme. Within these themes, Shakespeare provides the audience with so-called 'outsiders', including a black man and several women, although his characters refute the stereotypes, leading to the honourable Othello and the sharp-witted Beatrice, characters unique to Shakespeare's works. This raises the obvious question of Shakespeare's motives; why, in a supposedly sexist and racist era, is Shakespeare offering such positive characters to challenge society? Perhaps it is merely for a more interesting plot to attract audiences, yet there may also be more.

The first theme to consider is race; the protagonist Othello is defined by his ethnicity, leading the audience to question Shakespeare's choice. Although a liberal modern audience has little trouble accepting an honourable black character, it was definitely a shocking idea for the Elizabethans. In the Aristotelian definition of a tragedy, the tragic hero is one with whom the audience can sympathise, immediately suggesting a sympathetic view of Othello. Thus, the questions to be answered are whether Shakespeare is portraying the Moor in a positive light, and whether it is for a social purpose.

Shakespeare's play is based upon an earlier Giraldi Cinthio work, much less sympathetic to *"the cruelty inflicted by the Barbarian upon a citizen of Venice"*[1], and whose Othello cannot match the rounded personality of Shakespeare's work. The late seventeenth-century critic, T.Rymer, condemns Shakespeare, for *"alter[ing] it from the Original...but always...for the worse"*, elaborating that giving the Moor a name and an honourable character *"which neither History nor Heraldry can allow him"* [2] is a crucial failing. The evidence that Shakespeare knowingly changed Othello's character from the original nameless savage, gives credit to the assertion that he was addressing society's views on racial outsiders.

Elizabethan views of Africans were based largely on contemporary writings, which Shakespeare could easily access, thereby highly valuable in determining his motives. Most prominent were the writings of Leo Africanus, the Christian convert, whose comments on the inhabitants of Barbary, Othello's native land, include *"no nation in the world is so subject to jealousie...they are so credulous, that they will beleeve matters impossible"*[3]. Not a traveller, Shakespeare would have relied on such information in forming Othello's character; such negative character descriptions would have undeniably inspired some behaviour traits, suggesting that Shakespeare shared his society's stereotypical view of foreigners.

The audience first hears about Othello through the words of Iago and Roderigo, as *"a lascivious Moor"*, *"a Barbary horse"* and *"an old black ram...tupping [a] white ewe"* (I.i.111-125). The animalistic nature of these descriptions could be a reflection of the bestial Moor, or the crude nature of the speakers; Iago's prose, often used with vulgar language, suggests the latter. Shakespeare's juxtaposition of light and dark in *'black ram'* and *'white ewe'*, emphasises the unlikely relationship between Othello and Desdemona, and accentuates Othello's status as a racial outsider. 'Dark' being synonymous with evil is an accepted literary figure, however, only in *Othello*

does Shakespeare equate the idea of darkness with the supposed villain; Don John, the villain in *Much Ado*, is never described using this common metaphor. Perhaps Shakespeare does not use this cliché elsewhere due to its association with racial discrimination, thus proving his motives in writing *Othello* as reformist. Alternatively, perhaps he is only emphasising Othello's race further, thus one questions whether this is with a view to condemning the character, or to pitying him.

Allowing prejudice against Othello before his appearance, suggests that Shakespeare wishes the audience to hate him from the outset. However, this simplifies matters to a ludicrous degree; Iago himself tells the audience that he is untrustworthy, as *"I am not what I am"* (I.i.66), and once he appears, Othello is undoubtedly a strong, honourable, not the *"lascivious Moor"* of Iago's description. This provokes further scrutiny into their relationship, for it is clear that Iago is the villain in this tragedy. As the Shakespeare expert G.K.Hunter points out, *"the supposed outcast turns out to be the true Christian, while the nominal Christian with the white skin appears as the devil's representative"*[4].

Their relationship finds parallels with the one between Claudio and Don John in *Much Ado*, where, although Claudio publicly shames Hero, it is Don John who is the recognised villain. Moreover, just like Iago, Don John's villainy seems groundless; the nineteenth-century critic, S.T.Coleridge, coined a famous phrase in describing Iago's actions as *"motiveless malignity"*[5]. Othello commits murder, but defends himself by saying *"For naught did I in hate, but all in honour"*(V.ii.212), a justifiable motive for an Elizabethan audience, who understood this ideal as important in their times. Othello claims that his actions are *"what I thought a sacrifice"* (V.ii.65), the religious quality of which is paralleled by the use of phrases such as *"I would not kill thy unprepared spirit"* (V.ii.31); Othello's belief that Desdemona's death is a necessary moral sacrifice acquit him somewhat.

It seems that Shakespeare intended to paint a positive picture of the Moor, and yet his reasons are still unclear. Thus, to help establish them, one can examine another angle: gender. Both *Othello* and *Much Ado* are set in a patriarchal society, where women's partners define their identities; for example, Bianca may be a courtesan by profession, but Cassio's attitude to her and his treatment make her a 'whore'. However, it would be erroneous to suggest that by showing his female characters as suppressed by society Shakespeare approves of this situation; his representation of strong characters such as Beatrice, undeniable a match intellectually to her male counterparts, suggest otherwise.

The ideal Elizabethan woman *"not only had to be chaste but had to be seen to be chaste: silence, humility and modesty were the signifiers that she was so"*[6]. Shakespeare acknowledges this in the other characters' portrayals of Desdemona; Brabantio declares that she is *"A maiden never bold;/ Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion/ Blushed at herself"* (I.iii.293-4). Yet, this same quiet maiden boldly argues her case before a court full of the most important Venetian men. Unfortunately, this outspokenness at the beginning is lost by the play's end, where Desdemona becomes comparatively frail and submissive, perhaps a sign that her husband has 'conquered' her. Nevertheless, the handkerchief affair shows a lingering independence of thought from her husband, since she refuses to divulge everything to him. Her death could be seen as a punishment for her earlier defiance against her father; however, as the feminist Karen Newman argues, *"Shakespeare's*

representation of her as once virtuous and desiring, and of her choice in love as heroic rather than demonic, dislocates the conventional ideology of gender"[7].

Overall, Shakespeare seems to praise independent women rather than scorn them. The best example is in the juxtaposition of Hero and Beatrice, the former of whom typifies the ideal woman to marry, and her contrasting cousin. Hero and Claudio's vulnerable love is based on false assurances, quickly shattered at the slightest accusation; Beatrice and Benedick present the better love, based on mutual attraction. Greatly interesting is that the language used between the two sets of lovers is different; Beatrice and Benedick use prose since they are comfortable enough to speak informally, while Claudio and Hero, when she does speak, use the more insincere verse. However, the latter represent the Elizabethan convention, where the marriage was arranged by parents based on wealth and status, and the couple merely exchanged arbitrary love confessions. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's sympathies undoubtedly lie with the unconventional Beatrice and Benedick, thus showing a break from society's customs.

Another important female is Emilia, for, as Stanley Wells claims *"[*Othello*] is about Emilia's marriage as well as Desdemona's"*[8]. In Act IV, Emilia not only delivers a very practical view of marriage, *"who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?"* (IV.iii.72-3) in response to Desdemona's naïveté, but also delivers an eloquent speech calling for gender equality. Emilia's questions of *"have not we affections,/ Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?...The ills we do, their ills instruct us so"* (IV.iii.96-99) are very reminiscent of another speech by the social outsider, Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock also laments *"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?...The villainy you teach me I will execute."*(III.i.46-57). The Jew was an obvious outsider, though racially; the similarity between the two speeches suggests that Emilia felt that women are treated as cruelly as the 'enemies of Christ' in Elizabethan society. Unfortunately, another similarity is that each speech has a very limited audience; this is most likely a Shakespearean comment on the unwillingness of society to listen, for, however much these outsiders complain, there is no one to listen and to empathise. It is also interesting to note the difference in the language used; Emilia uses verse, while Shylock is given prose. Perhaps this distinction shows Shakespeare's opposition to Jews, or that this group of outsiders had less chance of being appreciated in society.

The Tudor period was one of increasing social mobility, due to the education available through the rise of humanism in the Renaissance. Although the idea of class does not comfortably fit into the idea of 'outsiders', any theory identifying Shakespeare as a social reformer has to offer evidence of his thoughts about class divisions.

There has always been a tradition of casting the lower social orders as the villains in literature, with the higher classes as the heroes. In *Much Ado*, the brother of a prince is the villain; however, he is also illegitimate, which strips him of his social ranking in society's eyes. This is the reason why cuckoldry is feared so much in *Othello*; the results would mean expulsion from polite society. Nonetheless, it seems Shakespeare is neither condemning nor condoning this view, but rather acknowledging it as prevalent in his times.

Of further interest, is the lack of difference in the treatment of women from different social backgrounds in *Othello*. Despite Bianca's profession and lower social class, she still feels the full sting of Emilia's insult, *"O, fie upon thee, strumpet!"* (V.i.121). The need to preserve the appearance of chastity and the 'ideal' seems to transcend social divisions, which Shakespeare acknowledges; going further, one could say that the higher up the social scale, the more necessary it becomes to

preserve this womanliness. This explains Desdemona's naïveté in refusing to believe *"that there be women do abuse their husbands/ In such gross kind"* (IV.iii.58-59).

It has been argued that Shakespeare uses *Othello* to condemn the liberal society of Venice, well known in the Elizabethan times *"when Venetian whores were a recognizable* topos *of literature and art"* as historian L.Jardine argues.[9] This seems to be supported by Iago's claim that *"In Venice they do let [God] see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands"* (III.iii.203-4). However, since the most duplicitous character in the play condemns Venice, doubt is cast over whether this was Shakespeare's true impression of Venice.

Having attempted to divine Shakespeare's thoughts in creating *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing* some conclusions must arise. Unfortunately, the answer is not simple, otherwise someone would undoubtedly have given it by now. It is true that Shakespeare acknowledges the social outsiders of his day; Jews, Africans, women and lower social classes all find roles in his plays, greater roles, it could be argued, than other writers at the time awarded them. This suggests that he at least saw the injustice of suffered by these groups through stereotyping, and wished to recreate it in his plays for his wide-ranging audience. However, terming him a 'social reformer' is perhaps too ambitious; it is extremely unlikely that Shakespeare had even heard of such a term, let alone categorised himself under it. Nevertheless, one hopes that the bard wished to reject his contemporaries' clichés; that Shakespeare wished to enlighten his audience to the existence of societal prejudices, overlooked by them; that there was more of a motive behind this than purely to entice crowds with theatrical controversy.

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Script C

Imagine a director is staging a new production of Othello. He has been invited to speak about the play on a radio show; script the possible conversation

Presenter: Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. Our special guest this week is the director behind the RSC production of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Mr Burbage, why Othello?

Director: Do you have a week?...This play is a treasure trove of complex characters. Iago; apparently an *"honest man"*, but actually a duplicitous fiend. Desdemona; a supposedly shy girl, who marries secretly and proudly defends herself before a court of men. Othello; a powerful, respected general, but also a black man in a white society. ✓

Presenter:, What's the most important theme, if you had to pick?

Director: Definitely race. The lovers are doomed from the start; Iago almost acts on society's behalf by driving them apart. In a tragedy, you need the tragic hero to fall to restore 'order'; this union between a black man and a white woman is unnatural, and 'order' is restored when they both die. ✓

Presenter: Yet Othello is 'powerful, respected'?

Director: Yes, but race is never forgotten. He's called *"the Moor"*, and bestial terms such as the *"black ram"*, because Africans were seen as animalistic, so very negative, very racist. Look at Kathryn Hunter's recent production; African drumming starts off the play, contrasted with an Italian air. That dissonance you hear reflects what the play is about, contrast and conflict. ✓

Presenter: You approve of her methods?

Director: Unfortunately, she overdoes it with Othello with a golliwog – would anyone under twenty even remember them now? There are tribal outfits, chanting...it's too heavy-handed. Race pervades the play, but there's also duplicitous Iago, gender issues, so on. Shakespeare doesn't focus on race throughout, but you feel its presence, for example when Iago convinces Othello that *"In Venice [women]...let heaven see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands"*. ✓

Presenter: Surely that's more sexist than racist?

Director: Yes, but Iago's subtly showing off his extensive knowledge of Venetian women, customs. What he's saying may be wrong, but Othello still believes him, because he sees Iago as the gateway to the 'white' society. ✓

Presenter: How do you go about it?

Script C

higher societal position in terms of race, and his persuasive influence over Othello. We have small moments to show Othello's uncertainty about Venetian customs. At a dinner celebrating his wedding, he uses the wrong fork until Desdemona corrects him. Also, at first greeting her on the quayside in Act II, his kiss is too long and passionate for the customs of the time. These are more effective than obvious, heavy-handed techniques. ✓

Presenter: I'm afraid we're out of time. Thank to you and our listeners. Goodbye.

Moderator's commentary

A top band folder across all the assessment objectives

Moderator's marks

Explorative Study
AO1: 6

AO2: 8

AO3: 36

AO4: 12

Creative Critical Response

AO1: 6

AO4: 10

Total: 78/80