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SAMPLE SECTION

Act One Scene One

Commentary

Two men are walking in the street in the middle of the night.

The play begins in darkness; and the night holds a darkness of another kind – hatred. That hatred will lead before the end of the play to a terrible murder which takes place, also, at night. So actual darkness frames the tragedy, and the darkness of men’s souls causes it.

The two men are arguing, but not because they hate each other. There is in fact a twisted partnership between them. One (Roderigo) is showing annoyance – *‘Tush, never tell me!’* – at what the other (Iago) has just said. Roderigo has been paying Iago to help him win Desdemona, the daughter of the rich merchant Brabantio. But Desdemona has secretly married Othello, a black general hired by the city-state of Venice to protect it against the Turks. Roderigo is angered by the fact that Iago has not told him about the marriage until now. 1

The story begins too, then, with a secret act; and secrecy and deviousness are the means by which the tragedy is brought about.

It is the *nimble* deviousness of Iago that fascinates us even in this opening scene, and then throughout the play.

Are we to believe him when he claims that he knew nothing of the marriage before it happened? 5-6

There is no obvious reason not to; but Iago’s words, we soon learn, are to be trusted only when he is alone on the stage, and not always then.

The pair are outside Brabantio’s house. Is that just a coincidence? Examine the possibilities.

- o Perhaps Iago, on hearing the news about Othello and Desdemona, has immediately begun to form a plan to spoil Othello’s happiness and has steered Roderigo in this direction through the darkened streets.
 - o Alternatively, finding that they are here by chance, he simply seizes the opportunity to stir up trouble.
- Either way, his quickness is evident.

He is also very good at using people against themselves. Othello has appointed Michael Cassio as his Lieutenant. Iago believes he himself should have got the job. (That seems to be only the most recent cause of his hatred of *‘the Moor’*; there are others.) He here accuses Othello of being proud, and of pursuing his *‘purposes’* undeviatingly once he has made up his mind about something. Iago’s view of Othello is distorted by his hatred; but the best lies are those which stick most nearly to the truth, and this criticism of Othello is shown later to be well founded: Othello’s pride and single-mindedness make it easy for Iago to lead him on. 12

What about Iago’s charge that Othello has relied on *‘bombast circumstance’* (wordy indirectness) and 13

'epithets of war' (military jargon) in explaining why he appointed Cassio as his Lieutenant? Remember that accusation when you come to examine some of Othello's important speeches; but note also how: 14

- o further into the play, Iago himself uses inflated language to stir Othello's passions
- o his own speeches in this scene and the next contain nautical and military terms designed to support the image he projects of himself as a down-to-earth and experienced soldier who deserved promotion.

In this we find early evidence of another trait of Iago's: his readiness to condemn in others faults he shares. In his very next speech, for instance, he complains that promotion can now be gained by influence (*'letter and affection'*), but he has already admitted that he himself got three *'great ones of the city'* to speak to Othello on his behalf.

Those may not seem important details in themselves, but they say something significant about Iago. Although he sees himself as 'a man apart', and Shakespeare represents him (in his devilishness) as *more* than a man, he is revealed as the play progresses to be subject to some of our common human insecurities and limitations – jealousy for one, and, in the end, an inability to determine his own fate. Just how we are to view Iago is one of the central issues of the play, and it is of interest from the very beginning.

What else has Iago complained about?

The fact that Cassio is *not* experienced in the art of war: he is on the contrary only a *'bookish'* soldier who has never seen action. Your worth as a person accumulates, as far as Iago is concerned, from what you have done. (He takes this principle further in Scene Three, arguing that Man has the power, through action, to control his own destiny.) And since *his* worth as a practised military man has not been recognised, he is now going to make Othello pay a heavy price for denying the principle and appointing Cassio over him. He is going to *act*, and by that very means show that action is of greater value than words, or theory. 24

To harm Othello it will first be necessary for Iago to pretend loyalty to him, just as he is pretending, here, friendship to Roderigo. He takes a justifiable pride in this ability to hide *'the native act and figure'* of his heart: Roderigo should have taken warning. 42 62

Note, however, that in *line 55* Iago *'professes'* (claims) to be one of those who follow their masters for personal gain. What *he* is seeking is not material reward but revenge; and the revenge he devises is out of all proportion to the wrong he has suffered. So when he gives Othello's failure to promote him as a motive for what he is about to do, maybe he is only professing in another sense (claiming *with an element of pretence*), and he is in fact driven by deeper forces. This will become important when we look more fully at why he wants to destroy Othello. For just as Iago himself hides behind an image of his own creation – *'I am not what I am'* – so it may be that his reasons are not what they are. 65

Whatever those reasons, he takes the first step towards achieving his objective when he persuades Roderigo to stir up Brabantio against Othello. In the rhythms and the imagery of this speech we see more of the power of Iago's language. Examine the images he uses. 67

- o It is appropriate that poison is mentioned: the poison which together they administer to Brabantio and which destroys his relationship with his daughter is the same poison that Iago pours into Othello's ear – warning of betrayal.
- o The image of fertility refers mainly to Othello's present happy state, but it also hints at his exotic background and perhaps contains a sideways glance at his sexuality (is Iago sexually

jealous of Othello? That possibility also emerges later).

- o Mention of the corruption (decay after death) that flies bring reinforces the effect of the poison image. But flies bring corruption by laying eggs which turn into devouring maggots and continue the cycle of life. At the end of Act One you will find Iago, exhilarated by the destructive plan he has conceived, using a linked image:

*'I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to light.'*

In the next part of the scene, notice the way in which Iago controls what happens while staying as far as he can in the background. Roderigo, having discovered that they are in fact outside the house of the very man Iago has just been talking about, is hesitant, and looks to Iago for approval before he actually calls out. Iago gives him the simple instructions he seems to need: Shout as if there's a fire.

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The best Roderigo can manage is not good enough for Iago, who takes over with a more compelling cry:

*'Awake! What ho, Brabantio! Thieves, thieves!
Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!
Thieves, thieves!'*

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Which of the three (house, daughter, money) will Brabantio be most anxious to protect? The fact that Shakespeare puts Desdemona in the middle of the list makes it plain that she isn't at the top, whichever way it's read. If you know *The Merchant of Venice* you'll perhaps remember how hard it was for Shylock to decide where, when his daughter ran off with his gold ducats, his greater loss lay:

*'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!'
Act Two Scene Seven lines 15-17*

Is Shakespeare, in the *Othello* passage at least, questioning the values of Venetian society? (And has he, in Roderigo's *'thick-lips'*, begun to note its prejudices?)

Iago clearly feels Roderigo isn't doing a very effective job, with his oblique questions, of stirring Brabantio to action, so he again takes over, beginning with a curse and continuing with graphic, degrading images which would rouse any father to fury. Iago believes, however, that it's not the loss of his daughter in itself which may distress Brabantio so much as the humiliation the loss will bring (Shylock felt humiliation too: *'Fled with a Christian!'*): he somewhat strangely tells Brabantio to dress himself properly *'for shame'* – perhaps in his official robes – and then tries to frighten him with the thought that he will end up with a black grand-child unless he acts quickly. He is in this way careful to stress that this will be a matter of public as well as private interest: he knows that thought will have an impact on Brabantio.

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He also tells Brabantio to sound the alarm. Why?

It suits his purposes to have as much fuss made as possible. He's trying to get Othello into trouble, remember.

Note the early devil reference. Iago is representing Othello as satanic (the Devil was commonly thought of as black); but he himself is already beginning to behave with devilish intent, and the irony,

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as with every similar reference in the play, is obvious.

Brabantio is slow to respond. He chooses to see this interruption of his sleep as no more than a further attempt by Roderigo, who has become something of a pest, to win Desdemona. Shakespeare establishes – 95

*'My spirit and my place have them in power
To make this bitter to thee' – 102*

that Brabantio is a powerful man who will be able to make things very difficult for Othello. It is he, however, who by the end of the episode will be a bitter man.

Brabantio feels safe because this is Venice, and not *'a grange'* (a house in the country), the implication being that life outside Venice is less secure. The action will soon be transferred to Cyprus, which will make it easier for Iago to play his games. (Life becomes more risky when we step outside what we know: Othello will learn that lesson.) 106

Once again Roderigo begins a bumbling attempt to get Brabantio going. Iago, exasperated with both of them and at the same time coolly judging what it will take to arouse Brabantio, adds further powerful sexual images to the ones he has already used. The reference to the Barbary horse (from North Africa) points again to his assumption that Othello's blackness will matter enormously to Brabantio (and therefore by implication to Venetians in general). Can you think of a word linked to Barbary which Iago may also wish to put into Brabantio's mind?

Barbarian? (Note Iago's use of the word in *Scene Three line 350*.)

There's some little irony (and hypocrisy) in Iago's complaint that Brabantio has judged the pair of them to be *'ruffians'* and will therefore not listen to what they have to say. Iago is speaking against prejudice at the same time as he fuels it. 110

His exasperation is also reflected in his use of prose: the passage reads very bluntly.

There is, as we have already noted, much obvious irony in the play.

- o *'Thou art a villain'* is a comparatively weak example. 117
- o Is there some irony also in Iago's response, *'You are a senator'* (*and should therefore have more sense than you seem to have*)?

If so, what's the difference between the two examples?

The first irony is Shakespeare's, the second Iago's. When Brabantio says *'villain'* he does not know how appropriate the word is; Iago's scornful *'senator'* is fully intended. This is a good illustration of the difference between dramatic irony and satirical irony (sarcasm in this instance).

Roderigo at last finds his tongue. His speech is unexpectedly impressive, and its calmness and structured logic have more of an effect on Brabantio than Iago's vile and *'profane'* outpourings. It's worth diagramming the sentence which begins, *'But I beseech you'* (breaking it down into its parts) to see how it leads Brabantio towards the inevitable conclusion that there is after all a problem worth striking the tinder for. What other methods does Roderigo use to excite Brabantio and convince him of the need to act? 119

- o He plays on Brabantio's prejudices (against men of '*common hire*' and '*lascivious*' Moors).
- o He puts disturbing pictures (not however as powerful as Iago's) in Brabantio's mind.
- o He repeats the word '*gross*', with its implications of moral looseness and unnatural dimension.
- o He ends as he began by offering himself to the processes of justice, as proof of his own certainty in the matter.

'An extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere' is a phrase to remember. Iago uses it to remind Brabantio that Othello is from a strange part of the world, far beyond the safe confines of Venice, and that he is also after all only a wandering (*'extravagant'*) mercenary who moves from country to country selling his services. But it contains an unwitting compliment in the word '*wheeling*'. Only massive things (a body of soldiers or horsemen, the planets) 'wheel'. Whatever else Othello may be (and we have yet to meet him) he is a man of substance and significance: his presence throughout the play is indeed massive. 135

This speech is out of character for Roderigo: it reveals a dignity in him we do not see elsewhere in the play. What is Shakespeare trying to achieve dramatically?

He wishes to underline the seriousness of the situation by stressing that Othello faces censure from a sophisticated and structured society which regards him fundamentally as an alien. We are reminded again at the end of the scene of Brabantio's standing in the community, which bodes ill for the Moor – '*At every house I'll call – / I may command at most*' (lines 179-180).

Brabantio goes inside to see whether his daughter is there. Iago, thinking ahead, knows that this matter will not in itself be sufficient to bring down Othello – Venice needs him too badly. He must therefore take care not to be seen working against his master, and slips away so that he can join Othello and pretend to defend him against Brabantio and his retinue when they arrive at the Sagittary (a local inn). Which single word in his parting speech again acknowledges something of Othello's worth, and not only to Venice? 143

'fathom' (depth, greatness) is a measure of Othello's skill as a soldier, but also implies a larger dimension to him as a person, just as '*wheeling*' did. Does Iago let this compliment slip? His awareness that Othello *is* a great man is part of his problem.

Other things to note in this speech are:

- o The images which again mark Iago as a soldier (a '*gall*' is a sore on a horse caused by the rubbing of a harness, or in this case a '*check*' rein; the '*flag*' may be a sign of friendship or perhaps false truce) and define more closely his relationship with Othello
- o The mention of hell (*'I hate him as I do hell pains'*). If we are to accept its full implications, this last reference suggests that Iago knows first-hand what the pains of hell are like; but Shakespeare's representation of Iago as a devil has perhaps not yet gone so far, and that therefore would be an over-reading.
- o The sense of hurry towards the end of the speech, if only in the shortening of the sentences. Iago must be gone before Brabantio appears.

Brabantio's distress is evident in the broken syntax (sentence-structure) of this next speech. He does

begin it however with some plain speaking. He has lost his daughter. Life from now on will be *'despised'* by him: in other words he will hate it and live in the *'bitterness'* with which he threatened Roderigo earlier; but there's an echo of the idea that the shame of it all will count for more than the loss...he fears he may in his turn be despised by his friends and associates. 160,161

Is Brabantio's exclamation *'O unhappy girl'* an expression of sympathy for his daughter? 162

Probably not. It's the event rather than its effect on her that he regrets, and Shakespeare sometimes uses 'unhappy' to describe people who make others (in this case Brabantio himself) unhappy in the more usual sense.

Brabantio continues to ask, distractedly, for more information, and at the same time calls for more candles: he needs to have light shed both on the street in front of his house and on the situation. He is also torn between making heated accusations about how daughters can not be trusted and seeking an explanation for how his daughter among all could have behaved like this. Could she have been subject to *'charms'*? (has Othello worked some witchcraft on her?) *'How got she out?'* he asks. What does the way that question is phrased suggest about the life Desdemona has led?

Perhaps that it has been oppressively sheltered.

When Brabantio says, *'O treason of the blood'* he could mean either of two things. What are they? (The notes in your edition of the play may help you decide.) 168

- o He may be just exclaiming against his daughter's betrayal of the family.
- o Perhaps, however, he is beginning to wonder whether it is blood (in the sense of lustfulness) that has betrayed her, and him. How physical is the relationship between Desdemona and Othello? There is conflicting evidence later.

Just how quickly we can change our view of and behaviour towards others according to how badly we need their help is satirically noted by Shakespeare as Brabantio's manner of speech towards Roderigo progresses from, *'The worser welcome!'* (line 96) through the threatening *'I know thee, Roderigo'* (line 120) to the uncertain *'Have you not read, Roderigo, /Of some such thing?'* (lines 174-175) and his petty *'O would you had had her!'* Then it's *'Pray you, lead on'*: by the final line of the scene the importunate pest has become *'good Roderigo'*, and they leave together to confront Othello.

Overview: other things to note

The commentary above covers much of the scene's detail. When you're working close to the printed text like that, however, you can lose sight of the play...so it's a good idea to step back and pay attention to some of the larger aspects of each scene before you move on. The headings below will help you do that – the first five represent common aspects of nearly all plays and novels, and much poetry.

Under this set of headings are notes on some of the significant features of Scene One. You may wish to look in the text for examples. You may also decide to make your own notes, under the same headings, on other things you think are important or interesting.

Setting ('where the story happens'. There are different kinds of setting – geographical, historical, social, economic, philosophical):

- o The sense of place Shakespeare establishes, not by including physical details of Venice but by giving us some idea of what matters to people of importance (Brabantio and his family, the Senators) there.

Character (who the people in the story are and why they do what they do. Characterisation – the methods the dramatist uses to help us see his characters clearly – is also important):

- o Iago. His cynicism and bitter cleverness, of course; but also his passion for principle, 'the right way of doing things'. He is, surprisingly, a *man* of principle, who lives out his own beliefs...particularly his belief in self-interest and the importance of controlling our own lives. He seems to enjoy upsetting Brabantio: is that a sign that he resents his success and power?
- o Brabantio: In this scene just a functional figure (outraged father of abused daughter)...but see how Shakespeare adds to him in the next two scenes.
- o Roderigo: His wateriness...with the exception of his effective speech beginning *line 119*. Has Shakespeare in that speech broken the general rule that characters should be consistent in what they do and say? There are signs much later in the play that Roderigo does have *some* backbone.

Action ('what happens', and the way the story is told):

- o The early sense of foreboding to which Brabantio's dream of something '*not unlike*' (*line 141*) and Iago's intensity both contribute.
- o The feeling that there are strong forces at work – within the characters and also in the world around them.
- o How Shakespeare prepares for future developments. He
 - has laid the ground for the transfer of the action to Cyprus
 - presents Cassio as a man (in Iago's view) with less than a full understanding of how things work in the world. When Cassio finds himself in a mess he turns readily, and fatefully, to others (Desdemona, Iago) for help.
 - notes (again through Iago, so we must be cautious) Othello's pride and wilfulness
 - foreshadows the central movement of the story. Just as Brabantio is transformed in this scene from a secure to a distraught father, so will Othello, also under Iago's hand, be turned from a trusting husband into one who believes himself immensely betrayed.

Style (the words and images characters and Shakespeare choose, and how they are put together for particular purposes):

- o Iago's language and its power to get others to move forward while he stands back
- o The way sentence structure can convey state of mind. The words of the play will be spoken on stage, and their rhythms are very important.
- o The differing effects of poetry and prose

Ideas (which, when they recur, become the play's themes):

- o A man's worth (how we judge it)
- o The importance of other people's opinion of us ('reputation')
- o Self-determination (deciding what we want for ourselves and making it happen)
- o Deceitfulness (contriving to hide reality by appearances)
- o Justice and accountability
- o Human insecurities and desires (and how easy it is to play on them)

General (anything else of interest, particularly how the play works as a play):

- o Plays (mostly) tell stories. The stories begin with 'situations'. People like their lives to be stable and as far as possible enjoyable. A situation arises when something happens to threaten stability or enjoyment. That something may have already taken place by the time the play begins, or it may occur during the opening scenes. The rest of the play tells the story of how the situation is resolved (the problem is sorted out) and stability, with the possibility of enjoyment, restored.

Go back a month or so before the opening of *Othello*. Venice is a wealthy and secure city-state. Brabantio is a proud father. Desdemona is a contented daughter (maybe). Othello is a successful professional. Iago is a soldier with a future. Roderigo is a hopeful lover.

Then the Turks threaten to attack Cyprus, a part of the Venetian commercial empire. Iago is passed over for promotion. Brabantio and Roderigo both lose Desdemona to Othello. Problems!

Do the problems have much in common? No, but they interlock. Brabantio will look to the State to help him with his problem by punishing Othello, but Venice needs Othello to solve its own. Iago will try to use bits of everybody else's problem (Brabantio's anger, Roderigo's pain, Venice's troubles in Cyprus) to work on his – which at this point in time seems to be simply the need to get his own back on Othello.

In this interlocking of problems we begin to see the *shape* of the situation, which is what we call the plot of the play (as opposed to its action, which is just what happens in it).

Student Response

The class are already held by elements in the story. They have focussed readily on Iago's nastiness and Roderigo's foolishness, and have been quick to identify the examples of prejudice and racism. There have been some sideways glances: they are themselves from a mixture of backgrounds, and some eyebrows have been raised at '*thick-lips*' and at the way Iago uses Othello's African-ness against him. They need to have it pointed out to them, though, that Shakespeare's interest in the story's racist elements would have been startlingly new to those of his audience who picked up on it. (Shakespeare made more of the matter than the writer from whom he borrowed the tale; and the idea of a black man as a 'good' man was unusual in the literature of the time.) This has led to a discussion on how our response to a piece of literature is partly determined by our own situation. I've given them sight of a typical examination essay question (with some slight modifications it could be an **IB, A Level or AP** question):

'Plays take us into worlds different from our own, but must have something to say about issues of importance in the world to which we, the audience, will return.'

Show how issues relevant to today's world are raised in 'Othello'.

Here we have a play written almost exactly four hundred years ago (its first production may have been in 1602) which raises a very live social issue of our time. We need to be careful when we read or watch the play that we don't see the theme of racism as more central than Shakespeare intended it to be.

As an extension of that we should be aware of Shakespeare's overriding compassion for man in all of his forms – even his prejudiced ones...and the misshapen ones like Caliban in *The Tempest*. Does he present Brabantio's distress with understanding? More importantly, does he have any sympathy at all for the morally bent Iago? We'll ask that question at the end of the play.

There are other intimate links with the class's own lives. Some of the girls have seen connections between Brabantio's restrictive attitude towards Desdemona and their own experiences (several of them are from traditional Asian backgrounds). We've discussed whether there is satire in Shakespeare's representation of Brabantio as a possessive parent whose values are predominantly commercial and who may have lost his daughter by trying too hard to keep her. The class will soon be studying Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. That play attacks The American Dream and tells the story of how a father alienates his elder son by trying to force a way of life on him. Is Othello in some small way an attack on 'The Venetian Dream'? If it begins as such, the issue is soon swallowed up by larger ones.

We've also discussed briefly the dramatic impact of symbols, beginning with the darkness in which the play opens.

'In a play the physical objects we see on stage, the actions of the characters, and the words and images they use when speaking must seem real; but they must also, in drama which is to last, mean something beyond themselves.'

Use this statement as a starting-point for a discussion of symbols in the play.

That's another question for future consideration. When Brabantio calls for light he is asking for more than a taper. When Othello extinguishes a candle in Act Five he is doing, symbolically, much beyond that. We may want to look at the sword as a symbol, but not yet, so we haven't made too much of the sword references in this scene.

'But we haven't read that bit yet! Why are you talking about Scene Three when we've only read Scene One?' The class has a legitimate complaint. But one of the wonders of the play is the way in which it is bound together by its echoes, and there's nothing wrong in saying, 'Listen out for that again later.'

END OF SAMPLE SECTION