Othello Take-home Test

1. To begin, a tragedy can be described as a serious play containing a protagonist whose tragic flaw causes his rapid downward spiral that results in an ultimate catastrophe (“Literary Terms and Definitions: T”). A tragic flaw is typically a characteristic that the audience finds admirable in the tragic hero, yet it is the ultimate cause of the character’s final demise (“Literary Terms and Definitions: H”). Thirdly, a tragic hero is a protagonist whose demise stems from his tragic flaw; the author portrays the tragic hero as an admirable person, making the audience sympathize with him (“Literary Terms and Definitions: T”). When looking at the literary definitions of tragedy, tragic hero, and tragic flaw, it becomes evident that Othello can be considered a tragedy.

First, Othello is a high ranked and well respected general. People constantly praise him, and almost everyone who meets Othello seems to have a great respect for him. Brabantio, the husband of Othello’s wife, admired Othello and invited him over often to tell stories. However, the main reason Brabantio is angered by his daughter Desdemona marrying Othello is because she is his only child, making him very protective over her. Brabantio goes to the Duke of Venice to complain about Othello using magic to make Desdemona fall in love with him. Brabantio begins to speak poorly of Othello to the Duke, but he defends Othello wholeheartedly. The Duke
notes, “…Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (Oth. I. iii). During this time period, black people were looked down upon which shows that Othello had to work very hard to become a high military leader. By saying Othello is fair, the Duke pretty much tells Brabantio that Othello is a great man, despite the color of his skin. Thus, the reader finds out at the very beginning of the play how admirable Othello is to his peers.

However, Iago becomes enraged to hear that Othello appoints Cassio as his new lieutenant. Thus, he vows to seek revenge on Othello. Iago plants ideas in Othello’s head about Desdemona cheating on him with Cassio; this way, Othello will ultimately despise Cassio and replace him with Iago. Due to Othello’s race, he is automatically an outsider in society. Thus, Iago cleverly plays on this insecurity to convince him of his wife’s infidelity. Iago argues, “Ay, there's the point: as--to be bold with you--/Not to affect many proposed matches/Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,/Whereto we see in all things nature tends--/Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,/Foul disproportion thoughts unnatural./But pardon me; I do not in position/Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear/Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,/May fall to match you with her country forms/And happily repent” (Oth. III.iii). In this quote, Iago suggests that something is wrong with Desdemona because she chooses a black man over a European man. He also suggests that it is only a matter of time until Desdemona starts pursuing a different man. Iago begins to contribute to Othello’s rapid downward spiral by slowly feeding his insecurity until it consumes all of his thoughts. Othello’s insecurity of being the outsider due to his race can be considered his tragic flaw; it consumes his thoughts and actions, ultimately leading him to murder his wife.

Thus, Othello can be considered a tragedy because the protagonist, Othello, is greatly admired by the audience. Shakespeare portrays him as an honest and fair man, while other
characters say things about him that also build up his character. Therefore, the audience sympathizes with Othello throughout the whole play while Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona does not love him, and feeds his insecurity. Othello’s insecurity is his tragic flaw, causing his rapid downfall and making him a tragic hero.

3. Initially, the evil mastermind Iago lacks physical proof to convince Othello that his wife, Desdemona, is cheating on him with his prized lieutenant, Cassio. Therefore, Iago draws his wife Emilia in to be his pawn and acquire proof. Iago knows that Emilia and Desdemona spend a lot of time together, so he repeatedly asks her to find the first gift that Othello gave to Desdemona, and give it to him. Unfortunately for Desdemona, she unknowingly makes it very easy for Iago to acquire the handkerchief.

One evening, Iago continues furthering his plan for revenge against Othello by continually convincing him that Desdemona is being unfaithful. After speaking to Iago for a while, it becomes evident to the reader that Othello begins to doubt the trustworthiness of Desdemona. Iago exits, then Othello sees Desdemona coming his way and says to himself, “Desdemona comes:/If she be false, O, then heaven mock itself!/I’ll not believe’t” (*Oth. III.iii*). Desdemona immediately senses that something is wrong with Othello, and he tells her that he has a headache. Desdemona tries to wrap her handkerchief around his head to make him feel better, but he tells her that it is too small, and he gets up to leave. Just as he gets up, the handkerchief falls to the ground. Desdemona does not realize the handkerchief falls, so it is left on the floor. At this point, the reader does not know that Iago desires the handkerchief or that it has any importance. However, Emilia enters and reveals the importance the handkerchief holds. She picks it up and remarks, “I am glad I have found this napkin:/This was [Desdemona’s] first remembrance from [Othello]:/My wayward husband hath a hundred times/Woo’d me to steal it;
but she so loves the token…” (Oth. III. iii). Thus, the reader may begin to piece together Iago’s evil plot. Iago comes in and takes the handkerchief from Emilia, then speaks to himself about how he will hide it in Cassio’s room. When Cassio finds the handkerchief, he gives it to Bianca, a prostitute in which he is involved, in the hopes that she will copy it for him.

When speaking to Othello later on, Iago reveals that he saw Cassio wipe his face with a handkerchief covered in strawberries. Othello’s ears immediately perk up at this revelation because he realizes that it must be Desdemona’s handkerchief. Now, Othello really begins to worry that Iago is correct in his accusation that Desdemona is indeed cheating on him. However, Othello has yet to see the handkerchief, and is still forced to rely on Iago’s word. However, in the next scene, Othello demands that Desdemona give him the handkerchief that Othello first gave her. When she finally tells him that she does not have it with her, Othello is enraged. Next, Othello gives the reader another revelation about the handkerchief, “That handkerchief/Did an Egyptian to my mother give;/She was a charmer, and could almost read/The thoughts of people: she told her, while/she kept it,/’Twould make her amiable and subdue my father/Entirely to her love, but if she lost it/Or made gift of it,/ my father's eye/Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt/After new fancies: she, dying, gave it me;/And bid me, when my fate would have me wive,/To give it her. I did so: and take heed on't;/Make it a darling like your precious eye;/To lose't or give't away were such perdition/As nothing else could match” (Oth. III. iv). Thus, Othello reveals that the handkerchief has even more meaning behind it than being the first token he gives Desdemona. Additionally, Othello’s anger towards Desdemona about not having the handkerchief shows that she typically carries it with her. Making matters worse, Desdemona dismisses the talk of the handkerchief to continue pleading with Othello to give Cassio his
lieutenant position back. Therefore, Othello begins to believe Iago’s false accusations about Desdemona again.

Finally, Iago slyly convinces Othello to hide while he talks to Cassio about Bianca. However, Iago first convinces Othello that he is going to talk to Cassio about Desdemona, and he ensures that Othello is far enough away to get the gist of the conversation without overhearing Bianca’s name. Iago is able to get Cassio to admit that he is romantically involved with Bianca; while Othello thinks they are talking about Desdemona. In the midst of Cassio and Iago’s conversation, Bianca barges in and yells at Cassio for giving her a handkerchief that is from one of his mistresses. Othello exclaims to himself, “By heaven, that should be my handkerchief!” (Oth. IV. i). Thus, Othello now has the solid proof he needed to believe that Desdemona is in fact cheating on him. When Cassio exits, Othello immediately asks Iago how he should murder Cassio. Therefore, it appears that Iago will inherit Cassio’s job as his reward for being a faithful friend to Othello. Iago’s plan of revenge is almost complete.

4. A major theme that Shakespeare focuses on in Othello is appearance vs. reality. Pretty much every part of the play that can be seen as appearance vs. reality involves the antagonist, Iago. First, from the very beginning of the play to the end, Iago tries to convince Roderigo that he is doing everything that he can to help him win over Desdemona. However, after being constantly frustrated that Desdemona has not paid any attention to him, Roderigo says to Iago, “With nought but truth. I have wasted myself out of/my means. The jewels you have had from me to/deliver to Desdemona would half have corrupted a/votarist: you have told me she hath received them/and returned me expectations and comforts of sudden/respect and acquaintance, but I find none” (Oth. IV. ii). Thus, in these lines Roderigo jabs at Iago a little bit, nonchalantly accusing him of stealing his money and jewels rather than giving them to Desdemona due to the
fact that she has not said anything to Roderigo about them. However, Iago is still able to manipulate Roderigo into going along with his plan and killing Cassio, which leads into another example of appearance vs. reality. Throughout the play, Iago convinces nearly each character that he is a great friend and honest man. Iago utilizes the trust that others place in him to give them advice that furthers his plan along, or trick them into doing things that benefit him. For instance, Iago seems like he is giving Cassio good advice to talk to Desdemona about getting his job back, but it makes the two of them look guilty for being alone together. Also, Othello gets very jealous when Desdemona repeatedly brings up Cassio’s job to him, which leads to Othello despising her and Cassio. None of the characters see through Iago’s deceit until the very end of the play, and they pay him compliments throughout. For instance, Othello says, “‘Tis he:--O brave Iago, honest and just,/That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!” (Oth. V. i), Cassio says, “Good night, honest Iago” (Oth. II. iii), and Desdemona says, “O good Iago./What shall I do to win my lord again?/Good friend, go to him; for, by this light of heaven,/I know not how I lost him” (Oth. IV. ii). In addition, Iago causes a fight between Cassio, Roderigo, and Montano at the beginning of the play. When Othello enters, he orders Iago to tell him what happened because he claims Iago is the honest man who will say exactly what happened. In reality, Iago is the one who started the fight, yet he quickly blames it on Cassio. It is very ironic that Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona all believe that Iago is a very good friend; when in reality, he is the reason for all of their struggles.

Later in the play, Iago acquires Desdemona’s handkerchief from Othello and hides it in Cassio’s room. When Othello sees Cassio with it, it makes it look like Desdemona really is cheating on him. However, the reader knows that Iago planted the token of Othello’s love to ensure he had solid proof that Desdemona appears to be unfaithful. Finally, Iago convinces
Othello to hide and eavesdrop on his conversation with Cassio about Desdemona. However, Iago actually talks to Cassio about Bianca; he ensures that Othello is far enough away that he does not hear the woman’s name spoken. Thus, Othello is enraged to hear Cassio laugh about his affair with Bianca, assuming it is actually Desdemona.

Appearance versus reality is a very universal topic because many things in life are always just as they appear. For instance, colleges cannot strictly judge a student based solely on ACT or SAT scores. Some students may have a very high GPA, yet they struggle in taking standardized tests which results in a low score. Other students may not try very much in school to achieve good grades; yet, they are very good at taking standardized tests which makes their test scores higher than other students. Still other students may be very involved in many extracurricular activities, including sports, volunteering, and a job. Thus, these students may not have as high of a GPA or ACT/SAT scores as others, but they are still very well-rounded individuals. However, other students are able to attain a strong GPA, high standardized testing scores, and several extracurricular activities all at the same time. Without looking at the whole resume of a student including ACT/SAT scores, extracurricular activities, and GPA, a university will not have an accurate portrayal of the teen.

6. In his play Othello, Shakespeare reveals several different stereotypes through his main female characters. Mainly, Desdemona can be seen as The Virgin, as well as The Wife. At times, Emilia can also be seen as The Wife, and Bianca is portrayed as The Old Maid. Of these characters, Desdemona is the best example of the stereotypes she represents.

To begin, The Virgin representation of Desdemona starts when the reader finds out how upset Brabantio is to find out she has been married to Othello. Roderigo insists that Desdemona is not in her room, and when Brabantio looks for her, he finds out that Roderigo is correct.
Brabantio exclaims, “O heaven! How got she out? O treason of the blood!/Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds/By what you see them act. Is there not charms/By which the property of youth and maidhood/May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,/Of some such thing?” (Oth. I. ii). Thus, Desdemona’s father reveals to the author how young and inexperienced she is by showing his immense care and worry for her. He even goes so far as to suggest that Othello uses magic to make her fall in love with him, and he tries to argue his speculation to the Duke of Venice only to be shut down. To continue, the reader never finds out if Othello and Desdemona actually consummate their marriage. Immediately after they are married, Othello is called away to Cyprus because the Turks are attacking. When Desdemona asks the Duke for permission to go away to war with the men, Othello reveals the true reason that he wants Desdemona to go with him. Othello pleads, “Let her have your voices./Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not,/To please the palate of my appetite,/Nor to comply with heat—the young affects/In me defunct—and proper satisfaction./But to be free and bounteous to her mind…” (Oth. I. iii). In this plea, Othello reveals that he does not want Desdemona to come with him so that they can have sex; but rather, Othello desires Desdemona’s company because it will make her happy. Finally, much later on in the play Desdemona speaks to Emilia about adultery. Desdemona argues that she cannot believe that any woman would be unfaithful to her husband. She goes further and says, “Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong/For the whole world” (Oth. IV. iii). By saying this, Desdemona tells Emilia that she would never cheat on Othello, not even for the entire world as her prize.

Moving forward, Desdemona remains a devout and faithful wife to Othello throughout the entire play. In Act 1 when Brabantio brings Othello and Desdemona’s secret wedding to the attention of the Duke of Venice, Desdemona tells the truth and does not try and get out of
Desdemona could easily lie and claim that Othello used magic to make her fall in love with him, but instead she proclaims her love for him. She tells her father, “My noble father,/I do perceive here a divided duty:/To you I am bound for life and education;/My life and education both do learn me/How to respect you; you are the lord of duty;/I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband,/And so much duty as my mother show'd/To you, preferring you before her father,/So much I challenge that I may profess/Due to the Moor my lord” (Oth. I. iii). Thus, Desdemona proves that she is a loyal wife because she pledges her respect and obedience to Othello, rather than her father. To continue, Othello grows increasingly hostile towards Desdemona because Iago convinces him that she has committed adultery with Cassio. However, Desdemona is clueless until the very end of the play as to why Othello acts so aggressive towards her; yet, she remains loyal to him the entire time. For instance, instead of being angry one of the first times Othello snaps at her, Desdemona asks Iago, “O good Iago,/What shall I do to win my lord again?” (Oth. IV. ii). Even when Othello treats her unfairly, Desdemona still wants to please him. Another instance that Desdemona shows her loyalty and love for Othello is when he is mad at her, but disguises it by saying he has a headache. Desdemona wants to make him feel better, so she tries to wrap his head to alleviate his pain, but he does not allow her to do so. Further, Othello’s anger toward Desdemona grows increasingly stronger when he hears Cassio and Iago talking, and he thinks they are speaking about Desdemona and Cassio. Thus, when Desdemona sees Othello afterward, he gets very irritated and hits her. He then tells her to get out of his sight, and Desdemona says, “I will not stay to offend you” (Oth. IV. i). Lodovico notes how obedient she is, and Othello calls her back. Instead of leaving because Othello treated her poorly by hitting her, she turns around and comes back to him. Towards the end of the play, Desdemona proves her loyalty to Othello once more by revealing to Emilia that she would never
cheat on him, even if she received the whole world at her prize. Finally, she proves her devotion to Othello when she is dying. Emilia notices Desdemona on her death bed, and asks her who killed her. Instead of giving up Othello, she exclaims, “Nobody [killed me]; I myself [did]. Farewell/Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell” (Oth. V. ii). Desdemona could have easily told Emilia the truth, Othello killed her despite her innocence, but she refused to betray her husband regardless of everything he did to her.

Shakespeare’s final female stereotypic character is Bianca, who represents The Old Maid. Bianca is a prostitute, which immediately places her in a position that does not give men the desire to marry her. Bianca falls in love with Cassio and thinks that he plans on marrying her. However, Iago talks to Cassio and finds out that Bianca’s belief is incorrect. When Iago asks if Cassio will marry Bianca, he laughs and says, “I marry her! what? a customer! Prithee, bear some/charity to my wit: do not think it so unwholesome./Ha, ha, ha!” (Oth. IV. i). Thus, the one man that Bianca truly loves does not wish to marry her. Therefore, it appears that Bianca will probably never find a man to marry.