

Worksheet 2 – Introduction: Part Two

Review: Lecture 1

In the first lecture of the unit, Prof. John McRae gave an introduction to *Othello* and some of its social and cultural influences.

- ✓ What connections can you make between Leonardo DaVinci's drawing of the *Vitruvian Man* and Shakespeare's play *Othello*?

Recall: Lecture 2

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember about the lecture and the play.

1. What parallel does Prof. McRae draw between King James I and the character Othello?
 - a) They are both Scottish
 - b) They are considered outsiders
 - c) They are strong military leaders
 - d) They were disliked at court
2. According to Prof. McRae, how did Shakespeare's Othello differ from previous representation of black men on stage in European theatre?
 - a) He didn't: he was the first black male character in Renaissance theatre.
 - b) Othello is a high status character
 - c) Othello is represented in a realistic way
 - d) He is not represented as a simplistic villain
3. How does Prof. McRae describe how Othello and Desdemona's relationship would have been viewed in Renaissance Venice?
 - a) Transgressive
 - b) Unusual
 - c) Wrong
 - d) Progressive

Analysis

4. Consider this quotation from Prof. McRae's lecture (8:08-8:23): 'The greatest flaw in any and all of Shakespeare's tragic heroes is not something like jealousy or ambition. The greatest single flaw is that they are a human in a humanist world. And because we are human, things go wrong'.
 - a) Using your work on humanism from Lecture One, explain in your own words what Prof. McRae means in this quotation.
 - b) Find three quotations in *Othello* that would support Prof. McRae's reading of Othello's 'greatest single flaw' being 'a human in a humanist world'.

Evaluation

5. In his lecture, Prof. McRae argues that Othello could be compared to real life heroic Renaissance figures, such as Sir Francis Drake, who circumnavigated the world on the Golden Hinde in 1577. Read the extract below from historian Miranda Kaufmann's, who has written *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (2017). Kaufmann she explores the role of a black sailor onboard Drake's ship:

Diego ran through gunshot in his eagerness to be taken aboard Francis Drake's ship when it docked at Nombre de Dios in Panama in 1572. He forged an alliance between the English and the local Cimarrons (Africans who had escaped their Spanish captors to found their own settlements) that resulted in the capture of over 150,000 pesos of Spanish silver and gold. Following this lucrative adventure, Diego returned to Plymouth with Drake, whence they set sail together again once more to circumnavigate the globe in 1577 on the *Golden Hinde*. He was with Drake when he passed through the straits of Magellan, raided South America, and laid claim to California in the name of Elizabeth I in 1579. Diego died near the Moluccas of an arrow wound sustained after a fight a year earlier with the Araucanians, who had lived on Mocha island off the coast of Chile.

Why might it be important for contemporary Shakespeare scholars to be aware of Kaufmann's account of previously under-acknowledged histories of black British Renaissance culture?

Write one paragraph in response to this question.

6. How might Diego's history influence our reading of Othello's character? How might this inform our understanding of how a Jacobean audience might have reacted to Othello's character on stage?

Write one paragraph in response to these questions.

Glossary

- **Transgressive** – involving a violation of moral or social boundaries.
- **Progressive** – favouring, or relating to, social reform.
- **Historiography** – the study of, and theories about, writing history and the interpretation of written histories.
- **Neoplatonic** – the modern name for a school of Greek philosophy, beginning with the work of Plotinus and ending with the closing of the Platonic Academy in 529 C.E. Neoplatonists believed that human perfection and happiness were possible on earth, without waiting for an afterlife, and were achieved through philosophical contemplation.