



Sample essay 1

'The great failing of *Othello* is that Desdemona and Emilia are too weak and easily deceived to be convincing.' How far do you agree with this criticism of the play? Evaluate the roles of the women in *Othello* in the light of this comment.

Grade A answer

The criticism that Desdemona and Emilia are too weak and easily deceived is a good argument to be considered. There are many arguments for and against this claim, but I think that there are more arguments against this claim, which I will now outline. Emilia is not a weak character, and I think she represents how the female voice should be heard. Emilia not only defends herself but her sex when Iago derides women: 'You shall not write my praise'. She is also sharp witted — 'is this man not jealous?' and has such strength that she says what she thinks — 'I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak'. Emilia also becomes her mistress's defender; she is a strong character as well as convincing.

Her only flaw is that she did not understand her husband Iago, and was deceived by him. Even though this does happen, she had suspicions about him all along which is why she repeats 'my husband' several times when Othello tells her about him because she is thinking her doubts and suspicions through. If Emilia was 'weak' then she would not have the ability to bring about the downfall of the clever and extremely convincing Iago. She begins the process which leads to Iago's undoing — showing her intelligence as well as her strength.

I think that Desdemona is represented very differently from Emilia, as she is weaker than Emilia, but she is still a very strong, convincing character. Brabantio says she was a 'maiden never bold; / Of spirit so quiet and still that her motion / Blushed at herself'. Yet when she enters, she contradicts everything that has been said about her because she is perceptive — 'I do perceive here a divided duty' — and shows an ability to sort out problems — 'I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband'. She is so strong that she has asserted her independence from a male patriarchy. This was an extremely brave



thing to do because women had little power, and had to do what their men told them to do. Thus Desdemona is not only strong but she is responsible, sensitive 'a child to chiding' and is extremely sympathetic (for example Othello's headache).

I think Shakespeare has presented Desdemona as such an innocent character that she does not fully understand the depth of Othello's jealous emotions. She totally misinterprets the handkerchief case, and even when Othello was getting more and more angry, she kept talking about Cassio which suggested she had feelings for him. She has such love and commitment for Othello, she wants to live with him in every sense and can't bear to be parted from him — 'the rites for which I love him are bereft me [...]. / Let me go with him'. Yet her innocence and purity means she is blinded by her love for him, and does not truly understand him or the situation.

After examining the ideas for and against this argument I strongly disagree with the statement because neither Emilia or Desdemona are weak. I think Shakespeare has presented the strength of womanhood. He has presented a wide viewpoint on women: Emilia, who is pragmatic about relationships — 'they are all but stomachs and we all but food' — and Desdemona, who is idealistic — 'tell me, Emilia — That there be women do abuse their husbands in such gross kind'. Both characters are trying to understand men in the world they live in. Iago's misogyny triumphs, however, as even when Emilia and Desdemona are alone talking, the topic is men and how to interpret them.

Desdemona is presented as such a strong character that even when Othello hits her she says 'I have not deserved this' but respects Othello's authority over her, and does not put up a fight when Othello kills her. She will even damn herself by lying for Othello — 'Nobody — I myself — farewell' shows how she won't tell Emilia that Othello killed her. As Marilyn French (a twentieth-century critic) said, 'Desdemona is a symbol of female passivity' and I strongly agree with this.

The role of women in *Othello* is to show how women can be persecuted and vindicated [sic] by men. I think Shakespeare uses Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello* to represent how the strength of women in that society was increasing, giving inspiration and advice to the Shakespearean audience. In some cases I think Desdemona and Emilia are deceived, but they are wonderfully strong characters and their deaths represent their nobility. This is why I do not agree with this statement.

Examiner's comments

The essay would be awarded an A grade.

It shows detailed knowledge of the text and is strongly focused on the question. The expression is concise and terminology is appropriately used, with supporting quotation. Other views are represented and the social context is referred to. The interpretation is not always convincing, however, and there is some potential contradiction in the presentation of Desdemona as both passive and bold which needs further elucidation.