**Discuss Shakespeare’s presentation of Iago in the first three acts of ‘Othello.’**

**Introduction**

Explain who Iago is and his role in the play. Give an overview of your argument. Is Iago presented as the embodiment of evil without any clear motive for his behaviour (the eighteenth century poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge called this ‘motiveless malignity’, ie just pure wickedness without any reason) or are there in fact some justifications for his behaviour? Suggest some ways Shakespeare presents the character to us (soliloquies, language, actions, other characters’ reactions to him) etc. Maybe point out that although the play is called ‘Othello’ in fact Iago has nearly one third of the lines, more than any other character, suggesting Shakepeare’s fascination with the character and Iago’s domination of events.

1. Maybe start by looking at how Shakespeare has changed the character from his source material. In Cinthio, the ‘ensign’ isn’t given a name, but in Shakespeare he is. In ‘Othello’ Iago is motivated by Othello’s rejection of him, whereas in Cinthio the ensign is motivated by Desdemona’s rejection of him (Shakespeare transfers this to Roderigo, a character who doesn’t appear in Cinthio’s text). Shakespeare brings Iago in from the beginning whereas Cinthio doesn’t introduce him until they get to Cyprus. You can read more about this on pages 4, 5, 8 and 9 of your edition (a photocopy of which also appears on the ‘Othello’ area of GOL). The key thing here is to consider why Shakespeare made these changes – how do they affect his characterisation of Iago? (For more help, revisit the estream video on the first act of ‘Othello’).

2. You could then go on to look at what motives Iago does have – rejection, social inferiority (see bottom page 9 of intro) sexual jealousy (see Act one, scene three lines 368-9, and Act two scene one line 275-8 and 288), maybe even homoerotic obsession with Othello (see end Act three scene three).Remember to quote to support your points and analyse your quotations. You might like to reference Ian McKellen’s interpretation of the character which you can read about here: <https://mckellen.com/stage/othello/index.htm>

3. Now consider another interpretation of Iago: Coleridge’s idea that he is just the embodiment of evil (‘motiveless malignity’) without any reason to behave the way he does. Can you mount an argument that suggests that although he originally has motives, as described above, his revenge should have been satisfied once Cassio is dismissed in Act two scene three (lines 228-30)? What do you think continues to fuel Iago’s behaviour – such as persuading Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful and needs to be murdered in Act three scene three and Act four scene one? Is there any evidence Iago is enjoying being wicked – try to find places where this might be apparent. What is the effect of him confiding in us (soliloquies) and acting as a ‘playwright and stage manager’ (see top of page 11 in the introduction)?

**Conclusion**

Finally, suggest what you personally consider to be Shakespeare’s presentation of Iago and why.