IB English 1: Shakespeare's *Othello: The Moor of Venice*

Contrasting Ideas and Themes Developed Throughout the Play on Which to Focus:

1) **Black and White:**

   a. The African and European.

   b. The Anglo conception of race in contrast to the Mediterranean (in this case the Venetian) conception of racial concepts: Color as a signifier is, generally and historically speaking, not a fundamental basis for the Mediterranean world's concept of race, whereas color has been the basis for racial definitions by the northwestern European powers – the British and the Dutch especially, for quite some time. Keep in mind that although the setting of the play is Venice and Cyprus, the characters – and therefore the stereotypes attributed to them – are all concepts of the English mind, a potentially ironic feature in *Othello* from a historical and geographic point-of-view.

      i. Therefore, it is important to note the racial attitudes in characters constructed by the Anglo writer, Shakespeare, toward Black Africans as captured in the context of 1604 *c.e.* By this point, the Atlantic/European slave trade has been in full force over at least the past 70 or 80 years – the Spaniards, the Dutch, and the British among others being the larger powers in the Atlantic slave trade. In this light, is may come as no surprise to see characters such as Iago and Brabanzio compare Othello and his actions to those of an animal – "an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe" (lines 85-86, I.i) and "your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs (lines. 12-14, I.i) – a fundamental justification for African slavery was that Africans were subhuman. Furthermore, they simply fixate on Othello's "blackness," and they often imply that they, as Venetians, are naturally superior to him.

      ii. Also note that the economic consequences of the slave trade is giving birth to modern conceptions of Capitalism, which leads to further socio-political and cultural conflicts.

      iii. **The question for you to determine an answer for is whether or not Shakespeare's characterization of Iago (and others such as Brabanzio to a lesser extent) is literal – that Shakespeare would just assume these attitudes himself as they are already embedded in his culture – or if he satirizing these characters.**

2) **The Socio-Political and Cultural Norms of the "High Middle Ages" in Conflict with the Birth of The Early Modern Period of European History:**

   Directions: *As a group, research the following topics and deliver a* **6 to 7-minute presentation** *in regards to the topic supported by researched secondary sources as found on*
   - ***Google Scholar***
   - ***EBSCO***
   - ***or J-Store***

   Orally cite your sources ("According to…").

   a. The Feudal Society in conflict with early modern notion of Capitalism.

      b. Vassalage in conflict with Individualism.

      c. The supernatural idea of Fate in conflict with the concept of Self-Determination (a basic fundamental of Capitalism, which is seen in Shakespeare's plays in its infant form).

   d. Traditional arrangement of marriage in conflict with the idea of love.

   e. Female subjugation vs. female empowerment. The treatment of female characters in the original Shakespeare plays are always enigmatic at best –the female characters often being the ones most in charge, yet still subjugated by societal norms.

   f. Appearances in conflict with reality and the motif of seeing versus blindness – the idea that a person was what others saw them to be.