Shakespeare’s Play Othello and Chevalier’s Novel New Boy: Comparative Essay

Stories delivered in various forms present a noteworthy responsibility in uniting individuals across cultures, communities, nations and historical eras. Furthermore, storytelling, particularly in the form of a narrative, often addresses central underlying notions pertaining to the human experience. The universal themes relating to the human experience explored in both William Shakespeare’s play Othello and Tracy Chevalier’s novel New Boy, aid in promoting a connection across ages. The distinctive features of narrative have been employed to exhibit their respective contexts which draw on the elements of the human condition, such as racial discrimination and prejudice and the influence of one’s emotional state on their actions, this being jealousy.

Shakespeare’s play Othello and Chevalier’s novel, New Boy, strongly echo and challenge the values and context of their time via exploring central themes associated with the human condition, explicitly racial discrimination and prejudice. This dominant idea is insinuated through various narrative approaches in order to highlight the differing perspectives of racism in relation to the contrasting time periods. Within Shakespeare’s play, Othello, racial identity is investigated via Shakespeare’s conscious addition of the word ‘black’ in a derogatory sense as to indicate ‘brunette’ or ‘dark skinned.’ The period in which this was written, this being the Elizabethan era, served as a major influence for Shakespeare’s integration of the theme. In the Elizabethan era, ideal human beauty was regarded as being ‘fair’ or light skinned with light brown or blonde hair and on the contrary, one who had darker skin or darker hair was labelled as being ‘black’ or ‘dark’ which suggested negation, dirt, sin and death. Racial discrimination is introduced by the play’s antagonist, Iago, who encourages the thought of Othello as being an animalistic, barbarous and foolish outsider. This is evident in the following statement made by Iago, “An old black ram is tupping your white ewe.” In stating this, Iago is attributing animal-like characteristics which effectively embody Elizabethan notions that black men display animal-like, hypersexuality. Shakespeare has deliberately supplemented these persistent animal references to shape Iago’s character and augment the resentment demonstrated towards Othello’s ethnicity. The unique qualities of a character, crafted by a composer is an additional principal component of narrative. Discriminative behaviour is also reflected in the use of other forms of contemptuous textual language including “Barbary horse” and “thick lips.”These negative connotations surrounding Othello’s racial identity exclusively reveal racial discrimination in a historical context, urged by the conditions of the Elizabethan era. Alternatively, Tracy Chevalier’s modern appropriation of Othello reflects the values and attitudes concerning racial discrimination in a contemporary context. Chevalier’s novel New Boy and Shakespeare’s play Othello are both vehicles of storytelling, however, the circumstances of the historical period and conditions during which these texts were composed differs considerably. These opposing contexts help to construct more consolidated judgments of how attitudes and values regarding the human experience have evolved over time. Chevalier’s appropriation of New Boy has adopted an identical narrative structure to the original Shakespearean play. This is referred to as the ‘Five Act Structure.’ Chevalier has methodically installed this narrative device to draw connections between a historical mode of storytelling and a contemporary style, while also enabling a clearer interpretation of the key attitudes associated with racial discrimination in a modern era and how they transcend time. This thereby reinforces a stronger distinction between

a historical and contemporary context. The experiences and circumstances that influenced Chevalier when she composed the novel were referenced within the text to strengthen the underlying theme of racism. Chevalier was raised in highly integrated living circumstances and attended an elementary school that was constituted of predominantly black students. She consistently experienced feelings of isolation and therefore felt the desire to supplement emotions alike in New Boy. Chevalier's novel centralises on "what it means to be the outsider", where Osei, the protagonist is plainly the outcast at his new school due to his race. Part one of Chevalier's novel serves as the orientation where characters are introduced. Osei is described by other students in a manner similar to how Othello is depicted in Shakespeare's play. His persona is ascribed animal-like traits which intensifies the degree of segregation and discrimination apparent. "He was moving now. Not like a bear, with its bulky, lumbering gait. More like a wolf…" This statement exemplifies the use of zoomorphism which amplifies the racist undertones of the cultural context. Additional comments made by the students such as "Where'd he come from? The jungle!" further highlights the racist nature of a contemporary society. This is indicated through the use of colloquial language, which affirms how their race is perceived by onlookers in a different context. Shakespeare and Chevalier have therefore successfully reflected their respective contexts and the key attitudes and values concerning racial discrimination through implementing textual forms and literary techniques alongside the content of the story to help create expression.

Additionally, both Shakespeare and Chevalier use narrative to explore the consistent psychological qualities that motivate humankind as a means to successfully reflect the social and intellectual meaning that surrounds and informs the text. Shakespeare's play Othello is a classical tragedy, relating to both literature and human emotions. It is characterised by Othello's internal struggle or imperfection per se that guides him to his tragic flaw. Similarly, Chevalier has managed to capture the essence of jealousy and tension through implementing these key elements of tragedy sourced from the original play. The universal theme of jealousy is closely linked with the supplemented idea of appearance versus reality where both Othello and Osei's jealousy impeded their ability to distinguish between reality and appearance and thus form rational thought. Jealousy was the prime driving force behind the antagonist's manipulative and deceptive actions towards the protagonist. Their actions stimulated the deterioration of relationships and the protagonist's psychological state, leading to the ultimate tragedy, this being their suicidal death. These two modes of storytelling explore the tragedies that continue to exist in modern society and successfully convey the underlying political context to prove how it is relevant to a contemporary era. Not only does this directly correlate with Iago's and Ian's concealed intentions but also represents how the surrounding environment, as depicted in both texts, is highly comparable to current society which is nonetheless constituted of lies, deceit and general misunderstanding, resulting in negative consequences. Othello and New Boy both examine jealousy as being a 'green-eyed monster.' This is demonstrated when Iago, the antagonist of Shakespeare's play announces: 'O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on.' Shakespeare has consciously elected this metaphorical expression so that Iago can utterly express how devious and evil tendencies of jealousy, similar to Iago's personal duplicitous nature. Likewise, it alludes to animals and the contrast between appearance and reality, which are two major ideas threaded throughout the play. Chevalier's interpretation of jealousy also corresponds with Shakespeare's connotations. The antagonist of the novel, Ian states, "Rod likes Dee. So he's jealous. The green-eyed monster, my father calls it." Similar to the original play, Ian and Rod plot against Osei and act to sabotage him out of jealousy. Although Shakespeare's play Othello and Chevalier's novel, New Boy, present respective contexts, we can acknowledge that the

nature of jealousy and it’s capacity to blind or steer an individual from rational thought, is still applicable to a widespread audience and has macro significance. This is illuminated through Shakespeare and Chevalier’s use of key narrative forms and features.

Conclusively, William Shakespeare’s play Othello and Tracy Chevalier’s novel, New Boy, effectively utilise narrative to reflect their respective contexts relating to the human experience. They reveal how the circumstances or conditions of their time, influenced their interpretation of racial discrimination and the nature of jealousy. Narrative devices such as the five act structure, characteristics of tragedy and literary techniques, particularly metaphor, have been implemented to reinforce and communicate the key messages pertaining to these dominant issues.