

How does  
shakespeare make  
an audience aware of  
the contrasting



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the opening scenes of the play, Shakespeare immediately creates suspense and excitement, at once immersing the observer in intrigue and conspiracy. He throws his audience directly into some of the major themes and concerning issues of the play. Furthermore, by centering the dialogue and action around the characters of Othello and Desdemona, without yet having presented them to the audience in person, Shakespeare increases our desire to become more engrossed in the play.

Shakespeare's decision to make a black man a tragic hero was bold although not original. In this play, Othello is the black man in a white man's society - the notion of black and white being the best contrast between the two characters, although the notional colours are inverted in the play (Othello/good = white; Iago/evil = black). It is true to say that in Elizabethan times, most theatre-goers would probably never have seen a black person, and the concept of such a person in a powerful position, let alone a powerful position in a white society, would have been totally alien to them.

At the time, "black" was associated with evil and the devil, and in previous plays, Shakespeare had used "blackamoors" only as evil characters. The concept, therefore, of making the main character (and title role) a black man, would have been a new and intriguing draw for his audience.

When, at last, we do see Othello, it is in Iago's company, but it is a very different Iago from the one to whom we are initially introduced. If the audience had not had some hint of Iago's real nature, they could consider his opening words to Othello, as those of a decent, honest, courageous and loyal man.

From the outset, we find Iago manipulating Roderigo - the only character to whom he speaks frankly. He clearly understands people's weaknesses, and has no compunction in exploiting those weaknesses to the full. Through the initial dialogues, we discover that Iago is a great speaker, and all good speakers need an audience. Roderigo (Iago's audience) appreciates the villainous qualities of his colleague.

Othello, on the other hand, doesn't have Iago's speaking qualities, but instead, relies on his honesty and openness to win people over. He has nothing to hide. Whereas Iago is the skilled politician who avoids a direct answer to a question, Othello is the administrator/monarch - loved and respected by his people, but unable to communicate succinctly.

Shakespeare permits Iago to entice us with his charm and energy, and almost traps us into admiring his evilness and manipulation. As this develops the audience have to bear in mind his plainly spoken words:- " I am not what I am."

In his appearance and outward behaviour, Othello literally towers above those around him, but as the play unfolds we see how Iago begins to control him and undermine his authority - a power that he appears to hold over everyone. Shakespeare has given Iago the capability of changing his outward appearance and behaviour, chameleon-like, almost as though he has intertwined his character with that of Lady Macbeth: " Act like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it."

It is almost as though Iago cannot help himself from becoming involved in intrigue. Does he really wish to become the governor of Cyprus, or is he simply addicted to causing mischief?

" Even now, now, very now an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe."

Shakespeare uses the theme of racial tension to teach his audience to be more tolerant of things that are strange to us. This proves to us that nothing is new in the world. The prejudices of modern society have hardly changed since Shakespeare's time. It is introduced in the crudest way possible. This is linked to the bestial imagery of which we come to identify with Iago's way of looking at the human world. We already start to feel the confidence, energy and wit, which combine to form the essential elements of Iago's personality. The rhythm of his lines contrasts greatly with the constant whining of Roderigo and as he continues, the tones and implications of Iago's speech become more serious and almost contain an essence of evil:-

" We cannot all be masters, nor all masters/Cannot be truly followed."

Throughout the play, the characters follow the biased thoughts of a white society towards black people - which is the same, some 400 years later. Othello is often accused of witchcraft and unnatural powers - possibly the only weapon an ill-educated society possesses to use against someone whose culture we do not quite understand. In response to his accusers, Othello replies using the language associated with him. His calm reasoning and studied delivery counter-balances that of the wicked Iago.

Shakespeare's masterly use of the language, immediately gives Othello a modest and sympathetic behaviour, which, on the one hand, increases the audiences' sympathy towards his tragic downfall. This (almost) simplicity of line helps to establish his powerful presence as a black man in white man's society:-

" Keep up your bright swords, for the dewes will rust them."

Othello's overall modesty contrasts greatly with Iago, who acts differently, behind his back. As the play progresses we learn that in one of his soliloquy's, Iago plainly states to the audience, " I hate the Moor." Iago declares his hatred by saying that he will have his revenge on the Moor, regardless of whether the reason he has given is right or not. These words clearly contrast to an " honest" man to which Othello has ironically related Iago to, although this is a word that he himself has built up, for his own purposes.

The audience witness that Othello loves Desdemona, whereas Iago is sexist. His bitter account of women even more strengthens our impressions of him whom evil and corruptness come more readily than gentler feelings.

" You rise to play and go to bed to work."

Finally, Shakespeare cleverly uses the imagery of the sea to refer to both characters - Iago falls into metaphors that are connected with violent flood, incidentally a metaphor that eventually turns into a storm in Act 2:-

" It engendered./Hell and night/Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."

In Othello's case, the imagery of sea was one that was linked to him and traditionally the sea is associated with power, mystery and strangeness, although these are also attributes of Iago.

In conclusion, Othello is such a " nice" bloke, it is difficult not to like him. Therefore, to bring about his downfall, Iago sinks to the lowest level possible to achieve his ends. In the end, Iago is left as the honest man, whereas Othello is seen as a corrupt fool. Shakespeare achieves this by the ongoing persistence and manipulation of Iago as he gradually inflicts Othello with visions of evil. Incidentally, Othello sees evil where it does not exist, in Desdemona, and only too late in Iago who truly embodies it.