

# Character analysis: iago in othello

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The two passages in question, the first a speech Iago makes at the start of the play, and the second, a short soliloquy at the end of Act one, introduce the audience to the character of Iago and the feelings he has towards Othello which will drive the action of the play and shape the tragedy. In the play, we see Othello, a heroic character, fall from grace.

Shakespeare's successful use of peripeteia is accentuated by Othello's strive through adversity and what he has managed to achieve, especially in Venice which was the most powerful society in the world for a time.

It was unheard of for a " Moor" to have reached such a momentous position considering the racism at this point in history. Othello is also a character that the audience can empathize with easily. This emphasizes the tragedy of Othello due to the fact that he doesn't deserve to have been plagued by trickery resulting in him murdering Desdemona and then killing himself. He has been entirely manipulated by Iago. He is the artist behind the fall of Othello. He realizes that Othello can be " tenderly led by the nose as asses are" and is clever and ruthless enough to take advantage of him and exploit his flaw, jealousy.

Iago's exploitative nature is communicated to the audience when he is talking to Roderigo about how he dislikes the " Moor" and says, " I follow him to serve my turn upon him. " This statement reveals Iago's feelings towards Othello, as well as an insight into the way he thinks and his priorities in life. This suggests that Iago's motive is just to climb to the top of society without regard or respect for anyone else's emotions. An example of this is when Iago is telling Roderigo how he feels about certain types of employees, the types that " line their coats".

He states that these people have "soul" and believes "such a one I do profess myself." This shows the audience Iago's selfish and power hungry temperament. It is interesting how Shakespeare has chosen to put a full stop after the word "myself". He has chosen not to use enjambment, which he uses abundantly throughout the text. When listening to someone act out this speech, there would be a pause after this word that would let the audience have time to think about the statement just voiced. Iago's desire for status brings to light the theme of class.

Iago feels an extremely strong desire to climb to the highest class and profess himself a success. This could be seen as his primary motive for money and power and ultimately status. However, he also wishes to break the bond between Othello and Desdemona. As well as revealing his character to the audience, these two quotations foreshadow and prime the audience for a tragic ending, one in which Iago will turn upon Othello, a noble and trusting character. Iago's motives are often unclear and we end up speculating that he is jealous, racist or insecure.

The presentation of Iago in the penultimate sentence of the first speech, invokes images of pain, destruction, darkness and possibly some of the aforementioned insecurity. He voices a sinister yet almost vulnerable statement to Roderigo when he says "I will wear my heart upon my sleeve/ For daws to peck at." This can be interpreted in many ways. One of which is that Iago feels that he has done so much wrong that he is leaving his feelings open for the people around him to "peck at" with the "daws" symbolizing the people.

This would suggest that Iago does have a heart because he feels punished for how he treats his companions and the net of lies he weaves around them. Moreover, leaving one's heart upon one's sleeve could be seen as an act to open their heart to the world, leaving one vulnerable and defenceless. This metaphorical image of a bird pecking at his heart paints an enduringly dark and depressing picture for the audience. Conversely, we could see this quote as Iago feeling he should be punished. We could also see it as Iago being self-destructive and almost psychopathic.

The structure chosen here by Shakespeare suggests that this statement should be read as a sinister one as opposed to a vulnerable one. The writer has chosen to continue this sentence onto the next line. His use of enjambement here suggests that the audience should hear the statement all as one. There is no pause between "sleeve" and "for daws.....". In addition, the fact that Iago doesn't care that he is leaving his feelings so vulnerable makes us think that he has no care for his emotions and anyone else's whatsoever.

It is also ironic because he is saying he will reveal his feelings, his emotions and his true self, but succeeds in manipulating all of the characters due to his immense power to lie, deceive and erect an impregnable facade. Shakespeare alludes to themes such as race and class in the last sentence of the first speech that also portrays Iago's deceitful character. Iago ends his speech to Roderigo by saying "I am not what I am." We have already learned that he is a deceptive and confusing character however this

statement means that he could have been putting up a facade this whole time and none of what he said could be true.

As an audience, we feel that Shakespeare has employed this dramatic device to keep us guessing. Moreover, this is interesting because we would usually expect Iago to reveal this about his character in a soliloquy rather than in conversation with another character. Shakespeare has most definitely chosen this short punchy sentence to end his speech for a reason. This is the main thought that the audience are left with. This is a key function in helping the audience to suspend their disbelief. Watching the play you would be confused trying to understand his character and then seconds later the dialogue resumes between Iago and Roderigo.

There is also another interesting interpretation of this statement that relates to class and race. At the time, white people considered themselves the higher power compared to black people. White people considered themselves clean and proper and considered black people dirty and improper. However, this is ironic because Othello, the black character or "Moor" is the noble, kind and strong character. And Iago is portrayed as being evil, deceptive and crazy. We could see this as an attempt by Shakespeare to attack the ideals and beliefs of the time by turning them over and challenging them.

The end of this passage gives the audience the idea that good will not prevail over evil resulting in a devastating end to the play. The second passage, Iago's soliloquy, starts with him telling the audience that whenever he can, he will take advantage of any "fool" for his profit. This again

communicates his exploitative nature and alludes to the idea that eventually Othello will become his "purse". He then goes on to say "I hate the Moor,". Once again Shakespeare has used structure to emphasize a certain point. This being that Iago despises Othello.

He does this by starting the sentence with "I" and has placed a comma after "Moor" which sections off this declaration causing a pause after hearing which leaves time for this statement to be absorbed by the audience. Iago is portrayed as being sexist in the beginning of his soliloquy when he says that by Othello sleeping with his wife he has "done his office". Referring to his wife as "his office" now would be a potentially life threatening comment, however at the time it was thought that men were above women and a woman's place was at home, cooking, cleaning and holding together the home-life.

He is referring to Emilia as if he can do with her as he wants. This suggests she is his sex object and reaffirms him as the duplicitous man that he is. Iago's character is portrayed as evil and scheming in the last sentence of his soliloquy. After Iago has been plotting he has conjured up a plan to frame Othello by exploiting his trusting nature. This is communicated when he says "Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light." This conjures up images of death, pain and evil beasts. This is a very powerful statement and has the most significance in terms of alluding to the tragic ending of Othello.

It is also interesting because Shakespeare has chosen to write this in verse. This adds a poetic and almost beautiful aura to what Iago is saying. It is

intriguing yet horrific at the same time. He has also chosen to use figurative speech that makes the audience think more about what is being said. This is typical of Shakespeare's fondness for dramatic irony. He may have been alluding to the overall themes of the play here in this one line. Specifically, the contrasting notions of heaven vs hell, light vs dark and good vs evil. In conclusion, we can see that both speeches play key roles in preparing the audience for the tragedy of Othello.

The first speech reveals much about Iago's character including his manipulative and exploitative nature. It is revealed to the audience that Iago is complex and intelligent but that these traits are ominous ones. Iago is portrayed in such a negative way that it leaves the audience thinking that there could only be a negative ending to the play. The assumption is that evil will prevail. However at this point in the play we have not met Othello. We are not sure whether what Iago is saying about Othello is true which means that the audience are ill prepared at this point for the tragedy of Othello.

In Iago's soliloquy he begins to engineer his plan to defeat Othello. At this point we have met Othello and we are aware of his trusting nature that becomes his downfall at the end of the play. Shakespeare uses a combination of structural techniques, language and themes to help the audience prepare for the tragedy that follows. I believe that Shakespeare was attempting an attack on the ideals and beliefs in society at the time and was trying to tell the world that fairytales do not usually come true and that humans will ultimately be the makers of their own downfall.