

# How shakespeare wanted to portray or present the character? essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



'The Arden Shakespeare', argues that Othello is the 'third of greatest tragedies, contains arguably the best plot and two of Shakespeare's most original characters'. Originating from a tale written by Cinthio, Othello is seen as one of the Bard's most passionate and intricate tragedies. The play, originally identified as The Tragedy of Othello-the Moor of Venice, can be easily differentiated from Shakespeare's other plays as Othello explores a sense of cruelty that lacks comic relief. Moreover, Iago's character greatly emphasises on an intense theme of unity of action that is revealed as there are no subplots throughout. A structuralist approach is discovered as the signifier and signified are inversed frequently during the play. Critics have said 'Othello subverts traditional theatrical symbolism, through the presentation of characters Othello and Iago'. The drama of the play is usually driven by Iago's machination to destroy his general. Iago possesses more lines than Othello does throughout the play and moreover uses the speech of soliloquies to communicate with the audience forming a mutual relationship, as the villain reveals other dimensions to his character and schemes.

Although Othello expresses wider emotions than Iago, it is clear that they are provoked through Iago's sociopath-like behaviour. Shakespeare focuses the piece on the Moor who is of African origin. Comparing Othello to other black leading characters in Shakespeare's plays (Aaron from Titus Andronicus and The Prince of Morocco in the Merchant of Venice) the Moor is perceived by a variety of audiences and other characters as a magnanimous, authoritative and respected member of high society in Venice. Reputation and status was greatly significant to the society in Shakespeare's era. We are able to distinguish this in the play as Iago's 'honest' and 'loyal' serving reputation is

what he uses to corrupt those around him. Iago's multidimensional and complex character impulses the vitality of his revenge and therefore in reflection Iago is incapable in supporting his actions with any precise consolidated reasoning or justification. Nevertheless, Iago's soliloquies do however provide tedious detail of his hatred for Othello and therefore influence the questioning of how Shakespeare wished the character, Iago, to be perceived in evolving audiences as the bard manipulates an uncertain motive for Iago's actions.

Othello was a great success from its first performances. The Elizabethan/Jacobean audience were taken by surprise because it may have been "The most innovative of Shakespeare's tragedies with regard to sexuality, gender, racial inheritance and social relationships" described by John Russell Brown.

Shakespeare wanted the audience to feel a range of emotions towards the depth of different characters and events that had taken place that perhaps assessed society and stereotypes on a whole. One of these issues is the white and black physiognomy of Othello and Iago, where black signifies evil and white signifies purity, which was greatly questioned by audiences of 16th century England. The Bard purposely identifies Othello as the heroic and kind Moor who holds a higher position than Iago, in contrast, who is perceived as wicked and sinful. A Shakespearean audience may have found the status of the white and black man in Othello unacceptable, in addition to how the characters are signified in the play considering stereotypical views about race at that time. Imtiaz Habib's research has led to 'new

understanding of the role of cultural politics in Shakespeare's time'. The critic identified that societies did have black residents and communities in England within Shakespeare's era (documented proof has been found) which proves that Black people were living amongst white and what's more is that the critic states that 'Shakespeare had a very personal, intense sexual experience with a black woman living in London'.

A soliloquy is the act of oneself that represents unspoken reflection by a character in drama and is often used by Shakespeare to express personal thoughts and emotions of characters. Iago's soliloquies expose the depth of his character, as we see when he confesses "I am not what I am" (1. i. 63), leading the audience to attempt to understand Iago's probable motives or the lack of them. Through the power of soliloquy Iago tediously convinces the audience of his cavernous motives for his 'revenge'. Iago consistently seeks reasoning for his actions to perhaps convince himself why he urges to corrupt his superior, Othello, and why he hates him enough to actually do it. Iago mentions his suspicions that Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia - "...it is though abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He's done my office' (1. iii. 385) or that Othello has not given him the promotion as a Lieutenant (but instead Cassio) - "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1. i. 8). Although Iago provides reasons for his objectives, I do not believe that they are sufficient enough to explain his pernicious nature. Iago's general dialogue seems to suggest that he 'wrecks havoc on other character's lives for no ulterior purpose' as mentioned by Coleridge and it becomes apparent that it may be because the malcontent is dissatisfied with his own monotonous life.

Iago can be any member of society; he has a wife, Emilia, and a reasonably superior position in the army, as Othello's ensign. For this reason, it could be considered, as Andy Serkis has previously stated, that Iago is 'not the devil. He's you or me feeling jealous and not being able to control our feelings'. This leads to other causes for Iago's actions, one of these being that he may simply be jealous of the fact that Othello is closer to Cassio (his lieutenant) and Desdemona, (his wife) than Othello is to Iago.

Therefore becomes hypnotized by his jealousy, eventually leading him to destroy all the character's lives as well as his own. However another theory can be discussed as it may be argued that Iago craves for something more in life altogether and not only intends to change his own life but other's around him too. William Hazlitt shows his concerns as he states 'The general ground work of the character of Iago as it appears to us is not absolute malignity but a want of moral principle, or an indifference to the real consequences of the actions which the meddling perversity of his disposition and love of immediate excitement lead him to commit'. His character is one which constantly seeks fulfilment, achievement and excitement that he estimates can only be gained by the destruction of other's. This is notable as Iago acknowledges "nothing can or shall content my soul / Till I am evened with him". I believe that Iago may not want a 'normal' or 'perfect' lifestyle but instead one that is the complete opposite in which he hopes for those in high society to be corrupt, giving him power, satisfaction and control.

Loyalty brings great importance to Iago's character and following this he may feel as if he has been betrayed by Othello. Mainly because, as

mentioned earlier, Othello chose Cassio as his lieutenant and Iago may feel that he is closer to Othello and has known him for a longer period of time. In addition, Iago may have been shocked to learn about Othello's hasty marriage to Desdemona, which is what led him to bring to Brabantio's attention of his daughter's love affair at the first acts of the play. However it can be discussed that Iago is not motivated by his hate for Othello but his love for him. J. I. M. Stewart (1949) argued 'that, from the psycho-analytic point of view, Othello...turns upon sexual inversion that their being no possible motive for Iago's behaviour in destroying Othello and Desdemona except the rancour of the rejected and jealous lover of the Moor'. Iago may have a 'subconscious affection' of the homosexual foundation that he did not understand or was entirely aware of. Therefore Iago's feelings of betrayal and jealousy may be what drove him to exploit those around him whilst searching for motives in his soliloquies.

When writing the play it was believed that Shakespeare was influenced by Machiavelli's theories, especially his famous book 'The Prince' where the protagonist (The prince) is explaining how to be a good leader. The character (The prince) consists of similar personality traits as Iago as both characters portray integrity about them, but in fact are deemed to be evil. Shakespeare may have based areas of the play story-line on a significant quote - "People are by nature changeable. It is easy to persuade them about some particular matter, but it is hard to hold them to that persuasion. Hence it is necessary to provide that when they no longer believe, they can be forced to believe." In this way Iago can be seen as a Machiavellian individual as he has

tendencies to deceive and manipulate others for his personal gain (Cassio, Emilia and Roderigo). One example of this is when he uses Roderigo in many situations and confesses this – “ For I mine own gained knowledge should profane...But for my sport and profit”. The quote shows that Iago is aware of his immoral behaviour, thus it identifies Iago’s lack of motives.

The two major locations of the play develop from Venice into Cyprus. Venice was the crown jewel of the sixteenth century Italy where there Italian renaissance took place leading the city to become the home of a spectacular opulence of literature, painting, architecture and music. Cyprus, on the other hand, was a fortified outpost on the edge of Christian territory that was a bastion of male military power. David M. Zesmer (Guide to Shakespeare, 1976) states that Cyprus “ is an uneasy middle ground between civilization, represented by ‘ The City’ Venice and Desdemona, and ancient chaos, identified with the Turks, Iago and the savage origins of Othello himself”.

Othello and Desdemona moved from an urban, civilized and cultured Italian city to a barren military encampment that may possess a sense of claustrophobic capture which could have intensified Iago’s remorseless psychological assault. Moreover, we learn that Turkish fleet had been destroyed by a storm earlier, which leaves the men with plenty time for pleasure in a closed community, where discontent can fester. The setting of the coming events since the relocation to Cyprus may have impacted on Iago’s motives and extremeness of his plots. We have always observed that Iago is cruel and conniving from the beginning of the play, however his plots against Othello and Cassio (“ To get his (Cassio) place and plume up my will /

In double knavery.”) were prepared carefully at the time in which he was in Cyprus, which indicates that his surroundings could have influenced his later actions.

The bard had made it apparent that racial backgrounds are a major issue to other characters in Othello such as Barbantio (Desdemona marrying Othello) and especially play a significant role within Iago's motives within the play. Iago notifies Barbantio in the first acts – ‘ Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe’ which identifies the significance of racial issues between black and white in Elizabethan societies. The study of semiotics was only derived from Saussure (1857-1913), but was utilised within the play as the signifier and signified are reversed. At the first scenes of the play we are able to identify that Othello is represented as a malevolent, brave and respectable person where as Iago is seen as a scheming, spiteful and manipulative.

However through Iago's devious plots, as he corrupts Othello, Iago brings out the worst of him by persuading him that Desdemona has committed adultery with his former lieutenant, Cassio. Which leads the ‘ green eyed monster’ (as Iago warns Othello) to influence Othello's actions as we see a brutal, devil crazed and harmful person which supports the Elizabethan signified model of a black man. Othello's language throughout the play also develops as the plot changes, whereby at Othello's first lines we judge him by his exquisite, romanticised and abstract language which hints a sense of possibility – ‘ Twas pitiful, twas wondrous...’ (1. iii. 169). His naive character is forced by Iago to feel an obsessive hatred and jealousy which transforms his use of



language into harsh, intense and violent – “ Damn her, lewd minx: O damn her, damn her!” (3. iii. 472). Iago’s speech is rigid, repetitive and cuts directly to the point, leaving the audience with no doubt that his character and intentions are misanthropic – “ Thus will turn her virtue into pitch / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all”.

In conclusion, I believe that Shakespeare purposefully provided few motives for Iago’s actions and used the strength of soliloquies to ruminate upon possible motives within them. Nevertheless it may be considered that the play writer never intended for Iago to be perceived as a ‘ motiveless malignance’. Although Iago’s character is multifaceted and quite complex his presented motives are not sufficient enough to support his psychological tendencies. (This is mainly because the evidence he supplies is neither observable nor recorded.) Moreover it may be supposed that Iago’s character has been carefully contextualised with Shakespeare’s great efforts and venture leading to the success of Iago’s character to be perceived as a malicious puppeteer. Overall, in regard that the Bard had Iago’s motives in mind, I believe he was persistent that Iago’s character was left unfathomable and unravelled for us to judge his character as well as to conjure up the motives at which he relies on to drive his ‘ malevolent’ schemes.

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