

Essay on hamlet vs othello

Literature, British Literature



In two of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, Hamlet and Othello, potency and impotency are addressed through characters' actions and schemes. To be potent is to wield power, to be mighty, influential, persuasive, and cogent. One in a high position, one whom many looked up to, would likely hold characteristics of potency. Contrastingly an impotent character would be one of a lower position, and accordingly one of lesser position and influence. The first of these plays, Hamlet, speaks of a young man, Hamlet, seeking revenge on his uncle for the murder of his father and the taking of his father's throne and wife.

The second play, Othello, demonstrates Iago, the antagonist, to be in want of Othello or Cassio's higher position and his determination to obtain these through murder, deception, or any other vile mechanism. Young Hamlet from Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Iago from Othello provide blatant contrast in the potency of their actions throughout the course of each play. Hamlet portrays an impotent character through his lack of communication and actions, and Iago portrays a potent character through his deceptive communication and decisive action.

However, they demonstrate regardless of one's influence or ability to wield power, similar motives will draw parallel conclusions. Throughout the course of the play Hamlet, the audience watches young Hamlet develop from a character that has no effect on the rest of his household to one who drastically changes its make up. In the beginning, he is compared to a dying king of another kingdom, one "who [is] impotent and bed-ridden" by his uncle Claudius, and is seen to have little effect on anyone around him. (I. ii. 9) The speaker draws this comparison to place emphasis on the weak nature of

Hamlet. Within the first acts, his character is not revealed through his communication with others, but through his asides and soliloquies. Upon an encounter with the ghost of his late father and the introduction to his mission to kill Claudius for revenge; Hamlet speaks in a soliloquy full of puzzlement over his subsequent actions.

He decides that “ break, [his] heart, for [he] must hold [his] tongue”, and thus not to speak with anyone regarding the matter, but search out the correct actions for himself (I. i. 159). Hamlet in this way designates his revenge to be interpersonal and impotent for the time as he determines his course of action, instead of taking action and speaking with others immediately. As he struggles within himself over the actions he will take, questions arise through witnessing more emotion portrayed in a play that happens on the King’s Court than he feels within him. Hamlet asks in an aside, “ had [the player] the motive and cue for passion/That I have? ” (II. ii. 564-565).

Despite Hamlet’s definite purpose for revenge, he struggles with his inability to take action and admonishes himself for being unable to even show the emotion a player showed in a fake situation. In this way, impotency of Hamlet is greatly emphasized through his soliloquies and affirmation that “[he is] pigeon-livered, and lacks gall” towards enacting revenge for his father upon his uncle (II. ii. 581). Furthermore, he speaks about how “ the son of a dear father murder’d/Prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell,/Must, like a whore, unpack [his] heart with words” instead of being able to take any determining action against Claudius (II. i. 587-590).

At this point, Hamlet's impotency has reached its highest potential. His purpose has been made clear, and the general course that his actions should take was dictated to him through the ghost; all that is left is for him to be decisive and take action. However, each action he takes is stagnant, and designed to determine his final measure of action instead complete it. From this point forward however, the actions of Hamlet and his plan regarding revenge slowly begin to play out.

Since his call to action, he had been in search of a way to prove Claudius' guilt, and once this is complete Hamlet will "take the ghost's word" and complete revenge upon Claudius. Regrettably, due to his indecisiveness over what path to take to determine the king's guilt, his final actions are made after Claudius is aware of the danger Hamlet presents to him. Thus the only chance Hamlet has to complete his final action is made as he is dying from being poisoned by the king through a "potent poison [which] quite o'er-crows [his] spirit" (V. ii. 357).

In this way his exceeding impotence throughout most of the play resulted in his own murder, due to Claudius' discovery of Hamlet's revengeful motives. In Shakespeare's Othello, a very different personality and methodology for completing a task is seen within Iago than has been seen in Hamlet. His soliloquies consist not of fighting with himself, determining the right and wrong actions, but they demonstrate his very potency in taking actions and manipulating others. Instead of toying with his own emotions Iago uses many different characters to complete his will throughout Othello, even those as minor as Roderigo.

Roderigo is found throughout his death to be taken advantage of by Iago, and even speaks of Iago as one “hast had my purse/As if the strings were [his]” and been able to maneuver him into actions and words which he would not normally have taken (I. i. 2-3). Iago does not spend time contemplating and fighting within himself over the course of actions as Hamlet does, but speaks out. However, although Iago does speak with others, like Hamlet he never reveals his plan to the public. He instead works in secret through manipulation and devious actions.

As Iago spends his time working through others and slyly taking critical actions, he speaks saying “Aye, that’s the way. /Dull not device by coldness and delay” (II. iii. 345-346). This very line, as well as the claim of Roderigo makes of Iago’s ability to manipulate and maneuver people, demonstrates the potency that Iago carries. He is able to take every opportunity present and use it to his own advantage. In order to weaken the position of Othello, he who holds Iago’s wanted position; Iago convinces Othello his wife has been unfaithful.

He determines “if [he] gave [his] wife a handkerchief-“ she should be able to give it to whomever she pleases as a token of affection (IV. i. 10). Thus, if Desdemona, Othello’s wife, no longer has the handkerchief it is a sure sign of her unfaithfulness due to the possibility of her giving it to a lover. By chance, Iago was aware that Desdemona could not find the handkerchief, and is able to use this to convince Othello that Desdemona is adulterous. As this part of Iago’s plan unfolds, Cassio and Desdemona—objects of Iago’s intent—are blindly drawn into his manipulation, yet Iago still appears to be innocent.

He uses every chance he is presented with, and builds his plans to gain status as each new opportunity arises, instead of determining a full plan of action before proceeding as Hamlet did. However, due to the immediate action that Iago takes, he is not able to fully comprehend the repercussions of them, as Hamlet was able to do. In the end, this carelessness led to his downfall when he was unable to kill Cassio. Cassio's death would have meant all the lies that Iago had been feeding to Othello and his peers would have seemed to be truth, and he would have been raised to a higher status as he wished.

However, with Cassio still alive the truth of who Iago is and his motives become apparent. He is seen as an “inhuman dog” for all of the manipulation and scheming that he had done (V. i. 61). Thus he is sent to meet the same fate that he led others to meet, and “the censure of this hellish villain (Iago)” and eventual death, is left in the hands of a remaining government official (V. ii. 366-367). In the same manner that Hamlet was undone by his extreme impotency throughout the play, Iago was also taken by the reverse extreme, potency.

Each character found a tremendous spectrum with seemingly no middle ground to act upon, and were each given a similar consequence for such extremes. Throughout the course of each tragedy, comparisons and contrasting elements can be drawn from both Hamlets' Hamlet, and Othello's Iago. Each has a direct goal in mind, and though they are different in detail, they are similar in how they are to be brought about. Though

Hamlet and Iago have similar goals, their method for attaining each vary greatly.

Hamlet speaks within himself; he wishes to be sure of his actions and the repercussions of them before executing his plan. In this way he is seen as an impotent character, one without influence and who does not manipulate his power in order to attain his goal of revenge. On the other hand, Iago directly manipulates people through his use of words and his own actions. He is viewed as a potent character for the way he uses power to attain his goal of a higher standing, and executes actions without seeming to consider the implications of each of them.

In the end however, both Hamlet and Iago find themselves facing inevitable death due to their actions. Each character was an extreme of potency, either high potency, or none at all, and ultimately this led to their downfall. The idea of extremes leading to one's downfall can be seen not only in Hamlet and Othello, but in many other cases as well. Apathy versus passion is an example of two extremes that if found in a marriage or even friendship, could lead to the end of the relationship.

Were there such passion within man he could not control himself, it could end in the opposing party being disapproving, and ending the relationship at that point. Likewise were one to be extremely apathetic in a relationship; it could end abruptly through lack of communication, or the opposing party renouncing the relationship due to lack of any emotion. In this way, each person with an extreme position will be led to his or her downfall through the

excessive nature of it, just as Hamlet and Iago were led to their death through extremes in potency.