

Tragic characters in "othello" and "king lear" essay sample

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The Greek philosopher Aristotle set forth the guidelines for a tragedy in his work *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the tragic character in a tragedy is a person, not all good or bad, who begins in a rank of high degree and importance and then experiences a downfall due to a tragic flaw. In the end of most tragedies, the character comes to a realization of his flaw after enduring a great deal of suffering. William Shakespeare, an English playwright of the 17th century, composed many tragedies, including *King Lear* and *Othello*, which exemplified the characteristics of a tragic hero outlined by Aristotle. The main characters in *King Lear* and *Othello* share many of the traits essential to tragic characters, yet they differ in their specific actions taken.

At the start of the two plays, both *King Lear* and *Othello* are presented as men of a high rank and importance. *Othello* is presented as a courageous military war hero with the noble rank of a general. In Act 1, *Othello* boasts, "I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege, and my demerits / May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune / As this that I have reached" (Shakespeare, *Othello*, I. ii. 24-27). These lines indicate that *Othello*'s courageous military acts give him a social status comparable to royalty. It is evidenced that others view *Othello* as a man of high esteem when a senator remarks in reference to *Othello*, "Here comes Brabantio and the valiant Moor" (*Othello*, I. iii. 55). *King Lear* appears to be a man of wealth, power, peace, and well being in the beginning of the play. Being a king, he has even more wealth and power than *Othello*; he controls the kingdom of England and possesses the absolute power common of monarchs during the time of the play. His entrance into the play is accompanied by the sounding of

trumpets, signifying his importance. Furthermore, the language spoken by Lear and his daughters is high and courtly, as opposed to the prose spoken by other characters in the play. This language emphasizes the high rank of the king.

Although Othello and King Lear are presented as men of high degree, they are both not perfect; each one possesses some traits that lessen their character. Othello is not all good or bad. He may be valiant and courageous, yet he is also proud and jealous. In addition, Shakespeare describes him as a Moor, or black man, a trait not associated with perfection during the time of the play. When speaking to the Duke and Brabantio, Othello states, "Rude am I in speech . . ." (Othello, I. iii. 96). Here, Othello shows that his character is not without fault; he cannot speak in the eloquent manner of the royals. Lear character is flawed by the fact that he is an old man who behaves somewhat childlike and rash. This imperfectness is shown when he imprudently banishes his advisor Kent for defending Cordelia, pronouncing "Out of my sight!" without even considering Kent's reasoning (King Lear, I. i. 158). Yet, despite his rashness, Lear will prove to be compassionate later on in the play.

The tragic flaws of the two characters are remarkably similar. Both seem to possess a certain sense of pride that leads them to gullibility and poor judgment. Othello's pride can first be seen when he asserts, "Which, when I know that boasting is an honor, / I shall promulgate . . ." (Othello, I. ii. 23-24). Othello is saying that, if boasting were a positive quality, he would have a lot to boast about. Later in the same scene, Othello avows, "My parts, my title,

and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" (Othello, I. ii. 36-37); with these lines, Othello shows that he believes nothing bad can come to him because he is such a great person. His pride leads him to believe that he is invincible. Likewise, King Lear possesses a great sense of pride. This pride is exemplified in the love test he sets forth for his daughters. He shows he is conceited by forcing each of his daughters to praise and flatter him in order to receive an inheritance. When one daughter, Cordelia, refuses to flatter him, Lear's pride is hurt and he struggles to defend it. He exhibits pride by comparing himself to an almighty beast when he cries, "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (King Lear, I. i. 123).

The pride held by Othello and Lear leads to further pride in others. They gain a sense that others would have no reason to do them harm which leads them both to deceit and poor judgment. Because Othello thinks highly of himself, he believes others will do the same; his open and trusting nature allows Iago to take advantage of him. Othello is constantly referring to Iago as "Honest Iago" and entrusting him with important duties, such as attending to his wife when he leaves for Cyprus. Iago scoffs at Othello's trust in him and shows intention of deceit:

The Moor is of a free and open nature,

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,

And will as tenderly be led by the nose

As asses are. (Othello, I. iii. 442-445)

Iago insults Othello by comparing him to a submissive donkey, and he displays an intent of deceiving Othello in this simile. Lear's pride, like Othello's, causes him to trust others who plan on deceiving him. Two of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, gain Lear's trust through their flattering formalistic love speeches by playing into his pride and boosting his self-image. Lear is unsuspecting of the daughters' plot against him, and the two go on to take advantage of their father's poor judgment. Lear trustingly divides his kingdom between them, giving up his power and entrusting his well being into the hands of these malicious characters. Goneril remarks on the obviousness of Lear's poor judgment when she remarks, ". . . with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly" (King Lear, I. i. 291-292). Even after Lear witnesses the malice of Goneril, he refuses to believe Regan could too be cruel; he states, " Yet have I left a daughter, / Who I am sure is kind and comfortable" (King Lear, I. iv. 308-309).

The downfalls of Lear and Othello, although similar in the respect that they are caused by the same ultimate flaw, differ in the specific actions played out. Othello's pride and trust in Iago cause him to be misled into believing Desdemona's infidelity, ultimately causing his downfall and suffering. He becomes so wrapped up in the idea that Desdemona could be injuring his image that he loses touch with reality and allows his passions to overcome reason. This loss of reason is evidenced when Othello voices, " My blood begins my safer guides to rule, / And passion, having my best judgment collid, / Assays to lead the way" (Othello, II. iii. 219-221). Othello becomes enraged with jealousy, which blinds him of the truth; instead of seeing the

reality of the situation and questioning Desdemona, he demands only ocular proof in the form of a handkerchief from Iago to be convinced of the affair.

Lear, on the other hand, does not become full of rage and jealousy, but rather he falls into a mad hysteria and becomes obsessed with his own failings; his madness is directed at himself instead of at another.

Lear is constantly reflecting on his mistakes and asking rhetorical questions; on his journey to downfall he asks himself, "Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give 'em all" (King Lear, III. iv. 63)? Unlike Othello, he realizes that he is becoming mad and tries to stop it. This can be seen in the first act when he experiences wandering thoughts and cries, "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! / Keep me in temper; I would not be mad" (King Lear, I. v. 45-46)! Lear calls upon the heavens to aid him in keeping his sanity. Lear falls into a more noticeable hysteria compared to Othello. At the climax of his insanity, he roams the fields "fantastically dressed with flowers," speaking nonsense and acting in an uncivilized manner (King Lear, IV. vi. 81).

Another key difference between Othello and Lear is their realization of their flaws. In contrast to Lear, who has a sense of his madness through most of the play, Othello does not realize the error of his judgment until the last scene of the play. Only after killing Desdemona and hearing Iago's confession of the truth does Othello realize he was mistaken all along. He also comes to a slight recognition of his pride, catching himself when he starts to boast: "I have made my way through more impediments / Than twenty times your stop. But- O vain boast" (Othello, V. ii. 314-315)! Even

though he may recognize his pride, Othello fails to rid himself of this flaw in the end of the play. Before his death, he appears concerned with what will be written about his actions; he asks, in the letters regarding the event, that the men do not "set down aught in malice" (Othello, V. ii. 403). After becoming aware of his enormous error in believing Desdemona to be unfaithful, Othello unsuccessfully tries to kill Iago; then, overcome with grief, he realizes that he ". . . threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" and stabs himself (Othello, V. ii. 407-408).

Unlike Othello, Lear realizes his suffering throughout the play, developing an understanding of it during the play; but it is only at the end that he learns his suffering is his own fault and accepts responsibility for flaws. In the midst of his suffering, Lear learns to not only care for himself but to be concerned with the misery of others, too. For instance, he worries about whether his fool is cold and remarks, "Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (King Lear, III. ii. 72-73). This is marked change from the self-centered Lear in search of flattery at the beginning of the play. Lear realizes that he has been too inattentive to certain parts of his life, and turns into a new man. He is more simplistic and content with the little joys of life, as evidenced when he is joyous just to be with his beloved Cordelia after their separation, even if their time spent together is in a jail. Unlike Othello, Lear has a moment where his suffering is temporarily healed during his reunion with Cordelia. At the end of the play, with the death of Cordelia, Lear's suffering returns. He is left desolate, having lost his family, kingdom,

and sanity; but, unlike Othello, he does not commit suicide but rather dies of a broken heart.

In conclusion, although Shakespeare's two characters have similar flaws, the actions played out in these two tragedies are not identical. Both characters follow the guidelines Aristotle set for a tragic character, yet the specific ways they meet criteria differ. William Shakespeare is arguably one of the greatest playwrights in history, and the complex tragedies of Othello and King Lear are exemplary of his mastery of writing.