

# Othello – iago's character



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The character of iago could be said to be divided between the positive persona of evil artist and conversely, the negative persona of dirty-minded soldier (this draws parallels with the negative and positive Aristotelian opposing principles of ‘tragic’ and ‘heroic’).

It is this, as well as iago’s use of comic language and soliloquies, role as a playwright, sadism and Machiavellian tendencies that could be said to make him the most attractive character in the play. iago’s wit and verbal dexterity, in particular his lively and dynamic soliloquies, portray him as a comic trickster – aiding his magnetism to the audience. Through the use of improvisation we see iago making comical mischief, for example, “Making the beast with two backs”, a sexual statement of a transformation of Desdemona and iago into a ‘two backed monster’ during intercourse, twisting their beautiful and spiritual relationship into something comically bestial. Although crude, it could be argued that iago is merely a dirty-minded soldier and is entitled to such harmless and insignificant jests. iago draws attention to “my manners”, aping the ‘courtesy’ that he ridiculed in his soliloquy; again identifying the entertaining difference between what he implies and what other characters infer, in full view of the conscious audience.

His true persona is hidden from the other characters for the majority of the play. iago’s wit is fully highlighted in the statement: “Nay, it is true, or else I am a turk”. iago himself claims that if it were lies, he would be as much of an adversary as their war-time enemy. This is an ironically truthful mockery of ignorance and foolishness. Moreover, iago uses riddling, which not only entertains the audience, but is also proleptic of future events; he states “I

am not what I am”, japing the ignorance of other characters to his true identity and at the same time creating dramatic irony.

By playing on Othello’s confusion with such convoluted expressions, “ I think you think I love you”, the audience’s lack of sympathy toward the tragic Othello is encouraged, as he is solidified as foolishly unobservant. Iago uses a range of sadistic terminology. It is Iago’s cruelty and hatred of characters within the play, predominantly Othello (often without apparent cause, “ I hate the Moor”), that allows us to question a possible sadistic propensity. Such hellish language is evidential: “ Hell and night”, “ Must bring this monstrous birth to world’s light” and “ Divinity of hell! , suggesting a subconscious attraction to hell. Moreover, Iago’s use of devilish imagery, “ When devils will the blackest sins put on”, draws surprisingly similar connections to his own behaviour, as a character that ‘ puts on’ a veneer in order to deceive characters of the play and yet commits ‘ the blackest sins’ (in Iago’s case, deceit, treachery and murder).

This underlying ‘ blackness’ is ironic as it is Iago that creates such negative racial prejudices of Othello’s colouring and ethnic origin (for example, the use of the disparaging term “ Moor”). In the Shakespearian era, devils were thought to be black, (Hamlet: ‘ his soul may be as damn’d and black [... ] as hell’, Merchant of Venice: ‘ the complexion of a devil’) therefore suggesting that Othello’s dark-skinned heritage is damnation, when it is Iago himself that is (self-created, “ put on”) ‘ black’ under-flesh. Othello’s language is ‘ infected’ by Iago’s: “ All my fond love do I blow to heaven: Tis gone! “, “ Arise black vengeance from the hollow hell [.

.. ]” and ““ O will I turn her virtue into pitch, [... ] And out of her own goodness make the net [.

.. That shall enmesh them all [..

. ]”. This presents iago’s inhuman control over Othello, where it is not only his actions that are altered by iago, but also his mindset. Such language is similar to iago’s cursing references to bbestiality, “ Zounds [.

.. ] an old black ram Is tugging your white ewe! ” and “ you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse”. In both cases, animalistic sexual connotations are used to sinfully depict the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. In many aspects, iago could be said to be an intelligent Machiavell.

Whilst he is essentially a servant, he is in many ways more intelligent than his master. “ Now, whether he [Othello] kill Cassio Or Cassio kill him, or each do kill the other, Every way makes my gain”, where he utilizes and exploits other characters to unwittingly aid his demands. iago is observant and aware of the danger he is causing, “ a frail vow betwixt an erring Barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian, be not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell”, as he considers the susceptibility of Desdemona and Othello against his devilish wit. However, his wit now expands beyond the realms of comedy – “ Though in the trade of war I have slain men Yet do I hold it very stuff o’th’ conscience To do no contrived murder”, he is prepared to out rightly lie in order to meet his gain. iago surveys Othello’s weaknesses and uses them to make his gain through the simile, “ 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

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th' nose As asses are", like a tamed beast of work, Iago uses his position to 'lead' Othello into trouble.

His view of Cassio takes a similar role, as a caged animal, tamed to his own bidding, "[aside] [... ] With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly (simpleton) as Cassio". In the same way, Iago uses Roderigo for his "sport and profit" – whilst his exact motives for such maliciousness are unclear, their evil nature is undeniable. This argues against Iago as a 'tragic hero' as an evil character cannot be heroic – he is coarse and bare, with nothing 'worthy' in him.

On the other hand, Iago's language at the beginning of the play could represent a microcosmic anticipation of his later plots: he is a devilish playwright. It is Iago's use of verbal legerdemain that makes us question our sympathy for the characters he ensnares, for example; "Her eye must be fed, and what delight shall she have to look on the devil?". In this context, his use of the word 'fed' is derogatory, referring to Desdemona's sexual appetite. He sullies her reputation with these words to Roderigo – as he will later with Othello. Whilst his wit is apparent through the use of literary devices such as the double entendre, we question Othello's ignorance and culpability for his own tragic flaws. Within Iago's dialogue, Shakespeare uses the simile, "In the womb of time", to depict the 'birth' of his plan, "Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light", where he is in control of the play.

This reflects Iago as a devilish playwright. Iago displays an 'artistic delight in power and manipulating others' (Bradley, 'Seven Tragedies'); an aspect of

characterisation adding to his persona of playwright. “ This is the night that undoes me or makes me quite” – Iago controls the characters within the play, in the same way he controls the plot itself. Perhaps this is what makes his character so attractive.

For many years critics have treated Othello and Iago as ‘ equal and opposite’ (‘ The Arden Shakespeare’) and this certainly implies Iago’s character to be that of the Tragic Hero (where it would not be unjust to re-title Shakespeare’s ‘ Othello’ as ‘ Iago’). He has some of the positive attributes of a hero; Shakespeare’s use of Iago’s soliloquies reveal Iago’s character to the audience, making them complicit and making him more accessible as is true of a ‘ hero’, in addition to his intellect, wit and self-sufficiency. But, it is his tragically flawed, negative ‘ hellish’ behaviour that advises us as an audience against this credence.

Instead he is the catalyst and the ‘ bad half’ of Othello the tragic hero, perhaps even Othello’s own ‘ fatal flaw’. Despite his awareness of Othello’s “ free and honest nature”, Iago entertainingly takes advantage of his susceptibility for Iago’s own gain. Overall, it is the crude vitality of his speech that is at once repulsive yet engaging, making him possibly the most attractive character in the play.