

To what extent does shakespeare present othello

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The character of Othello can be viewed in relation to the theories of tragedy described in Aristotle's Poetics, with specific reference to the categories of hamartia and hubris. Additionally, it could be considered that his high-status conforms to Aristotle's emphasis on such characters. Consequently, the murders that occur at the end of the play reveal the extent to which his noble character has fallen. At the same time, it is clear that other factors intervene, such as the machinations of Iago and the effects of chance.

This combination of influences and attributes is characteristic of Jacobean tragedy as a whole. This is perhaps best exemplified in the opening pages of Othello where Brabantio claims "This accident is not unlike my dream", (I. i) clearly suggesting an inevitable foreshadowing of the events to come. This view is not synonymous with the aspect of the Aristotelian model which prescribes the hamartia of the tragic hero at the epicentre of the reasons for his downfall.

To analyse Othello's role in his own downfall, the height from which he falls, both socially and emotionally, should be considered. In Act 2 even Iago describes Othello's as having "a constant, loving, and noble nature" (II. i). This develops the sense, both of the depth of his emotional integrity and his high social-status. It is also reflected in Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter verse, as in, for example, Act 1 scene 3.

Through this subtle control of language Shakespeare suggests that he is able to command respect in society equal to the members of the Venetian court he is addressing. The speech beginning "Her father loved me" (I. iii), Othello's desire to draw from Desdemona "a prayer of earnest heart"

reveals both his sound religious attitudes and authentic considerations of love. Shakespeare presents Othello as such a grand character, in adherence with the Aristotelian model, to allow the scope for Iago's manipulation and violation of such positive qualities.

Shakespeare immediately presents the audience with external threats that could undermine Othello's position, even whilst at the height of his success in Act 1. Notably, Brabantio's despair that his daughter Desdemona did not marry one of the "the wealthy, curled darlings of our nation" (I, ii) immediately excludes Othello from the aristocratic social circle within which he exists.

There is an argument that Othello forfeited his right to remain 'honourable' by his secretive marriage to Desdemona which is clearly presented through Brabantio's declaration that "She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted By spells and medicines..." (I. ii) Here, Shakespeare clearly conveys the distinction between the "curled" men of Venice, who connote attractiveness and youth, and the manner by which Othello himself is perceived by another high-status member of society. The reference to "spells" would have been particularly effective for a 16th century audience as the connotations of witchcraft, or Paganism, stood in marked opposition to the Christian beliefs that were common throughout Europe. The influence of external forces on Othello's downfall is more conventionally expressed in modern theories of tragedy, as opposed to Aristotle's, and indeed suggests that his role in the tragic occurrences, and destruction of his own nobility, was limited.

Shakespeare frequently refers to Othello as a “ moor”. Although it was not uncommon for foreigners to hold positions of power in the Venetian courts, and indeed the concept of ‘ racism’ was hardly established, it is clear that quotations such as “ old, black ram” refers to the colour of Othello’s skin and further hints at the suspicion of witchcraft. This view could not be presented without reference to Othello’s bitter exclamation “ O, blood, blood, blood” (III. iii) that reveals Shakespeare’s allusion to a practising of the ‘ dark arts’. It is difficult to be sure in this instance whether Shakespeare intends to comment on people’s misconceptions of race or to suggest allusions to Othello’s sinister and dangerous traits that allow him to be so successful in the field of war, but which are also the foundation of his un-doing.

There are significant arguments to contradict the latter view as, throughout the play, there are clear references to Othello’s transparent nature, such as his pledge in Act 1 to deliver “ a round, unvarnished tale”. (I. iii) If this interpretation is to be accepted, there should be less focus on the ‘ inner evil’ within Othello, that allows him to murder his adoring wife than on his naivety within the culture of Venetian society. It is this naivety that convinces him to believe the word of Iago, a native, over his own better judgement.

Iago’s manipulation of this essential weakness can be seen to trigger Othello’s descent into pathological jealousy after Iago suggests “ I know our country disposition well”, (III. iii) which presents a clear continuation of the marginalization Othello experiences at the hands of Brabantio. Furthermore, it could be suggested that Othello’s own steadfast interpretation of honour “

Certain, men should be what they seem" (III. iii) results in his failure to see through Iago's plan.

In this respect it could be perceived that Iago infects, with ease, this honourable manner of thinking with his own "nature's plague To spy into abuses". (III. iii) This is displayed by Othello's eventual convergence with Iago's use of violent language, specifically in Act 4 scene 1, with a semantic field created through dynamic verbs such as "murder", "strike" and "chop". Similarly, his employment of sexually provocative language such as "What would you with her, Sir?" (III. I) alludes to the disturbing essence of Iago's language whereby he frequently presents the audience with his cynicism and mockery of conventional relationships through brutal, animalistic imagery.

The argument that Shakespeare presents, with regards to Othello's position as an 'outsider', could entail a contradiction in the traditional interpretation of Othello's hamartia as pathological jealousy. Instead it could be inferred that his naivety, presented not least through the repeated declaration "Honest Iago", creates the perfect conditions for Iago's strategic suggestions that aim to 'un-do' Othello. It could be inferred from this that Othello has no tragic hamartia besides innocent ignorance, a symptom to which all humanity is subject. From this it can be perceived that Iago's scheming could have led many men to the same end as Othello and consequently this veers from the Aristotelian model that suggests that regardless of circumstances, the hero's hamartia will lead to his downfall.

Othello's role in his own downfall cannot be entirely explained on grounds of his naivety. Othello's hubris and concern for his outward image add hugely to the emotions of jealousy and paranoia that Iago intends to provoke within him. It could be suggested that this sense of pride is an element of his cultural background and personal history as a 'warrior'. However this flaw is unique to him throughout the play and from this it could be concluded Shakespeare intends to mark it as a reason for his demise. There is perhaps no better quotation to support this view than "O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial". (II. iii)

Although the impact of the above quotation is undeniably positive in terms of our view of Othello, it could be argued that the intense commitment to the idea of reputation has considerable negative implications. It is undoubtedly portrayed here that he would have guarded his reputation over his love of Desdemona as he regards it as the single most important thing in his life. According to this view, Iago is little more than a catalyst in Othello's fall and it can then be argued that the description of Iago as a "demi-devil" (III. ii) accurately reflects the limitations of his responsibility in the downfall of Othello.