

Formalist critique of othello essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Northrop Frye, noted literary critic, contends that tragedy is carefully outlined, particularly in the Shakespearean tragedies. Frye recognizes that tragedies are “ more concentrated on a single individual,” and that “ the tragic process in Shakespeare is natural in the sense that it simply happens, whatever its cause, explanation, or relationships,” (Frye, 208).

In the case of Shakespeare’s play *Othello*, we find a single tragic hero, Othello himself. Led astray by his trusted ensign Iago, Othello goes from a magnificent military hero to a murdering, emotionally beaten man in a mere five acts. His secretly wedded wife, Desdemona dies by Othello’s own hands, thereby concretizing his fall from grace. The actions are unstoppable by any means, creating the unquestioning atmosphere Frye intimates. If only Othello could see his own failings, look beyond his ego, he could see the treachery he faces, but there is nothing for it and he falls blind to Iago’s hatred.

Frye further posits, in tragedies, “...the central character is given the greatest possible dignity in contrast to the other characters, so that we get the perspective of a stag pulled down by wolves,” (219). This fact is illuminated in the opening act where Roderigo and Iago paint Othello as a hideous, murdering African. He is referred to as a “ the Moor” (I. 1. 39), “ the thicklips” (I. i. 66-67), “ an old black ram” (I. i. 88), and “ the devil” (I. i. 91) just to point out a few. The obvious intent is to create distaste for the character that has yet to be named. In fact, it is not until scene two that he is called anything but derogatory terms. Iago refers to him as “ your honor” (I. ii. 7) and Cassio informs him of a request by the duke by calling him “ general” (I. ii. 36). The countenance of Othello from the moment the

audience meets him infuses the character immediately with an air of respect. He is not smarmy like Iago or desperate like Roderigo. Othello carries himself with grace, and speaks calmly. The audience can identify with him as the stag; it is equally apparent who the wolves are.

In understanding *Othello* as a tragic play, one must further consider whether Othello has inflicted this tragedy on himself, or whether he is hapless victim. It is the contention of this paper that he is a combination of both.

In looking at Othello's self-inflicted tragedy, we find he has spiked the ire (unknowingly) of Iago. For the position of lieutenant, Othello has promoted, "One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, a fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife; that never set a squadron in the field, nor the division of a battle knows," (I. i. 20-23). In choosing the young Cassio over Iago, Othello has created a jealous beast who will stop at nothing now to ruin him. He also recognizes his own merit, something that possibly construed as egotism. "Not I; I must be found: my parts, my title and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly," (I. ii. 30-32). Finally, the very nature of Othello makes him an easy target amongst his own men. "The Moor is of a free and open nature, that thinks men honest and seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are," (I. iii. 405-407).

In the case of Othello led beyond his control into tragedy, the obvious culprit is Iago. The plan to destroy Othello carefully hatches when Iago contends to "to abuse Othello's ear that he (Cassio) is too familiar with his wife. He hath a person and a smooth dispose to be suspected, framed to make a woman look false," (I. iii. 401-404). Iago's definitive plan is announced to the

audience with, “ Two things are to be done: My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress; I’ll set her on; myself the while to draw the Moor apart, and bring him jump when he may Cassio find soliciting his wife: ay, that’s the way: Dull not device by coldness or delay,” (II. iii. 389-394). Iago not only intends to use his own wife in the scheme, but he intends to do it without delay, his vengeance must be immediate. No quarter is given on their wedding celebration night. Finally, we find Iago moving onto the famous handkerchief. He says to Othello, “ She may be honest yet. Tell me but this, have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief spotted with strawberries in your wife’s hand,” (III. iv. 432-433)? Iago certainly knows that Othello had given Desdemona this handkerchief, Iago himself getting through dishonest means.

Through the manipulations of Iago and Othello’s decision to trust in his men over his new bride, Desdemona dies at her own husband’s hands. Her final forgiveness returns the audience to feeling for the Moor general. However, it is in his final torment over the guilt of what he has done, and his subsequent suicide, that Othello is vindicated to a certain extent.

In conclusion, we find Othello is indeed a tragic hero, and that his tragedy is both self-inflicted and beyond his control. Many more instances of proof can be found within the text of the play, but the scope of this paper has refined the argument to brief descriptions as evidence.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "Othello: The Moor of Venice." *The Unabridged William Shakespeare*. Eds. William George Clark and William Aldis Wright. New York, NY: Running Press, 1989. 1093-1132.

Frye, Northrup. "The Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy." *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 206-223.