

How effective is  
shakespeare in  
creating iago as a  
tragic villain



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In creating Iago, Shakespeare crafts a character that, according to Harold Bloom, "is by merit raised to a bad eminence that seems unsurpassable." Undeniably, Iago is one of Shakespeare's most compelling villains; his unfaltering malice, as well as his relentless desire for a revenge supported by feeble motives, are all features that have ensured infinite fascination over Iago's character for the past 400 years. Over the centuries, critics have developed a range of opinions with regards to this character, from a "recognisable type of human being.

.. with passions and frustrations... to a being next to Devil" Indeed, it is impossibly hard to label Iago as any particular stereotype, due to Shakespeare's characterisation.

With reference to the first quote, Iago can certainly be interpreted as a "tragic villain", and his cynical nature is definitely a driving force for the inevitable tragedy in "Othello". However, the term "tragic villain" sparks numerous interpretations and both quotes can be explored from different points of view. Clearly, it is important to define what the classical tragic villain is and whether Iago fits the constituents associated with this particular type of character. On a simple level, a tragic villain is the antithesis of a tragic hero.

With regards to Aristotle's theories, the latter character is typically a person of high rank who experiences a downfall through hubris and hamartia; a tragic flaw and the consequential mistakes caused by it. The characteristic role of the tragic villain is to provoke this flaw and to bring about disorder for their own means. In this sense, Iago's character undeniably agrees with

these notions. However, in Greek tragedy, many villains tend to portray extremely violent tendencies. An example of this is shown in the work of Aeschylus, where the two villains, Electra and Orestes, murder their own mother out of revenge in “The Oresteia”.

Indeed, the theme of unrelenting violence is common to Greek tragedy and Shakespeare manages to subvert the genre in “Othello”. The play is much more psychological. Iago is an insidious villain, as he slowly applies an evil pressure on Othello through trickery (the stealing of the handkerchief) and lies: “In his sleep I heard [Cassio] say “Sweet Desdemona...

“”. These manipulative techniques gradually convince Othello of his wife’s infidelity and (as Iago himself states): “[practise] upon his peace and quiet even to madness.” The most shocking aspect of Iago’s character is that, unlike most tragic villains, he appears to have no clear motives for the chaos he brings about, only vague suspicions: “I do suspect the lusty Moor hath leaped into my seat...

“. His jealousy of Cassio’s position is obvious, however the fact that Cassio loses his rank quite early on in the play suggests that this envy cannot be the driving force behind Iago’s fierce desire for revenge. Many critics believe that Iago has no motives at all and is, as William Hazlitt suggests, “a philosopher... who plots the ruin of his friends as an exercise for his understanding.

.. “Read about Iago’s soliloquies Hence, Iago is an example of Shakespeare effectively breaking the mould where classical tragic villains are concerned.

In respect of Todd Lidh’s understanding of a tragic villain, Iago undoubtedly <https://assignbuster.com/how-effective-is-shakespeare-in-creating-iago-as-a-tragic-villain/>

follows the course this critic describes to a high extent, making him an effective tragic villain. From the outset of the play, Iago begins to weave a web of deceit that is necessary for his “grand program of uncreation”. Undoubtedly, the structure of “Othello” is an example of the classical tragedy form, in the sense that there is an introduction followed by a series of complications (Othello’s trust in Iago etc.

that build up towards a climax (Desdemona’s murder), followed by an understanding and resolution, in which Othello’s nobility returns subsequently resulting in his suicide. Throughout this, it is clear Iago’s scheming drives the plot. Indeed, Harold Bloom goes as far as saying that “Othello” is, in actual fact, “Iago’s play”<sup>1</sup>. Tragic villains “reaching a high point” and subsequently plummeting to “their doom”, is a notion that could be seen to apply to Iago very fittingly. Indeed, the character constantly manipulates those around him until he is in complete control of the tragic situation. However, in the latter scenes of “Othello”, Iago’s plans clearly don’t run as smoothly as before (Cassio’s survival etc.

) and Emilia’s betrayal makes for a short-lived vengeance. Iago is promptly arrested and will probably be executed. Due to this it would appear that Iago follows the course that Lidh has identified for tragic villains because of the structure Shakespeare follows. On the other hand, it could be argued that Iago does not “plummet to his doom” at all, because he doesn’t die on stage like so many other typical tragic villains in Shakespeare plays, (Edmund in “King Lear” for example). Indeed, the audience is left with no absolute resolution. In a performance of “Othello” by the Royal Shakespeare

Company, the final scene ended with Iago's lingering laugh resounding into the darkness.

This had the effect of portraying Iago as unrepentant and almost victorious in his own mind. Therefore, this suggests that he does not necessarily hit rock bottom at the end of "Othello", as it all depends on individual interpretation of the play. In this sense, it could be implied that Iago is not a typical tragic villain and perhaps this is the point that Lidh wishes to get across. Shakespeare once again subverts the classical tragedy form through keeping Iago alive at the end of the play; this is quite innovative for the time as most Elizabethan audiences would not expect to have any loose ends to contend with: "Demand of me nothing, what you know you know." This was not the norm and is an element featured more frequently in modern theatre. Taking the second quote into consideration, Iago is certainly a very "mysterious creature."

"This is partly due to his unclear motives for revenge, as well as his uncanny ability to mask his true thoughts and feelings. Samuel Johnson describes Iago as having a "cool malignity" 5; the word "cool" implying that Iago does not let his emotions overwhelm him, he keeps them all under the surface. This suppression is a skill that empowers Iago, since it allows him to build trusting bonds between himself and the other characters in the play, leaving him free to abuse the trust for his own benefit. He easily manages to lead Othello "by the nose..

. as asses are". Indeed, the character is ironically referred to as "honest Iago" throughout the play, because he comes across as a sincere character

with frank advice. The fact that many of the characters rely on him for help makes it all the more easy for Iago to influence other's actions; due to this he has frequently been compared to a puppeteer. He is able to gain control over his "puppets" through his undoubtedly superior intellect, which also contributes to his overall mystery and emphasises his role as a masterful tragic villain. His "unlimited cynicism" is very apparent through out the play because of his insecurities regarding Emilia's fidelity and his vow to never "wear [his] heart upon [his] sleeve for daws to peck at."

Indeed, D. R. Godfrey concludes that Iago displays an "all encompassing jealousy..."

against love itself in all its manifestations. 6 The fact that Iago feels he cannot trust others makes it impossible for him to experience love, which is the reason for his jealousy and desire for revenge, which in turn originates from Iago's cynicism; the driving force behind his evil behaviour. Knight's wording is interesting, in the sense that he refers to Iago as a "creature". This implies that Iago is so lacking in emotion, he cannot be considered fully human.

A. C. Bradley supports this idea, as he views Iago as "if not a psychological impossibility, not a human being." 7 Certainly, it is difficult to grasp such a despicable personality and many consider Iago to be a personification of the Devil himself, which would rise him above a mere tragic villain. In the last scene of "Othello", the Moor realises he has been fooled into murder and cries: "I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable."

If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee. " To which Iago replies: " I bleed Sir, but not killed. " This exchange appears to support the idea that Iago is not human, but an evil spirit. Viewing Iago in this light, his motives for causing such chaos become more clear, in the sense that the Devil seeks destruction of all that is good and the rise of evil. These contrasting forces are represented through Iago and Desdemona.

The latter character is frequently described by others as " divine, the grace of heaven. , whilst Iago is deemed " hellish" once his plot is uncovered. In many ways, Iago could be seen as much more than a tragic villain because of this; he is part of the representation of a " heaven vs. hell" theme within the play. Interestingly, there are subversions of this idea proposing that Iago is an avenging angel rather than a devil. In order to have this view, it is necessary to regard Desdemona as the tragic villain, in the sense that Othello is destroyed because of his love for her.

Elizabethan society was still very prejudiced against women and many would have believed the story of Adam and Eve, and the idea that women were the downfall of men. Indeed, this interpretation suggests that Iago is a hero for trying to help Othello out of loyalty and love, both of which qualities are convincingly shown when Iago states " Witness that here Iago doth give up the execution of his wit, hands and heart, to wrong'd Othello's service. " Although there are numerous viewpoints, undoubtedly Iago possesses many inhuman traits, which further compounds the mystery surrounding him. The fact that Iago revels in his villainy is typical of many antagonists in Shakespeare's tragedies; " Richard III" also features a villain with similar

characteristics, in the sense that Richard delights in his treachery too: “ I am subtle, false and treacherous..

. “. This is similar to Iago’s awareness of his own deceitful nature: “”... but yet confused, knavery’s plain face is never seen, till used.

” The theatrical use of rhyme in the latter quote emphasises the notion that Iago possesses a “ gaiety in destruction”, fitting in with the tragic villain stereotype. Certainly, Iago has been judged “ the most perfect evildom...

by Swinburne and Harold Bloom considers him a “ flawless conception” 1; indeed, he is in many ways superior to Shakespeare’s more “ crude” 1 Machiavels, Aaron the Moor for example, due to his refined intellect, his opportunist qualities and his poetic nature. He is not only an effective tragic villain, he is Shakespeare’s “ radical invention” 1 because Iago defies many of the standard elements associated with an Elizabethan antagonist. His complex personality gives way to numerous interpretations, which contribute to his mystery. In Iago’s own words: “ I am not what I am.

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