

How significant are  
iagos soliloquies to  
the development of  
tragedy in othello



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Tragedy is constantly evolving, with differing key aspects defining how tragedians have constructed their plays. Stoppard believed tragedy should be defined as: “Wheels [that] have been set in motion and they have their own pace, to which we are . . .

condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one – that is the meaning of order”. Shakespeare uses Iago to orchestrate Othello’s tragic downfall and has him ‘set the wheels in motion’ by using a dramatic device usually associated with a tragic hero, rather than the antagonist, in soliloquies. Shakespeare has Iago use his soliloquies to foreshadow everything we see throughout the play, showing his careful consideration to how he will engineer Othello’s downfall.

During Iago’s soliloquies, Shakespeare ensures his plots are made blatant as he hopes ‘to get his place and to plume up my will in double knavery’ and will do so by having ‘our Michael Cassio on the hip’. The vivid imagery of Cassio being powerless at Iago’s mercy is used by Shakespeare early on in the play to heighten the audience’s fear when Iago eventually ‘wounds Cassio in the leg’. Shakespeare has Iago share key details to his plot as he plans to ‘question Cassio of Bianca’ after ‘I will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin’.

Shakespeare does this to trigger a feeling of helplessness in the audience as they watch Cassio fall into Iago’s trap, resulting in his actions becoming detrimental to Othello. The hatred for Iago progresses as those around him continue to call him ‘honest Iago’, leaving the audience powerless in voicing the truth about his notions. Iago’s straightforward manipulation is

foreshadowed as he tells the audience he will tamper with ' Othello's ear that he is too familiar with his wife', setting the pace of Othello's downfall.

Shakespeare has these small acts of malice result in Othello's formidable act of murder as ' he smothers' Desdemona, showing the power in Iago's soliloquies to develop tragedy. Shakespeare has the audience become aware of Iago's plot to frustrate them; the audience's denial of a voice as they watch his plan unfold heightens their hatred for Iago as they recognise his power in controlling Othello's demise.

The sense of inevitability throughout the play emphasises the audience's pathos for those Iago has planned to destroy, and the audience thus fear a lack of hope for Othello. Therefore Shakespeare makes Iago's soliloquies significant by ensuring the audience feel helpless in preventing the tragedy they have foreseen, feeling hatred for Iago as his plans become inevitable. Iago's constant use of satanic imagery in his soliloquies is used by Shakespeare to make it seem he is villainous enough to summon the devil. During his soliloquies, Shakespeare has him threaten that ' devils will the blackest sins put on' those around him as he screams ' divinity of hell'. Elizabethan audiences dreaded the summoning of the devil; this satanic imagery is thus used to make the audience fearful that Iago is capable of such a ghastly act, presenting him as the pinnacle of evil.

It is argued that Iago is the puppet master as he controls Othello, Desdemona and Cassio, depicting him similarly to a god in Greek tragedy. These gods had no motives when concocting tragedy in men, and this seems intrinsic to Iago's character. Shakespeare has Iago claim ' every way makes my gain' yet throughout the play he changes his apparent cause, stating ' I  
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hate the Moor' and then asserting ' I do love' Desdemona. This proves to the audience that Iago has no motive, horrifying them as they watch him set the wheels of tragedy in motion. Shakespeare had written ' Othello' during the Renaissance movement, which believed in the power of men and not gods, using Iago as a symbol of this.

Iago's mastery of the soliloquy is thus used by Shakespeare to depict the power of men, not gods, to dictate tragedy in others. Therefore this parallel between Iago and the Greek gods and the satanic connotations throughout Iago's soliloquies are used to develop tragedy, condemning the audience throughout the play to his unreasoned actions as he dictates Othello's downfall. Shakespeare does not build an internal conflict in Othello, showing the significance of Iago's soliloquies in developing tragedy. Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, such as Macbeth and Hamlet, display their conflict through soliloquies, yet Shakespeare purposefully withdraws this attribute from Othello. Shakespeare creates Othello to be ' of a free and open nature' who ' thinks men honest' and has Iago recognise these qualities throughout his soliloquies, claiming ' The Moor' is ' of a constant, loving, noble nature'.

By doing this, the audience realise that Othello has no internal conflict and Shakespeare makes it clear that Iago has recognised this also. Renaissance tragedy depended on the protagonist's internal conflict to result in miscalculation or revenge, as the gods no longer devised tragedy in men. Therefore, Shakespeare ensures Iago's main purpose is to create Othello's internal conflict. This is highlighted at the end of the play when Iago is captured, only saying ' from this time forth I never will speak word' when Othello asks ' why he hath ensnared my soul and body'. This silence is used

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by Shakespeare to create catharsis; whilst Iago previously guided the audience through his plans, they are now left emotionally purged as Iago has no explanation to why he has set the wheels of tragedy in motion.

Shakespeare clearly displays Othello's development of internal conflict by creating his first soliloquy late on in the play, having him question whether Desdemona is 'a closet lock and key of villainous secrets'. Shakespeare ensures the audience realise that Iago has created this internal conflict; during Othello's subsequent soliloquy he claims 'O brave Iago' has 'teachest me' to show Iago's impact on Othello's character. Therefore, Othello's internal conflict is developed explicitly through Iago's use of soliloquies, showing their significance in developing a tragedy that was not inherent with Othello's original characteristics. Shakespeare has Othello's language and imagery mimic Iago's near the end of the play to show Iago's power to influence him. Throughout the play, Shakespeare has Iago refer to women in his soliloquies as 'my young mistress' dog' and calls his wife 'a good wench', showing his feelings that women have a lesser position in society. The audience are shown Othello's stark contrast to Iago's language near the beginning of the play, claiming he wants to be 'free and bounteous' to Desdemona's mind and love.

However, Shakespeare shows Othello's language mutate as he shouts 'strumpet, I come' calling Desdemona a 'subtle whore' when he doubts her faith after seeing her handkerchief with Cassio. By Shakespeare showing the clear contrast in Othello's language style, Iago's influence is highlighted as he corrupts Othello throughout the play. Othello's imagery is created to resemble Iago's closely before killing Desdemona, crying 'O ill-starred  
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wench' and hollering ' whip me, ye devils'. Shakespeare has Othello's distinct choice of language simulate Iago's to make the audience believe that Iago has embodied Othello, showing them that Iago's influence and corruption are the sole causes for Desdemona's murder. Shakespeare has Iago use a semantic field of poison to allow the audience to associate his imagery with Othello's corruption. As Iago's plot to destroy Othello thickens, he claims to ' poison his delight' and cries ' work my medicine, work' whilst Othello's attitude transfigures.

Shakespeare has Iago refer to this corruption as his ' medicine' yet calls it Othello's ' poison'; this contrast creates hatred as the audience despise the connotations of Iago treating Othello, watching helplessly as Othello's downfall soars because of Iago's poison. This hatred is heightened as he claims that ' the moor already changes with my poison', allowing the audience to see the extent of Iago's malice as Othello begins to doubt Desdemona and seek ' swift means of death'. Shakespeare thus evokes catharsis for Othello after stabbing himself as the audience have watched Iago manipulate him with little motive. It may be argued that the audience shouldn't feel catharsis for Othello after having murdered innocent Desdemona, yet it is key that Iago has poisoned Othello's mind. Shakespeare ensures that Othello's actions can be blamed on Iago setting the wheels of tragedy in motion, making it difficult for the audience not to feel catharsis for a man who has been exploited and manoeuvred into murder. This catharsis is heightened by Shakespeare as the audience track Iago's poisoning of Othello throughout the play, with Iago availing his soliloquies to ' pour this

pestilence into his ear' with such simple lies and questioning throughout the play.

The way Iago plants this poison with simple questions such as 'O beware, my lord, of jealousy' and subtle hints as he claims 'I think Cassio's an honest man' shows his simple, yet powerful, influence over Othello through his use of language. Therefore, Shakespeare uses Iago's soliloquies to develop tragedy to show he has condemned Othello to his tragic downfall, corrupting his mind with poison enough to ensure such 'foul disproportion' could not stop the inevitable. In conclusion, it is clear that Iago's soliloquies are key in developing Othello's tragic downfall. Shakespeare ensures that Iago sets tragedy 'in motion' throughout his soliloquies, not simply foreseeing it, to show the power such simple language and manipulation can have over a seemingly 'fair warrior'. Shakespeare has chosen to create Iago as a satanic character to frighten the audience, using his mastery of language to direct and persuade those around him to do evil, showing how men now have the power of gods to evoke tragedy.

This would have scared contemporary audiences whilst they face their lack of power to stop Iago's manipulation of Othello, let alone stop his power over themselves. Shakespeare induces the fear of encountering people with god-like powers who will plant poison into their own minds, leaving their fate similar to Othello. Without Iago's soliloquies, there would be no tragedy of Othello, yet throughout the play it is clear that Iago sets the wheels of tragedy in motion, dictating the plot of tragedy.