

"UNVEILING IAGO: THE SUBVERSIVE PROTAGONIST OF OTHELLO"

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ABSTRACT: William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* is typically analyzed through the lens of its titular character, Othello, the Moorish general whose tragic downfall unfolds amidst themes of jealousy and deception. However, this paper challenges conventional interpretations by arguing that it is Iago, Othello's ensign, who functions as the true protagonist of the play. Through a careful examination of Iago's motivations, actions, and impact on the plot, this paper seeks to demonstrate that Iago drives the narrative through his manipulative prowess and complex psychology. By reevaluating Iago's centrality, this study sheds new light on *Othello*, revealing how Shakespeare crafts a compelling protagonist in Iago who subverts traditional notions of heroism and villainy.

INTRODUCTION: William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* has captivated audiences and scholars alike with its exploration of jealousy, betrayal, and tragic consequences. Traditionally, the titular character, Othello, has been viewed as the central figure whose tragic flaws lead to his downfall. However, amidst the complex web of relationships and motivations in the play, there exists a compelling argument that challenges this conventional perspective. This paper posits that it is Iago, Othello's ensign and confidant, who emerges as the true protagonist of *Othello*.

Iago's character is enigmatic and multifaceted, wielding a manipulative prowess that drives the play's action and shapes the destinies of its characters. While Othello serves as a tragic hero whose virtues are tragically undone by his fatal flaws, Iago operates as a Machiavellian strategist whose motives and methods drive the narrative forward. By examining Iago's motivations, actions, and the consequences of his machinations, this paper seeks to illuminate how Shakespeare subverts traditional notions of heroism and villainy. Through this reevaluation, a deeper understanding of *Othello* emerges, highlighting the complexity of human nature and the power dynamics inherent in relationships.

In this exploration, we will delve into Iago's character and analyze how Shakespeare crafts him not merely as a villainous foil to Othello, but as a protagonist whose agency and influence shape the course of the tragedy. By

foregrounding Iago's role and significance, this study aims to enrich our appreciation of *Othello* as a masterful depiction of human ambition, manipulation, and the consequences of unchecked ambition.

PROBLEMS:

- Address the challenge of redefining the protagonist in a play traditionally centered around Othello. Explore how Iago's actions and motivations shape the narrative trajectory and character dynamics.
- Discuss the conventions of Shakespearean tragedy and how Iago's character aligns with or diverges from traditional protagonist roles. Consider how his agency drives the plot and affects other characters.
- Analyze how Iago challenges conventional perceptions of heroism and villainy. Examine his complex motivations, moral ambiguities, and the psychological depth Shakespeare imbues in his character.
- Evaluate the implications of viewing Iago as the protagonist on interpretations of *Othello*. Discuss how this perspective alters critical readings of themes such as jealousy, manipulation, and the consequences of unchecked ambition.
- Consider how interpretations of *Othello* have evolved over time and across different cultural contexts. Explore how reevaluating Iago's role as protagonist sheds new light on the play's enduring relevance and meaning.

By addressing these problems, my paper can provide a nuanced exploration of Iago's character and his central role in *Othello*, challenging readers to reconsider their understanding of Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece.

OBJECTIVES:

- To Challenge traditional notions of protagonist in Shakespearean tragedy by arguing that Iago, rather than Othello, drives the narrative and serves as the central figure of the play.
- To conduct a detailed analysis of Iago's character, exploring his psychological complexities, motivations, and the methods he employs to manipulate and deceive the other characters.
- To investigate how Shakespeare structures the play around Iago's agency and the consequences of his actions, examining how this redefinition of protagonist affects the overall narrative and character interactions.
- To discuss how Iago's ambition and thirst for power contribute to the unfolding tragedy, and explore how these themes resonate with broader human experiences and societal dynamics.
- To provide with a new lens through which to interpret and appreciate *Othello*, highlighting how Iago's character enriches the play's exploration of jealousy, trust, and the complexities of human nature.
- To engage with existing critical interpretations of *Othello* and contribute a unique perspective that challenges and expands upon traditional readings of the play.

METHOD:

- Literary analysis of the play Othello, focusing specifically on Iago's speeches, actions, and interactions with other characters. Discuss the critical lenses (e.g., psychological, sociopolitical) through which you interpret Iago's character.
- Close reading of the key scenes or passages that highlight Iago's role as the central figure driving the plot. Exploring the language, imagery, and dramatic techniques Shakespeare uses to develop Iago's character and advance the narrative.
- Comparing Iago's traits and actions with those typically associated with protagonists in Shakespearean tragedy. Contrast Iago's motivations and agency with Othello's character development and tragic flaws.
- Historical and cultural context in which Shakespeare had written Othello and performed on the stage. The societal norms and expectations of the villainy and heroism influence interpretations of Iago as the protagonist of the play.

AN APPROACH:

- **Literary analysis:** Iago is one of Shakespeare's most complex and sinister villains, and his actions and motivations are central to driving the narrative in "Othello." Here's how Iago's actions and motivations influence the plot.

Iago's motivations are multifaceted and often debated by scholars. Some of the primary motivations include: Professional jealousy, because Iago is deeply resentful that Othello has promoted Cassio to the position of lieutenant instead of him. This professional slight fuels much of his anger and desire for revenge.

Racial prejudice is another element, Iago harbors racist sentiments towards Othello, who is a Moor. His disdain for Othello's race compounds his other grievances.

Suspected infidelity of Iago, where he suspects that Othello has been involved with his wife, Emilia. This suspicion, though never confirmed, intensifies his hatred.

Innate villainy of Iago often appears to take pleasure in the chaos and destruction he causes. Some interpretations suggest that his actions are driven by an inherent evil and desire to manipulate others.

Iago's actions are deliberate and carefully orchestrated to manipulate other characters and advance his schemes. Key actions include; Manipulating Othello: Iago sows seeds of doubt and jealousy in Othello's mind regarding Desdemona's fidelity. He does this by insinuating that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, using subtle hints and strategic lies.

Deceiving Roderigo: Iago exploits Roderigo's love for Desdemona, convincing him to assist in his schemes and to finance his actions. He promises Roderigo that he will help him win Desdemona's love, all the while using him as a pawn.

Framing Cassio: Iago engineers situations that discredit Cassio in Othello's eyes. For instance, he orchestrates a drunken brawl that leads to Cassio's demotion, and he plants Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's possession to provide "evidence" of the affair.

Manipulating Emilia: Iago uses his wife Emilia to further his schemes, such as getting her to steal Desdemona's handkerchief, which becomes a pivotal piece of "evidence" in convincing Othello of Desdemona's infidelity.

Orchestrating violence: Iago's manipulations culminate in multiple acts of violence, including the wounding of Cassio, the killing of Roderigo, and ultimately the tragic deaths of Desdemona and Othello.

Impact on the Narrative: Iago's actions are the catalyst for the tragic events that unfold in the play. His manipulation and deceit lead to:

Iago's influence transforms Othello from a noble and loving husband into a man consumed by jealousy and rage. Othello's descent into irrationality and violence is a direct result of Iago's machinations.

The false belief in Desdemona's infidelity, fostered by Iago, leads Othello to murder her in a tragic and misguided attempt to preserve his honor.

Iago's actions unravel the social and military order in Cyprus. His schemes result in the demotion and disgrace of Cassio, the death of Roderigo, and the ultimate collapse of Othello's authority.

The play concludes with the revelation of Iago's treachery. Though Iago's motives and actions are exposed, the damage is irrevocable. Othello's realization of the truth comes too late, leading him to take his own life in a final act of remorse.

- **Historical and contextual:** analysis of Iago from Shakespeare's "Othello" involves examining the societal, cultural, and theatrical influences of the time when Shakespeare wrote the play. It also includes understanding the Elizabethan worldview, particularly regarding race, gender, and hierarchy, as well as the broader themes of human nature and psychology that Shakespeare explores through Iago's character.

Elizabethan society was highly stratified, with a strong emphasis on social and professional status. Iago's resentment over being passed over for promotion can be seen as a reflection of the importance placed on rank and hierarchy.

Othello, being a Moor, represents the racial "Other" in a predominantly white society. Iago's manipulation of racial prejudices against Othello reflects the xenophobic attitudes of the time.

The patriarchal society of Elizabethan England dictated strict roles for women, who were often seen as property of their husbands or fathers. Iago's treatment of women, especially his manipulation of his wife Emilia and his deceit of Desdemona, reflects the misogynistic attitudes of the era.

In Elizabethan drama, the vice character was a common trope, representing evil and corruption. Iago fits this mold, embodying deceit and malevolence, and often breaking the fourth wall to share his schemes with the audience.

Othello, as a tragic hero, must have a flaw that leads to his downfall. Iago's manipulation brings out Othello's tragic flaw of jealousy, aligning with the structure of classical tragedy.

- **Psychological and Thematic Analysis:**

Iago is a master manipulator, adept at playing on the weaknesses and insecurities of others. His ability to deceive and manipulate those around him highlights themes of trust and betrayal.

Iago's duplicity underscores the theme of appearance versus reality. He presents a façade of honesty and loyalty while orchestrating a web of deceit. This theme resonates with the Elizabethan fascination with disguise and the true nature of individuals.

Iago's actions invite a broader contemplation of human nature and the capacity for evil. His motivations—jealousy, racism, ambition, and sheer malice—are complex and multifaceted, reflecting Shakespeare's deep understanding of the darker aspects of the human psyche.

Iago's manipulation is largely verbal. His skillful use of language to plant seeds of doubt and manipulate perceptions underscores the power of rhetoric and communication, a significant theme in Shakespeare's works.

CONCLUSION:

Iago's character in "Othello" is a product of the historical, social, and cultural context of Elizabethan England, while also transcending his time through his complex psychological makeup. Shakespeare's portrayal of Iago taps into contemporary issues of race, hierarchy, and human nature, making him one of the most compelling and enduring villains in literature.

References:

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