

The Theme of Jealousy Portrayed in Othello

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Abstract

Throughout Shakespeare's Othello, jealousy is apparent. The tragedy of Othello focuses on the doom of Othello and other Major characters as a result of Jealousy. In Shakespeare's Othello jealousy is mainly portrayed through the two major characters: Iago and Othello. It corrupts their lives utterly because it causes Iago to show his true self and makes Othello to undergo an absolute conversion that destroys the lives of their friends. Othello represents how jealousy, particularly sexual jealousy, is one of the most corrupting and destructive of emotions. It is jealousy that prompts Iago to plot Othello's downfall. Jealousy is the tool that Iago uses to arouse Othello's passions. Roderigo and Bianca demonstrate Jealousy at various times in the play. Emilia demonstrates that she too knows the emotion well. Desdemona and Cassio are the two innocent characters of the story and both of them seem beyond its clutches.

Key Words: Jealousy, Sexual jealousy, Tragic flaw, Misfortune, Suffering and Death

Introduction:

Shakespeare's Othello is very close to the Aristotle's conception of tragedy, especially in respect of the portrayal of the protagonist Othello. Othello falls from his position due to his tragic flaw, jealousy. Jealousy is the main tragic flaw that brings about Othello's misfortune, suffering and Death. Though this flaw is fuelled by the external force like the witches in Macbeth but jealousy seems to have a deep root in Othello's character.

Jealousy is the main factor that appears to destroy Othello. Iago is the initiator of the chain of events that sparks jealousy in Othello and eventually leads to the downfall of not only the main character but also of the most of the significant characters in the play. In Othello Shakespeare presents us with the tragic spectacle of Othello who in the mood of jealousy kills his wife, Desdemona whom

he loves best in the whole world. The marriage between Othello and Desdemona is a real marriage of true minds and a true love based on mutual awareness. The Love of Othello and Desdemona transcends the physical barriers of colour, nationality and age. But this love is destroyed as soon as jealousy enters into the mind of Othello. It is Iago who plants the seeds of suspicion and jealousy in Othello's mind. In Act III Scene III Cassio speaks to Desdemona, asking her to intercede with Othello on his behalf. Desdemona willingly agrees knowing that Cassio is an old friend of Othello's. She promises to speak of him with her husband repeatedly until the quarrel is patched up and Cassio is recalled. In the meantime, Othello and Iago enter and Cassio, who is embarrassed because of his antics and undermining comment. Iago introduces jealousy into Othello's subconscious.

Desdemona greets her husband and without guilt, introduces Cassio's name into their conversation. Here fate plays a major role in this tragedy; not even Iago wholly arranged this swift, coincidental confrontation of Othello, Desdemona and Cassio. Certainly the pathos of Desdemona's position here is largely due to no other factor than the fate.

A conversation follows between Othello and Iago in which Iago continues to imply that he knows something that he refuses to divulge. Othello denies that he would give himself over to jealousy. In his denial, he shows himself most vulnerable. He is consumed with doubt and suspicion. Iago leaves and Othello contemplates his situation: He could be tricked, married to a woman who is already looking at other men and he fears that he must wipe her out of his heart. He tries to tell himself that it is not true. Iago also urges Othello that Desdemona deceived her own father by marrying Othello. If Desdemona deceived her own flesh and blood, she might deceive her husband.

When Desdemona re-enters Othello watches her intently, looking for signs and brushes away her handkerchief when she seeks to sooth him. They go for dinner and Emilia picks up the fallen handkerchief, one that her husband, Iago often urged her to steal from Desdemona. Emilia decides to have a copy made to give to Iago, but he enters, sees the handkerchief and snatches it from her.

When Othello enters, Iago sees that Othello cannot regain his peace of mind. His speech is fevered, sweeping and frantic. He believes that his wife has been unfaithful to him.

Othello then turns on Iago with savage intensity and demands to see the proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Cornered, Iago produces the dream story: Cassio spoke in his sleep, embraced him, called him Desdemona and cursed the moor. Iago tells Othello that he has seen Cassio wiping his brow with a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries; Othello recognizes this handkerchief as the one he gave to Desdemona.

Othello dismisses love and calls for vengeance. He has freed his mind from doubt and confusion. Now he swears for action and Iago swears to help him. Othello wants Cassio dead. Iago agrees to do it. Othello wonders how to kill Desdemona.

The fire of jealousy is further inflamed in Othello in Act III: Scene IV. When Othello enters, he claims a headache and asks her for a handkerchief to bind his head, but he will have only the embroidered strawberry handkerchief. Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief and tries to deflect his questions about the handkerchief, speaking again of Cassio. Othello walks out in fury.

Othello is totally engulfed by his jealousy in Act IV, Scene 1, in which he sees his wife's handkerchief in the hands of Cassio's mistress Bianca. It is for Othello, the proof he sought. He is now convinced of Desdemona's infidelity and decides to kill both Cassio and Desdemona that very night. This is the second time Othello has sworn to kill both Cassio and Desdemona.

Othello goes directly to the point: "How shall I murder him, Iago? Othello swears also to kill his wife this night, he curses her and weeps over her at the same time,

mingling love and murder: “for she shall not live; no, my heart is turned to stone...” (178-179).

Othello asks for poison so that he might kill her at a distance but he sees justice in Iago’s idea of strangling her in her bed, imagining that she has dishonoured that bed. Again the agreement is made: Iago is to kill Cassio and Othello is to kill Desdemona.

Thus we see how the passion of jealousy which derives from pride and breeds anger, gradually gains control over Othello and destroys his initial nobility so that he finally turns into the cruel beast. The decline in the moral and spiritual stature of Othello goes hand in hand with the destruction of his love for and faith in Desdemona. Iago, “most honest” in the eyes of his companions, in fact truly the opposite. His feelings of jealousy uncover his actual self.

Jealousy divorces Iago from rationality and this loss of rationality causes Iago to make a life of Jealousy and plots to destroy Othello. Although Iago has a reputation of being

References:

1. Shakespeare, William. *Four Tragedies*. Bantam Books, 1988.
2. A Shakespeare companion 1564—1964, Baltimore, Penguin, 1964; pp. 146--347

“full of love and honesty”. He is responsible for destroying many lives and is considered “perhaps one of the most villainous characters in all literature.” Iago alludes to Othello that his wife, Desdemona has been unfaithful to him (Othello). Iago’s jealousy makes him (Iago) vicious. This, in turn, creates a new Othello to emerge, “one utterly possessed calling out for blood and vengeance”.

Conclusion:

The theme of jealousy is prominent throughout the play as it motivates the characters’ actions. The major characters of Iago and Othello clearly possess this jealousy and show how it affects them. Iago is forced to expose his actual nature and Othello undergoes a total transformation from normal human to a spiteful monster. Obviously jealousy does cause people to change in horrific ways. Othello is jealous of his wife. Bianca is jealous of Casio. Iago is formerly jealous of Emilia and latter of Othello.