
Is Othello A Play About Human Weakness?

Human frailty encompasses one's weaknesses and insecurities as well as lack of self-belief, which acts as catalyst for their downfall. William Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Othello* through Othello's paradoxical character and how his character changes as the play advances, explores the fallibility of human nature, epitomised through Othello's degeneration from a great soldier to a blood – thirsty monster. His alienation and jealousy instigated by Iago due to his 'free and open nature' and racism not only results in the loss of his rationality, but as part of human condition contributes greatly to the undeniable flaws of human weakness.

Due to the profundity of human nature and human fallibility, Othello succumbs to the emotions of jealousy and revenge. The climactic scene in *Othello*, Act III scene 3 depicts the overthrow of Othello's self – control and trust as he is overwhelmed by Iago's manipulation and thrown into personal anarchy. His unwavering trust in Iago allows him to be deceived and undergoes a dramatic transformation from his contented love to passionate jealousy over Desdemona's supposed infidelity, as Iago manages to 'triumph' over Othello. It is the increasing insecurity of Othello arising from a constant need to assimilate in Venetian society and fight the label of outsider that weakens his trust in Desdemona. The extent to which Iago reduces Othello's nobility to unthinking savagery is illustrated by Othello's transformation into the use of animal metaphors. His glowing terms used for Desdemona changes to 'goats and monkeys'. The 'gentle Desdemona' is now referred to as a 'young and sweating devil' and a 'whore'. Othello's mind is poisoned with foul thoughts, as he now seeks to punish his wife with death as she is contaminated and poisoned with her lust. It is particularly ghastly that the real prisoner (Iago) suggests the method of killing Desdemona. Furthermore, in Act V Scene II, Shakespeare's use of paradox effectively accentuates his conflicting state of mind as he lingers between his passionate love for Desdemona and his impassioned determination to kill her, "I will kill thee and love thee after". His dilemma is denoted in his third person assertion about Desdemona, "A fine woman, a fair woman...let her rot and: perish and be damned tonight." Othello murders his wife because of his jealous possessiveness, reflected in his assertion; "I had rather be a toad...than keep a corner in the thing I love for others' use." Ultimately, Othello is entirely consumed by his jealousy that highlights the frailties of human nature. In the violent image of his slaying of a 'malignant and a turban'd Turk' Shakespeare foreshadows Othello's own death. Hence, the dramatic outplay of the role in jealousy responds to the fallibilities of the human condition which reveals the brittleness of human nature and how Othello's own weakness cause his own downfall.

Shakespeare uses *Othello* as a medium to critique the fallibilities of the human nature, through his delineation of the idea of alienation and racism to amplify the extent to which humans can fall due to their hubris and hamartia. Othello demonstrates how a weakness in self-belief and a sense of alienation can result in self destruction, resonating to the convention of Shakespearean tragedy since the central dynamic is the moral and physical breakdown of the protagonist, Othello. He is sequestered from the beginning of the play with Iago's fastidious plans, as a result of his race. The racial epithets and bestial imagery used by Iago in "the Moor," "barbary horse" and "an old black ram" reinforces how society treats people who appears to be different due to their race. This brings about a reoccurring paradox in Othello, although he is seen as being valuable to Venetian society due to his military prowess, he is still

regarded as a heathen through the perceived belief that he is from an Islamic Faith, exacerbating his alienation. Othello's increasing self-doubt is revealed through his first- person assertion and metaphor in, "Haply, for I am black...for I am declined into the vale of years." When conflicted with thoughts and ideologies, it is hard to assert one's identity as precursor to one's alienation. Othello's is forced to question his identity by becoming a victim of his own insecurities, which is catalysed through Iago's clever manipulation. This is exemplified in Iago's "Divinity of Hell" soliloquy where Shakespeare creates irony in the quote, "When devils with the blackest sins..." The composer intentionally creates this paradox between Othello and 'honest' Iago, who even with white skin has a heart of 'blackest sins.' By constantly being referred to as the 'the Moor,' Othello struggles to fight the label of an 'outsider,' which leads to his disintegration of his self-dignity and control. Through this, Shakespeare exposes the fallibilities of human nature and how one can succumb to their insecurities and self-doubt due to the latent racism one confronts, consequently preventing their meaningful belonging.

Othello's nobility is questionable in his last soliloquy where he poses as both the victim in a simile, "Like the base Indian who threw away the pearl" and that of avenger as he once was in "Aleppo". Surprisingly, he continues to pursue his former self, of military heroism, endeavouring to escape reality rather than reflect on his actions. Moreover, Othello's suicide is merely an attempt to redeem the reputation he holds in high esteem and escape the guilt that haunts him, "speak of me as I am..nor set aught in malice". This is supported by the contextual setting of the play, in a time where his suicide would be perceived as a noble deed rather than an action of cowardice, which it was. Othello's actions, therefore, expose his hamartia leading to his own degeneration. This shows how one's vulnerability exposes their flaws forcing them to take irrational decisions on important issues.

Therefore, Shakespeare's exploration of timeless ideas of alienation and jealousy effectively critique the fallibilities of the human condition. He explores the complexities of human nature and draws connections to how tragic flaws of human nature act as a catalyst for the moral and physical disintegration of the human spirit. This universal study of the human condition, whilst responding to the Elizabethan culture, contributes to the overall textual integrity of the play.