

Sample Essay

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Zsófia Gregor:**Understanding Iago's luck:
The Role of Chance and Character in Shakespeare's *Othello***

Evil in Shakespeare's *Othello* is "in itself almost irresistible, aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the innocent mistakes of its victims," according to Bradley.¹ It is true that throughout the drama favourable coincidences of events play an essential role in furthering action. Yet, it is not Iago's good luck that truly causes the success of machination and thus the tragedy. The importance of intrigue does not, as Bradley states, "diminish the sense of dependence of the catastrophe on character".² Instead, one has the feeling that with the given circumstances and people, a tragic outcome is inevitable; if not evoked by Iago, then brought about by someone or something else. Seemingly accidental conjunctions of reality with Iago's plan are in fact results of his genuine insight into the characters. Iago does not cruelly create a situation which causes suffering, but rather exploits the possibility of tragedy induced by Othello's and Desdemona's circumstances, human qualities, and behaviour.

In the case of *Othello*, the basic cause that leads to his tragedy is that, due to diverse factors, he loses his clear-sightedness. He no longer acts deliberately; instead, he is carried away by zealous jealousy and becomes incapable of keeping cool and thinking logically. Such passionate demeanour cannot be attributed to Othello's general disposition. Coleridge's comment that Othello had "no predisposition to suspicion"³ is proven by the words of both Othello and Desdemona. Initially, the Moor unsuspectingly accepts anything said by Iago ("Iago is most honest")⁴, and has absolute confidence in Desdemona as well ("My life upon her faith")⁵. When asked about Othello's jealousy, Desdemona tells Emilia that "the sun where he was born drew all such humours from him".⁶ Because of the protagonist's trust toward everyone, Iago had to cleverly utilize several opportunities to finally arouse his

¹ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*. (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 168.

² Bradley 172.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on Shakespeare: A selection of the essays, notes, and lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the poems and plays of Shakespeare*. Ed. Terence Hawkes. (London: Penguin Shakespeare Library, 1969) 196.

⁴ This and further act-, scene-, and line-references to Shakespeare's text are to: William Shakespeare, *Othello*. (Bristol: New Penguin Shakespeare, 1970) II.3.6.

⁵ I.3.292–4.

⁶ III.4.30–1.

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jealousy. Besides the potentials lying in Othello's temperament, the nature of his love, his age, and his background all contributed to the success of intrigue.

In defence of Othello's selfless character, Coleridge argues that his "belief is not caused by jealousy (...) and is such as any man would and must feel who had believed in Iago as Othello did".⁷ What is important to emphasise here is that perhaps not every man would have believed in Iago to such an extent. While Iago could not rely on Othello's natural suspicion, he could certainly build upon his naivety. In addition to the Moor's openness to deception,⁸ passion also plays a role in his hasty decisions. Though Othello is mostly capable of controlling his temper, some outbursts, such as hitting Desdemona or the demotion of Cassio, reveal that reason is sometimes overridden by his strong emotions. The same fire that takes Othello into his unnatural marriage finally becomes his ruin. Othello admits how inflammable he is ("every puny whipster gets my sword"⁹), thus giving an important reason of why he ultimately becomes entangled in murder.

Beyond his romantic complexion, the nature of the Moor's love further increases Othello's mistrust, and thus Iago's chances. Newly married, Othello apparently encounters this feeling for the first time and also does not know his wife very well. Therefore, when Iago presents the alleged signs of Desdemona's disloyalty, accompanied by generalizations of women's inclination to infidelity ("Foul disproportion"¹⁰), Othello is utterly gullible. Iago's argument is rather persuasive because it sheds light on the fact that such marriage is not only extraordinary, but at the same time also unusual.¹¹ Othello is aware of his inexperience with women and that his judgment might be obscured by love.¹² Consequently, he gives full credit to Iago's opinion ("This honest creature doubtless sees and knows more"¹³) and lets his opinion be controlled by his enemy.

Another condition that reduces the reliability of Othello's discernment is the disparity in years and culture between him and Desdemona. This factor is by some critics considered to be one of the main driving forces of the tragedy. In Kállay's interpretation, divergence in age and

⁷ Coleridge 194.⁸ Bradley 176.⁹ V.2.242.¹⁰ III.3.231.¹¹ Kállay Géza, *Nem pusztá tett.* (Budapest: Liget, 1999) 228.¹² Bradley 182.¹³ III.3.240–1.

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background is a problem that the couple would definitely have to face in the future and that would necessarily result in unhappiness. Such reading suggests that Desdemona's murder was a sacrifice by which Othello prevented the otherwise inevitable misery and protected their unclouded marriage from decline. I do not see support for claiming that the Moor's marriage exemplifies the fate that awaits couples of differing ages or origins. The main conflict of the drama takes place between Othello and Desdemona. Similar to the connection between Othello's Moor origin and his inflammable temperament, the theme of opposition with society is not touched upon in *Othello*. Whether the unhappiness of Othello's marriage is an individual case or a general destiny of such relations cannot be decided.

Although I do not think that disparity between the spouses is the single most important factor leading to their disaster, Othello's being a foreigner in Venice does unquestionably influence the resolution of the drama. Unfamiliar with European and Venetian culture, the protagonist has no choice but to rely on Iago's low opinion of Italian women, according to which their "best conscience is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown"¹⁴. Because Othello had not known Desdemona for long, he has no evidence to prove that his wife is different. Thus again, because of a lack of experience, the Moor is exposed to Iago's ill will and deceit, prompted to distrust Desdemona, and left with no other choice than to believe what he is told.

According to Kott, "Desdemona is the victim of her own passion".¹⁵ It is true that just as with Othello, the underlying causes of Desdemona's tragedy can be found in her character. However, her passion is only one of the factors that Iago exploits. Not only is Desdemona brave or even daring; her ardent actions are accompanied by credulousness and an inability to recognize certain situations. At first sight these two determining qualities, namely quiet innocence and stubborn rebelliousness seem to be incompatible, but actually they are necessary consequences of each other. If Desdemona were not so naïve, she could not have brought her opposition with society to such extremes and would probably not have fallen victim to Iago's machination. However, given her intense emotions and trusting disposition, the victory of evil forces is inescapable.

One basic characteristic which leads to Desdemona's fate is her innocent charm and sweetness. She is so endlessly gentle that she cannot presume anyone to be indecent. Nothing

¹⁴ III.3.201–3.¹⁵ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1966) 119.

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is capable of arousing Desdemona's hatred; instead of objecting to someone's decision, she normally warm-heartedly and thus passively accepts what others say. She is not indignant at her beloved husband even when he turns against her in an incomprehensible way and begins calling her a whore and treating her as one ("And his unkindness may defeat my love, but never taint my love"¹⁶). Desdemona is defenceless against guile, because she never supposes anyone to be dishonest. She is at a loss to know why Othello has changed towards her, due to her faith in the goodness of humanity ("Dost thou in conscience think (...) that there be women do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?"¹⁷). Desdemona is easy to defeat because she does not question Othello's act but humbly submits herself to it.

Bradley points out that Desdemona is "a child of nature".¹⁸ This means that her kindness derives from an unspoiled innocence of mankind. She is not virtuous because she is taught to be, as she is not familiar with "conscious oppositions of right and wrong, duty and inclination, justice and injustice".¹⁹ Thus, Desdemona does not conceal the truth about her handkerchief to mislead Othello deliberately. It is out of good-will that she denies having lost her husband's gift; she simply does not want to hurt the Moor's feelings. Desdemona firmly believes that since she has not done anything wrong, she does not have to fear evil. In this way she is hindered in recognizing the significance of the handkerchief and consequently cannot justify her innocence to Othello.

The final factor that contributes to Desdemona's defencelessness is her romanticism and fervency. In contrast with her generally quiet nature, Desdemona becomes determined and self-confident when it comes to her marriage. Through her passionate love of Othello, from a girl Desdemona becomes a mature woman both as wife and as lover.²⁰ She becomes very earnest about the obligations of married life, such as everlasting faith, respect, and service of the other. Moreover, the one-time shy admirer of the Moor turns out to be full of devotion and desire towards her husband. Such an unexpected aspect of Desdemona's character thoroughly surprises Othello, who is thus easily talked into jealousy. Iago has to mention the idea only once that Desdemona is just like every woman and therefore might be disloyal to her husband.

¹⁶ IV.2.159–60.¹⁷ IV.3.58–60.¹⁸ Bradley 193.¹⁹ Bradley 193.²⁰ Kott 119.

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When Iago argues that “she did deceive her father, marrying you”, Othello is persuaded that his wife would truly be able to be unfaithful to him, just as she had been to her father. From that moment on, manifestations of Desdemona’s love towards Othello all remind him of how much she had changed since their marriage, and so how easily she could again change and abandon him. In the case of Desdemona, it is again not Iago’s luck that educes the lack of communication among the couple, which brings the success of machination. Desdemona’s absolute, extreme emotions make her actions predictable and give Iago the opportunity to create such evil conditions that “the better she loves, the more readily Othello believes that she can, or has, betrayed him”.²¹

The final occurrence that derives from Othello’s and Desdemona’s characters is the murder itself. According to the values of both of them, marriage is a commitment for a lifetime.²² Desdemona is surprised to hear from Emilia “that there be women do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?”²³, because in their view of life, faithlessness or a divorce are inconceivable. For Othello, virtue is more important than anything else. Consequently, as soon as he is persuaded of Desdemona’s uncleanness, it is obvious what he has to do. Othello’s last dialogue with Desdemona shows why the Moor thought the extreme deed of killing to be the only solution. He calls the murder a sacrifice,²⁴ thus suggesting that his terrible act would return moral order and protect their sacred marriage from sullyng. Othello’s other argument, “she must die, else she’ll betray more men”²⁵, unmasks another aspect of the sacrifice. If the beloved Desdemona dies, her honour can be preserved. Ultimately, the Moor claims that “I will kill thee, and love thee after”²⁶. That is, he does not at least loathe Desdemona, but rather desperately wants to love her with the certainty that there are no other men in his wife’s life. In the case of most couples, Iago probably could not have caused one to murder the other by any means. Nevertheless, for such people as Othello and Desdemona, very little was enough to evoke the sacrifice.

²¹ Kott 119.²² Géher István, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv: Tükörképünk 37 darabban*. (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1991).²³ IV.3.58–60.²⁴ V.2.65.²⁵ V.2.6.²⁶ V.2.18.

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Many commentators are critical of the role characters play in inducing the tragedy and they cite several parts in the drama to prove that Iago was helped by a series of accidents. Kállay claims that until the last moment, there is a chance for the disaster not to occur. Had Othello spoken with Cassio, or had Emilia arrived earlier to the scene, the tragedy could have been avoided. Undoubtedly, these events might have changed the course of actions. However, it is not by chance but because of his blindness that it does not occur to Othello to question Cassio. Regarding Emilia's late arrival, I believe that if she had come in time, she would not have prevented suffering, only postponed it. Othello's and Desdemona's marriage carried such tensions that when a specific situation and motivation were given by Iago, the inescapable consequence immediately occurred. The couple's disaster was naturally not predictable; without intrigue, their problems would probably not have been brought to the surface. However, with Iago deciding to do harm, the outcome was unquestionable.

Connections between character and catastrophe prove that Rymer was unjust in claiming that "the tragical part is, plainly none other, than a Bloody Farce".²⁷ The plot is not improbable, because Iago's machination and thus action are carefully built on his thorough knowledge of the protagonists' characters. Figures are not, as Rymer states, superficially portrayed either. The qualities of Othello utilized by Iago are not simply a projection of his nature; they also reflect his reaction to the cultural differences between him and his wife. While in the case of Othello it is imaginable that without intrigue, his nature would have caused no harm, Desdemona, her name meaning misery, seems to be definitely doomed with her naivety and endless good faith. Due to the tragedy's dependence on general human qualities such as passion or jealousy, *Othello* is not a single course of random events far from reality. Instead, it is a play where the tragic outcome is an effect of everyday traits the reader of all ages can identify with.

(13456 characters)

²⁷ Cited in Kott 100.

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