

# Heroes and Villains: Iago and the Extent of Human Potential in Shakespeare's Othello

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The character of Iago has traditionally been viewed as the most infamous villain in all of Shakespeare. The conniving ringmaster of the tragedy of Othello, Iago serves as a necessary catalyst for the action of the play. He takes such a principal role in the drama that the play has commonly been described as [Othello's](#) tragedy, but [Iago's](#) play. Scholars have disagreed, however, as to whether or not Iago can simply be described as an ingenious villain lacking all regard for morality. Many have seen some of his most inhuman or evil qualities as the very thing that makes him human; others have attributed his manipulative ambition to a deep-seeded psychological need to belong and have drawn clear parallels between Iago and the play's tragic hero, Othello. Clearly there is more to Iago than a simple lack of a moral compass. In the process of becoming the vehicle for the tragic actions of the play, Iago also brings about his own downfall. He is the second tragic figure of Othello, and the undoings of both Iago and Othello demonstrate both the extents and limits of human potential as well as Shakespeare's implication that no single man can ever be greater than the world around him.

Although it is counter-intuitive to say that one of drama's greatest antagonists is actually

one of its tragic figures, Iago fits much of the criteria for a tragic hero in a Shakespearean play. According to A.C. Bradley, a Shakespearean tragedy brings about the downfall of "an exceptional being," a man or woman who demonstrates extraordinary capabilities and whose greatest attribute, or tragic flaw, is also the most significant cause of his or her death ("The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy" 3154). Iago constantly demonstrates exceptional cunning and skills...

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