

## Extract only

**Academic purpose:** Discuss the roles of Othello and Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. [1]

Newton refers to other critics' views about Othello and Iago. Summarise these views.

Bradley, like most 19<sup>th</sup> century critics, believed that Othello was a noble man [2], not to blame for what he did as a result of Iago's manipulation.

Eliot disagrees with the idea that Othello is a noble figure, claiming that he extenuates the murder of his wife by trying to rebuild his pride in his final speech [2], rather than mourning her death.

Leavis perceives Iago as a representation of the traitor within Othello. He believes that Iago was merely a device [2].

Bayley sees Iago's role as nothing more than a catalyst [2], setting in motion events that were inevitable.

Explain how the writer's view differs...

The writer, K M Newton, disagrees with the notion supported by Leavis and Bayley that Iago was nothing but a dramatic mechanism, and instead believes that both "characters are of equal importance to the play. Newton claims that the story is "weakened" and "distorted" when one character is "elevated at the expense of the other" which he says Bradley does by focussing on Iago. In Newton's eyes, the roles of Othello and Iago are complete contrasts but equally essential to the plot [2].

"Iago should also be seen as part of the tragedy since his self-conscious cleverness and corrosive resentment prove no more adequate to the world than Othello's noble qualities." Explain what the writer means here.

In the above statement, Newton suggests that Iago's actions bring him no joy, and that is a tragedy in itself. Iago goes to great lengths to destroy Othello so that he can take his place as "Master" but is unsuccessful. Newton considers this a tragedy because Iago is unable to change his slave-like qualities, which he says implies that "human beings can never attain sufficient completeness [4]."

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What might Shakespeare's message for his audience be about this? ...

"Human beings can never attain sufficient completeness to be the masters of their world" is a message that Newton finds in "Othello". This idea is demonstrated in the plays through the characters of Othello and Iago. Shakespeare uses these characters to illustrate this theme because they are both struggling to obtain a fulfilling life (Iago wants to be a noble figure and Othello needs to conquer his insecurities). Their failure to achieve this is a clear demonstration of the message suggested by Newton [5].

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the critic's views about the roles of Othello and Iago in *Othello*?

I disagree with Newton's idea that Othello and Iago are not to blame due to the limitations of their qualities. Different lifestyles provide people with different traits, and Newton says that "one cannot criticize [a person] for lacking those attributes" if they are not "irreconcilable" with the lifestyle [3]. I agree with this statement to an extent, but I believe Othello and Iago are responsible for their crimes regardless of their backgrounds. Newton claims that Iago cannot "change his slave-like qualities," but this should not justify his actions, just as Othello's qualities that are "insufficient to cope with the world" do not exempt him of the responsibility for Desdemona's murder [3].

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