

Revenge in Othello

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Revenge is a very popular theme in Elizabethan high-literature. There are many plays throughout the ages that have revenge as a central theme. Shakespeare, one of the era's greatest playwrights, used revenge as a central theme in many of his plays. One such play is *Othello*. Revenge is typically used to dramatize an issue. In the case of *Othello*, revenge is personified through a character, Iago. What makes revenge an effective dramatization tool is how it is exacted, what triggered the vengeance, and whether the vengeance is justified or not. Revenge almost always leads to tragic consequences. This is why it is such an effective theme in traditional tragedy writing. In the case of *Othello*, Iago's revenge has tragic consequences for everyone in his life. Before we can analyze *Othello*, however, an understanding of revenge must be considered.

Merriam-Webster defines revenge as "the infliction of injury in return for". (Merriam-Webster) It is a harmful action against a person or group as a response to a real or perceived wrongdoing. Revenge is often portrayed as being the more violent form of justice. Justice is more harmonious and restorative, whereas revenge is more about injury and inflicting punitive damage. Justice is often thought of as being handed down through a legitimate judicial system, involving a system of ethics and an ethical majority. Revenge is typically conducted by an individual or narrowly defined group not bound by an ethical judicial system. Revenge consists of two primary actors: the wrongdoer and the avenger. In the end, the wrongdoer typically suffers a similar or greater pain than that which was originally inflicted upon the avenger. The tenet of revenge goes back many generations. In fact, the Old Testament teaches the philosophy of "an eye for an eye" (Exodus) – essentially an attempt to moderate the allowed damage. The Bible actually has revenge woven throughout it, teaching that God is the only entity with the moral right to exact revenge, and describing tales of avengers working on behalf of God. In fact,

every major religion teaches some method to mediate disputes and puts limitations of vengeance. Most, if not all religions teach that the laws of God are greater than those of man, and that cosmic justice should prevail when the laws of man fail. Martha Nussbaum, American philosopher and professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, once said

“The primitive sense of the just—remarkably constant from several ancient cultures to modern institutions...—starts from the notion that a human life...is a vulnerable thing, a thing that can be invaded, wounded, violated by another's act in many ways. For this penetration, the only remedy that seems appropriate is a counter invasion, equally deliberate, equally grave. And to right the balance truly, the retribution must be exactly, strictly proportional to the original encroachment. It differs from the original act only in the sequence of time and in the fact that it is response rather than original act—a fact frequently obscured if there is a long sequence of acts and counteracts” (Nussbaum)

This portrayal of revenge is seen through art history, as well as real history. In fact, this was the common theme in a dynamic genre of the Elizabethan period known as *revenge tragedy*. These plays were primarily, but loosely built upon a model credited to the Roman philosopher and playwright, Seneca. These plays were often full of gruesome and dark comic violence. These plays often exhibited one or more of the following aspects of Seneca's model:

- *A secret murder, typically a benign ruler killed by an evil one*
- *A ghostly visitation of the murder victim to a younger kinsman, generally a son*
- *A period of disguise, intrigue, or plotting, in which the murderer and the avenger scheme against each other, with a slowly rising body count*

- *A descent into either real or feigned madness by the avenger or one of the auxiliary characters*
- *An eruption of general violence at the end, which is often accomplished by means of a festivity*
- *A catastrophe that utterly decimates the characters, including the avenger*

(Revenge Tragedy)

In English theatre, it was commonplace for revenge to be the tool used to explore themes of absolute power, corruption, and faction. One such play is *Othello* by William Shakespeare. *Othello* gives a more traditional use of revenge in a play to create the downfall of a tragic figure.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare uses revenge throughout. Shakespeare actually goes as far as casting revenge in a role; the character of Iago. Iago believes himself to be the rightful heir to the position of lieutenant. When Othello decides to give the position to Cassio, a younger and less experienced individual, Iago becomes determined to destroy Othello and his family. Iago sees no resolution to the situation except through revenge.

“IAGO: Why, there’s no remedy; ‘tis the curse of service” (40)

He strongly believes in his convictions and believes that his actions are only accountable to God.

“IAGO: ...Heaven is my judge...” (66)

In an attempt to exact his revenge, Iago publicly humiliates Brabantio, a senator, at the expense of Othello. Iago calls on Brabantio late in the night to tell him that Othello had eloped with his daughter, Desdemona. Brabantio, being a conservative man, took offense to Othello, a black

man, running off and marrying his white daughter. This draws out Othello and forces him to prove that he did not use “witchcraft” or “black magic” to win over the heart of Desdemona. Desdemona then proclaims her true love for Othello, resulting in being disowned by Brabantio. This attempt to harm Othello’s character is successful on part of Iago. However, it is not enough. Iago seeks more revenge. The next step of Iago’s vengeance is to convince Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona. Iago’s goal is to make Othello question his decision to appoint Cassio to lieutenant. Iago believes that he “must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light”. Iago successfully convinces Othello of Cassio’s nonexistent affair. This drives Othello into a rage, causing him to kill Desdemona in restitution for her unfaithfulness. Following this, Iago’s wife Emilia informs Othello of her husband’s lies, showing Othello that Desdemona had indeed been faithful to him. Ultimately, this only helps Iago exact his revenge, eventually leading to the death of Othello and Iago himself. In this play, Iago quickly became consumed with jealousy and sought to exact revenge. The result was that, while his revenge was successful, it brought harm to all those around him, including himself. The need for revenge on Iago’s part drives him to destroy his friendship with Othello, the love between Desdemona and Othello, and the trust between Cassio and Othello. By exaggerating the effects of revenge in this situation, Shakespeare emphasizes the devastating effects that revenge can have on humanity.

The primary catalyst to revenge, as seen in Shakespeare, is often betrayal. Iago feels betrayed; therefore, he feels a strong need to exact his revenge. It is through this vengeance that he seeks to receive restitution. He believes he is owed this restitution and that his actions are supported by the laws of God. As it turns out, betrayal is often a catalyst for revenge. This is borne out of our relationship structures. Human relationships rely heavily on trust. When that trust is broken, we feel betrayed. When we feel betrayed, we feel a strong urge to seek

restitution. In the words of Julie Fitness of Macquarie University, “The key to betrayal, then, lies in relationship knowledge structures - people’s theories, beliefs, and expectations about how relationships in general, and their own relationships in particular, should work - and also in people’s trust that their partners will share, or at least respect, those beliefs and meet those expectations.” (Fitness) Othello and Iago are long time friends and professional partners. A relationship like this is bonded by a strong trust between the two characters. However, when Othello passes up Iago for the position of lieutenant, this trust is shattered. Iago feels as if Othello does not trust him to do the job. This loss of trust is what creates the sense of betrayal within Iago. In turn, it pushes Iago into exacting his revenge upon Othello.

The question remains, is Iago’s revenge justified. Trying to put oneself in Iago’s shoes may suggest that Iago’s revenge is justified. Sir Francis Bacon, a 17th century English philosopher, had several thoughts on the idea of revenge justification. Taking a look at Francis Bacon’s thoughts on revenge, “The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there are no law to remedy.” (Bacon) Considering this ideal to be true and just, and looking to Iago’s situation, it may be considerable that Iago’s revenge is justified. It is highly unlikely that affirmative action and equal opportunity employment were true ideals in the 17th century. As such, there would be no laws ensuring jobs go to those most qualified. In fact, our current laws are far from perfect in this respect. Taking this into account, Iago’s revenge could seem justified to some. However, Iago never pleads his case to Othello. The audience never sees how Iago is more qualified for the position than Cassio. From the audience perspective, Iago’s only qualification for this position was that he was next in line for the position; he was an heir to the position. Othello, on the other hand, never has an opportunity to explain why he made the choice he did. Considering these two facts, Bacon’s theory is called into question. While it is true that

no law may exist, this hardly makes Iago's revenge justified. Perhaps Iago is deserving of justice, but not revenge.

In conclusion, revenge has been a part of humanity for ages. Revenge allows us to deliver our own justice when the laws of man fail us. How revenge is exacted, how feelings of revenge are triggered, and whether that revenge is justified or not. These are things playwrights consider when using revenge as a tool to dramatize an issue. One extreme case can be seen in Shakespeare's *Othello* when Iago exacts revenge on Othello, bringing destroying the lives of Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, Brabantio, Emilia, and himself. Ultimately, revenge is fed by betrayal and feelings of jealousy. Human dependence of trust in relationships makes it easy for people to feel the need to exact revenge; especially when that trust is broken. Quite often people see revenge as the only means of restitution when the laws of man fail. Revenge fills the voids created when one is failed by a justice system. Unfortunately, revenge leaves a person largely unfulfilled and seeking further restitution. Revenge will almost always lead you down a road of fraught with tragic consequences.

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