

# A Nietzschean Analysis of Othello

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## Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche's first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, explores the creation of tragic art by categorizing it into dual characteristics, aesthetics, and archetypes: that of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Although *The Birth of Tragedy* deals almost exclusively with analyzing Greek Tragedy, the concepts that are asserted throughout the book can also be applied to Shakespeare's tragedies. Nietzsche himself was aware of this potential application to Shakespeare's work. He even wrote an aside in the seventh section of *The Birth of Tragedy* that describes the character Hamlet as possessing a kind of Dionysian awareness. Although further analysis has been done with Nietzsche's theory with regards to *Hamlet*, this paper will be exploring how Nietzsche's ideas from *The Birth of Tragedy* appear in Shakespeare's *Othello*. More specifically, I'll be arguing that Othello is the Apollonian Figure of the play, and that Iago is the Dionysian figure.

## Defining the Apollonian Figure

Before jumping into the ways in which Nietzsche's theory plays out in *Othello*, it is important to first explore the nature of the Apollonian and Dionysian figures that he describes. The Apollonian Figure is that of the tragic hero. Apollonian Figures are identified as those who assert themselves and attempt to rise above the chaos of existence. Often portrayed as kings, generals, warriors, and slayers of monsters, these figures act as an opposing force to the cacophonous darkness of the world. Nietzsche claims that the origins of Apollonian figures are

"necessary effects of a glance into the inside and terrors of nature; as it were, luminous spots to cure eyes damaged by gruesome night" (67). As an assertion of will and order, the Apollonian Figure also exists honestly, characterized as "simple, transparent, and beautiful" (67). As the one who orders the world in tragic art, the Apollonian Figure enacts his will by "drawing boundaries" (72). This creation of boundaries can be literal, like in the case of kings establishing kingdoms, or it can be metaphorical – as we'll see in the case of Othello as the Apollonian.

## Defining the Dionysian Figure

The Dionysian Figure (or sometimes a group of people, or metaphysical force like the will of the Gods) often represents the chaos that the Apollonian Figure attempts to rise above. Often understood as being more "natural" and "animalistic" than the Apollonian Figure, the Dionysian is that of the more "base" human conditions such as lust, desire, rage, and frenzy. Essentially, the feelings associated with the Dionysian are those "terrors of nature" which the Apollonian Figure attempts to emerge from (67). As a force of nature and chaos, the Dionysian is also distinctly *anti*-individuation, acting as a force that levels those trying to rise above. The Dionysian represents "the shattering of the individual and his fusion with primal being" (Nietzsche 65). Unlike the Apollonian Figure, there's no stable or true sense of "self" for the Dionysian Figure, as the Dionysian sees oneself as enmeshed in the continuous chaos of natural existence, like a rippling wave enmeshed in its body of water. As we'll see in the case of Iago,

the Dionysian forces at play in tragedy are often the victors, as they “level” the world to its natural, chaotic state by evoking strong primal emotions.

### **Othello as the Apollonian**

As the tragic hero of the play, Othello can easily be understood as the Apollonian Figure. Every quality of the Apollonian explored thus far applies to Othello. When we are introduced to him at the beginning of the play, he’s shown as having individuated himself while confronting the chaos of the world as a successful general, and his conduct is “honest, transparent, and beautiful,” especially with regards to his manner of speaking and storytelling (Nietzsche 67). Othello’s sense of individuality is demonstrated to readers and audience members as he explains himself as a person who’s left his original country to *make* a life for himself. In doing so, he became a successful military leader, which of course portrays him as someone who confronts conflict and imposes order on the world. As far as his overall behavior goes, Iago describes Othello in Act 1 Scene 3 as “of a free and open nature/ That thinks men honest that but seem to be so” (1.3.409-410). As someone who lives as an authentic Apollonian individual, Othello seems to assume that those around him are similar in this respect. This honest quality also makes itself apparent in the way Othello speaks, as he describes his oration style as he notes earlier in Act 1 Scene 3, “Rude am I in speech/ And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace” (1.3.91-92). However, this honesty and openness is not exclusively “rude,” as it should be noted that Othello’s speech abilities and storytelling are what make Desdemona fall in love with him. As he describes: “She’d come again, and with a greedy ear/ Devour up my discourse” (1.3.161-162). The honesty and simplicity with which Othello tells Desdemona his life story is what seduces her, proving that Othello’s manner of speaking is “beautiful” in the Apollonian sense that Nietzsche describes. As we’ll see in Section VIII, these are the

very Apollonian qualities – particularly the *assumption* of honesty – that lead to Othello’s downfall at the hands of the Dionysian Figure, Iago.

### **A Note on Monologues**

The very qualities that are virtuous in the Apollonian Figure are the qualities that make such a character almost uninteresting compared to the Dionysian. Nietzsche describes Hamlet’s character as very close to a Dionysian Figure. Hamlet’s monologues throughout the play describe a chaotic world, one that brings all humans to equilibrium in death. This concept—when applied to Hamlet—makes perfect sense, as it is Hamlet’s status as the main character of the play and his role as the Dionysian that make him the main source of monologues. This same pattern emerges with Iago, as Iago is not the main character of the play despite having the majority of the monologues. This is because the Apollonian Figure in the play, Othello, has such a straightforward and honest conduct that his monologues, though beautiful, don’t have the kind of intensity and awareness that Iago’s do.

### **Iago as the Dionysian**

Unlike Othello’s Apollonian characteristics, Iago’s existence as the Dionysian Figure is a bit more subtle, but it becomes apparent after deeper layers are examined. One of the first indications that readers and audience members get of Iago as the Dionysian is his lack of identity. Although he’s not constantly in a kind of existential crisis like Hamlet is, Iago’s perception of himself as an individual is incomplete if not deep-down nonexistent. In the opening scene of the play, Iago expresses this sentiment in his esoteric musings. First, with: “Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago/ In following him, I follow but myself” and then later on when he says: “I am not what I am” (1.1.60-68). Although some scholars have pointed to this last line as being an inversion of God’s proclamation “I am what I am,”

it also serves as a kind of paradoxical statement that embodies the lack of identity in the Dionysian Figure (Exodus 3:14). In other words, the idea of Iago as a “demonic” or “satanic” force makes perfect sense in this context, but examining this passage from Nietzsche’s perspective resists such blanket moralizations, as neither the Apollonian nor the Dionysian can be understood as fully good or evil. Other than his unclear conception of individual identity, another characteristic that identifies him as the Dionysian Figure is his *opposition* to the virtues of the Apollonian Figure. We have identified Othello as “honest, transparent, and beautiful,” so it makes sense that Iago is deceitful, opaque, and vile (Nietzsche 67). The most apparent of these traits are his dishonesty and opaqueness, as he uses his expert and subtle lies to manipulate Othello into his downfall – all the while keeping his true plans and intentions completely hidden. This is most apparent in the lines just before his anti-individualism statement, when he gives his famous piece that climaxes with the now-cliche phrase “But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve/ For daws to peck at.” Here he expresses his distaste for the characteristic of transparency, preferring instead to be inwardly drawn and unable to be truly identified (1.1.67-68). Iago’s “vile” quality is a bit more complicated. The Dionysian Figure is certainly not one of “ugly” features, but it rather contains more nuance than Apollonian beauty. Because the Dionysian is one with the chaos of existence, this beauty is something repulsive and shocking when it first meets the eye. For example, the human birthing process is often seen as “beautiful”, but witnessing such a thing is often disgusting, painful, and shocking to the senses. In the same way, Iago’s “vile” quality is not the direct opposite of beauty, rather a further compilation of it. For example, Iago’s monologues, though detailing immoral intentions, are nonetheless captivating and poetic in their own way. As a kind of evil manifestation of the Dionysian Figure, Iago takes on

numerous characteristics that propel the plot of the play (i.e. Othello’s downfall), and he gives the play depth and conflict.

### **Iago’s Motivation**

One of the main questions that comes up with regards to this exploration of Iago as the Dionysian Figure is: what motivates Iago? In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian Figure is a kind of anti-motivation. In opposition to the Apollonian Figure, whose motivation is often pure, honest, and noble, the Dionysian embodies a force of chaos and submergence. At first glance, it might seem like Iago breaks from the category of the Dionysian in this sense, as it is noted by some readers and audience members that Iago wishes to gain status as a consequence of Othello’s downfall. As a more emotional character, it comes to light early on through Iago’s own admission, that this is not actually the case. According to Iago, the real reason for his hatred of Othello is his suspicion that Othello slept with his wife. In Act 1 Scene 3, lines 396-400 he says:

I hate the Moor;  
And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets  
He has done my office: I know not if ‘t be true;  
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do as if for surety.

This would better explain Iago’s hatred for Othello, as Iago’s Dionysian nature makes him more in-line with his “lower” primal emotions, one of the most potent of which being jealousy. Still, this doesn’t quite satisfy the question, as Iago is never shown to be so scheming and hateful towards his wife. If he truly believed that she’d slept with Othello, wouldn’t he also be scheming against her, as well? Ultimately, Iago’s “motivation” for his plot comes back to the concept of anti-motivation that is so often seen in the Dionysian. As the most difficult to understand character in the play, Iago’s inner chaos is expressed by his wife with her phrase, “I nothing but to please

his fantasy” (3.3.332). Another way to put this to align it more clearly with the Dionysian would be to say, “I nothing but to please his frenzy,” which seems just as accurate as the original. Iago’s motivation, if anything, is a kind of frenzy: chaotic, unfixed, complicated, and delusional.

### **Downfall of the Apollonian**

As the tragic hero, everyone reading or watching *Othello* knows from the start that Othello is destined for death, likely a dreadful one. This downfall is all brought about by the Dionysian Iago, as he pushes the deeper elements of Othello’s psyche to overcome the noble Apollonian virtues that he originally embodies. As the Dionysian, Iago pierces the high-minded ideals of Othello, and he evokes powerful “lower” emotions that gradually possess him. Iago does this in an interesting way, not just by using his cleverness and manipulation, but he manipulates the very characteristics of the Apollonian against the Apollonian Figure. Othello’s honesty and openness were reviewed in previous sections as his most notable qualities, and it is these very qualities that Iago uses to destroy Othello. Othello often assumes the honesty of others, and he accepts that Iago is honest in his reported “suspicions” of Cassio, even labeling Iago as “Honest Iago” throughout the play (5.2.87). It is these characteristics of openness and honesty that the hidden and dishonest Dionysian uses to “level” the Apollonian and bring about a state of chaos. As the Dionysian, Iago also uses the repressed, primal part of Othello’s psyche against him. Along with this, the emotions that Iago evokes in Othello are often described as animalistic and even monstrous, such as when Iago famously states “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy/ It is the green-ey’d monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on” (3.3.187-189). After inducing these monstrous, primal emotions in Othello, Iago ultimately evokes the ultimate combination of all these things, resulting in Othello’s *frenzy*. It is in this frenzied state that

Othello kills Desdemona. Consumed by this state, Othello is unable to even wait “But half an hour” to kill Desdemona, when doing so would have allowed her innocence to be proven without any murder taking place (5.2.87). After the plot has taken place and Othello’s frenzy has caused him to kill his wife, Iago’s final statement is that “From this time forth I will never speak word,” claiming to cement himself in a kind of anti-transparency, never to vocalize anything again (5.2.348). Still committed to the virtues of Apollonian, Othello’s final speech displays his commitment to honesty and transparency, particularly with the phrase “Speak of me as I am” (5.2.391). As seen with these two very different last-words, Othello and Iago’s opposing characteristics as Apollonian and Dionysian are demonstrated to the very end.

### **Conclusion**

In exploring Nietzsche’s ideas of the Apollonian and the Dionysian figures of tragedy, it has been made clear that Othello and Iago belong to these categories. As the Apollonian Figure, Othello represents the human tendency towards emergence, honesty, beauty, truth, transparency, and order, while the Dionysian Figure, Iago represents the more “natural” tendencies of the world: characteristics of chaos, confusion, desire, lust, jealousy, hiddenness, and the primal attributes of our species. In *Othello*, we see a unique, complicated, and fascinating portrait of these figures, given to readers and audience members through the renowned poetics of William Shakespeare.

### **Works Cited**

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