

## Iago's soliloquies in Othello

- In Shakespeare's plays there is usually empathy between the audience and the characters who speak alone on stage. The dramatic device of the soliloquy gives the audience the speaker's perspective and makes them, in part, his accomplices, as they are taken into his confidence and listen to his plots being hatched against the other characters.
- Iago speaks to the audience throughout the play, unlike Othello, and thus draws them into his web.
- The theatrical convention is that in soliloquy the character tells the truth, but Iago may be an exception in that he may not know himself what the truth is about his own feelings.
- Coleridge claimed that Iago's soliloquies are 'the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity'.
- Iago's soliloquies are an integral part of the plot structure in that they tend to fall at the beginning or end of scenes, where they either summarise and reflect back on what has just happened and the response of the others, or preview what is about to happen.
- This strategic placing of the speeches gives the impression that Iago is playing the role of chorus in a play of his own devising, and that he is the source of all the action.
- His soliloquies repay close attention for the wealth of material they provide for a discussion of the characters, themes and imagery of the play, as well as for what they reveal of the audacity and quick-thinking of his own mind.

**(1) Study the seven soliloquies which are given below. Summarise and paraphrase each soliloquy. Underline the key words and comment on aspects of the language.**

**(2) Say what each soliloquy seems to reveal about Iago's character.**

**(3) List the alleged reasons given in each soliloquy for his beliefs and actions, and comment on which parts seem true and which dubious, and why.**

**(4) Decide what you think Iago's overall motivation in the play is and why, or whether you agree with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, (Romantic poet and Shakespeare Critic) that Iago's malignity is motiveless.**

**(5) Consider why Shakespeare might want to create disagreement and confusion about Iago's motives.**

### Act I scene 3 (lines 377–98)

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:  
For I mine own gained knowledge should profane  
If I would time expend with such a snipe  
But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor,  
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets  
He's done my office. I know not if't be true

But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do as if for surety. He holds me well:  
The better shall my purpose work on him.  
Cassio's a proper man: let me see now;  
To get his place and to plume up my will  
In double knavery. How? How? Let's see.  
After some time, to abuse Othello's ear  
That he is too familiar with his wife;  
He hath a person and a smooth dispose  
To be suspected, framed to make women false.  
The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,  
And will as tenderly be led by the nose  
As asses are.  
I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

**Act II scene 1 (lines 277–303)**

That Cassio loves her, I do well believe't:  
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.  
The Moor — howbeit that I endure him not —  
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,  
And, I dare think, he'll prove to Desdemona  
A most dear husband. Now, I do love her too;  
Not out of absolute lust — though peradventure  
I stand accountant for as great a sin —  
But partly led to diet my revenge  
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor  
Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof  
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards,  
And nothing can, or shall, content my soul  
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife;  
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor  
At least into a jealousy so strong  
That judgement cannot cure. Which thing to do  
If this poor trash of Venice, whom I leash  
For his quick hunting, stand the putting on,  
I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,  
Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb —  
For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too —  
Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me  
For making him egregiously an ass,  
And practising upon his peace and quiet,  
Even to madness. 'Tis here, but yet confused:  
Knavery's plain face is never seen till used.

**Act II scene 3 (lines 44–59)**

If I can fasten but one cup upon him,  
With that which he hath drunk tonight already,  
He'll be as full of quarrel and offence  
As my young mistress' dog. Now my sick fool Roderigo,  
Whom love hath turned almost the wrong side out,  
To Desdemona hath tonight caroused  
Potations pottle-deep; and he's to watch.  
Three else of Cyprus, noble swelling spirits —  
That hold their honours in a wary distance,  
The very elements of this warlike isle —  
Have I tonight flustered with flowing cups,  
And they watch too. Now 'mongst this flock of drunkards,  
Am I to put our Cassio in some action  
That may offend the isle. But here they come;  
If consequence do but approve my dream,  
My boat sails freely both with wind and stream.

**Act II scene 3 (lines 326–52 and 371–77)**

And what's he then that says I play the villain,  
When this advice is free I give, and honest,  
Probal to thinking, and indeed the course  
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy  
Th'inclining Desdemona to subdue  
In any honest suit. She's framed as fruitful  
As the free elements; and then for her  
To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,  
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,  
His soul is so enfettered to her love,  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetitie shall play the god  
With his weak function. How am I then a villain  
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course  
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!  
When devils will the blackest sins put on,  
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows  
As I do now. For whiles this honest fool  
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes  
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,  
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:  
That she repeals him for her body's lust,  
And by how much she strives to do him good,  
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.  
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all.

[...]

Two things are to be done.  
My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress:  
I'll set her on.  
Myself the while to draw the Moor apart,  
And bring him jump when he may Cassio find  
Soliciting his wife. Ay, that's the way.  
Dull not device by coldness and delay.

**Act III scene 3 (lines 318–26)**

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,  
And let him find it. Trifles light as air  
Are to the jealous confirmations strong  
As proofs of holy writ. This may do something.  
The Moor already changes with my poison.  
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons,  
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,  
But, with a little act upon the blood,  
Burn like the mines of sulphur.

**Act IV scene 1 (lines 93–103)**

Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,  
A housewife, that by selling her desires  
Buys herself bread and clothes. It is a creature  
That dotes on Cassio — as 'tis the strumpet's plague  
To beguile many and be beguiled by one.  
He, when he hears of her, cannot refrain  
From the excess of laughter. Here he comes.  
As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad;  
And his unbookish jealousy must construe  
Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behaviour  
Quite in the wrong. How do you now, Lieutenant?

**Act V scene 1 (lines 11–22)**

I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense,  
And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio,  
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,  
Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,  
He calls me to a restitution large  
Of gold and jewels, that I bobbed from him  
As gifts to Desdemona.  
It must not be. If Cassio do remain  
He hath a daily beauty in his life  
That makes me ugly: and besides, the Moor  
May unfold me to him — there stand I in much peril.

No, he must die. But soft, I hear him coming.