

2. Psychoanalysis

Iago

on the Couch

Is it useful to psychoanalyse fictional characters? Terry Hands believes it is. Here, Jo Caird takes a closer look at Hands' contribution to *Iago on the Couch*, the first in a series of filmed discussions commissioned by The Institute of Psychoanalysis.

... poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.

These are the words of Sigmund Freud, the nineteenth-century psychologist who introduced the world to psychoanalysis, and in so doing fundamentally changed the way we think about ourselves, our personal development and our relationships.

Freud's ideas have profoundly affected the field of psychology, yielding greater understanding of the workings of the human mind, both in its healthy and diseased states. They've also been applied far more widely, as the above quotation suggests, opening up the worlds of literature and art, as well as disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and education.







Freud's basic theory, as explored in his seminal works *On the Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Ego and the Id*, holds that the human mind is made up of the conscious and the unconscious. While we are aware of the thoughts and memories in our conscious mind, the unconscious is a storehouse for the material our mind wishes to keep from us. It is the presence of repressed thoughts, such as the memory of trauma, which causes anxiety and neurosis; accessing a patient's unconscious to bring this hidden trauma to light was central to Freud's practice.

Applying Freud to Literature

But how useful are such methods when it comes to discussing not real patients, but fictional characters? Can we delve into a protagonist's unconscious in the same way that we would a person suffering from mental health problems? The Institute of Psychoanalysis, the home of British psychoanalytic practice and research, believes we can and has commissioned a series of filmed discussions to explore the issue, focusing on the work of our greatest poet and playwright, William Shakespeare.

Iago on the Couch is the first in the series, putting one of Shakespeare's most complex villains at the heart of the discussion and considering how a psychoanalytical approach might enable greater insights into the study of *Othello*. The atmospheric setting for this conversation is none other than the dining room at the former London home of the great psychoanalyst, now open to the public as The Freud Museum.

Terry Hands, one of the UK's foremost directors of Shakespeare, is among those taking part, along with the actor Simon Russell Beale, psychoanalysts David Bell and Ignês Sodr , and former president of the British Psychoanalytic Society, Donald Campbell. As director of Clwyd Theatr Cymru, and in his previous role of artistic director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Hands has directed a large number of Shakespeare's most challenging plays, as well as a wide range of other drama, making him ideally placed to comment on the psychoanalytical aspects of the Shakespearean canon.

Hands says:

All Shakespeare's plays begin with a crisis and all are love-stories. 'Why?' becomes the inevitable question. Why does 'honest' Iago become a killer? Why does Enobarbus die of a broken heart?

Why does Kate become a shrew? Any director or actor will have to answer these questions and psychoanalysis is one of several useful tools.

Othello's Marriage

The crisis in the case of *Othello*, Hands explains in the film, is 'that marriage', the union of the eponymous Moorish general with Desdemona, daughter of the Venetian senator, Brabantio. As Hands sees it, Othello and Iago 'have clearly been together for a very long time: he's been 'honest Iago' to Othello and pretty much everybody else' and it's only once the General has announced his intention to marry that Iago begins his campaign to 'pass on his own chaos to somebody else'.

During the discussion, Hands refers to the characters' back stories and the likely contexts of the action, on a number of occasions, asking the group to consider Othello and Iago's relationship before the start of the play; what expectations a young woman like Desdemona might have had of marriage during the period; and how the Moor's cultural and religious upbringing might have affected his attitudes towards women.

The director says:

Shakespeare's ability to create real people is part of his longevity. Century after century audiences, critics, actors and directors have seen in his characters aspects of themselves – intensified by the drama – that allow them to speculate and participate. The audience too is asked to answer the question: 'Why?' With Agatha Christie we want to know or guess, 'Who dunnit?' With Shakespeare we know 'who' – we want to know 'why'? It is a natural interaction between the stage and the public.

It is precisely this 'realness' that enables scholars and theatre practitioners to use psychoanalysis as a tool to understand the motivations of Shakespeare's characters.





The Bard presents us with fully human figures, making it possible to ask the same questions of them that an analyst would ask of a patient.

Repressed Homosexuality

We see this process in action in *Iago on the Couch*, as David Bell attributes Iago's sociopathy to his repressed homosexual feelings for Othello. According to Freud, Bell explains, we are all naturally bisexual and it is only when these desires are repressed, rather than accepted by the conscious mind, that the trouble arises. Iago can so quickly turn against the man he has willingly served for all these years because he is harbouring unconscious turmoil as a result of repressing his homosexual urges for the Moor. It is only when Othello and Desdemona marry that this turmoil rears its head. This, of course, is not Iago's only motivation for doing what he does, but this type of analysis is undoubtedly helpful when it comes to understanding what makes Iago tick, and untangling the many justifications he gives for his actions.

Sexual Jealousy

Othello is a play rich in topics for discussion, as anyone studying the text will be well aware, but it is hard to think of a more fundamental theme than that of sexual jealousy, itself a ripe subject for psychoanalytical debate.

Hands comments that:

Shakespeare wrote three plays about sexual jealousy: *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *Othello*, *Leontes* and *Ford* pursue their jealousy to such extremes that it goes beyond irrationality to madness. *Ford* searches places that couldn't contain *Falstaff's* foot, let alone his body, *Leontes* sacrifices his son and *Othello* kills the woman he loves. We might call this psychosexual jealousy – the term 'the Othello Syndrome' is often used [in clinical practice nowadays]. And it begs the help of psychoanalysis.

As Hands sees it, Iago is able to lead Othello to his downfall because he recognises the potential for excessive sexual jealousy in the General and is skilful enough to exploit it. This is at the heart of the tragedy; it is this flaw of Othello's that makes the events of the play unavoidable.

The Oedipus Complex

Bell points to the Oedipus complex as the source of Othello's tendency towards sexual jealousy. According to the now much-debated theory, the Oedipal phase (said to take place between the ages of three and five) sees the male child begin to develop an unconscious erotic attachment to his mother, who up until this point has been a figure of pure, idealised love, inseparable from the child's sense of self. Central to the boy's early sexual development is the realisation, again unconscious, that the mother is 'betraying' him by sleeping with his father. She is no longer the pure being she was before. Gradually, the child's dependence on his mother fades, allowing him to see her as a separate being and put aside his feelings about her as a sexual object.

Bell's reading of the text sees Othello's relationship with Desdemona as a re-enactment of the Oedipus complex: the General's notion of his bride as the perfect woman – the pre-Oedipal mother figure – is contaminated by Iago's insinuation that Desdemona is a sexual being – the whore who 'betrays' her child. Understood this way, it is not so much Iago's suggestion of Desdemona betraying him with Cassio that sparks Othello's jealousy, but the realisation that she is actively interested in sex (with him and only him, it should be noted) and is therefore not the virtuous girl he wooed.

The Limitations of Psychoanalytic Readings

For all the usefulness of a psychoanalytical approach, it is clear from the line taken by Hands in the film that the director is suspicious of any methodology that excludes other ways of thinking about the text. These routes into character and motivation are helpful

only in conjunction with other more prosaic concerns – why did Othello become a soldier, for instance; why is Cassio a Florentine; why does Iago have a Spanish name, and so on.

At one stage in the course of the discussion, Hands advises Donald Campbell not to attribute too much of Iago's actions to

the disappointment regarding his loveless marriage with Emelia, reminding the group that the desire of a soldier such as Iago to marry would have been motivated largely by the need to conform to social expectations and find someone to take care of domestic tasks.

Hands goes on to say:

The limitation of such an approach is exclusivity. Shakespeare is rich in ambiguity. Most psychoanalytic approaches tend to be exclusive, even rigid – which is why several schools are preferable to only one. Jung is also helpful, possibly more so, but so too is [the English psychologist William] McDougal, [Freud's collaborator Alfred] Adler, [the Canadian sociologist Erving] Goffman, even [the American playwright turned paleoanthropologist] Robert Ardrey. Their theories are all useful, non-exclusive, tools.

The danger of any system is when it abandons 'perhaps' and asserts a quasi-religious creed. The Oedipus complex is a *sine qua non* of Freudianism. But one size does not fit all and Shakespeare in particular resists categorisation.

So the next time you sit down to study one of Shakespeare's plays, think not just about what the characters are saying and doing, but also about what is left unsaid. You might be surprised what such an exploration of the unconscious could reveal.

Taking it Further

Iago on the Couch is available to order via The Institute of Psychoanalysis website, www.beyondthecouch.org.uk, for £15.99 (including P+P) where you can also view an extract from the film. Email ann.glynn@iopa.org.uk; tel: 020 7563 5017.

The Freud Museum (20 Maresfield Gardens, London NW3 5SX; 020 7435 2002; www.freud.org.uk) is open from Wednesday to Sunday, from 12-5pm.



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