



UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MALE CHARACTERS IN THE  
TRAGEDIES OF SHAKESPEARE: *HAMLET*, *MACBETH* AND  
*OTHELLO***

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## ABSTRACT

This project provides a comparative study of the main male characters in Shakespeare's tragedies. Among all the Shakespearean tragedies, I have chosen *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, (and their respective main characters), which are well-known plays and good representatives of the Shakespearean dramatic world. This research project consists of several parts: a part with the description of the characters and then a comparison between the two main chosen characters.

The different plays appear in isolation, in order to analyze the characters inside the context of their own play, that is to say, their own dramatic world, in order to make it clear to the reader the background and the different reasons which can contribute to the behavior and personality of the protagonists. In the following pages it will be found just two characters from each play, a brief description of each one and then the analytical comparison with an explanation of the differences found among them.

## RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es proporcionar un estudio comparativo sobre los principales personajes masculinos de las tragedias de William Shakespeare. Las obras elegidas son: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* y *Othello* (y sus respectivos personajes masculinos). Dichas obras son bien conocidas y representan muy bien el mundo dramático de Shakespeare. Este trabajo de investigación está formado de varias partes: una parte con la descripción de los personajes y luego la parte de su comparación.

Las diferentes obras seleccionadas aparecen por separado, para analizar así a los personajes dentro de su propio contexto y de su propio mundo dramático. En las siguientes páginas, el lector encontrará dos personajes de cada obra seleccionada, una breve descripción de cada uno de ellos y a continuación, la comparación analítica junto a una breve explicación de las diferencias encontradas entre ellos.

#### KEY WORDS

*Comparative, study, Shakespeare, tragedies, male, characters, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, differences, behavior, comparison, negative.*

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

*Estudio, comparativo, Shakespeare, tragedias, masculinos, personajes, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, diferencias, comportamiento, comparación, negativa.*

## INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, born in England in 1564, was one of the most influential writers in Universal Letters. There is a general consensus among scholars to consider him the greatest writer in the history of Literature due to his huge capacity to embody in his plays the most diverse aspects of human psychology and feelings. His plays have marked a milestone in writing, and his contributions go beyond literature inasmuch as he also influenced theater and the way in which the plays were performed as well as he influenced English, introducing to it new words and expressions. Therefore, William Shakespeare was a prolific writer who wrote comedies as well as tragedies or historical dramas, presenting in a magnificent way the respective feelings and emotions for each one; among the features present in his plays are the universality of themes, the accurate description of human psychology and the complexity of characters; the field of study for this project is the different features depicted in different characters taken from three different tragic plays by Shakespeare. I have chosen three tragedies for this project because on them, the strength of feelings and motives that move and motivate the actions of the protagonists are more visible and diverse rather than maybe in comedies. The tragedies chosen for the analysis are *Macbeth* and its protagonists Macbeth and Banquo; the second tragedy is *Hamlet* and the characters of Hamlet and Claudius and finally, the third tragedy to study is *Othello*, and its two main male protagonists: Othello and Iago.

The aim of the project is to provide a full description of the characters mentioned above, and then, with all the characteristics and features brought together, make a comparison of similarities and differences among them in order to prove how these characters, despite of the fact of being different, are all driven by negative aspects of human

mind, that is to say, by negative motivations. The project is divided into four chapters: the three first chapters are devoted to the respective plays, being these chapters at the same time subdivided into specific chapters for each of the characters; at the end, it is found the final chapter, which is devoted to the general conclusions and the principal ideas extracted after the accomplishment of the project.

## CHAPTER I: *HAMLET*

*Hamlet ( The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark)* is Shakespeare's longest play and one of the most influential in English Literature. It was performed for the first time in 1609. This play is based on the revenge taken by Hamlet, the main protagonist, after the death of his father, King Hamlet, in hands of King Hamlet's brother, Claudius. Full of hate and thirst of revenge, it is also one of the most famous works by the English playwright. The plot has Hamlet as the main protagonist and then Claudius is placed as the antagonist of Hamlet, focusing on the revenge of Hamlet towards his uncle once he has received the apparition of his father's spirit telling him he had been murdered by Claudius. In order to compare both characters, it is precise to highlight the features that they share and also those features which make them different.

### **1.1 Hamlet:**

Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, son of King Hamlet. Hamlet, full of hate against his uncle Claudius, who has killed his father, plots revenge in order to regain the throne for him, as his father has requested him in dreams. Hamlet has now become a superstitious man who believes in the apparition of his father's ghost, who tells about his own crime. Hamlet is then psychologically pushed by the spirit of his father to commit the revenge and occupy the throne that he considers as his belonging.

Therefore, his father's death is crucial in the development of Hamlet's acts, but there is another important factor that should be taken into account, and it is the affection that



Hamlet may feel towards his mother. It is important to highlight the fact that Hamlet is very jealous of her mother's love and sees again in Claudio a threat to this affection. Some critics have observed a kind of Oedipus' personality in Hamlet:

Hamlet is plunged into anguish at the thought of his father being replaced of his mother's affections by someone else. It is as his devotion to his mother made him so jealous for her affection that he had found it hard enough to share this even when his father and could not endure to share it with still another man. (Jones, "Hamlet and Oedipus" 140)

Thus, Hamlet is portrayed as an insane man dominated by jealousy and a desire of revenge for the death of his father. From a psychological point of view, revenge is the main motivation for this character in order to commit murder against his uncle, Claudius, a man who, full of ambition, has killed his own brother, King Hamlet, in order to obtain the throne and the Queen's affections. Besides to this simplistic interpretation of desire for revenge in Hamlet, there are current interpretations that suggest an incestuous desire in Hamlet towards his own mother. As Jason P. Rosenblatt carries out in his article, there would be in Hamlet a "desire to supplant his father in his mother's affection..." (Roseblatt 349)

Following with this idea of a kind of Oedipus Syndrome found in Hamlet: "there are indications that even here the influence of the old attraction for his mother is still exerting itself" (Jones, "The Oedipus Complex ..." 98)

Bringing all these ideas together, it could be said that the best way to define Hamlet's character is as a jealous man, controlled by a strong desire for revenge against his uncle after the death of his father. Hamlet is a man who finds himself in love with this

mother and who finds in the crime committed against King Hamlet the best pretext to perpetrate his revenge against Claudius and then obtain both, the throne and his mother's love.

### **1.2 Claudius:**

Claudius is presented as an ambitious character. He is controlled by the desire of power and being king. Due to this reason, he kills his own brother and marries the Queen, a sinful act which leads the plot towards his own death. He defends this act as a way of protecting the Queen; this idea is supported by the words claimed by Ernest Jones in his article: "He explained to the assembled nobles that he has done this to protect his sister-in-law from ill-treatment and eminent peril of her life at hands of her husband" (Jones, "The Death of..." 178)

Therefore, Claudius tries to justify his crime and hides the real motives of ambition. After achieving the throne, Claudius becomes a detestable person for Hamlet who, full of hate, is ready to kill him. Some critics, as it has been mentioned before, have seen in this act of revenge a murder more motivated for incestuous reasons rather than for filial-love ones.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

Hence, taking these two characters in perspective, the comparison between them can be made. It is noticeable that, despite of the fact that both are moved by ambition, these

ambitions are of different kinds: on the one hand, Hamlet's ambition is referred to regain the throne and then, have the Queen's affection whereas Claudius' ambition is more concerned with desire of power. The motives that push Hamlet are more passionate, more related with affection, whereas Claudius' motives are more focused on money and power and with the benefits that the condition of being king would report him.

Concluding with the analysis and comparison of these two characters, it can be observed that the main difference lies in the nature itself of the motivation that pushes them towards revenge, being the one for Hamlet based on affection towards his mother and also towards the memory of his dead father, and being the one for Claudius more concerned with power issues.

## CHAPTER II: *MACBETH*

*Macbeth* (also known as *The Tragedy of Macbeth*) was firstly published in the Folio in 1923. It is a tragedy which reflects the consequences of political ambition. The main protagonist, Macbeth, plots the murder against the king in order to become king of Scotland. Written during the kingdom of Jacob I, it is one of the tragedies by Shakespeare in which the relation between the dramatist and the sovereign is most present.

**2.1 Macbeth:** Macbeth is thane of Cawdor and works for the king of Scotland but everything changes when he receives the message of three witches saying that one day he will be king of Scotland. From the appearance of these witches on, Macbeth becomes an obsessed person who is corrupted by ambition and who finally, being helped by the ideas of Lady Macbeth, murders King Duncan becoming king of Scotland.

Macbeth is an obsessed character, full of desire for power and someone unable to see beyond his desires and ambitions. He is presented as a murderer, a person willing to commit any kind of act in order to achieve what he wants. This psychological condition is at the same time influenced by Lady Macbeth's persuasive ideas, which boost even more Macbeth's intentions.

Macbeth's actions reveal an insane man who cannot control himself. His obsession has made him crazy and finally, in a kind of divine justice, he will die, leaving to some extent an idea of Macbeth as victim of his own ambition, a person corrupted by his own acts. As some critics have pointed out, Macbeth is perceived as an imaginative person who has

plotted the murder even before the apparition of the witches. This idea can also be read in the following quote from an article by O.W Firkins on the analysis of Macbeth's personality:

I am prepared to admit that Macbeth's physical courage was unquestionable, that he was ambitious and unprincipled, that he entertained the thought of murder before the meeting with the witches, that his character rapidly degenerates in the last acts, that his love for his wife, at first of singular tenderness and intensity, is latterly somewhat impaired, that his chief point of distinction from the vulgar usurper and assassin is a vivid, poetical, masterful imagination. (Firkins 417)

So, as I have said before and as this quote reinforces, Macbeth is presented as the paradigm of madness, of an insane mind corrupted by his own desire for power and as a person able to kill in order to achieve whatever he wants.

## **2.2 Banquo:**

Banquo is also presented as an ambitious man who wants power but who is unable to act in such an immoral way. He appears as a loyal subject to Macbeth, ready to obey him under any situation, no matter how conflictive or dangerous this situation is. Another important aspect present in Banquo's personality is that, as some scholars have perceived, he is obsessed with a guilty mind provoked by his murderous dreams. There is on his mind

a constant feeling of guilt that is consuming him slowly along the play. This can be seen in the following words by scholar Perry D. Westbrook:

I do not mean that Banquo actually would have murdered the king, but that he was afraid that he would. Banquo was suffering from a guilty conscience because of his murderous dreams. He was appalled by the ideas that had entered his sleepy mind. He had become so afraid of his thoughts and dreams that he hardly dared go to bed and face for another night such an unexpectedly dreadful side of his nature. (Westbrook 220)

### **2.3 Conclusion**

Once the comparison between these two characters is made, it is easy to notice the differences between them: the ambitious Macbeth, a man plotting how to kill the king in order to achieve power, and the obedient and loyal Banquo, also with ambitious desires but mainly motivated by his obedient mind, and also obsessed with this sense of guilty which becomes him even a crazy person. I have noticed these differences between the two main characters in *Macbeth*, two characters that at first sight can be regarded as similar, but are quite different when they are analyzed more deeply.

### CHAPTER III: *OTHELLO*

*Othello* (1603) also known as *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, is a tragedy by Shakespeare based on the work *A Moor Captain*, written by the Italian novelist Cinthio, in which jealousy and deception are the central motives for the protagonists of the play, which drive them toward the fatal end. Iago finds himself full of envy towards Othello due to professional issues after Othello's promotion for the position of lieutenant in favor of the inexperienced soldier Michael Cassio; after such an event, Iago starts to plot a chain of red herrings in order to cause destruction in Othello's life. Othello, crazy and driven by jealousy and believing himself a betrayed man by Desdemona, his wife, is able to kill her. In this play, it is very patent the importance of manipulation and deception as keys to achieve control, as well as envy as essential motivations for the characters in order to develop their actions.

#### **3.1 Othello:**

Othello is a general in Venice. He is a strong and courageous man who starts becoming obsessed with the idea of an infidelity of his wife. This obsession is caused by Iago's words, who, in an attempt to destroy Othello's life, makes him believe in the infidelity of his wife. Othello is sometimes seen as a "puppet" easily controlled by Iago's deception. Moreover, some critics have perceived in Othello a kind of "repressive character". Othello denies knowledge, maybe in order to avoid pain and suffering. This idea of repression present in Othello can be seen in the following quote: "Repression pervades the entire word of Othello. The first note of the play sounded three times in quick succession, is a refusal of knowledge: "Never tell me". (Snow 34)

As it has been seen in the previous words, Othello is a repressive “puppet” of Iago: perhaps he does not want to know about Iago’s words, but at the same time, he has become the person which Iago moves as he wants, controlling his mind and also his actions.

Another important idea in relation with Othello is his nature itself since it has been said that Othello offers a very romantic nature, being considered by some critics one of the most romantic or tragic characters in the Shakespearean world, as Philip C. Kolin refers by quoting the words previously written by A. C. Bradley, in which it is said: “Othello is, in one sense of the word, by far the most romantic figure among Shakespearean heroes” (Kolin 9)

As it is perceived in the previous quote, another important characteristic present in Othello is his romantic nature, something that it is not so seen in Iago’s nature, which will be developed later.

### **3.2 Iago:**

At the same time, Iago is presented as a deceiver, a controller who manipulates Othello’s mind in order to achieve his goals. He prepares false clues for making Othello believe that Desdemona is unfaithful. Iago’s lies are the responsible for the acts that Othello commits at the end of the play when he murders his wife and himself. Many scholars have focused on this side of Iago’s personality and describe him as follows: “Iago is certainly racist, manipulative, malicious and above all else, flawed, but this flawed nature demonstrates Iago’s humanity” ( DeLuca 25)



Therefore, Iago is presented as a manipulative person, full of evil, but at the end, also a human being who falls in deceit as a revenge or as a way for obtaining what he considers fair for him.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Taken these two characters in perspective, it is important to highlight as the main difference between them the nature of their personalities; whereas Othello is presented as a “pure” man, kind and decent, Iago is presented as a contraposition, an “evil spirit”, a man who is able to manipulate and to deceit in order to fulfill his desires. This idea is also shared by Laura DeLuca: “Iago is often portrayed as an inhuman, supernatural being, bent on destroying the purity of Othello’s nature” (DeLuca 25)

It can be understood how different the character’s natures are, on the one hand the pure nature of Othello and on the other hand the evil mind of Iago. Othello, portrayed as a human, romantic and susceptible mind, influenced by Iago’s manipulation, which is perceived as a deceitful, manipulative man, moved by an evil nature.

## CHAPTER IV: GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

As a general conclusion for the project, it is important to observe how different personalities are used by Shakespeare in the construction of his characters. He is able to bring together very different aspects of human's behavior in order to create his tragedies, tragedies full of verisimilitude and drama. The deceitful character of Iago, able to manipulate the "pure" nature of Othello, or the ambitious nature found in Macbeth, who is at the same time followed by his loyal Banquo; and the revengeful mind of Hamlet, plotting how to kill his uncle Claudius, the usurper of the throne, motivated both by revenge against his father's murder and by his incestuous love to his mother. All these ideas have been explained and developed throughout these pages, in order to provide a complete comparative study of the main male characters of Shakespeare's tragedies: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Taking into account these descriptions it can be concluded that the male characters in the Shakespearean tragedies that I have analyzed and compared are quite different among them and furthermore, all of them are moved by negative aspects of human behavior such as envy, ambition, jealousy or incestuous passion. That is to say, it is concluded from the analysis that in spite of the fact that these characters are quite different, their actions have something in common, and it is that they are moved by some negative behaviors and forces, sharing all of them these negative aspects of human psychology.

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