In this speech, what does Iago reveal about himself?

**IAGO**

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


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 th’ nose

As asses are.

I have ’t. It is engendered! Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light
As Iago opens this speech, a soliloquy made alone on the stage, he states that he makes his money from fools, he makes ‘[his] fool a purse’, addressing his manipulative nature. He looks upon certain people as inferior, and uses this to justify his arguably immoral actions. Nobody views him as such however, and he is able to show mild empathy towards the suicidal Roderigo, ‘no more of drowning, do you hear?’, seemingly showing concern, but really wanting to keep Roderigo alive for monetary gain, and the soliloquy, as in many other of Shakespeare’s plays, is the space to demonstrate dark intent and the desire to harm others. He harms others for ‘sport’, seemingly, for his own joy and happiness, truly the epitome of amoral hedonistic sadism, harming others for one’s own pleasure.

His hatred of ‘the Moor’ (Othello) is attributed here to rumours that Othello had sexual relations with Emilia, Iago’s own wife, ‘twixt my sheets,/ He’s done my office.’ Such actions, of being party to adultery, is a violation of Biblical law (condemned within the Ten Commandments of Exodus), a key part of Jacobean society in that it was ultimately the moral compass that many lived by. However, this seems a poor justification; Iago lies, cheats and uses others, and appeals to ‘Hell and night’, two dark, mysterious concepts alluding to evil, and yet he presents concern about Othello’s own moral trespasses, and these are done only in ‘suspicion’, and Iago here acts out of presumption rather than reality. It is possible that he simply uses this excuse as a front for his own discriminatory mindset, as he frequently refers to Othello as ‘the Moor’, stripping him of individuality and defining him by his race, and so it is not an insensible conclusion to draw that Iago may also be racially prejudiced, that Othello would be more likely to sleep with Emilia, it is more in ‘surety’, because of his race. The comparison, ‘as asses are’, may also have such undertones, as if Othello would act like an ass, unlike a human, due to his background.

This speech lays out clearly many of Iago’s vices: he intends to manipulate Othello’s earnest nature (‘tenderly led by th’nose / As asses are’) in order to see his demise, and intends to paint Cassio, a ‘proper’ (honourable) person, in a light of being in ‘double knavery’, or as being roguish and mischievous. Iago is thus in many ways, a man filled with spite and hatred, and is willing to do anything, no matter how sinful, to get revenge. Much like other Shakespearian characters (such as Macbeth before he murders Duncan: ‘Hear it not Duncan, for ‘tis a knell / That summons thee to Heaven or to Hell’), Iago’s soliloquy finishes with a flourishing rhyming couplet, to act as a motif for evil deeds, thoughts and intentions, and reflects the melodrama of his nature in the sound of his lines themselves, and truly assures us that Iago is the archetypal villain here.