

Iago: “Motiveless Malignity” or diabolic intellectual

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Abstract

“Evil has nowhere else been portrayed with such mastery as in the character of Iago” (Bradley, 1951, p. 206). Even a casual reading, or viewing, of Shakespeare’s plays will show that Iago is indeed Shakespeare’s most evil character. How realistic is such a portrayal? Can such a being exist in the “real” world?

“Men’s attitudes to the issues which appear in *Othello* have greatly changed between Shakespeare’s time and our own...” (Holloway, 1961, p. 155)

While running the risk of differing with famous critics like A. C. Bradley (the person who has written the most sense on Iago, in my opinion) I must state that it must be borne in mind that every reading of a text, also, and especially a Shakespearean one, is shaped by the reader’s own experiences and life-views.

I could justify this statement by saying that we live in a post –Bradleyan age: a century that has witnessed the widest range of human excesses and achievements. This has been a century that has witnessed two World-wars, the existence of a Hitler, Himmler, Stalin and international terrorism.

It has also been a century where “serial-killer” and “psycho” have become household words.

I believe that studying Iago’s motives and character from such a perspective will lead one astray. The reason is that in our age everything is done for a reason, an ideal, or a cause. In Iago we find an absence of all three. This is why Coleridge called him a “motiveless malignity” (Bradley, 1951, p. 228).

Another reason is that the Elizabethan view of nature and human actions differed largely from ours. Shakespeare portrayed evil men as people who differed from the accepted views of the universe. An example is Edmund in King Lear.

Unlike the Elizabethans, he does not believe that the planets affect a man’s life. This is clear from his soliloquy in AI.i 118-130.

Today a belief in planets affecting men’s lives is largely frowned upon. The critic John Holloway reminds us of these differences again saying “*Othello* issues from a society in which certain modes of thought, which to us have not simply lost their force, but become positively the expression of the tyranny of the past, were perfectly familiar and acceptable.”(Holloway, 1961, p. 38)

The theology of Shakespeare’s time held out horrid spectacles of a life of torment after death. There seems little reason to doubt that Shakespeare and his contemporaries believed in the existence of perfect villains, children of the devil, not children of God.

This belief underlies the destruction of witches and heretics. In our age we tend to doubt the existence of people who steadily, persistently, and naturally desire evil. But the villainy of Elizabethan villains was a force in the world.

I believe the most profitable course to follow in studying Iago's character and motives would be to try and determine the kind of person Shakespeare made Iago to be.

Interpreting Iago in a modern, solely 20th century perspective is not Shakespearean. Similarly, confining his character to sixteenth century Venice is also not Shakespearean. In his excellent book Shakespearean Tragedy –Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth A. C. Bradley says;...with [Shakespeare] the differences of the period, race, nationality, and locality have little bearing on the inward character..."(Bradley, 1951, p. 210)

Why does Iago destroy a being as noble as Othello? Why does he destroy one as innocent as Desdemona and as harmless as Roderigo? Why does he attempt to destroy his comrade-in-arms, Cassio?

Coleridge studied these issues and came to the conclusion that Iago's actions were the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity".

I am tempted to agree with Coleridge. However, his analysis seems flawed by the fact that Iago's creator (Shakespeare) must surely have known his motive.

It would be an oversimplification to see Iago acting in consistently evil ways because allegorically he represents evil. This would reduce him to a "thematic" character, representing the theme of evil in *Othello*. Seen in this light Iago becomes de-humanised: however; he *is* human. Reducing him to the level of a "stock" character will not answer our questions as to his motives or why he hates Othello. If he is a "stock" or "thematic" character we would have to agree with Coleridge in seeing Iago as a "motiveless malignity", enjoying ensnaring innocent victims: someone who enjoys evil acts too much for them to require motives.

He is therefore not a developing character; he remains loyal to his ideal of malicious revenge. Seen in this light evil is Iago's *raison d'être*. He is, however, far too complex a character for such a simple analysis.

I will now attempt to show that Iago *is* human, is a developing character and has motives, however slight.

We see from Iago's list of grievances in A I.i lines 8-33 that he has not only been wronged, but also insulted. He has been non-suited, although he is not a nobody and has influence with the great ones of the city.

He feels that Othello has turned his back on justice. Othello, he claims, has seen him in action "*At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds...*" (I.i 29-30). Taken at face value, as Roderigo sees it, this is enough to offend anyone, especially a professional soldier like Iago.

Iago also states this as his main motive for seeking revenge against Othello.

Bradley warns us against accepting Iago's explanations for his actions. "One must constantly remember not to believe a syllable Iago utters on any subject, including himself, until one has tested his statement by comparing it with known facts and with other statements of his own or other people, and by considering whether he had in the particular circumstances any reason for telling a lie or telling the truth." (Bradley, 1951, p. 211) This is very important in trying to figure out how Iago's mind works. Bradley further states that critics often take Iago's words as information given by Shakespeare.

We have no reason to doubt that Cassio was appointed over Iago, or that Iago was "non-suited". However, it is doubtful whether Othello refused Iago's suitors out of pride or obstinacy, and that he lied in saying he had already chosen an officer.

A study of Othello's character and actions prove that he would not have behaved in such a fashion. It is also highly probable that Cassio was more of an expert in military science than Iago.

He was, as Bradley says, definitely not a "closet student" (Bradley, 1951, p. 212).

This is proven by the fact that a person of fairness and integrity like Othello appoints him as his lieutenant and also by the fact that the Venetian state places Cassio in command of Cyprus after Othello's death. They would never do this if Cassio were merely "...*a bookish theoretic*" (I.i.24) guilty of "*mere prattle without practice*" (I.i.26); a person who had "...*never set a squadron in the field, Nor the division of battle knows*" (I.i.21-22).

Iago also claims that it is the curse of service that promotion "...*goes by letter and affection, And not by old gradation*" (I.i.36)

This would imply that Iago is Cassio's senior in years ; however we have only Iago's word for it. "Iago...never calls Cassio "young" as he does Roderigo, and a mere youth would never be made governor of Cyprus." (Bradley, 1951, p. 213)

It would appear that Othello's mind was perfectly at ease with Cassio's appointment, and that he never thought Iago would feel offended. I believe he thought Iago would have agreed with his appointment of Cassio as his lieutenant. That he is innocent of the fact that Cassio's appointment is one of Iago's "motives" for revenge is evident in his question to Lodovico and Cassio on Iago's capture in act V:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil

Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body? (V.ii.297-299)

Bearing in mind that Iago is probably lying about Cassio's qualities and the truth of his nature, we must now consider Coleridge's phrase that Iago's actions are the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity". Is Iago hunting for motives if the promotion issue is a lie or not quite true?

I believe that Iago *felt* slighted and, even if Cassio deserved the appointment, was bitter and sought to avenge himself on Othello.

In the process of seeking a method of revenge he fuelled the fire of his hatred and anger with motives, real or imaginary.

An example of this is the fact that he "suspects" both Othello and Cassio of an affair with his wife, Emilia.

...I do suspect the lusty Moor

Hath leapt into my seat...(II.i.286-287)

He goes on to say:

For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too- (II.i.298)

Clearly this is motive-hunting at its best, since we have no cause to believe the truth of his suspicions. Iago suspects them both in order to maintain the momentum of his revenge.

He has an obscene mind, speaks in animal imagery and sex to him is not something sacred and involving love. We see his attitude when he awakens Brabantio in A.I.i:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram

Is tugging your white ewe... (I.i.89-90)

In consoling Roderigo he calls love merely:

...a lust of the blood and a permission of

the will. (I.iii.331)

He states that Desdemona will leave Othello for Roderigo when:

...she is sated with his body... (I.iii.346)

In his light-hearted banter with Emilia and Desdemona, while waiting for Othello to arrive in Cyprus, we see his attitude to women:

...you are pictures out of doors,

Bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints

In your injuries, devils being offended, players in your

Housewifery, and housewives in your beds. (II.i.108-111)

He even continues to say:

You rise to play and go to bed to work (II.i.114)

He seems to be a person with a “sexual-hangup” to use modern jargon.

The apparent “ease” with which Othello got Desdemona must have riled him. Iago even mentions his “love” for Desdemona:

...Now I do love her too;

Not out of absolute lust – though peradventure

I stand accountant for as great a sin-... (II.i.282-284)

In the erotic lie he tells Othello (of Cassio dreaming of Desdemona) we see further traces of a repressed lust. Sexual jealousy, both of Cassio and Othello, could therefore also be seen as one of his motives.

Now two important issues must be closely examined to get a glimpse at Iago's immensely complex psychological character.

Firstly, we need to examine what *kind* of man he was. I have discussed what I believe to be his two main motives nl. Missing military promotion and sexual jealousy.

Secondly, we need to see how it was possible for someone like Othello to fall victim to Iago's evil schemes.

What kind of man was Iago?

To see Iago as an ordinary villain would reduce Shakespeare to common place. Iago is not simply a man who has not been promoted and revenges himself; he is not a husband who believes he has been wronged nor an ambitious man willing to destroy his rival. Numerous critics see Iago as a man who hates good because it is good and loves evil purely for itself. This view of his character makes Iago unhuman and reduces him to no more than a "motiveless malignity". He is , however, in my opinion none of these. He is as Bradley puts it " a thoroughly bad ,*cold* man..."(Bradley, 1951, p. 218)

In Iago we see very remarkable powers of intellect and will. He has remarkable insight into human nature and knows how to manipulate people, as we see him do to Othello, Roderigo and Cassio. This intellectual power of his is in my opinion diabolical. He is what one could call a "driven" man. Evil is his driving force. He is quick and versatile and has the ability to deal remarkably well with unforeseen circumstances.

Once Roderigo becomes a threat he has no qualms about killing him instantly. Similarly he does not hesitate to kill his wife once she threatens to compromise his position.

Iago is also a master of his will. He shows no signs of nervousness or doubt and we detect very little emotion in him. He is indeed a cold man.

The creed he lives by is that absolute egoism is the only proper attitude. This is clear from his soliloquy in A I.i lines 30-66. Granville Barker calls Iago,"...a common fellow, foul minded and course-tongued, a braggart decrying others the qualities he himself lacks, bitterly

envious, pettily spiteful, morbidly vain. He has abounding vitality, a glib tongue and a remarkable faculty of adapting himself to his company..." (Granville-Barker, 1961, p. 99)

This would probably be the most accurate way of describing his character if one were to leave aside its complexities.

An interesting, although highly unorthodox view, of Iago (and Shakespeare) is G.B. Shaw's. He says;" Shakespeare, as usual, starts with a rough general notion of a certain type of individual, and then throws it over at the first temptation. Iago begins as a coarse blackguard whose jovial bluntness passes as "honesty" and who is professionally a routine subaltern incapable of understanding why a mathematician gets promoted over his head. But the moment a stage effect can be made... [he] becomes a godsend to students of the "problems" presented by our divine William's sham characters" (Shaw 154)

How terrible! I have to disagree with Shaw. Shaw reduces one of the greatest playwrights of all time to a bungling amateur and, at the same time, ridicules Shakespeare's characters, the most complex, and in my mind the most interesting one, being Iago.

Such an approach to Iago's character and motives is quite absurd and I am forced to agree with Leech in his severe criticism of the critic Rymer, who had similar views to Shaw's:" It is easy to make fun of Thomas Rymer. He was a learned, pugnacious and foolhardy man who gave the quasi-immortality of publication to critical judgements that he knew would not be popular. Iago, he is sure, is a badly drawn character; soldiers have everywhere the reputation of being "open hearted, frank, plain dealing, and Shakespeare was wrong to present him otherwise".(Leech, 1961, p. 87)

How did Othello fall victim to Iago?

An in depth examination of this point falls beyond the scope of this article; however, it is necessary to briefly examine this point to shed more light on Iago.

I believe the main reason Othello trusted Iago is because he appears "honest". Iago is quick to see this opinion others have of him, and perceives this as a weakness in Othello's make-up:

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.iii.393-396)

Harrison says, “The tragedy is that an essentially good man is betrayed into such a catastrophic madness because he believes Iago to be honest”. (Harrison, 1951, p. 146)

Indeed all acquainted with Iago believe him to be honest. After Cassio’s drunken brawl, staged by Iago, Othello says to Iago:

Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,

Making it light to Cassio... (II.iii.242)

After Iago has started poisoning Othello’s mind with his insinuations regarding Cassio and Desdemona Othello says:

And for I know thou’rt full of love and honesty,

And weigh’st thy words before thou giv’st them breath (III.iii. 118-119)

In his first soliloquy Othello reveals his tragic mistake;

This fellow’s of exceeding honesty,

And knows all qualities with a learned spirit

Of human dealings... (III.iii.256-257)

Even Emilia, the person who should have known him best, was deceived by him. She loved her mistress enough to die for her, yet she stole the handkerchief for Iago, little suspecting the tragic consequences.

Hopefully my approach to analysing Iago’s character has not been too lengthy and confusing but I found it necessary to mention certain critics views to show the diverse views, plausible, and otherwise, on the subject.

I believe views like those of Shaw, Rymer and the great S. T. Coleridge, are not a just representation of a character as complex and appealing to an audience as Iago’s. Iago is one of Shakespeare’s greatest creations. He is a convincingly portrayed villain driven to extreme measures with no seeming motive. That he is hard to understand is clear from the large volume of critical writings on his character.

Many critics fail to see a motive behind his actions, but as I have attempted to show, he is driven by a “hate” of Othello fuelled by not being promoted and sexual jealousy.

His perverse mind causes him to be cold and cynical in his outlook. He disguises this from all who know him, even his wife, by appearing to be “honest”. He achieves this by seeming to be a “plain speaker” i.e. someone who says what he feels and thinks.

Although he has an obscene mind he certainly took his pleasures by choice and not from weakness.

To him the most delightful experience was “...something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority;...if it involved the triumphant exertion of his abilities...[and] the excitement of danger...” (Bradley, 1951, p. 228)

It can be said that the tragedy of Othello was also the tragedy of Iago. He found himself in a situation, with “motives” that tempted him to let loose the diabolical forces of his intellect, and was at once destroyed.

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