

The role of iago in act iii scene 3

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Iago is one of Shakespeare's most unforgettable desperados. In Act III scene 3 Iago's feelings are driven by a passion of such intense strength that, even though we might understand his motives, it is difficult to feel that anything other than pure evil could compel him to such extremes of behaviour as a result. We also see Iago taking a powerful, sadistic delight in the damage which he causes throughout the scene, and how he has a cancerous effect on Othello and his relationship with Desdemona.

Iago manipulates the perceptions of other characters with great skill, using lies which contain sufficient truth. He is an opportunist, and takes advantage of anything.

'Ha! I like not that.'

Iago plants a seed of guilt, which he nurtures throughout the scene. He advocates that the figure he has seen leaving cannot be Cassio, because he is a respectable and worthy man who would not stoop to such a sneaking and fraudulent kind of behaviour. By suggesting that an action, which might seem innocent, may in reality conceal something altogether more suspicious, Iago cleverly hints that Cassio has a guilty conscience. The effectiveness of the compound word 'guilty-like' used by Iago puts an element of doubtfulness and apprehension in Othello.

At the beginning of the scene there is an open, playful, loving relationship between Othello and Desdemona:

'Tis as I should entreat you wear gloves,

Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,'

This flirtatious discussion is the last time we see love and contentment between Othello and Desdemona.

'Excellent Wretch'

This is Othello's last statement of happiness. The words show an eternal world of love and lust; Othello loves Desdemona deeply. From that moment on Othello suffers a torment of jealousy; his happiness is being ate away by the covetousness seed that Iago has planted. Iago is a fine judge of character: he knows what people like and what makes people irritated and infuriated.

'Did Michael Cassio,

When you wooed my lady, know of your love?'

Iago is prodding Othello. He is not giving him a straight answer, and this deeply exasperates and annoys Othello. Iago uses good tactics to form a sense of culpability and doubt in Othello. Iago's hesitations frighten Othello.

In a performance of this scene, the actor playing Iago should put prominence and emphasis on 'think' as this would create an impression of guilt.

'Men Should be what they seem'

This statement is ironic. If Iago was what he seemed he would be good, trustworthy and loyal, but he is not. He is iniquitous and impious. He is able to put on false front. Iago is a consummate dissembler.

Iago has now begun to plant a seed of hesitation and uncertainty in Othello.

'As where's that palace, whereinto foul things

Sometimes intrude not?'

Iago articulates how the purest spirit may still endure from foul things. This echoes exactly what is happening in this scene. Iago is pouring his foul, evil poison into the mind of Othello. This causes Othello to doubt what is really happening.

No matter how many dreadful things Iago says, Othello is left with the abiding belief that he knows more terrible things than he has been told and is trying to diminish the upset because of his honest friendship and regard for him:

'Though I perchance am vicious in my guess...'

Iago again uses the extremely effective tool of appearing to be very reluctant in speaking ill of others whereas at the same time managing to advocate that he knows much more which would cause distress to Othello if he were to know the truth

'Who steals my purse, steals trash; 'tis something,

nothing;

'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:

But he that filches from me my good name

Robs me of that which not enriches him

And makes me poor indeed.'

Here we see the effect iago has had on Othello. iago has threatened Othello in his most defenceless area: his reputation. iago is very dexterous. He tells Othello that his reputation is everything. This is the opposite of what he said to Cassio, telling him that his status was not everything. iago then ingeniously tells Othello to be aware of being jealous, to hide his jealousy. This cunningly plants the thought of being covetous in his mind. iago is again taunting Othello. He is building up his heat-oppressed mind.

'Thou dost conspire against thy friend, iago,'

Othello knows that iago is keeping something terrible from him. Shakespeare uses dramatic irony. Othello says that iago is plotting against him by not telling him his thoughts, but iago is telling Othello his thoughts whilst at the same time plotting against him. iago is getting Othello emotionally prepared for what he is planning to inform him. iago uses goodpsychologyby keeping Othello at a distance by not expressing his thoughts to him.

'Ha!'

Othello's short, sharp speeches portray the effect iago has had on him, emotionally.

It shows the state of mind that iago has reduced Othello to.

Othello has been emotionally reduced. This shows that iago is gaining the ascendancy. The roles have swapped. iago is now the more dominant of the two.

Iago introduces the word 'cuckold'. He explains to Othello that it is better to know Desdemona is having an affair compared to not knowing and the torment of a man who is infatuated but insecure, who suspects his wife but continues to love and adore.

Iago is again taunting Othello. He is purposely building up an element of doubt and suspicion in Othello. At this point Iago assumes he has convinced Othello that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, but things go wrong. Othello tells Iago that he is not going to doubt Desdemona until he sees it and therefore if he does, Othello can then prove that Desdemona is disloyal and unfaithful. For a short period of time this throws Iago off track. Up until now Iago has just dropped hints. This has not worked to his best advantage. Now he becomes much more direct and focused and attempts an innovative, diverse approach. Although we condemn and depreciate Iago's malevolence, it is very difficult for us not to admire his skill and creativity.

'I speak not yet of proof...

Look to your wife, observe her with Cassio'

Iago skilfully twists his words so that the fact of Desdemona's deceitfulness and dishonesty appears not to be in question. Iago tells Othello of his innocence and ingenuity of Venetian customs.

'I know our country disposition well'

This further persuades Othello to believe his lies by pointing out how Desdemona has already deceived her father in marrying him. This echoes Brabantio's final words in Act I scene 3.

'She had deceived her father, and may thee.'

Iago reminds Othello this at the best possible time, when he is feeling at his most vulnerable. Iago tells Othello how Desdemona is exceptionally good at deceiving people, as she did it to her own father. This is also ironic as Iago is a skilled dissembler, and yet is accusing Desdemona of also being a consummate dissembler.

Othello is reduced to single utterances, which show he is losing confidence and has something on his mind. It shows the impact Iago is having on him. Again, it illustrates to us that Iago is now the much more dominant of the two and is gaining control.

Othello's diminutive answers show he is reading into what Iago is saying.

This also emphasizes our sense of Othello's significant theatrical status as an 'outsider', someone so unfamiliar with the Venetian customs and society that Iago's lies will seem conceivable, and who will accept as true the suggestion that all Venetian women routinely commit treachery and betrayal.

Iago is not only an expert at manipulating people, but also at manipulating words.

'I think she's honest'

Iago ingeniously picks up on words and fills them with hesitation and doubt. Othello reacts to this by leaving the stage. This shows us that the poison, which Iago planted, is now spreading. Iago has a cancerous effect on him.

Iago then continues to provoke uncertainty and suspicion in Othello by putting forward the idea that it was un-natural in Desdemona for choosing Othello. She refused proposals from men who were from her own country, men of the same race, and in the same rank as her, and she chose Othello instead. Iago takes a risk. He implies that Desdemona is un-natural and lustful, as she has chosen someone older than her and someone not of the same race.

We can see the dramatic impact Iago has had on Othello. In Act III Scene 3, Othello is bursting with love for Desdemona 'Excellent Wretch!' Now Othello is asking himself 'Why did I marry?' This shows how successful Iago has been bringing down Othello's happiness. He has taken his height of happiness and filled it with covetousness, distrust and jealousy. Iago has done all this without any proof, which shows that he is a brilliant operator. He has taken Desdemona's goodness and corrupted it into a vice of loyalty. Iago has a deep knowledge of the human psyche and is smartly and ingeniously able to manipulate feelings- for his benefit. Iago has convinced Othello that Desdemona has committed adultery because of his race and because he does not have a smooth engaging conversation like some other men have.

'This fellow's of exceeding honesty'

This is the first soliloquy given to Othello. This allows us to see the inner workings of Othello, which have been unable to be seen until now. The correspondence between the outward appearance and inner reality begins to break down. Othello dwells upon what he has come to see as his deficiencies in the eyes of others. Desdemona may well see him as a black man and who has few civilised graces of more sophisticated men. Desdemona enters and is concerned her husband is not well. Othello is unwell, but not in the way Desdemona thinks, for he is sick of spirit, not of body.

Othello has convinced himself he's been 'abused' and his only relief is to despise her. There is a total contrast between the contentment and delight in Desdemona and the tormented and tortured soul of Othello. Iago mentions the prospect of providing Othello with 'proof'. Yet in no circumstances proof has been impending, and still Iago is able to skilfully able to compose characters to act and feel guilt and suspicion to act with certain proof on many occasions.

Iago sees innocent things and turns them into acts of guilt and causes suspicion in people. This allows him to move the criteria for Desdemona's remorse and guilt onto such a modest thing as a handkerchief.

'I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,

And let him find it.'

In Iago's soliloquy he reveals the key to his success, in proving that Desdemona's adultery is in no doubt. It is Othello's weakness, which will bring out his destruction.

'The mines of sulphur'

This gives us the image of hellfire. Iago is often connected with the powers of hell, evil and torture.

Othello re-enters. This shows he is confused and has a perplexed state of mind.

'I slept the night well, was free and merry;

I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips.'

Iago obtains a sinister, evil, malicious enjoyment from the torture and torment he has caused Othello. He has turned the loyal Othello into a confused, eager man who has been totally consumed by jealousy and melancholy. Othello has been deduced. He says goodbye to a peaceful mind. The repetition of 'farewell' shows the completeness of his loss. But the sad thing is he has lost nothing. Yet he does not know that.

We see a human being rapidly destroyed by another human. Othello is declining and emotionally becoming bitter, almost approaching insanity.

'I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,

I think thou art just, and think thou art not'

Othello is wavering between suspicion and loyalty as he struggles with himself to determine the truth. In choosing between Desdemona and Iago, it is Othello's inability to accept his own potential for love and trust which destroys him. This is an important turning point for Othello. Othello's vision

of himself and his wife excludes such compromise, and so when Iago offers Othello 'proof' he is savage in the passion with which he believes her to be guilty. What we see here is evidence of Iago's mastery of intrigue and deception.

'Give me a living reason, that she's disloyal.'

Iago has put himself in an awkward situation. Iago's bombardment has an effect on Othello.

He has awakened Othello's wrath and if he cannot support his suggestions of Desdemona's infidelity he will pay dearly for it. Othello is now desperate to be certain, that he seems almost keen to pounce upon Iago's account as true. This is ironic, as the roles of the characters are briefly changed, when Iago comments on Cassio speaking in his sleep. Othello is convinced of Desdemona's betrayal and Iago who is arguing in support for Cassio, 'it was but his dream'. Othello has now overtaken Iago's plotting and sweeps the action along. Iago is unable to give Othello proof, so Iago cunningly makes proof sound dirty so that Othello will not ask any further questions. The image Iago paints in Othello's mind is repulsive, sordid and disgusting. Iago uses animal images to describe the action of Cassio and Desdemona together. This is significant as he is again reducing beauty to a disgusting act. He reduces the sex act to a bestial and foul level.

'Do not rise yet.'

Iago kneels with Othello as they swear a 'sacred vow' to seek 'black vengeance' against Desdemona and Cassio.

As iago's work on Othello begins to stoke up a furnace of jealousy and his sense of wronged honour, we see a change in Othello's behaviour. We also see how the language of iago and Othello has been interchanged with the roles. iago is now clearly the master in the relationship, as the villain speaks of vows to heaven. Othello, using language more appropriate to that of iago, says of Desdemona: 'Damn her, lewd minx'.

His effectiveness as a character in the play rests upon the way he is seen differently by the other characters, who see loyalty, honesty and trustworthiness, and by the audience, who see a malevolent, who manipulates others with the intention of completely destroying them.

iago is portrayed as a self-admiring, vicious, weak, cruel and arrogant character that is only able to achieve his ends through the weakness of others. He is not merely a symbol of iniquity and malevolence, but is much more. The malign iago turns Othello, from a noble, heroic, loving innocent man and destroys him.

iago falls prey to the same suspicion he generates in Othello and, through controlling the plot for most of the scene, moves Othello towards his cynical view of the world.