

Iago's true character exposed in Othello

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Iago's True Character Exposed in Othello Of all the characters in Shakespeare's Othello, none is more complex and unknown to the audience than Iago. He is portrayed by every character as an honest and trustworthy person. Yet, as the audience is well informed by the end of the first act, he appears to be quite the opposite. He's a duplicitous character, honest and kind on the outside, but truly a pure, evil and malignant person on the inside. Throughout the entire play he turns all his friends, who trust him most, against each other. He does this by penetrating their deepest fears and concerns, using that to "make the net that shall enmesh them all" into a jealous web of hatred [II. iii. 356]. There are many examples throughout the play that show clearly Iago's villainy, but the motives for his villainy become increasingly unclear to the audience as the play progresses. Iago gives several different possible motives to the audience throughout the play in his different soliloquies and while talking to Roderigo, but he never backs up these motives and for the most part never refers to them again in the play. In this essay, I will prove through evidence in the text that Iago was in fact an honest and caring person who suddenly turned villainous because he was deeply unhappy about the way his life was turning out. Things were not going his way: he did not gain lieutenantcy, his rank in society was completely reliable on Othello, he was jealous of Othello's life as well as Cassio's, and most of all honesty was getting him nowhere. I will also prove that Iago is not a complete villain, but that the crimes and murders which occurred could not have happened without the villain which lurked inside the other characters in the play. Iago simply enflamed a jealousy which was already there and therefore cannot be blamed for the actions of others.

Throughout the play Othello almost every character at one time or another referred to Iago as an honest man while the audience saw Iago cruelly and viciously lie and deceive one character after another, trapping them all in a jealous rage. Othello says, "A man he is of honesty and trust" before allowing Desdemona to be in the care of Iago [I. iii. 286]. Othello again says, "I know, Iago thy honesty and love..." when asking Iago to tell him who started the drunken brawl between Cassio and Roderigo [II. iii. 240]. Cassio says "Good night, honest Iago" before leaving after the drunken brawl [II. iii. 329]. Cassio says to himself "I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest" after Iago gave him advice about his job [III. i. 42]. Desdemona states "O, that's an honest fellow" after Emilia brings up the fact that Iago is worried about Cassio's job. Iago is seen as deceptively honest throughout the entire play, but it is hard for one to believe that Iago's "universal reputation for honesty has been based over a long period of time on calculation and bluff" (Godfrey, 421). Iago must have truly been an honest person prior to this plot against Othello and Cassio, and this proves that he was not always a villain. Iago had probably been honest and kind his entire life, and now reaching the age of 28 ("I hath looked upon the world four times seven years" [I. iii. 311]), Iago saw that his life was not going the way he wanted. He felt he was of low rank and without that promotion from Othello he would remain of low status far beyond when he felt it was time for him to move up. "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" [I. i. 12]. That fear of remaining in a job for the rest of his life that he felt was for the less experienced, struck and scared him into an overwhelming feeling that he was running out of time. A comparison can be made to someone of the

modern era. Iago felt the same way someone would who got stuck working at McDonalds the rest of their life after graduating from high school and college, when the person had much greater plans. Yes, it is okay to work at McDonalds as a starting point when one is young, but as one gets older he or she deserves a higher paying more responsible position. Iago felt this way. He felt jealous of Cassio over the lieutenantcy and had a grudge against Othello for not promoting him. On top of that Iago's status was totally hinged on Othello who Iago felt had the competency of an " ass" in terms of making good decisions. " The Moor is of free and open nature, that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will tenderly be led by the nose as asses are" [I. iii. 400]. " Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me for making him egregiously an ass" [II. i. 310]. Iago says these two statements in his first and second soliloquy when plotting his scheme against Othello and Cassio. Iago also feels jealous that Othello and Cassio are leading a better life than he is. Cassio is lieutenant and Othello is of high authority with a beautiful wife who Iago has feelings for, or so he says: "... And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona a most dear husband. Now, I do love her too,..." [II. i. 291]. Iago has been honest his entire life, and it is getting him nothing he desires. So he tries to get the life he desires by revenging against Othello and Cassio who have stopped him. " Iago confronts us, jealous, embittered, vengeful, viciously repudiating the honesty and loyalty that have led him nowhere" (Godfrey, 421). Iago feels honesty is getting him nowhere, so he turns to honesty's opposite, evil. Iago admits this himself: O wretched fool, That lov'st to make thine honesty a vice!... .. To be direct and honest is not safe. I should be wise, for honesty is a fool And loses that it works for. [III.

iii. 391-98] To prove in another way that Iago was once honest and has turned evil, he begins to go "motive hunting" after a motive to rest his conscience from the evil he is going to commit. In Iago's numerous soliloquies, he comes up with several possible motives for his plot, but he has no evidence to back these motives up and refers to them once before moving onto a different motive. Iago first says his motive for hurting Othello is that he promoted Cassio over him. And after the first soliloquy Iago never mentions this motive again. In fact, in the fifth act Iago states: Cassio "hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly" [V. i. 20]. However, Iago has already been made lieutenant at this point in the play, so some other grudge against Cassio that partially makes up his motive must exist as well. Iago also suspects Othello and Cassio of being sexually involved with his own wife. However, Iago has no evidence of this theory and never mentions it as a motive again. He also can not be that upset about his wife, Emilia, having an affair, for he shows no affection for her at all in the play and ends up killing her in the end. Iago also mentions a love for Desdemona in the second soliloquy, but does not mention it before or after this instance as part of his motive. This motive hunting expressed by Iago is a sign that Iago once had or still somewhat has an honest conscience. He has turned evil to get his life back on track, but shows remnants of a conscience. Iago is a man "setting out on a project which strongly attracts his desire, but at the same time conscience of resistance to the desire, and unconsciously trying to argue the resistance away by assigning reasons for the project" (Bradley, 438). This can be familiar to us all when we try to push away our conscience by almost lying to ourselves. Nonetheless, the mere fact that Iago has a conscience

proves he is not pure evil as most would suspect. In Iago's first soliloquy he states in regards to Othello and Emilia, "I know not if't be true, but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety" [I. iii. 387]. This shows he is pulling logical motives out of thin air as to why he should go through with his plot, just to shut up the honest and loyal conscience that does in fact exist inside of him. Part of the reason Iago is seen as such a villainous character to the audience is because Iago is such an intelligent character. An evil person of intelligence can be a very dangerous and scary villain. Iago knows exactly what to say to every other character that will provoke and enrage their jealousy or motive. He knows exactly where everyone's weakness is, and he knows exactly how to spark the evil, jealous rage that exists in most characters of Othello. Iago did not really do anything to directly harm anyone until the end when he killed Roderigo and Emilia. Everything else was done by the evilness in other characters. Iago was not making people jealous, but unleashing the jealousy that already existed. He was targeting everyone's weakness and proving that they themselves are to blame for their actions because they themselves have killed through their own jealousy, not jealousy Iago created. As we find out latter in the play, Othello is not as good as he was first presented to us. He shows an evil that Iago never could have created. Othello already had a pinch of jealousy and evilness which Iago merely enflamed. Othello killed Desdemona without ever confronting Cassio on the topic and did not directly confront Desdemona until he had already made up his mind. Had Othello not been the least bit jealous before Iago's prompting, Othello would not have jumped to conclusions based on a hint and a handkerchief to kill the woman he loved. It

is apparent that Othello is already jealous of Desdemona even before Iago tells him anything (perhaps because of seeing Desdemona lie to her father). Othello already shows distrust of Desdemona and after Iago says Cassio is honest, Othello says: Nay, yet there's more in this I prithee, speak to me as to thy thinkings, As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts. The worst of words. [III. iii. 143] It is apparent that Othello has an evil side and wants a reason to uncover the mysterious and suspicious evilness that he fears is in Desdemona and which will give him justification to harm her. 300 lines after this quote Othello already says " I'll tear her to pieces" [III. iii. 447]. In the face of Desdemona's pleas and on mere assumption of Iago's word Othello kills Desdemona and plots for Cassio's death. Does he go from good to evil simply because he was told a rumor? That is Nonsense. Othello had evil in him that Iago did not create. Iago did not kill Desdemona and Othello by making everyone jealous. He unleashed and brought the jealousy he knew already existed to a higher level simply because he could. The evil existed in other people besides Iago and he brought it to life. On that same note, Iago is not a pure evil villain who contaminated everyone else with his evilness. Othello, Roderigo, Cassio, Emilia, and even Desdemona all have an evilness lurking inside their " honest" bodies just waiting to spill out as Iago's evilness did in this play. As I showed above Othello's evilness definitely spilled out in the second half of the play when he killed Desdemona and plotted against Cassio in his jealous rage. Additionally, Roderigo's evilness coming from jealousy over Desdemona was definitely apparent in the play right from the start, even before Iago enraged it. Cassio was evil to a lesser extent, but nevertheless still had evilness, and his showed up when he tried

to attack Roderigo and then killed Montano in the brawl of the second act. Even Emilia had an evilness and hers came forth when she stole the handkerchief from Desdemona knowing it meant a lot to her. Desdemona's evilness spilled on to the play when she married Othello, never mentioning it to her father and abandoning him coldly and abruptly. If one considers any of the characters in the play honest or with a good heart, than Iago is no different, for Iago has evilness inside just as the other characters, only Iago's honest side existed mostly before the period in which play took place. In the play "Othello", Iago comes forth as an apparently evil, vicious, and intelligent person who is creating havoc for reasons of seemingly pure villainy. However after examining the text, it can be stated that Iago is not a pure evil character, but was once honest and kind and still has honesty within him. He could not have held up a reputation for honesty his entire life if he was not truly honest at one time or another. By the time this play took place Iago had already changed his way of life from being honest to being evil because honesty was getting him nowhere: he did not get promoted to lieutenant, his status was completely reliable on Othello, and he was jealous of Othello and Cassio who were leading a better life than he. It can also be proved that Othello had an honest conscience which he was trying to keep quiet by assigning it logical reasons for his villainy to shut it up. Iago is also responsible for all the murders and crimes that occurred because the other characters in the play also have an evil lurking inside. The murders in the play would not have occurred if there was not a villainous side to every character in the play and therefore Iago cannot be blamed for all these murders and crimes. In the end, Iago was not an evil villainous person, but

was an honest person with no other alternative to go to change the way his life was going.