

Characteristics of the antagonist



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An antagonist is essential to any story. Establishing a clear “ bad guy” gives the story more emotion, uniting the reader with the protagonist(s) against a common enemy that is easy to hate. Every story has an antagonist, but only some are evil. The qualifications to be considered evil are much more extreme; one must be completely heartless and indifferent to the harm they cause others, perhaps even enjoy it. Sometimes, a character may be considered evil that isn’t even the antagonist. Michael Corleone of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* trilogy is an example of this. Whether Michael is evil or not depends on who you ask. There’s a case to be made that he is evil, as he is a mafia boss, making a living off organized crime and ordering murders. Perhaps the best evidence to support this is one of the final scenes of *The Godfather Part II*, where Michael has his brother Fredo executed. He does have a reason for this, as Fredo betrays the family earlier in the movie, but many view this reaction as unwarranted and truly evil. This is a fair argument, but Michael simply does not have the mind of an evil man. As terrible as the things he does are, he does them for the sake of his family, to provide for and protect them. His immoral strategies makes him a sinner, but since he acts with good intentions, Michael is not evil. Analyzations like this can be done with any character. The antagonists of *Othello*, *Paradise Lost*, and *A Picture of Dorian Gray* all have varying levels of evil, which can be determined through discussion of their motives, strategies, and goals.

Evil consists of a few core components. Lust, greed, pride, and all the other basic sins of man collectively make up all evil and wrong in the world. In Shakespeare’s drama *Othello*, audiences are able to suspect the evil within Iago before he even reveals his malicious intentions, by observing his jealous

nature. The play's opening scene features Iago ranting on how he hates his superior, Othello, for promoting Cassio, another soldier, to serve as lieutenant in his place. He reflects on this setback, saying, " But he, sir, had th' election... must be beled and calmed By debtor and creditor" (I. I. 28-33). Iago's obsessive hatred of Othello for a purely professional decision, combined with his intense jealousy of Cassio, serves as a warning to viewers of the play that he is not a good man.

Most readers of the play already suspect Iago's sinister intentions after the first few passages of Othello. This suspicion is quickly verified. After Iago's rant, Cassio asks him why he does not quit, since he is so frustrated with his current employment. Iago answers, telling Cassio he has a plan. Iago explains that " I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (I. I. 44). He describes himself as the kind of servant " Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty, Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves" (I. 153-54). This is the first time in the play that Iago reveals his true intentions, consequently revealing the play's antagonist.

Iago has various motivations for his sabotage of Othello's life. In the first act, Iago relays to Roderigo his frustration with Othello promoting Cassio over him. He describes how this has damaged his life, saying " This countercaster, He, in good time, must his lieutenant be, And I, God, bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient" (I. I. 33-35). Referencing this passage, Bryan Reynolds writes that " Iago's motive is therefore revenge: revenge against the military general who did not promote him" (Reynolds 212). This is the first motive that audiences are provided for his behaviour.

There's also a personal reason that fuels Iago's sinister actions. In act three, Othello is summoned to Cyprus for his military prowess. After he leaves, Iago launches into quite a revealing soliloquy. In addition to his desire for professional advancement, Iago discloses a personal grudge against Othello, describing how "it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets' Has done my office" (I. III. 430-431). Iago's suspicion Othello has slept with his wife adds revenge to the mix.

Iago illustrates his cleverness throughout the entirety of Othello, particularly as an expert manipulator. He is able to inflame or cool Othello's emotion at will, using insinuations to enrage Othello without ever directly saying anything upsetting. Here lies Iago's true genius: he can incite Othello's emotions by planting the suspicion in Othello's mind that his comrade Cassio and his wife Desdemona are having an affair, without blatantly saying they are. After Iago has his wife steal Desdemona's handkerchief, he uses it as evidence to support the idea of Desdemona and Cassio's affair. John Gronbeck-Tedesco examines Iago's persuasive dialogue, noting how "Iago still has not produced the handkerchief, but, by talking about it, he has earned Othello's belief nonetheless" (Gronbeck-Tedesco 267). Iago is such a master manipulator that he can convince Othello of Desdemona's guilt based off of a piece of evidence that he has only described to Othello. He also knows that after hearing this, Othello will immediately go to his wife for verification and ask her to show him the handkerchief. Since it has been stolen, Desdemona will fail to produce it and Othello will have no choice but to believe everything Iago has told him. This is genius. Because Othello will be going to Desdemona and asking for the handkerchief himself, it will feel

like he found out about the affair on his own. This makes it much more believable, and creates a stronger belief in Othello's head than if Iago had assisted him in his discovery more.

Another strategy of Iago's is reverse psychology. After he has gotten Othello suspicious and angry, he will pretend to defend Cassio. This is very clever because through this technique, Iago has made Othello angry at Cassio while making himself seem honest and reputable, like he is not trying to get Cassio in trouble. In act three, Iago is employing this tactic especially well, insinuating Cassio and Desdemona's romantic involvement, when Othello asks him his opinion of what Cassio is up to. Iago responds, saying "I am not bound to that all slaves are free to. Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false" (III. III. 140-141). By expressing resistance to share his opinion, it seems like Iago thinks Cassio is guilty but is afraid of saying it. Iago continues this strategy in the next act. The first scene of act four opens with Othello and Iago having a conversation on whether certain actions count as infidelity for a married woman. Iago says that a married woman laying naked with another man is not sinful, if they do not have sex. Othello responds, exclaiming "Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm!" (IV. I. 5). This is exactly the thought that Iago intended for Othello to have: why would two people ever lie naked together for any other reason? Obviously this conversation is referencing Desdemona's rumoured infidelity. Throughout the play, audiences should take note of how Iago tries to talk to Othello about Desdemona and Cassio as much as possible. This is because the more Othello thinks about the two as a couple, the angrier he becomes.

Iago's primary and most obvious goal in Othello is to have Michael Cassio fired or executed, so he can be Othello's most trusted advisor. Iago also means to have Othello fired or imprisoned for murdering his wife and/or Cassio, actions that would be fueled by Iago's insinuating that they are having an affair. Simply put, Iago wants to completely sabotage everyone's life who is competition for him to achieve a prestigious military job. By destroying the competition, Iago carves himself a clear, easy path to success. Act two reveals an additional goal, when audiences learn that Iago suspects that Othello may have had an affair with his own wife, Emilia. Iago reflects on this, expressing "nothing can or shall content my soul Till I am evened with him, wife for wife" (II. I. 320-321). The interesting thing about this is Iago does not even love his wife. They have a brutal, emotionless marriage, so one may wonder why it upsets him so much to think his wife may be unfaithful. This is because Iago is a prideful man, and sees Emilia as property. If he thinks Othello had sex with Emilia, Othello has stolen Iago's property. For this reason he commits to sleeping with Desdemona. He is so prideful, and obsessed with never being wronged or bested, that he must get even with Othello, "wife for wife."

Evil is the main theme of "Paradise Lost." Basically the entire poem is inspecting every aspect of evil: how it is born, what drives it, the different sins that compose it. Satan, more than any of the other demons, personifies evil. His evil even outstrips his own being, because all of his offspring developed into morally corrupt figures like him. In act two, Satan meets his daughter, Sin. Sin explains that when Satan was still an angel, he had a severe headache one day. Sin tells him his head burst into flames, and "a

Goddess arm'd Out of thy head I sprung" (ll. 757-758). Satan literally possesses so much evil that his body cannot contain it. Satan's evil can, however, still be difficult to detect at times. In act nine, Satan roams the Garden of Eden as a snake, trying to corrupt Adam and Eve, the first man and woman of the human race. He attempts to convince Eve to eat fruit from the one tree that God has forbidden to her and Adam. After Satan eats some of this fruit, he asks her " Shall that be shut to Man, which to the beast Is open?" (IX. 691). Satan's comment should raise a red flag for Eve. She should be able to tell this snake is evil since he is appealing to her sense of pride to disobey God. Here Milton shows how evil preys on the pride of its victims, just as it can prey on greed and envy in other contexts.

Satan, the antagonist of Homer's epic poem " Paradise Lost," does not rebel simply for a love of destruction. Unlike other evil villains, he provides motive for his sins. Homer reveals that Satan's first sin, which is also first sin of all time, occurred when " his Pride had cast him out from Heav'n," referring to when Satan first waged war against God (l. 36-37). An angel at the time, Satan grew jealous of God's power and Jesus' status, and wasn't satisfied with his rank as an angel. He was " aspiring to set himself in Glory above his Peers," so Satan gathered an army of angels and attempted to rebel against God in his own kingdom of Heaven. God punished Satan and his followers by exiling them from Heaven and incarcerating them in Hell for eternity. Satan's punishment " Reserv'd him to more wrath; for now the thought both of lost happiness and lasting pain" (l. 54-55). This time motivated more by a craving for revenge than power, Satan wages his second war against God. Noam Reisner discusses Satan's motive in his book " John Milton's Paradise

Lost: A Reading Guide,” commenting on how “Satan, like Iago, is motivated by pure hatred” (Reisner 11). Homer writes him this way to make it clear to readers that he is the personification of evil, a metaphor for all sin.

Because evil seeks to destroy, warfare often proves its favored strategy. Act 2 of “Paradise Lost” opens with a meeting of Satan’s entire army in their freshly built temple, Pandemonium. Just defeated by God, Satan has called a gathering of all the demons to discuss the possibility of a second attack. Moloch, an extremely aggressive, pro-war demon, speaks first. He criticizes the idea of accepting defeat and restraining from further attack, advising “let us rather choose arm’d with Hell flames and fury all at once.” Of course Moloch wants to continue to fight, but he makes an interesting suggestion that this time, they utilize the weapons of Hell. This is an intelligent strategy, as God’s army is likely not familiar with such warfare. Arnold Stein compares this idea to “the introduction of chemical warfare in World War I” (Stein 52). Later in the meeting, Beelzebub, Satan’s right hand man, delivers the most significant speech. He reveals that God plans to create a new race, mankind, that he values even more than the angels. Beelzebub proposes that the demons, “By sudden onset... To waste his whole creation, or possess All as our own” (ll. 364-366). He wants to target God’s most prized possession, the human race, and either destroy them or gain them as allies against God. This is extremely clever. It would upset God more than anything else, which is what the demons are going for, and they could possibly build a stronger army. The demons all love the idea, agreeing to advance with this strategy. There is a pattern in the strategy of evil, in that it is relentless and barbaric,

ignoring all rules and decencies and solely aiming to cause maximum damage.

Satan has a few goals in “ Paradise Lost,” and they can all be achieved through one feat: the defeat of God and the angels. When Beelzebub advocates targeting the human race, he appeals to Satan by informing him that the humans are “ favour’d more Of him who rules above” (II. 350-351). Believing that God favors mankind over the angels, Satan realizes that the elimination or corruption of mankind would devastate God, which gives him all the motivation he needs to do it. He sees this as a grand form of revenge for being cast out, in his mind, in favor of God’s other creation. Satan’s other goal is to rule the universe as the king of evil. He recognizes that he has lost all hope of ever being “ good,” and decides that “ Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least Divided Empire with Heav’ns King I hold By thee” (IV. 110-112). Like God is the authority of good, Satan wants to rule evil. He wants to attain the most prestigious position in the realm of sin.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* lacks a truly evil character, unlike Othello or *Paradise Lost*. Lord Henry is the antagonist of the novel, which he demonstrates by displaying many “ symptoms” of his poor character. A good examples come in how he behaves after breaking the news to Dorian about the death of his fiancée. Dorian is obviously devastated by this news, and Lord Henry offers no condolences. Instead, he becomes slightly annoyed at Dorian’s emotional state, telling him “ Dorian, you mustn’t let this thing get on your nerves” (Wilde 100). This lack of empathy is indicative of a disturbing level of insensitivity and self-centeredness. It makes it clear he is the “ bad guy,” but this is not enough to determine him evil.

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Michael Patrick Gillespie makes an interesting point about Lord Henry, writing that he “ does not reject ethics but rather seeks to redefine received opinions through an alternative system” (Gillespie 97). Chapter three perfectly illustrates this principle in the dinner party scene. The table is discussing philanthropy, when Lord Henry begins ranting on how he does not believe in charity, saying one should only focus on their blessings and “ The less said about life’s sores, the better” (Wilde 22). This is clearly a very selfish and unethical ideology, but Lord Henry cannot acknowledge this, for he has convinced himself it is reasonable. This makes him delusional and a bad person, but it does not make him evil. True evil is when one knows one is being sinful and destructive, and continues anyway. So while this is yet another indicator that he is the novel’s antagonist, it fails to support that true evil is present within the antagonist. Additionally, Terence Dawson points out how Lord Henry “ never says a moral thing and never does a wrong thing” (Dawson). One who merely speaks sinisterly cannot be considered evil.

Lord Henry is purely motivated by his own self-interest. Everything he does serves to make his life more pleasurable and superficially prestigious. Part of this endless quest for pleasure is an adoration for all things beautiful. He usually satisfies this obsession with art, but upon meeting Dorian Gray, Lord Henry is obsessed. He observes his beauty in creepy detail, noting his “ finely curved scarlet lips” and “ crisp gold hair” (Wilde 2). His weird infatuation with Dorian develops into even weirder intentions, when he states he wants to “ make that wonderful spirit his own” in chapter three

(Wilde 35). Lord Henry's motive in socializing with Dorian is to dominate him, to own his beauty like one would own a beautiful painting.

Lord Henry does not have much of a strategy to bring Dorian under his wing other than to simply be himself. He wins Dorian over the same way he wins everyone over: with his witty charm and charisma. Terence Dawson speculates that Lord Henry is meant to represent a side of the author, acting as “ the carrier of Wilde's extravagant personality and wit” (Dawson). This is illustrated during the dinner party scene. While giving his anti-charity lecture, Lord Henry starts to argue that one should not act philanthropically because to do so is to surrender to one's emotion (sympathy). He instead says people should behave as scientifically as possible, stating “ The advantage of emotions is they lead us astray, and the advantage of science is that it is not emotional” (Wilde 23). Here, Lord Henry takes his irrational, morally corrupt argument and sugarcoats it with fake logic. By defining philanthropy as nothing more than satisfying an urge, he has caused it to lose its nobility, and make it easier to criticize. The members of the table are drunk off Lord Henry's charm, forgetting the true value of charity and accepting his alternate definition. Even though it completely contradicts the opinion they argued thirty seconds ago, they are delighted by his speech, telling him “ You are really very comforting” (Wilde 23). Among these delighted guests is Dorian, who consequently becomes infatuated with Lord Henry. Through the simple tactic of charisma, Lord Henry seeks to win Dorian over.

The purpose of Lord Henry's unusual mentoring of Dorian is confusing. Through charm and wit, he aims to win him over, but it is not clear what this

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means. He explains his objective in chapter three, shortly after meeting Dorian. He reveals that he finds “ something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence” (Wilde 27). He continues, expressing how he loves “ to project one’s soul in some gracious form,” in order to “ hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth” (Wilde 27). Lord Henry is so self-obsessed that he finds extreme pleasure in creating intellectual clones of himself. He lives vicariously through Dorian. He has the mind, and Dorian has the youth and beauty. So by instilling his personal philosophies into Dorian, he creates a man who is the best of both worlds (at least in Henry’s mind).

Iago and Satan represent simple, absolute evil, while Michael Corleone and Lord Henry represent less demented, more round adversaries. It should be noted how similar the motives of the two evil characters are. Like Iago is fueled by anger at his lack of a promotion, Satan is unhappy with his level of authority in God’s kingdom. After he rebels against this, God throws him in hell. Furious with his punishment, Paradise Lost begins with Satan planning a second rebellion. This fighting to escape God’s punishment is very similar to Iago’s motive: both are dissatisfied with their superior’s decisions, and are driven by this. Michael and Lord Henry are not very similar other than their shared lack of an evil nature. All four of these characters are great antagonists, with their motives, strategies and goals personalized for the benefit of their respective story.

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