

# lago and opposition

Literature, Russian Literature



The name Iago comes from Latin, “Iacobus,” meaning “one who trips up another and takes his place.” This name also belongs to the most important character in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and one of the most wonderfully evil characters of all time. The character Iago is more than worthy of his name, for in the process of “tripping up” the character Cassio in order to gain Cassio’s lieutenantcy, Iago takes extreme measures to take revenge on Othello, the general who first deprived him of the lieutenantcy. In taking these measures, Iago wreaks havoc on the lives of the characters and creates a reign of disorder. Thematically, this disorder is manifested in the juxtaposition of opposing sides: honesty versus deceit and appearance versus reality, black versus white and good versus evil, and God versus the Devil. Iago exemplifies the theme of opposition and contradiction and casts an aura over the play which reflects this theme with his paradoxical statement, “I am not what I am.” (Act I; i) This statement is significant in many ways, one being that it reflects the theme of contradiction within the play. It is also significant because it directly repels God’s statement to Moses in Exodus III: “I Am that I Am.” By this God meant that He was All, the “I Am,” the Ego, the complete and only Being and Power. By deliberately contradicting God’s statement, Iago insinuates that he is the opposite of God, implying that he may be the devil. The idea of Iago as a representation of Satan will be discussed further on. Iago’s self-denying statement can also be used as a formula throughout the play – whenever he uses the words “I am,” they can be replaced with the words “I am not,” to produce a completely different meaning to what he says. This idea obviously coincides with the theme of opposition in that it deals with opposing meanings. For

example, at one point Iago says to Roderigo, “ I am for you.” (Act I; ii) Plugging in the formula translates this statement to “ I am not for you.” This makes much more sense, because Iago is not “ for” Roderigo at all – he is merely using Roderigo to carry out his schemes, and he greatly dislikes Roderigo, thinking him to be an idiot for his passive cooperation and his gullibility. A more important example of how this formula can be used is when Iago says “ As honest as I am.” (Act II; i) This is one of the many references made to Iago by himself and others as being “ honest.” He is, of course, not honest at all, which is why it makes sense to use the formula so that his statement says “ As honest as I am not.” Iago appears to be honest but is really dishonest; this idea reflects the theme of opposition – in this case, the opposition of honesty and deceit as well as appearance and reality. Other elements of the play likewise reflect these ideas, such as the reality of Desdemona’s innocence and the distortion of reality, her unfaithfulness, which Iago makes Othello believe to be real. Iago makes Desdemona and Cassio seem dishonest, while really Desdemona is chaste and loyal and Cassio is honorable. All of these contradictions arise from Iago’s craftiness, and they are also related to Iago’s “ I am not what I am” statement – he is not what he is, and so he makes others seem to be not what they are. The theme of opposing sides is also manifested in the ideas of black versus white and evil versus good. Othello, a Moor, contrasts greatly with the rest of the characters, who are all white. His coloring creates conflict in some areas, such as the way in which others view him. Brabantio, for example, is Desdemona’s father, and he becomes angry when she elopes with Othello, mainly because Othello is black. He speaks harshly to Othello and accuses

him of witchcraft, demanding of him why else his daughter would “ run from her guardage to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight!” (Act i; ii) The conflict between black and white later becomes prominent as the dark Moor begins to oppose his fair-haired, blue-eyed wife due to his ever-growing suspicion, constantly fed by Iago’s guile. The theme of black and white is centered on at one point in a witty speech by Iago about women: If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit, The one’s for use, the other useth it.... If she be black, and thereto have a wit, She’ll find a white that shall her blackness hit.... She never yet was foolish that was fair For even her folly helped her to an heir. (Act II, i) This clever rhyme seems to favor fairness over blackness, which reflects Iago’s hatred of Othello. The theme of black versus white is a variation of the theme of evil versus good. Iago, of course, is evil, and he is in opposition with good, represented by Othello, especially, and by all the other characters. The irony of Iago versus Othello is that it creates a contradiction within a contradiction. The first contradiction is, once again, good versus evil. The second contradiction is that good is usually represented by white and evil by black, but in this case the colors are reversed. Not only does the theme of opposing sides exist in the form of good versus evil, but it presents itself in the form of God versus the Devil. As mentioned before, Iago may be considered a representation of Satan because of his declaring himself the opposite of God with his “ I am not what I am.” Another time Iago implies that he represents the devil is when he describes how he deceives others with his appearance: “ When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, As I do now.” (Act II; iii) Also, the role of a destructor which he

assumes directly opposes the idea of God as the Creator, so Iago must represent the opposite of God, the devil. Who, then, is the god against whom Iago is warring? According to Harold Bloom in *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*, Othello is Iago's god. Though this may not at first seem logical, one must consider the following ideas: Iago, being a representation of Satan, revels in his evil qualities and loves to wage war. In fact, war is his religion. Because Othello is a general of war, Iago worships him as a god. When Othello passes Iago over and gives the lieutenantcy to Cassio, Iago becomes nothing, hence "I am not what I am." Because he is nothing, he must war against his god, Othello, who, like God in the Bible who is All, is everything to Iago because war is everything to Iago. Iago's love of war also reflects the theme of opposition in the play, because war is essentially about opposing sides. Incidentally, Iago states at one point that, had Othello not passed him over, Iago never would have become "nothing." Iago conveys this idea to Roderigo in the words "It is as sure as you are Roderigo, Were I the Moor I would not be Iago." (Act I; i) Iago means to say that if he were as powerful as the Moor and he had received the lieutenantcy, he would not have become the nothing that Iago is, the "I am not" which constitutes his being. He never would have experienced the emptiness of his soul, which led to his lack of morality and then his malicious pursuit of mischief. In fact, he never would have become the wonderfully evil character who is so esteemed in literature. The meanings of names plays a small but significant role, as illustrated previously with the meaning of Iago's name. There are two more significant names, however, which have not yet been mentioned. The name Bianca, which belongs to Cassio's lover, means "white." This is a contradiction,

because white is associated with purity, and Bianca is a prostitute, someone who is certainly far from being pure. Her name also coincides with the black and white theme. The name Desdemona, from Greek, “*desdaimonia*,” means “of the devil.” This is significant in two ways. Firstly, it reflects the theme of contradiction because Desdemona is completely pure and far from being “of the devil.” It is also significant, however, that Othello comes to think the devil is in her because she is disloyal – at one point he even strikes her and says to her when she weeps: “O devil, devil! / If that the earth could teem with woman’s tears, / Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile. / Out of my sight!” (Act IV; i) It is evident that Shakespeare’s choice of names was anything but random. When Othello’s rejection of Iago sparks in Iago’s empty soul the desire for revenge, Iago embarks on a journey which eventually ends with his defeat. Somewhere along the way, however, Iago ceases to have a motive for his causing murder and mayhem and begins to do it for pure pleasure, indulging in his passion for war-waging. In this way, his evil takes on a life of its own. Iago is able to succeed in his destruction of others for two main reasons. One idea belongs to Harold Bloom, that the absence of comedy allows for Iago’s success. This is because comedy would mean wit, and the presence of wit, which is so strategically lacking in any other character but Iago, would mean his ruin. One reason that Iago succeeds in beguiling Othello, therefore, is because Othello has no wit and cannot see through Iago or outfox him. Another reason is the nature of Othello’s character. Othello is entirely dependent on how others view him for the way in which he views himself. This is the reason that he marries Desdemona – he loves her only because she loves him for his greatness and valor. When

Othello feels he is losing Desdemona, he begins to lose himself as well, because his identity is dependent on her and how she views him. Iago knows this and uses Othello's vulnerability against him, telling him Desdemona is untrue and shaking his confidence in himself until he cannot see clearly. Shakespeare's Othello certainly revolves around the character Iago, and not only because every other character is just a pawn in his game of war and revenge. The entire thematic structure of the play revolves around the contradiction and opposition which arises from the disorder caused by Iago, and which is manifested in Iago's ominous statement, " I am not what I am."