

Othello by william  
shakespeare and we  
need to



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The motives behind the villains from Othello, We Need To Talk About Kevin and Rebecca are one of the key ingredients that attract the readers to the characters as, the writers choose not to explicitly spell out their true motives but to make the readers' curiosity grow by giving them hints as the readers are able to interpret how they see the motives. Othello is a romantic tragedy written in 1603. Shakespeare has adapted the plot from a collection of tales by Italian writer Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi called Hecatommithi (1565).

Othello is still relevant in the modern society as we can still relate to the themes of love, jealousy, betrayal and racism. We Need To Talk About Kevin is a post-modern thriller by Lionel Shriver published in 2001. It is written in a series of letters from Eva a mother to her estranged husband Franklin. The novel mainly focuses on the modern society of America as Kevin's crime is based on the real life Columbine shooting of American teenagers. Shriver also uses Eva's character to explore the nature versus nurture's debate and explores whether Kevin was born evil or was his behaviour a result of Eva's lack of motherly love.

Rebecca, a romantic, gothic novel written in 1938 by a British author Daphne Du Maurier, is set in the form of a flashback as readers discover the narrator's new life at the stately home of Manderley. However, the main character of this novel is nameless as she is shown to be a " shy young woman". In addition, the eponymous title of Rebecca over-shadows the narrator completely; making her a vulnerable target for Mrs. Danvers the housekeeper.

Arguably Rebecca is revealed as a villain too, in so far as her name entraps the narrator. It will be interesting to explore the different interpretations of the villains' motives for the destruction of others. What unites these texts is the way each villain has their own purpose for their crime. In

Shakespearean's tragedy, a villain is used as an element to cause the downfall of a noble person. Iago is the "villain" in Othello.

Iago's enters the stage with "S'blood" therefore Shakespeare presents him as a highly blasphemous character. There is a suggestion that Iago's character is based on a Spanish Saint of "Santiago Matamoros" which means St James the Moor-killer. At first glance, it would be obvious to suggest that the motive is racism as Iago says "I hate the Moor". Here, the mono-syllabic tone of this statement emphasises the hatred. "Moor" is seen as a derogatory term in modern day though Shakespeare reveals the racist attitude that was current in his day through his plays.

Furthermore, the sixteen century audience would not question the perspective of racism that this play implied as it is considered normal. This is because in Elizabethan times, moor was a religious term, not used for racial identity. By doing this, Shakespeare highlighted the fact that Othello is different from the society he lives in. This also implies Iago's bitterness towards Othello was due to his race. Correspondingly, Iago's motive here is to discredit Othello's hard won reputation as Army General. The fact that Othello is placed at a higher rank than Iago in the Venetian society pushes Iago to expose the suppressed nature of the people in Venice as presented by Iago's conversation with Brabantio at the beginning of the play.

His use of crude racist and animalistic language as “ an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” exposes Brabantio’s racist nature and Iago’s bestial side. However, this makes the audience wonder whether Iago is racist since this could be part of his ability to adapt language in order to create maximum manipulative impact on others. Iago is a great observer and judge of character as he is able to realise the hidden side of Brabantio. Likewise, Kevin is able to recognise the hypocrisy of his mother’s utopia as Eva despises the American way of life which is a contradiction as she hates “ spoiled” people and yet she is “ rich”. Iago succeeded in his master of manipulation as he is able to manipulate any character on the stage with his words. For example, his advice for Cassio that the “ general’s wife is now the general” is in fact plausible as his “ advice” is indeed “ honest”.

The reputation of “ honest Iago” can be seen as an oxymoron as people in the Elizabethan times believed that they can tell people’s personality by their outer appearance. This supported by Iago’s belief that “ knavery’s plain face never seen, till used” as this also reflects the ideology of the society as they often chooses not to look beyond the surface. Though, this is an idea that has work in favour of Iago as he suggests that “ men should be what they seem”. Then again, he admits “ I am not what I am” which conveys Iago as a cunningly manipulative character.

Iago is sneaky as he is able to hide his malice behind his “ honest” appearance. Iago has a positive reputation amongst others for honesty though he sees it as being “ idle” and “ false”. The term “ honest” to describe Iago is seen as patronising and contemptuous. Correspondingly

Rebecca hid her promiscuous side behind her “ angelic” appearance as everyone including the narrator thought that Rebecca was perfect.

However, through the eyes of Maxim she is presented as “ rotten through and through” because she was unfaithful. The use of the word “ rotten” to describe Rebecca is precise as her inside was truly decaying from cancer which could symbolise her corrupted moral. However, this is seen as controversial from the point of feminist reading because during the time which the novel is written, promiscuous women are seen as being immoral. This had been reflected in the novel as Rebecca was killed. Iago is presented as a malcontent character as he is unhappy with the social structure of Venice because Othello promotes Cassio over him even though Iago has more military experience.

Iago firmly believes that his malfeasance started by his thirst for revenge of Othello’s injustice of appointing Cassio over him. Iago can be seen as a victim of the corruption in the Venetian’s society as Cassio has never been in a battle field, yet he has the lieutenant’s position. Iago feels bitter towards Othello decision and portrays Cassio as an incapable man since Iago believes that he is more deserving of the position. This led him to have a personal grudge towards both Othello and Cassio. Iago becomes determined to destroy their happiness, peace of mind and credibility; eventually their lives too.

Likewise, Kevin is discontent with the social structure of America as his conversation with his mother reveals. Kevin and Iago are connected in that Kevin sees his wrongdoing like he was putting on a “ show” and Eva is his “

audience". Kevin believes that his crime is a kind of entertainment as he thinks there are only two types of people; the " watcher" and the " watchee". Kevin chooses to be the " watchee" to gain notoriety and attention which could be seen as a motive.

Kevin is merely a child who seeks for attention from his mother as he realises that Eva " never wanted" him which was true as she was not ready for a baby. This feeling is similar for Mrs. De Winter as she thinks that she is an inferior substitute for Rebecca. She believes that Maxim is " imagining" Rebecca in her place. Equally, Mrs. Danvers " resents" the narrator taking the place of Rebecca, which conveys a discontent in the social structure of Manderley as she constantly reminds the narrator that Manderley was " different when the late Mrs de Winter was alive".

Iago's response to Othello's love as " I am your own forever" conveys a sense of control and possessiveness; although through some interpretations this is seen as a declaration of Iago's homoerotic feeling towards Othello. Besides, the homoerotic feeling could be a motive as during the Elizabethan era, homosexuality is illegal which led Iago to suppress his love for Othello by hating him. Furthermore, this also gives a reason to why Iago want to get rid of everyone that is important to Othello. Whereas, in Rebecca, there is a subtext to suggest that Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers were involved in a homosexual relationship. This is supported by Mrs.

Danvers revelation that Rebecca " despised" all men. Furthermore, Beatrice reveals that Mrs. Danvers " simply adored Rebecca". Jealousy could be one

of Iago's motives as he uses the imagery of "poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards" as a representation of his growing jealousy.

The use of "gnaw" suggests unpleasant emotion as it eats up his inside, whilst "mineral" suggests that it ever growing. Iago leaves Othello to deal with his misery so he can suffer the same way he did. Iago is not only jealous of Cassio for his lieutenant's job but also of his "daily beauty". Iago is consumed with jealousy which helps fuelled his vengeance.

Iago's use of sibilance in "set a squadron" make him appear as a snake-like character. The three texts resemble each other in their responses to this as both Kevin and Rebecca have this characteristic. Kevin can "hiss without pronouncing any S's" as he overheard his parents discussing their divorce. This conveys his spiteful feelings towards the decision that his father would gain his custody whilst he much rather live with Eva.

This is one of many interpretations of what motivates Kevin as Eva believes that moment is when he "decided". Nonetheless, we cannot be sure as her point of view is not reliable. Eva realises this as she admits that sometimes she jumps to the conclusion that Kevin is always the culprit. Moreover, the narrator in Rebecca compares the imagery of Rebecca's handwriting to the motion of "a snake" as it "twisted" around to give a sense of how conniving Rebecca was.

By comparing Rebecca with a cold-hearted reptile, Du Maurier is suggesting that Rebecca is lacking a feminine quality as she also has womb cancer which prevents her from having a child; possibly as a form of punishment for her infidelity. From the point of view of a feminist reading, this is seen as a

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critique to Rebecca as she did not behave the way a wife and woman should seeing as she should be denied from culpability because traditional gender roles should not be reinforced in modern society. Mrs. Danvers decided on her plan upon finding out Rebecca's murder. A fundamental point of connection between all three texts is the writers' use of "snake" as a metaphor for the villain's behaviour.

These suggest that in a way, all their motives are based on the loss of something or someone. As Iago loses the job he wanted, Kevin's family is falling apart and Mrs. Danvers loses Rebecca through the hand of Maxim. On the Elizabethan stage, a soliloquy was delivered directly to the audience.

This convention was a fruitful and flexible tool for the dramatist as Shakespeare uses Iago's soliloquies to create dramatic irony as this is a great way for the audience psychologically engage with Iago. Iago confides to the audience about his plans and suspicions. His soliloquies demonstrate his recognition of others' virtues as he says that Cassio is a "proper man" despite the fact that he later contradicts with the statement fearing Cassio with his wife. This suggests that Iago is a paranoid and filled with sexual jealousy as he does not trust women. Iago's suspicious of having been cuckolded as he said "And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets" Shakespeare uses of the conjunctive "and" suggests Iago does not hate Othello because he might have slept with Emilia but there are other reasons to this hatred.

It could be argued that Iago is inventing new reasons as a way to justify his crimes as later he also suspects Cassio with his "night-cap too". Iago has



admitted to himself that he was not “ sure” if it was true that Othello has “ done his office” but he wants to use that as an excuse to destroy Othello’s happiness anyway. The use of the term “ office” as a metaphor for his sexual relationship with Emilia shows his lack of affection and respect for her as he does not see her as a person but merely his duty. In similar manner, Kevin has the same attitude towards women which is “ Hump ‘em and dump ‘em”; the use of the rhyme and colloquial language gives a tone of disrespect as it reveals his low opinion of women. Likewise Rebecca “ despised all men” and she was “ above” them according to Mrs. Danvers.

Iago’s use of the word “ sport” suggests that Iago sees his malicious plan as being a game; something he does for “ pleasure” which could be seen as one of his motivations. Nevertheless, this adds weight to Iago’s character as being a “ motiveless malignity” according to Coleridge’s comment. Similarly, Shriver never gives the reader any justification that Kevin’s crime has been triggered by any true motives as Kevin always “ bored” and “ not interested” of his surroundings. The term Machiavellian originated from the Italian Renaissance diplomat and writer Niccolò Machiavelli. Kevin is described as a “ Machiavellian” character by Eva but none of his wrongdoings has the sole purpose to manipulate and corrupt others for his own personal gain unlike Iago. As Iago’s is to “ make the Moor, thank me, love me and reward me” Iago’s list of three could be seen as Iago’s initial motives or possibly his plan to destroy Othello.

The repetition of “ me” suggests that Iago is only interested in his own benefit. His enjoyment in acting malevolently as he declares “ I follow him to serve my turn upon him” indicates Iago has the sole aim of destroying

Othello as the main reason why he continues Othello's service. Even as a child, Eva's suspicion of Kevin provoking the girl with asthma to scratch herself could be part of Kevin's misdeed but Eva was not certain until Kevin's ultimate crime, similarly to Iago. Whilst Kevin is sick, Eva discovers that underneath his "fury" "lay a carpet of despair" suggesting that perhaps Kevin is not a bad person initially but his malice is stemmed from past experiences.

This makes the reader wonder whether Kevin is in fact a normal human-being hiding behind a mask of malevolence and wonders how reliable is Eva's narration as this could have been the only time she has been sympathetic towards Kevin. From Kevin's birth, Eva suffered from post-natal depression which could be the reason why she has difficulty bonding with Kevin as she mistook Kevin's rejection of her milk as a sign that he does not want her as a mother. Therefore Eva pushes Kevin away from her emotionally as a form of punishment. The rejection causes Eva to believe that Kevin is "heartless" from birth. This corresponds with Ecclesiastes' idea that "the hearts of the children are full of evil". This reading is further supported by Sarah A Smith's review in The Guardian as she believes that "Kevin is a monster, a gross caricature of childhood", suggesting that perhaps Kevin's twisted mind was not due to nurture but nature.

Nonetheless, Kevin does horrible things in similar manner to most teenagers because he sees that as the only way to get the attention from Eva.

However, according to Jai Arjun Singh, he believes that Kevin's character is not "a result of his mother's attitude towards him" as either nurture nor nature is solely responsible for shaping a character of someone. Kevin uses

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others' good qualities to destroy people as he knows that his victims are filled with vanity which is why he creates the "Bright and Shining Promise Award" to lure them into the sport hall. The use of "Bright and Shining" could foreshadow the bleak reality of his victims. In the same way that Iago uses Desdemona's "virtue" to "enmesh 'em all". Here, Iago is presented to be a cunning and merciless character.

Shakespeare has given Iago more soliloquies than any other characters in the play which let the audience into the villain's mind. The audience are forced to side with Iago as we often know about his malicious plan as illustrated by Iago's plan to "abuse of Othello's ear" yet we are unable to stop it. This allows for heightened tension because of dramatic irony as well as making Iago psychologically engaging for the audience because we want to discover his true motives. Alternatively, the readers are unable to psychologically engage with either Mrs. Danvers or Kevin as the writers choose to write in the form of past tense, first person narration which shows their victims' response and feeling but not the villains' inner-private thoughts during the crime.

This technique has allowed the authors to withhold any major information from the reader, consequently able the authors to create suspense. Thus, it's hard to know the villains' true motives due to the biased narration which means that it's even harder to psychologically engage with the villains. However, this could be the main point of Shriver's novel that we could never truly understand what make people behave the way they do. Besides, one of the problems with determining Iago's motivation is that he presents several

different fronts to the other characters, leaving us wondering who the real Iago is.

The fire that destroyed Manderley which was suspected to be caused by Mrs. Danvers, releases the narrator from the memory of Rebecca as it is hard to imagine Mr. And Mrs. De Winter living happily ever after there where the malignant presence of Rebecca's ghost still lingers. In a way, Mrs.

Danvers' crime could be seen as a way to free the heroine from the past. On the contrary, Kevin is forever entrapping Eva in a life without those she loves most and he also forces her to admit that she actually loves "her son". The use of "her" pronoun conveys a sense of possession as Kevin is no longer refers to as "our son". This also diminishes Franklin's role as a father, which could be a positive thing according to Zoe Green from The Observer, as she believes that "Franklin's deliberate blindness that prevents Kevin's sociopath traits from being taken seriously". Somehow, Kevin's crime could be seen as the only way for him to experience the "closeness" to his mother as they had been "fighting" ever since he was born. Kevin uses crude, explicit and disrespectful language to gain control and perhaps to impress Eva as he refers her family home as a "shithole" to provoke reaction.

There are many different interpretations for the villains' motives. For Iago's motive, it is fair to say that Iago is "motiveless" as he seems to be searching for new reasons as he goes along with his plan. Iago has the potential of a good person as suggested by his good "reputation" but he was getting nothing in return which is why he decided to take revenge on the society. Furthermore, he believes that he only "play the villain" which suggests that

he is only pretending. However, due to his bitter feelings that caused him to become a “ typical stage Machiavelli” character according to Hazlitt, Iago is “ an amoral artist who seeks to fashion the world in his own interest” which is true in Iago’s case as he is only interested in his own gain, this is shown by Iago’s repetition of “ money”. In a way, it could be argued that Eva is to be blamed for Kevin’s malice as she pushes her child away when he needs her love most.

This is supported by the style of the novel as the letters could be seen as a way for Eva to construct her thoughts and ask for forgiveness or to pinpoint the blame. Perhaps, Kevin’s evil is from the feeling of knowing that there is nothing else he could achieve in his life since he has all the money and material goods. Kevin is spoilt as he believes that he could get away with his actions without punishment. Mrs. Danvers represents the dead Rebecca as she fights to keep the presence of her mistress alive as a way to make the narrator’s life miserable. Mrs.

Danvers’ final crime to get rid of Rebecca’s presence once and for all was because Rebecca decided to die without conferring with her. She felt left out by Rebecca’s decision to leave her in pain from the loss. She fails to ensnare the narrator who goes on to live a happy marriage with Maxim whereas Iago and Kevin ensnare their victims forever. Eva is trapped in her new life without her husband and daughter.

Othello is seen as the tragic hero as he lost his reputation and wife which led him to commit suicide. At the end of the play, Iago refuses to “ speak word” which sustain Iago’s power of manipulation as he doesn’t let people know

the real him. Also, he remains in control as he still has the power to manipulate people by the use of his language. On the other hand, Kevin believes he knows the reason behind his crime but as he faces his punishment, he starts to feel some remorse when he gave Eva his sister's glass eye and told her that he was " sorry". Whereas it could be his fear for the " real" jail as the junior one is tough enough for him. It could be argued that Kevin feels no remorse for his crime but only for himself.