

Why does iago hate othello?



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Iago's hatred of Othello emerges from a variety of reasons. At the outset, Iago is Othello's servant and there is bound to be a systemic hatred against one's masters. Then there is Desdemona, the most gracious and virtuous wife of Othello. The intimate and exemplary nature of their mutual love and devotion inspires envy and none more strongly from Iago himself. In the play, Iago is so placed that he sees opportunities to improve his station in life by bringing about his master's demise. Seen from this perspective, Iago holds no special grievance against Othello, but rather the latter happens to be a mere hurdle to Iago's social and economic progress. Shakespearean scholars through the centuries have forwarded a variety of reasons for Iago's apparent hatred of Othello. This essay will provide the whole gamut of reasons offered by scholars, namely sexual envy, material opportunity, religious belief, ethnic and racial prejudice, social and economic progress, etc; but it seems that there is no consensus within the academia as to a comprehensive understanding of his reasons.

By carefully studying Othello and the Merchant of Venice, one can see that the two plays are connected at several levels. Othello is portrayed as black-skinned whereas his dear wife Desdemona is fair and beautiful, suggesting an uneasy disparity in their marriage. From a modern psychological perspective, one can find traces of an 'inferiority complex' in Othello's perception of his relation to Desdemona. The same reason could be applied to explaining Iago's hatred of his master, a Moor (Grady, 1995). The fact that the play is set in Venice, adds credence to the following observation by Maurice Hunt:

“ Shakespeare’s Venice encapsulates certain dynamic relationships between a persecutory Christian culture and a potentially savage alien—a Turk, a Moor, or a Jew—who exists both without and within the city. Unfortunately, individual Venetians stereotype and persecute the necessary “ foreign” alien. They do so because a counterpart to the “ foreign” alien has surfaced figuratively within their hearts and minds, where it has slept dormant. This alien within, once precipitated, seeks relief by the exercise of destructive power. This malign power manifests itself mainly through the affected Venetian’s intensified stereotyping of others and the sadistic persecution that stereotyping makes possible—not only of the “ foreign” Venetian alien but of other, non-aliens as well.” (Hunt, 2003)

One can deduce from the above passage that Iago’s hatred for the dark-skinned Moor could also emerge from this sense of ‘ the alien’ and ‘ the other’. Although the hardened warrior Iago is a Venetian himself, he is isolated in his role as a warrior. For its safety, Venice depends upon the stewardship of an alien, in this case Othello. As a result, “ the sense of an unwarlike, perhaps pusillanimous, Renaissance republic is reinforced in the play’s violent final scenes when the Venetian Lodovico, hearing bleeding Cassio’s call for aid, tells Gratiano, “ Let’s think ‘ t unsafe / To come in to the cry without more help”. There is more evidence toward the end of the play that reinforces this notion of ‘ the other’ (Bloom, 1987). For example, when Othello says to Gratiano “ Uncle, I must come forth,” the latter replies to him thus “ If you attempt it, it will cost thee dear; / Thou hast no weapon, and perforce must suffer”. When Othello charges Gratiano with a Spanish sword, Gratiano disgracefully retreats. At this juncture, Othello asks him “ Do you go

back dismayed?”, suggesting that Gratiano acted like a Venetian. So, the multicultural atmosphere of 16th century Venice has fostered prejudices among its populace on grounds of race and ethnicity. Iago’s hatred of his master Othello, though not blatantly or consciously racist, can be said to emerge from this social paradigm (Hunt, 2003).

Another explanation for Iago’s hatred of Othello is attributed to the very persona of Iago. The concept of ‘evil’ in Iago’s disposition is widely studied in the academia. In the relatively truthful world of sixteenth century Venice, the manifestation of evil, often takes monstrous proportions. To his defense, Iago’s evilness emerges not so much from his words as it does from his connivance. In fact, Iago, who is often referred to as “Honest Iago” seems to be speaking the truth all the time (Grady, 1995). His mode of evil doing is not by spinning suitable falsities, but by using truth as a weapon of manipulation. As Shakespearean scholar Francesco Aristide Ancona mentions,

“Honest Iago”—just think of the numerous times his honesty is referred to in the play—tries whenever possible to tell the truth, so much so that sometimes when he does tell a lie he will actually admit it. For example, after he deftly manipulates the “truth” by using a conditional interrogative to provoke Othello’s jealousy, “What if I had said I had seen him do you wrong?”, Iago creates chaos because Othello’s imagination and assumptions lead him to believe Cassio has actually admitted an affair with Desdemona—even when Iago admits he is only asking “what if” and really doesn’t know the truth”. (Ancona, 2005)

Examples such as these illustrate that iago does not blatantly hate his master Othello. A liberal interpretation of the play could even lead to the conclusion that iago does no more than caution his master on reasonable suspicions and that much of Othello's misery and tragedy is of his own making.

The famous English poet T. E. Coleridge made a remarkable observation when he talked of iago's apparent " motiveless malignity". While this assessment is true to an extent, a sounder understanding of iago's underlying motives for his conspiratorial acts can be attained by scrutinizing his interactions with individual characters in the play (Bloom, 1987). Among his dialogues in the play, the ones with Desdemona is of special significance. The passage in the play in question is the interlude in which Desdemona entices the time-period before Othello's arrival at Cyprus by asking iago how he would praise different kinds of women. As Karl Zender points out, " Often in Shakespeare the inconsequentiality of an episode relative to a play's plot alerts us to its significance in other terms. There is no plot reason, why Othello's ship need not arrive later than Desdemona's for any plot reason (it in fact left Venice earlier); so Shakespeare must have had other reasons for including the delay-perhaps to allow time to develop nuances of character, theme, and motive that he could not conveniently develop elsewhere". (Karl F. Zender)

Another passage of interest is the exclamation is when iago shouts " Divinity of Hell". This phrase has a parallel to Desdemona's framed beauty that despite its goodness can be quite evil and iago's course of action. iago continues with " When devils will the blackest sins put on/ They do suggest
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at first with heavenly shows/ As I do now.” Zender adds, that “ this assertion is as much a comment on what he intends to do as it is a comment on Desdemona. The way Iago sees it, Desdemona, s heavenly show can be a frame that contains the most devilish of black sins. And look at how successful that frame has been! Her beautiful frame has completely “enfettered” as great a warrior as Othello. Succinctly, what Iago is confessing here is that he’s learned how to be evil from Desdemona.” (Karl F. Zender)

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