

Caitlyn Speier

ENGL 3007 (Katelyn McCarthy)

April 8th, 2019

The Humanity of Iago

First and foremost, let me say, I read Marvin Rosenberg's "In defense of Iago." I searched high and low for some article that would help me crack the character of Iago and his motivations and simply none of them came anywhere near this paper. I found his argument and analysis on the motivations and character of Iago so compelling that I will do my absolute best to make this an original work, but I simply don't know how successful I will be at it.

So, let us begin attempting to answer the question that not even Iago claims to have the answer to, why does he do these things to Othello? From the very first scene of the play Shakespeare informs us that the story line of Iago will be just as integral to the purpose and messaging of this play as the titular character's. There is almost no question that the actions of Iago, existing in contrast to actions of characters like the Weird Sisters from Macbeth, are solely responsible for any and all chaos within this story. Which allows us to focus exclusively on the question of his intentions. After considering the wide array of potential motivations of Iago as well as the people effected, it will be the case that it is not one slight by one person that explains the actions of Iago, but rather it is the expression of his own insecurities and personality defects manifested in controlled rage, manipulation and jealousy.

When the plot of Othello is broken down into its basic parts, the obvious answer seems to be that Iago is motivated by racism. And based in the language of Iago there is a legitimate case that he, along with most ever Venetian of the time, held racist ideas. Consider, how for example,

Iago refers to Othello as the Moor, significantly more often than by Othello. Or how Iago makes his feelings about Othello clear within the first scene of the play when he refers to Othello as "an old black ram" (1.1.88) and "the devil" (1.1.91). It is key to not ignore the importance of race within the story of "Othello," however it does not appear to be the main motivation of Iago when you take into account the way he treats every other character around him, especially people subordinate to him like Roderigo and Emilia. It is the case that race, rather than being the motivator of Iago, is a tool he uses in order to manipulate and take advantage of Othello.

The next most apparent source of Iago's jealousy can be attributed to lust within the play. It is speculated both that Iago had desires for Desdemona, as well as was suspicious of an affair between Othello and Emilia, as well as Cassio and Emilia. Generally, it is well acknowledged that neither of these things are unlikely or unreasonable, however their power as a motivator is pretty thoroughly concealed in the play, but we can see interesting evidence of it within Act 2 Scene 1. Here Desdemona and Iago have a witty exchange revolving about Iago's attitudes about women. It is speculated that this exchange has no purpose in the plot other than to reveal how inept Iago is at conversing with women, which further alienates him from them. We also get an insight into his contempt for Emilia and Cassio, and his facility in exchanging with women, when he quips in his aside "Ay, smile upon her, do, I will gyve thee in thine own courtship. You say true, 'Tis so, indeed." (2.1.169-171) He's revealed his hand as being intimidated by women, which can enlighten us as to why he so intentionally aims harm at Desdemona, rather than Cassio, who was the original target of Othello's wrath. However, it does not completely explain his treatment of Roderigo or Othello.

So, maybe he is motivated by a contempt for Cassio or Othello's promotion over him. As we've seen before, he does hold some contempt for Othello and Cassio over race and their ease

with women, so it is easy to conclude that their superior position to him would cause him much dissatisfaction. It would also be permissible to say that Iago has been able to find fault within Othello and Cassio because they out rank him. Throughout the play it seems that both Othello and Cassio treat Iago with the respect and friendship he deserves. Repeatedly Othello goes out of his way to prove his friendship, ultimately trusting him over his own wife, so it is fair to say that the slights Iago has taken offense to are more a reflection of himself rather than any mistreatment and his motivations lie in a general, unappeasable dissatisfaction with his rank among others as Emilia reminds us “But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster Begot upon itself, born on itself.” (3.4.159-160)

Now that we have an understanding of the motivations of Iago it is worth reflecting on the effects of his actions and what they can teach us about the life and consequences of a jealous person. First, let us consider Othello. The effects of Iago’s manipulation are fully realized in the final lines of the character when he proclaims “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him-thus” (V.ii.355-5) As Edward Berry explains, “He attempts to transcend the constricting framework of assimilation or inferiority not by breaking free of it but by asserting, in death, that its opposite extremes are both true... The most disastrous consequence of racial alienation for Othello is not the hostility or estrangement of the Venetians but his own acceptance of the framework within which they define him.” We can see that Iago’s own seething jealousy was enough to bring out that of an individual generally known as virtuous. As Iago’s insecurities and subsequent jealousy appear to come from within, he is left to suffer a life of torture, while Othello experiences the manipulation of his own, otherwise ignorable, insecurities that result in his demise and alienation.

The next victims of Iago's wrath prove to be the most tragic in the final scenes, Desdemona and Emilia. I want to discuss these two together, because they seem to be two relatively similar sides of the same coin. Both are women of virtue who fall victim to the insecurities of the men around them. Desdemona exists as almost divinity realized, while Emilia is more of a realist exposed as a bit jaded from her unhappy marriage, remarking to Desdemona when asked if she would cheat on her husband for the world, "The world's a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice." (4.3.56-57) Desdemona remains obedient to her husband until the end, while on the other hand Emilia begins outright denouncing her husband. Despite their existence on opposite ends of the spectrum, their deaths starkly parallel each other, making the messaging of the play very clear. Jealousy and contempt exist around you, regardless of your own action.

Finally, we must consider the impact Iago's actions and mentality has on himself. Within her analysis of Iago in conjunction with Melanie Klein's theories of projective identity, Janet Adelman outlines the effects of Iago's actions on himself when she says, "If the projection of his own inner contamination into Othello is Iago's relief, it is also his undoing, and in a way that corroborates both the bodiliness of the fantasy of projection and its dangers to the projector as well as the recipient." (Adelman) As he is squashing all the goodness in others, in order to prove his own worth, superiority or goodness, he in reality will only be making his position and character worse. As he frets over the good others have, he is losing anything he might have had before. This self-destruction is fully realized within the final scene of the play and may serve as a explanation for his silence when some reason for what he has done. Throughout the play Iago at all times is cunning and speaks in order to manipulate and has fully plotted what end he would like to achieve. Within the final scene, his moral depravity has been revealed and he is at a loss.

When asked for an explanation, he doesn't have one, but falls back on old habits and gives the only answer that will give him some superiority.

Now that we have some grasp on the motivations and effects of Iago, in order to completely understand his character, we must consider, what was his goal? As we've gathered, he lacks a specific slight he can source for his dissatisfaction and in turn "it would do him no good to be satisfied on all these points-indeed, when he does get the lieutenantcy, it does nothing to satisfy his fury. What we are shown in the inner Iago is a bottomless, consuming passion that feeds on all life around it." (Rosenberg) This conclusion from Rosenberg seems eloquently supported by Iago himself when he remarked that Cassio "hath a daily beauty in his life That makes me ugly." (5.1.19-20) The destruction of beauty as a goal, both fully explains how we made our way to the destruction of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona within their marital bed at the hands of Othello, and fully establishes Iago as nothing more than the devil, present within Shakespeare's plays.

But did Shakespeare really intend for Iago to be nothing more than evil personified? Much of the complexity of Iago is introduced within his soliloquies, where we witness Iago try to explain his intentions just as much to himself as the audience. Most critics will tell you, the more blatantly ugly Iago becomes in a director's re-imagining the more boring and less tragic the story becomes, this is why for example Kenneth Branagh's 1995 example is particularly compelling, because he portrays him with, more than anything, a sort of humor. Branagh himself claims "What takes over is a sort of growing delight, a sort of quiet glee in his ability to manipulate." More than he is a devil, it seems Iago is human. He is consumed by jealousy and acts to feed his most despicable appetites.

As we understand the motivations, effects and goal of Iago, we understand his depravity as an incurable human condition. "His goal is to make those around him as ugly as he is; but that goal depends on his unusual sensitivity to their beauty" (Adelman) This sensitivity is grown out of a dissatisfaction with his own goodness. Where this dissatisfaction actually comes from is a question that I do not believe we would be able to answer without more information about the life of Iago before when we meet him in this play. But this ambiguity in the source of his insecurity is one of the largest strengths of this character, as he allows us to endlessly speculate and debate. As the full realization of what can come from a jealous soul, Iago reminds us to believe someone when they tell you "I am not what I am." (1.1.67)

Works Cited

Rosenberg, M. (1955). In Defense of Iago. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 6(2), 145-158.

doi:10.2307/2866395

Berry, E. (1990). Othello's Alienation. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 30(2), 315-333.

doi:10.2307/450520

Adelman, J. (1997). Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello. *Shakespeare Quarterly*,

48(2), 125-144. doi:10.2307/2871277

Not quoted, but influenced by:

Orkin, M. (1987). Othello and the "plain face" Of Racism. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38(2),

166-188. doi:10.2307/2870559

Rand, F. (1950). The Over Garrulous Iago. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1(3), 155-161.

doi:10.2307/2866423

Zender, K. (1994). The Humiliation of Iago. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 34(2),

323-339. doi:10.2307/450904