Presentation of Iago in the first three acts of ‘Othello’

In the first three acts of ‘Othello’, Iago is presented as the antagonist of the play and his behaviour can be summarised in three descriptions: deceiving,deceitful/deceptive? manipulative, and jealous. Whilst he deceptively configures a reputation of honesty and integrity in Venetian society, Iago invents an elaborate twist of lies in order to exploit and manipulate others for his own advantage. As Coleridge states, Iago shows “motiveless malignity” in order to seek the approval of others, and he is certainly chosen by Shakespeare to dominate the play by lines in order to reflect his relentless desire for status in Venetian society; conforming to the typical Machiavellian villain image of the time. Perhaps Shakespeare is also using him as a means to comment on the nature of manipulation: how easy it is to subvert power, if one has the motiviation or narcissism to do so?

Firstly, throughout the first three acts of ‘Othello’, Iago is presented as highly deceiving and false. For example, in Act 1 Scene 3 and throughout the play, Othello is depicted to describe Iago as “honest”. However, as an audience member and through the use of dramatic irony that Shakespeare frequently entwines in the play, we know that this is very far from the truth. Therefore, the fact that Othello, the general in service of Venice, describes Iago in such a way, indicates how skillfully Iago is able to deceive others. Furthermore, another interpretation could be that this also demonstrates how cunning Iago is by having the ability and nerve to exploit Othello’s vulnerabilities; being the outsider in Venetian society and therefore lacking the full extent of cultural knowledge and understanding. Therefore, this interpretation could suggest that perhaps Iago isn’t so skillful at deception and falsity, but is able to exploit ones’ weaknesses instead, which to some degree depicts Iago as more malevolent and sadistic, which supports Coleridge’s description of Iago as “A being next to the devil”. As the play advances, Iago takes advantage of his falsely acclaimed image in Venetian society, when, in Act 2 Scene 1, he describes himself “As honest as I am”. Iago underplays his credibility, which, given his position as the “most honest” man in Venetian society, only goes to makes him appear even more loyal and trustworthy among his peers; feeding his desire for acknowledgment and approval from others. Similarly, this isn’t the only example whereby Iago underplays himself. For example, in Scene 1 Act 2, when lying to Othello about Roderigo and the claims he made against him, Iago states that “with the little godliness I have I did hard forbear him”. Again, Iago curtails his generosity, which is in fact false all along, and takes advantage of Othello’s powerful position in Venetian society in order to seek recognition and a higher rank from Othello. By doing so, Shakespeare is conjuring a very ironic situation, whereby we as an audience member hold the knowledge that Iago does in fact view himself like a god, and that he is only doing so in order to strengthen his vanity. This as a result is the hubris in a Shakespearean tragedy which inevitably causes his downfall at the end of the play. Thus he is both presented as an evil character, and as a vain human.

Also, throughout the first three acts of ‘Othello’, the character of Iago is often subjected to manipulation. For example, in Scene 1 Act 3, Iago describes how his friendship with Roderigo is merely for “sport and profit”, which indicates how all of Iago’s actions are centered around his own self gain, with the majority of it coming from wealth and status. Shakespeare could have chosen to depict Iago in such a way in order to draw parallels and question the morals of 17th century England; whereby wealth was creating a huge divide in the country and there were vast social differences between those at the lower classes of society and those at the top. Furthermore, another interpretation, which 20th century critic Fred West also supports, is that by demonstrating Iago to be cruel and calculating, and by prioritising wealth and status over friendship and relations, Shakespeare has depicted Iago to conform to all of the psychological traits of a psychopath. Therefore, if true, perhaps Shakespeare was presenting the character of Iago in such a way in order to make the idea of mental illness more heavily acknowledged and accepted in society. A lovely idea and very well expressed Lorna. Additionally, Iago is also presented as highly calculating in Act 3 Scene 3, when he plants the seed of doubt in Othello’s mind concerning Desdemona’s loyalty and claims that “She did deceive her father, marrying you”. By pointing out that Desdemona demonstrably has the capacity to lie and keep secrets since she hid her courtship with Othello from her disapproving father, Shakespeare is highlighting Iago’s skill at psychological manipulation: as he subtly uses the couple’s own love as a weapon to increase the distrust between them. Good. Despite the fact that we, as an audience, saw how both strong and respectful Desdemona seemed to be to her father.

In addition, throughout the first three acts of ‘Othello’, Iago’s jealousy becomes a crucial characteristic which forms his role as the antagonist; enabling his other fatal flaws hamartia to come about and shaping the peripeteia of the play. For example, in his soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 1, Iago claims that his love for Desdemona “partly led to diet my revenge”. This, given the multiple allegories of “diet”, could on one hand suggest that Iago’s revenge is unnatural and that he is not in fact an “evil” character (like Coleridge suggested), but is in fact spurred on to commit evil deeds due to circumstances (e.g. Cassio’s position as lieutenant, Iago’s love for Desdemona, and the colour of Othello’s skin and the stereotype of Moors in the 17th century). However, another interpretation of “diet”, with the connotations of it being what one eats naturally, is that it suggests that Iago’s revenge is natural and therefore highlights the large extent to which his desire for vengeance against Othello is ingrained within him. This links to the 17th stereotype of Moors being violent, lustful barbarians, and also there is some evidence to suggest that black people were regarded as unwelcome intruders in London (e.g. Queen Elizabeth I’s ineffective 1601 edict for their expulsion). Furthermore, the Moslem Turks were dangerous enemies of Christian Europe, with Venice the frontier state engaged in constant warfare against them. Therefore, perhaps Shakespeare is presenting the character of Iago as jealous, manipulative, and deceitful, in contrast to the level headed and just character of Othello in the beginning three acts, in order to question this presumed image of those of colour or Moors, and highlight the wrongdoings of those who accept such opinions in society. Additionally, the use of the natural connotations surrounding the noun “diet”, could also link to the way in which Iago’s jealousy of Othello comes naturally and how his desire for a higher status also comes about for natural reasons. For example, also in Act 2 Scene 1, Iago indicates his strong inclination for a higher status in Venetian society when he wishes to “make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me”. Through the repetition of “me”, the audience and reader are able to get a great sense of how self-indulgent and concerned Iago is, and the large extent to which he values his place in society and the opinions of those above him. Therefore, perhaps Shakespeare presents Iago as such an envious character, in order to raise awareness of, and question the highly corrupt social hierarchical system evident in both 17th century England and Venice, whereby ones’ status had the power to determine what life they were to lead. As a result, by questioning this viewpoint, this enables the interpretation that Iago isn’t a solely evil and malicious character, but perhaps struggles to emotionally and psychologically cope with the pressures of social status and hierarchy in 17th century Venice, evoking the tragic feature of the catharsis. This is an excellent piece of analysis Lorna; full of contextual and close language analysis, woven together with a clear argument and intelligent thinking – very well done. I would also suggest that he has to ‘diet his revenge’ as part of the tropes of revenge tragedies.

In conclusion, throughout the first three acts of ‘Othello’, it is undeniable that Iago has “malignity”, evident through his highly complex and cunning tricks of deception, and manipulation, all brought about by the desire for revenge. However, I struggle to accept that he is “motiveless” as Coleridge claims, as, although Iago is presented to be seeking sadistic vengeance upon a vulnerable outsider as Othello, without the promotion of Cassio to the role of Lieutenant, Iago’s undeniable love for Desdemona, and the prominent stereotype and fear surrounding Moors during the 17th century (especially in Venice, I find it hard to believe that Iago would be seeking revenge otherwise. I believe that Iago choses to act in such a way as a coping mechanism due to the intense pressures of social status within venetian society, and instead of being a purely cold-blooded, self-indulgent character, I believe that his psychological deterioration and mental illness are important to understand his current and future behaviour. An excellent, psychodynamic counter argument Lorna, and again, very well expressed.

Well done Lorna – this is a very mature, insightful and thorough essay, full of analytical discussion, relevant contextual referencing, and a clear line of argument. It is also shows a very promising use of the critics, and understanding of how they are to be used next year, in conjunction with your own ideas.

To improve: next year include more critics, make sure you are linking to context several times, and t that you comment on form, and close language analysis at least three times.

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