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Iago: The Ultimate Villain

William Shakespeare’s play, *Othello,* tells the story of a black general to the armies of Venice who secretly marries Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator. The play then shifts to Iago, Othello’s ensign, who has just been passed over for promotion to lieutenant in favor of Michael Cassio, a “great arithmetician…that never set a squadron in the field” (*Othello* 1.1.15). Iago is more than upset about this action and begins to conspire and develop a meticulous plan to bring about Othello’s downfall. Throughout the play, readers are able to see just how malevolent Iago really is and how his plan makes him one of the most heinous villains in all of Shakespeare’s prose.

As Iago begins to carry out his master plan, he states that he is going to hide his true self and intentions from Othello: “in following [Othello], I follow but myself” (1.1.17). He plans to act as though he loves Othello and obeys him because of this love for him, but he is actually serving him to achieve what he desires: Othello’s downfall. Building a good reputation with Othello means that Iago will be trusted as an honest man who cares about Othello’s welfare, thus making it easier for Iago to get Othello to believe his lies. Iago then states that “hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (1.3.34). This statement can be viewed as the way Shakespeare introduces Iago’s character to the audience; Iago will do nothing short of killing those in his way to make sure his plan is achieved.

The first apparent skill Iago has is getting others in trouble for his actions. This skill is shown in act two when he is on night patrol with Michael Cassio after Othello and Desdemona’s wedding. Iago gets Cassio drunk so that picking a fight with him will be that much easier. Of course, Iago is not the one picking the fight, he enlists Roderigo, a soldier who is madly in love with Desdemona and jealous of Othello, to do the dirty work for him. After the street brawl takes place, Othello is summoned and he ends up firing Cassio from his lieutenant position because of his unprofessional behavior. The audience can infer that Iago is basking in Cassio’s firing, but it is almost a surprise when he gives Cassio advice on how to get his job back.

However, it is not like Iago to help someone out, especially when it is someone Iago despises like Cassio, so there is an underlying meaning to this supposed act of kindness. Instead of telling Cassio to go speak to Othello about re-hiring him, he tells him to talk to Desdemona, who will have pity on him, and she does: “be thou assured, good Cassio, I will do all my abilities in thy behalf” (3.3.57). This statement forms a bond between Cassio and Dedemona that Iago uses as evidence to aid his argument to Othello against Desdemona.

Iago’s evil really shows, though, when he plants the idea into Othello’s mind that Desdemona is cheating on him with Cassio. Iago does this cleverly and indirectly, creating doubt in Othello’s mind. He tells Othello to “look to [his] wife; observe her well with Cassio” (3.3.63). He mentions that “she did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.63) meaning that she has had experience with lying and running behind peoples backs. At first, Othello does not believe Iago’s lies, but as time goes on Othello becomes obsessed with Desdemona’s supposed unfaithful ways. Iago’s skill in creating suspicion in Othello’s mind- very subtly and telling Othello not to dwell on it- was what ruined Othello, a result that was exactly what Iago planned.

In the end, all of Iago’s clever manipulating and scheming ends up getting him what he wanted. Othello smothers Desdemona with a pillow because “she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (5.2.101). Then, after Othello has killed her, he finds out about Iago’s plan and that Desdemona was telling the truth the whole time, so, in turn, he kills himself. For Iago, Othello killing himself in his time of guilt and shame was a perfect punishment because Othello will never rest in peace.

Iago successfully tricked everyone into thinking that he was on their side, when he was actually unfolding a plan to ruin their lives. During the course of the play he goes from being depicted as an honest, noble man to a “Spartan dog, more fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea” (5.2.112). His conniving ways and sheer malice enable him to be called “the ultimate villain.”

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Othello.* Clayton, DE: Prestwick House Literary Touchstone, 2005. Print.