

Hypothesis: Iago was a deliberately evil man who wanted Othello to suffer.

If there is one thing critics agree on, it is that Shakespeare crafted the character of Iago so skillfully that centuries later, critics still debate what Shakespeare intended this character to portray, and who he is. From Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the character, Iago tells us "I am not what I am". This warning leads us to see that Iago was a deliberately evil man who wanted to see Othello suffer.

① Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that Iago was "A being next to Devil... only *not* quite Devil... & this Shakespeare has attempted... executed... without disgust, without Scandal!"¹ This viewpoint is classic of the early 19th century, when the concept of The Devil was much more real and people believed that Satan was a real figure, instead of an idea. Coleridge is marvelling at the fact Shakespeare could create such an evil figure, like the Devil, but still human.

② While Coleridge viewed Iago as a motiveless, malignant, devil-like creature, 20th century critic Fred West argues that Iago has all of the psychological traits of a psychopath. West wrote "It is not sufficient to simply drape Iago in allegorical trappings and proclaim him Mister Evil or a Machiavel or a Vice. Such a limited view of Iago is an injustice to the complexity of his character..."²

① West's critical analysis of Iago is psychological in essence, while still connecting to literary criticism. The rise of psychology as an academic profession in the twentieth century has provided literary critics with another way of approaching literary criticism. Iago certainly carries psychopathic traits: he is impulsive, boastful, vain and manipulative; and West draws parallels all the way through his article between clinical diagnosis of psychopaths and quotes from the play, and from Iago, that back it up. As the play progresses we see that he is also capable of impassive cruelty. However before Iago ruins Othello's life, there is no evidence of this happening before.

③ West argues that as a soldier, Iago was rewarded for such behaviour; in peacetime though there was not the same outlet for these aspects of his character.³ Using what he thinks of as his superior intellect he then manipulates other people's lives for his own 'sport', and justifies it through what he sees as Othello's slight in promoting Cassio above him. Iago, says West, seeks power and intellectual superiority over others and is willing to do anything to achieve it. In Act 1, Scene 3, Iago manipulates Roderigo into giving him money, which he sees as a form of power, and at the same time striking at Othello through Roderigo's feelings for Desdemona: *Let us be conjunctive against him. If thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport.* Iago professes his hate for Othello to Roderigo, to make Roderigo feel he can trust him, and anticipates pleasure in seeing Othello hurt and humiliated. This behaviour is consistent with the psychopathic personality that West describes.

④ A.C. Bradley also thinks that Shakespeare's portrayal of Iago as an evil man is exceptionally good: 'Evil has nowhere else been portrayed with such mastery as in the character of Iago.'⁴ Bradley thinks that previous images of Iago are wrong in two ways: that Iago was an 'ordinary villain' who acted only out of revenge; or that, like Coleridge's 'motiveless malignity', he was an evil being 'who hates good simply because it is good, and loves evil purely for itself'. He argues that this kind of being was not the human

¹ <http://shakespeare-navigators.com/othello/motiveless.html>

² Fred West, 'Iago the Psychopath', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, v.43, n.2, (May, 1978) pp.27-35, p.27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3198785>

³ Fred West, 'Iago the Psychopath', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, v.43, n.2, (May, 1978) pp.27-35, p.31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3198785>

⁴ <http://filebox.vt.edu/users/drad/courses/4166Docs/BradleyOthello.html>, p.1.

3 being that Shakespeare meant Iago to be. To Bradley Iago is not a violent man 'but a thoroughly bad, cold man, who is at last tempted to let loose the forces within him, and is at once destroyed.' He thinks that the important question about Iago is 'Why?' and comes to the conclusion that his vanity, love of power, ego and ability to plot combine to bring out the evil in him. He is a monster for doing monstrous things, but he is a *human* monster.⁵ Bradley concludes that because Iago's evil is intelligible, able to be somehow understood, it is human in comparison with Coleridge's devilish Iago.⁶

5 These three different critics of Iago all agree that Iago is an evil character, a real villain, and that Shakespeare was a master of clever and subtle characterization. From their different perspectives of time and viewpoint they come to different conclusions about what kind of evil he embodied, and what drove him to act the way he did. Iago plotted to achieve his goal of making Othello suffer, so much that Othello killed himself when he realised that Iago was evil and that Desdemona had always been true to him. So in this way he was undoubtedly a deliberately evil man. Coleridge, Bradley and West all had some insights into Iago, but West's argument that Iago fitted the profile of a psychopath and so acted that way makes the most sense to me.

6 **Bibliography**

Main sources (not included in exemplar)

<i>Extract from Data evaluation chart</i>		
<p>Source</p> <p>Note: your sources must cover at least two distinct time periods or perspectives</p>	<p>Hypothesis: Iago was a deliberately evil man who wanted Othello to suffer.</p>	<p>Relevance=</p> <p>Reliable?</p> <p>Useful?</p> <p>How the viewpoint supported or contradicted your hypothesis and / or other sources?</p>
<p>Source 2:</p> <p>http://shakespeare-navigators.com/othello/motiveless.html</p>	<p>The triumph! again, <i>put money</i> after the effect has been fully produced.--The last Speech, the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity--how awful! In itself fiendish--while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady View.--A being next to Devil--only <i>not</i> quite Devil--& this Shakespeare has attempted-- executed--without disgust, without Scandal!</p> <p>Coleridge asserts that Iago's motives (in our sense) were his "keen sense of his intellectual superiority" and his "love of exerting power." And so Iago's malignity is "motiveless" because his motives (in Coleridge's sense) -- being passed over for promotion, his suspicion that Othello is having an affair with his wife, and the suspicion that Cassio is also having an affair with Emilia -- are merely rationalizations.</p>	<p>Although this source is short, it is helpful and reliable because it quotes the critic Coleridge on his famous "motiveless malignity" criticism of Iago. This source is the only one I could find which put Coleridge in his own words.</p> <p>The viewpoint of Coleridge supports my hypothesis in that Iago is evil.</p> <p>Coleridge's criticism was written in 1819, a time when people truly believed in real life devils, and that Iago was one simply because he appeared to have no motive.</p> <p>Coleridge is also commenting on Shakespeare's skill as a writer, to be able to conjure up such a beautifully crafted devil character.</p>

⁵ <http://filebox.vt.edu/users/drad/courses/4166Docs/BradleyOthello.html>, p.13.

⁶ http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sqHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&inPS=true&prodId=LitRC&userGroupName=per_k12&tabID=T001&searchId=R6&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=1&contentSet=GALE%7CH1420007265&&docId=GALE|H1420007265&docType=GALE&role=LitRC, *Shakespeare for Students*, 1992, no page numbers shown.