

Iago



Iago

Motivations

One of the first reasons Iago gives for hating Othello is that the latter passed him over for promotion in favour of Cassio, a mere ‘counter-caster’ and a man with far less experience in the field of battle than Iago. Iago is deeply bitter about this and says that he hates Othello as he does ‘hell’s pains’. In his anger and spite, Iago is determined to bring down both Othello and Cassio.

Iago’s reaction is excessive, but we can at least understand why he might feel cheated. However, he has clearly hated Othello before this point because when he tells Roderigo about Desdemona’s surprise elopement with Othello, Roderigo replies, ‘Thou told’st me thou didst hold him in thy hate’. Whether Iago really did hate Othello or was simply lying to Roderigo is something we will never know, but it adds another layer of mystery to this evil, scheming villain.

In the first of his soliloquies at the end of Act 1, Iago reveals another reason for hating Othello: ‘And it is though abroad, that ‘twixt my sheets / He has done my office.’ ‘Abroad’ here simply means ‘everywhere’: Iago is telling us that it is widely believed that Othello has slept with Emilia. There is no evidence whatsoever to support this. No other character mentions it and Othello and Emilia never display even a hint of interest in one another. Iago admits that he is not at all sure if his wife has cheated on him but says ‘for mere suspicion in that kind / Will do as if for surety’.

When Iago and Emilia arrive in Cyprus, Cassio – ever the suave gentleman – greets Emilia with a kiss. Although this is completely harmless and Iago appears to take little notice of it, he says later that he fears Cassio ‘with my night-cap too’. He repeats his suspicion that Emilia is sleeping with Othello and says that ‘the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my innards.’ (This idea of jealousy eating away at a person is picked up again later when Iago pretends to warn Othello of the danger of such a destructive emotion.)

Sexual and professional jealousy are not the only reasons Iago gives for his diabolical actions. He also expresses his envy of Cassio who, he says, ‘hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly’. Cassio’s natural grace, charm and attractiveness is hateful to Iago because he possesses none of these attributes.

Although these reasons may be seen as sufficient for Iago’s hatred of Othello and Cassio, we are left unsatisfied at the end of the play and can never be sure why he did what he did. When his treachery has been revealed, Iago says, ‘Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word’.

‘The Motive-Hunting of Motiveless Malignity’

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous phrase, ‘The motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity,’ is often quoted when students – and critics – write notes on the character of Iago. Coleridge meant a slightly different thing by ‘motive’ to what is understood by the word today. He saw it as the object: the desired result. Iago, Coleridge argues, was driven by his ‘keen sense of his intellectual superiority’ and his ‘love of exerting power’. The assertion of these was Iago’s motivation. This is why Iago does what he does. The reasons he attributes to his actions –

not being promoted and suspecting that first Othello and then Cassio have slept with Emilia are merely attempts to rationalise what he is doing. The real reasons are his belief in his own superiority and his love of power.



Masterfully Exploitative

Iago takes a perverse pleasure in exploiting weakness and is, in the words of Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom, 'an artist of evil'. Iago approaches his diabolical plotting in such a way that he seems to enjoy the planning and execution of his schemes just as much as he does the result. In his soliloquies he positively gloats as he works out his next step.

Iago sees Othello's decisive dismissal of a man he recently held in high esteem and promoted to high office as an ideal opportunity to further his plotting of Othello's downfall. He deduces from this demotion that Othello can be driven to acting hastily against those he loves if he is pushed far enough. Iago has engineered Cassio's disgrace and now plans to benefit from Cassio's desire to win his way back into Othello's good graces by appealing to Desdemona for help. He realises that from 'as little a web as this' he will trap 'a fly as great as Cassio'. He knows that Desdemona will do all she can to have Cassio reinstated because of her kind heart, and he seizes on this as an ideal way to convince Othello that Desdemona loves Cassio. He is as willing to exploit goodness as he is human weakness, saying of Desdemona 'So will I turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all.'

The tragic action of the play is now well underway as Iago realises that Othello's inexperience and naivety will make it relatively easy to persuade him that various falsehoods are true and to act on them impulsively instead of after due consideration.

Diabolically Evil

The following is an interesting excerpt from the famous lecture on *Othello* by A. C. Bradley:

Iago stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices — such as ingratitude and cruelty — which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect. In the latter respect Iago is nearly or quite the equal of Richard, in egoism he is the superior, and his inferiority in passion and massive force only makes him more repulsive. How is it then that we can bear to

contemplate him; nay, that, if we really imagine him, we feel admiration and some kind of sympathy? Henry the Fifth tells us:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out;

but here, it may be said, we are shown a thing absolutely evil, and—what is more dreadful still—this absolute evil is united with supreme intellectual power. Why is the representation

tolerable, and why do we not accuse its author either of untruth or of a desperate pessimism?



It is in Act 3 Scene 3, the ‘Temptation Scene’, that we see Iago’s evil nature come to the fore at the same time as Othello is at his most insecure. Iago plays on Othello’s self-doubt about his place in Venetian society, his pride and his impulsive nature. He tells Othello that Desdemona is naturally

drawn to Cassio as he – unlike Othello – is of ‘her own clime, complexion and degree’. Othello falls straight into this trap and frets that his race, age and lack of ‘those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have’ may be making him unattractive to his young Venetian wife. Iago knows Othello well and astutely judges that by pretending to be reluctant to voice his suspicions he will make the other increasingly desperate to hear ‘The worst of words’. Thus is Othello cunningly manipulated into believing that he has forced ‘This honest creature’ to admit what he knows and this gives the falsehoods greater weight. Once he begins to believe that Desdemona may have been unfaithful to him, Othello’s pride and rash nature work to torment him. He laments that by losing Desdemona, he has lost the right to respect and ‘The royal banner, and all quality / Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!’ Iago fuels the fire of Othello’s rage by forcing Othello to imagine Desdemona and Cassio together, ‘as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys’. His disgusting, bestial imagery, followed by a claim that Cassio spoke of Desdemona in his sleep drives Othello to such a frenzy of rage that he vows to ‘tear her all to pieces’. By the end of the scene, it is clear that the combination of Othello’s vulnerabilities and Iago’s genius for spreading poisonous lies has set Othello on the path to a tragic end.

Emilia



Emilia

Social Class

Emilia is Iago's wife and is brought along to Cyprus to act as Desdemona's maidservant. Emilia and Iago are from a lower social class than Othello, Desdemona and the other nobles.

Cynical and Experienced When It Comes to Love

Emilia is older than Desdemona, but the pair develop a close bond. The relationship has a positive effect on Emilia: the longer she spends with the younger woman, the better she becomes. Understandably, considering Iago is her husband, Emilia has a rather jaundiced view of love. She says of men that 'They are all stomachs and we are all but food; / They eat us hungrily and when they are full, / They belch us'. Her cynical and rather bitter take on married life contrasts sharply with Desdemona's idealistic adoration of her husband.

Desdemona, being from a higher social class than Emilia, has led a more sheltered life and so is unprepared for the harsh realities she encounters. Emilia, unlike Desdemona, has no difficulty believing that women as well as men can be unfaithful: 'And have we not affections / Desires for sport, and frailty as men have?' Not only does Emilia think women are capable of affairs outside of marriage, but she blames men for their wives' unfaithfulness, saying that 'The ills we do, their ills instruct us so'. She says that if men sleep around, or get jealous for no reason, or hit their wives, or take away their wives' household spending money, those men should remember that their sweet wives can get resentful and take revenge.

Unfaithful?

We never learn for sure whether or not Emilia did sleep with Othello, but we have no reason to suspect she did. Certainly, she admits to having no qualms about such behaviour and says that if it would advance her husband's cause, she would happily cuckold him. This is an interesting point because it shows the duality of Emilia's character. On the one hand she would cheat on her husband, but on the other hand she would only do so out of a strange kind of wifely loyalty. So we know that the worldly Emilia would sleep with another man under the right circumstances. Yet there is nothing concrete which could link her to Othello. Despite Iago's claim that everyone knows about it, not a single character mentions anything about the pair, nor do they show the slightest interest in one another at any stage. Emilia denies it too, saying that it is a vicious rumour that Iago must have heard from some villain who 'turned your wit the seamy side without / And made you to suspect me with the Moor'.

Understands the Nature of Jealousy

Emilia, a worldly-wise observer of human nature, knows that infidelity is but one expression of human frailty. When Desdemona loses the handkerchief she tells Emilia that this could be enough to make Othello jealous, if he were the jealous type. Emilia asks, 'Is he not jealous?' She is more than ready to believe Othello is as capable of jealousy as any man. Furthermore, she knows that jealousy can appear without any real cause. 'Tis a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself'. Emilia is aware that rationality cannot defeat jealousy, explaining to Desdemona that men 'are not ever jealous for the cause / But jealous for they're jealous'.

The Handkerchief

Emilia's behaviour when she finds the handkerchief is an act of betrayal and a serious mistake. She lies when Desdemona asks where the handkerchief is and answers, 'I know not, madam', And when Desdemona says that the loss of the handkerchief would be enough to make Othello jealous, if he were the jealous type, Emilia asks, 'Is he not jealous?' which seems to indicate that she is well aware Othello could be jealous and may react badly to the loss of the first gift he presented to his wife. Emilia then stands by as Othello comes in, berates Desdemona about the handkerchief, and leaves in a fit of rage. As soon as he's gone, Emilia says, 'Is not this man jealous?' (3.4.99). A little later, when Desdemona is trying to make herself believe that Othello is upset by some problem at work and is just taking his frustrations out on her, Emilia again suggests that Othello may be jealous. When Desdemona declares that she has never given her husband any reason to be jealous, Emilia offers some

wisdom about the nature of jealousy; she tells Desdemona that jealousy doesn't need a cause; 'It is a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself' (3.4.161-162).

One of the big questions in the play is 'Why doesn't Emilia admit what she has done with the handkerchief? Although she might initially be reluctant to admit that she gave such a precious thing to Iago, when she sees how angry Othello is and realises that he has become jealous, Emilia should tell the truth. She is loyal to Desdemona, which we see quite clearly at the end of the play when she dies to defend Desdemona's honour, but she stays silent at this important juncture. Why does she not speak up?

One rather cynical way to view it could be that if Emilia did own up, the play would be short and not a tragedy at all. However, Emilia's silence is more than a mere plot device. Despite what she has just seen, she doesn't seem to make the connection between Iago and Othello's jealousy. This may be because she has such a low opinion of men that Othello's jealousy seems almost normal. In her mind, men are strange creatures who are likely to get jealous for no reason at all.

Another reason she doesn't make the connection between Othello's jealousy and Iago is that she - like everyone else in the play - puts absolute trust in 'honest' Iago. In the last scene of the play, when Othello tells her that Iago has told him that Desdemona gave the handkerchief to Cassio, Emilia refuses to believe it until the moment that Iago himself confirms it.

We must also take into account the fact that there is no evidence Emilia knows how Iago will use the handkerchief: 'What he will do with it, heaven knows, not I'. She is loyal to Desdemona, but she is also loyal to her husband at this stage in the play. Part of the reason for her spirited and selfless defence of Desdemona at the end of the play could well be that she feels dreadfully guilty when she realises the role she has played in bringing about the other woman's death.



Brave and Independent

Emilia may be a good wife, but she is also fiercely independent and spirited. She does not stand quietly by when Othello berates Desdemona. She criticises him to his own wife, which is a risk. After all, Desdemona is not just her mistress but also her social superior and has shown unwavering love for her husband, despite his cruel words. By speaking up, Emilia potentially jeopardises her position in Desdemona's household as well as the friendship that has developed between herself and the younger woman.



The speech about sexual morality and double standards also shows us that Emilia is a strong character who is not afraid to say what she thinks, even if it defies the conventions of the time. She points out that women are ruled by the same desires and passions as men are, and that men should not expect slavish devotion from their wives if they have been misbehaving or treating their wives unkindly.

Although she makes a serious error of judgement concerning the handkerchief, Emilia more than redeems herself at the end of the play and proves her true loyalty and strength of character. She confronts Othello and repeatedly insists that Desdemona was guiltless and that he is a devil for having killed her. This is true bravery as she, a woman, is standing up to a man who is not only her social superior but also armed and dangerous. Yet she cares little, crying 'Thou art rash as fire, to say / That she was false. O, she was heavenly true!' and urging him to 'Do thy worst!' if he wishes but he will not stop her from speaking the truth despite his threats. Emilia's spirit and courage here makes her truly admirable.

Iago's arrival only cements Emilia's determination to clear Desdemona's name and lay the blame for her death at her husband and Othello's feet. Iago's curt 'Go to, charm your tongue' cannot stop Emilia who says that she is duty bound to tell the truth for the sake of her mistress who 'lies murdered in her bed'. She will not be stopped and although she knows that society demands she obey her husband and be silent, she is prepared to defy him: 'Tis proper I obey him – but not now'. Her horror when she realises the role the handkerchief played in convincing Othello that Desdemona was false is clear: 'O God! O heavenly God!' This goes a great way towards absolving Emilia of too much blame for the theft as it shows that she genuinely had no idea how it would be used.

In her final appearance in the play, Emilia emerges as a woman of great spirit and can be contrasted with the meeker Desdemona who obeys Othello even when he is murdering her and tries to deflect the blame by saying that she killed herself! Emilia, however, does not hesitate to denounce both the ‘murderous coxcomb’ Othello nor her husband: ‘I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak.’ Emilia is magnificent in her final scene and by far the bravest and most selfless of all the characters. Her passionate denunciation of Iago and Othello mirrors the horror and indignation of the audience and we are completely on her side.

Tragically, Emilia pays the highest of prices for her courage. Iago stabs her before fleeing, but with her dying breath, Emilia vows her mistress ‘was chaste’ and Othello a ‘cruel Moor’ for having doubted her. Her last thoughts are of Desdemona, not herself, unlike Othello whose final speech is all about himself and how worthy he once was of respect.

The critic Harold Bloom points out that Iago made a huge mistake in underestimating his wife: ‘Iago, even more totally the master of his play, is at last undone by Emilia, whom Shakespeare revised into a figure of intrepid outrage, willing to die for the sake of the murdered Desdemona’s good name. Shakespeare had something of a tragic obsession with the idea of a good name living on after his protagonists’ deaths.’ This is ironic in that Iago, the expert manipulator and student of human behaviour, fails to understand the person closest to him.

A.C. Bradley on the Character of Emilia

‘Till close to the end she frequently sets one’s teeth on edge; and at the end one is ready to worship her.’

On her final scene: ‘Terror and pity are here too much to bear; we long to be allowed to feel also indignation, if not rage; and Emilia lets us feel them and gives them words. She brings us too the relief of joy and admiration, - a joy that is not lessened by her death. Why should she live? If she lived forever she never could soar a higher pitch, and nothing in her life became her like the losing it.’

