

# Unit 2 Explorations in Drama.

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English Coursework AS

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Essay Question:

Coleridge states that Iago is “a being next to the devil” driven by “motiveless malignity.”

Comparing the presentations of Iago and Don John, and considering the context of the plays in performance, how far do you agree that the villains are purely evil?

Word Count: 1993.

Coleridge states that Iago is “a being next to the devil” driven by “motiveless malignity.” Iago’s character and motives are intricate and there are diverse interpretations of his villainy and his attempts to bring about the tragedy of *Othello*. Nevertheless there are several ways of interpreting “Shakespeare’s” Iago, where one might state that Iago is simply a manifested spirit of malignant evil who delights in his perversity, symbolizing the Satan figure. Alternatively Iago can be connected to the stock Malcontent image, having a deeply disturbed perception of the world. A Malcontent has a cynical, unsettled and displeased with the world as he sees it. Iago can also be recognize as the vice character, as his motives are to lure and manipulate the characters by taking advantage of their trust. A vice character is a term from the morality places, representing evil, and an agent of the devil, resenting a mischievous figure full of manic energy and aims to drive innocent characters away from virtue, almost out of pleasure and enjoyment. Iago is recognized as a vice of *Othello* as he drives characters astray almost as if they were chess pieces. There is distinct a comparison between the villainous characters of Iago and Don John and how their villainy is addressed in the different Shakespearean plays; however I feel that both characters show a different degree of villainy, where Iago would be described as the “devil incarnate” and Don John being the typical Malcontent character.

*Othello* is a tragic drama, based upon the fall of innocent characters, which are manipulated and mislead by Iago. He is triggered with anger and jealousy, as Cassio is made lieutenant, in which he rages revenge and plots against anyone to his advantage. As a result, the drama ends in catastrophe, where Iago’s “monstrous plan” has failed and innocent people died consequently of Iago’s malicious hatred and deception. In comparison, *Much Ado About Nothing* is a comic drama, based upon a comparison of two different love stories. Hero and Claudio’s romantic story is the main focus, where Don John plots against them. At the peak of disaster, the comical love story of Beatrice and Benedick is introduced and eventually, Don John and his companions are caught in their evil scheme, and there is a happy ending to the drama.

Iago’s initial impression upon the audience is one of complete self-confidence and control with an aura of intellectual arrogance, as he is successfully able to manipulate his victims, where characters such as Rodrigo are vulnerable to fall into Iago’s “monstrous plan” under his influence. Iago is a complex character; our first impressions of Iago’s character seem to be pure evil. Iago’s jealousy is his driven motivation, fuel and strength, and he allows this emotion to plot against those whom he hates. There is a degree of understanding that Iago recognizes that jealousy is influential and destructive but there is a perception that there is control over his emotions. “Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners.”[1.3.315] Iago suggests here that traits are created by our own choice.

We initiate a different perception of Don John's introduction as he remarks "I thank you, I am not of many words, but I thank you." [1.1.118] With direct comparison to Iago's initial impression, this suggests that Don John lacks the self-confidence and intellectual arrogance as he is "not of many words".

The temptation scene is a pivotal scene in which Iago uses his skilful manipulative qualities to mislead, frustrate and anger Othello into considering corrupt conclusions. Act 3 Scene 3 is critical for Iago to display his manipulative and devilish traits, where it is essentially evidence to see the strength of Othello's tolerance and resistance against Iago's constant remarks. Iago's shrewd and calculated Machiavellian disposition plays on Othello's inner weakness and anxieties, directing his corrupted vision onto Othello's insecurities through correctly-timed and tentatively progressed insinuations. *A. C Bradley* considers Iago as a cold Machiavellian intellect, who intends to exploit Othello's mind by preying on his preoccupied conscience, where certain keywords induced are initially unnoticed: "Ha! I like not that" [3.3.40], yet later takes effect and registers onto an anxious and agitated Othello. Iago uses this knowledge and applies it in Act 3.3 to lose Othello's calm state of mind and therefore, ironically, there is no question of Iago's honesty. The Temptation scene is essentially the presentation of the carefully designed manipulative techniques of Iago. The ultimate brilliance of Iago, combined with the absurd credulity destroys Othello's peace of mind, as shown in the "Farewell to Arms" speech: "Farewell! Othello's occupations gone." [3.3.382] Iago's demonstration of malevolency becomes apparent, where Iago intends to provoke jealousy, furiously pounding Othello with a collection of information, most of which is hyperbolic, resulting in Othello dissolving in Iago's contempt and is blinded by revenge: "Death and damnation...I'll tear her all to pieces!" [3.3.383 - 3.3.434] The absurd credulity is centered around Othello's insecurities, as well as the mastered manipulative techniques of Iago, who not only successfully provokes Othello but simply presses the correct buttons to arouse his unbalanced state of mind; this is ultimately the brilliance of Iago; his manipulative techniques is seen as an art.

Similarly, the pivotal scene in *Much Ado About Nothing* is Act 3 Scene 2. This is the turning point where ideas of villainy and trickery are introduced. Like Iago, Don John uses manipulative techniques to make their evil scheme work. "Means your lordship to be married tomorrow?" [3.2.73] Here, he is creating a sense of doubt and builds on Don Pedro's and Claudio's suspicion. Like a Machiavellian malcontent stock character, Don John plays on Cassio's doubt, and uses this as his strength to tear him apart. "The word is too good to paint out her wickedness..." [3.2.74] He goes to extreme measures and makes a hyperbolic statement. He manipulates them by placing "Honor" and "Reputation" at the center of this climax and "it would better fit your honour to change your mind" [3.2.74] Don John understands that his reputation is not great and uses proof to convince Don Pedro and Cassio about the truth concealed in Hero.

Borachio is the malicious and spiteful character, as he is part of the evil scheming, and deceives Claudio and Don Pedro in thinking he was making love with Hero, as he states “I have tonight wooed Margaret...by the name of Hero.” [3.3.130] As a result, Cassio’s state of mind is ruptured, and like Othello, he seeks for revenge: “Are our eyes our own?” [4.1.45] His eyes were Don John’s eyes and are poisoned by this villainy.

Iago’s embittered interpretations of virtue and vice demonstrates his similarity to those of a malignant evil spirit, as “Evil be thou my good”<sup>1</sup> is considered a satanic principle, rather than a possible human philosophy. Iago does not simply love evil for evil’s sake but only as he disputes virtue and goodness. This is further illustrated by the metaphorical reference to the corrupted Garden of Eden: “Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners” [1.3.315], suggesting a Machiavellian perception, where the human will determine moral behavior and reason is logical, however, this cold, ruthless, irrational Machiavellian view distorts the belittles human expression through emotions, reducing its potential.

Significantly, Iago is a representative of the demonic Satan figure, where Iago essentially becomes the Invidia of the tragedy play, projecting himself through his strategy to conceal himself and motivate self-love, where fundamentally he is a treacherous duplicitous character, revealing to Roderigo, “I am not what I am” [1.1.51]. One could interpret Iago as a symbol of the Satan figure through the cold, irrational feelings of disputing virtue and goodness, thus, adopting Machiavellian characteristics. Iago creates an ambiguous label for himself, only revealing his true motives in the soliloquies, where he has deliberately created an image of his own and is highly competitive, when his sense of superiority is threatened.

The satanic figure of Iago is more intensely expressed through the image of the stock Machiavellian malcontent, where Iago creates more damage than the Satan who only constructs generalized chaos, whereas Iago’s intentions of destruction stems from a more deep-rooted loathing of Othello, becoming a more personal innovation. Iago is ruthless, and does not care or appreciate other’s lives, and happily sacrifices them for his materialistic benefits. Through Iago, there are the common elements of money-orientated gain, and creating evil motivations needed for his survival: “Money is the root of all evil”. For Iago, the aura of goodness challenges, disturbs, embarrasses and is generally rejected as a quality, and on the surface, Iago is a representative of the demonic figure, yet this is more enhanced by his Machiavellian beliefs, where Iago comments: “The power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills”. Iago actually recognizes goodness, truth and virtue in an objective way, and consciously rejects them. Iago’s enormous self-control is allied to his belief that absolute egoism is the only rational and

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1 Statement made by Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

proper attitude, where Iago expresses that conscience, honor and regard for others is an absurdity. There is a sense of bitterness and jealousy about Cassio's promotion as a lieutenant and Othello's marriage and his misogyny are not about being a malcontent but being a product of his sexist and racist society.

Don John can be interpreted as a stock Machiavellian malcontent. There are similarities in the characters of Iago's and Don John's as their motives are to create havoc and catastrophe, and to deceive people on the wrong path. Don John has a disturbed perception of the society, making himself appeal like a villain as a result of his personal motives and hatred towards Don Pedro and other characters.

He states: "I had rather be a canker in a hedge, than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all." [1.3.29] This shows his hatred towards Don Pedro, and he prefers being cold blooded and evil as it is in his nature to be so. There is a subtle difference between Iago and Don John, and how they confide with society. "I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests..." [1.3.29] Don John reveals to everyone his villainous and is not ashamed of being what he is. In comparison, Iago is the opposite and discloses his true identity to the audience, and convinces everyone that he is the "Honest Iago" and misleads people in playing the character of virtue. Don John's motives are revealed in the play and portray his hatred towards Don Pedro across to the audience: "...That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow: if I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way." [1.3.30]

Iago can be interpreted as a "Dark Clown" for the entertainment he gets from his evil scheming and pleasure in playing and manipulating his victims. There is a sense of irony, as the mocking statements he makes are there for his entertainment. Auden has described Iago as a "Dark Clown" as his motives are intricate, and like a Machiavellian stock character, there is a sense of amusement that we understand from Iago's perspective. There is a deeper meaning to understand when Iago says "For I am nothing if not critical" [2.1.117], as the audience understands that Iago is incredibly cynical. Also, Iago takes great enjoyment when other characters call him "Honest Iago".

Ultimately, Iago is the Invidia, stemming from his malcontent and Machiavellian beliefs, where Iago does symbolize the Satan figure to a justified level, using his power to manipulate his victims for his own gain. Iago resents humankind as a whole, as they consider virtue before vice, illustrating his disturbed perception of the world, which creates reason to demonstrate malevolency. Don John is driven by "motiveless malignity" however, there is a limit to his malignity, and is not a comparison to the Devil as he seeks for villainy advice from his companions.