

DEFAMILIARIZING IAGO IN *OTHELLO*: TO BE OR NOT TO BE THE HERO, THAT IS THE QUESTION

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ABSTRACT: *There is a customary notion that Shakespeare's Othello portrays Iago as an evil character who disturbs the smooth lifestyle of the protagonist, Othello. But if Iago was absent, would the play develop? Would Othello become round character and therefore the protagonist? Would there be any play written on the flat character of Othello? It leads us to pave the way for a second thought regarding Iago's role. This paper aims to analyze his character and seek alternative ways of comprehending him so that the traditional idea can be destabilized and a new scope can emerge. The paper examines him by means of textual analysis to explore the features of his thoughts and actions. Then narrative analysis locates the structure which may situate him in the category of hero. It restrains us to be judgmental or make hurry to digest the typically long-accepted conclusion. There can be insights available out there of making him the villain. The paper doesn't intend to renounce or check them, rather it argues that it's not the ultimate outcome for which the other possibilities should be weighed down or go unheeded. It wants to shed light on the other paths that may avail Iago to make his journey to heroism. Which contention is more relevant, valuable or appropriate that's not its point. But the directions should not be limited.*

KEYWORDS: Iago, Hero, Controlling power, Title of the play, Narrative structure

INTRODUCTION

The paper works on an altered way of looking at Iago in the play, *Othello*, to find out whether Iago has the potential of being hero in order to dismantle any long-settled idea regarding him and make room for new notion to emerge for better understanding of the readers. The framework of Iago's character will determine in which category of function Iago can be placed. Due to the very concept that Othello is the protagonist, and Iago, the antagonist, this paper will investigate if there is anything overlooked regarding Iago which is worth counting in the process of being the hero. Perhaps his way is intricate but we cannot miss out something which can help him to be considered otherwise. It is indeed possible that the other lead may not be sufficient to put it that way and in that case that would be stated as acknowledgement in the end of the argument. But the point is that any prejudice should not rule over or subvert the other scope even if it is trivial, nuanced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I have conducted my research work pretty much corresponding with the style of contestation. Most of the sources I've found relevant to consult with demonstrate that looking at Iago in the manner of making him the villain is the ultimate way. On that point, I have disagreed that it's not the ultimate conclusion, not the end of the argument, rather there are other ways available. One of them can be the consideration of being hero which I'm dealing with. Presenting one instance follows that it's possible to think yet differently. Who knows perhaps countless options are there capable of structuring his myriads of functions, like comic character, Renaissance man or something else. As I am not willing to accumulate everything in one paper to cover, other options can be kept for another research problem endorsed by further research work. Many scopes may already have been taken place in the form of scholarly articles. Finding out all those and pointing out afterwards what have gone missing, then incorporating the left-out ones, would require a prowl and ramble of massive resources which is likely to be exhaustive, taking a considerable deal of time and management. I thought it rather wise to compose focus, avoid hustle, better touch one issue at a time, not venturing the style of gap filling. Contestation was the preferable call in this case to serve my purpose.

At first, I have analyzed the text as primary source. Side by side I've gone through the scholarly articles but I don't prefer to call them secondary source because my research problem is also concerned about what other researchers have brought about and then get to engage in constructive way. So, eventually at one point their journals have become not just merely handy but primary source as well.

According to William Hazlitt (1817) about Iago, "his mind digests only poisons". (58). Similarly, a recent work (Nahvi, 2015) asserts that Iago does not possess any good qualities. In his words, "There are no good qualities in his nature". But in my opinion, there are certain qualities that cannot escape the good vibes such as philosopher, counselor, reality perceiver and so on which will be illustrated in my discussion section. Then he mentions Iago's soliloquy from Act 2 Scene 3 of the play:

"Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now." (Shakespeare 2.3.350-353)

From these lines he contends, "Iago compares himself to a "devil;" he is aware of his own evil." (Nahvi, 2015) I am not refuting the idea but if I'm let to deconstruct, it may look different: Iago has the knowledge of what is divinity and how to become one. He compares himself as that very divine person amidst the hellish ambiance. Thus, I am trying to locate the other directions which may prove to be a turning point from the conventional flow of view. My style is neither parallel to prosaic stream nor prone to rejecting it. My point is that we should not limit our vision; the established deferred notions should also come forward to have access with equal importance so that we can discover what they have to say or manifest to us. For instance, another study

(Remington, Lauren , 2013) shows a twist by suggesting, “Iago’s character is so varying that it is hard to pin down”. This led me to give a second thought before accepting any pre-established idea circulating out there. Another step in the same track evaluates (Alqaryouti, Marwan & Sadeq, Ala, 2016), “The motives that justify Iago’s actions do not make him a villain.” This kind of statements have remained successful to prompt me taking interest in venturing the less trodden path to explore what new is in store and eventually, I have come up with the insight in my research question that whether Iago can be framed as the hero of the play.

As a result, I am proceeding with creative disagreement to the interpretations that are centered around the concept of evil role in Iago. For example, let us drive focus to this reference (Sharma, Bindu, 2019), “Regarded as one of Shakespeare’s greatest studies in malevolence, matched only by Milton’s Satan, Iago sets new standards of wickedness.” If Iago is being compared to Satan of *Paradise Lost*, that follows he will be counted as hero as well which is mentioned in the scholarly article (Alqaryouti, Marwan & Sadeq, Ala, 2016): “In *Paradise Lost* (2007), Milton assigns Satan a heroic character.” Thus, the focus is shifted to Iago. A bunch of claims, reasonings, evidences can secure his place as hero. Throughout the process, textual analysis along with narrative analysis have supported to solve my research problem and strengthen the argument.

METHOD

Textual analysis combined with narrative analysis have been used in this paper to understand Iago’s role in *Othello*, written by William Shakespeare.

DISCUSSION

This paper is going to judge Iago not side by side considering Othello as standard. It’s not the aim to find whether Iago's deeds fit or go against to Othello's good or bad qualities and based on that whether Iago is supposed to be determined as hero or not. Rather focus will be singularly on Iago, not in the shade of Othello's characteristics. Yet, comparison is still allowed, but analysis is not preferred to be influential of one on another or prejudiced or biased. The conflict is not between Othello and Iago stating that who the hero or villain is. We won't look for complementary relationship that if one is the hero, the other will be left to be the opposite by default. Not even the possession or absence of heroic qualities denote the scope of being protagonist or antagonist. Not necessarily the heroic qualities are centered around the protagonist or ideal figures. Similarly, one is evil doesn't mean he is not the hero. Findings would be if there is any static idea regarding Iago's character then this paper will try to dispel it and dispose with the new room of chance. It tries to access a different direction which is the twist of the customary flow. It would venture the less trodden path to explore what new is in store for us.

A diagram is used to clarify the paper’s position. The paper intends to maintain the focus showed here.

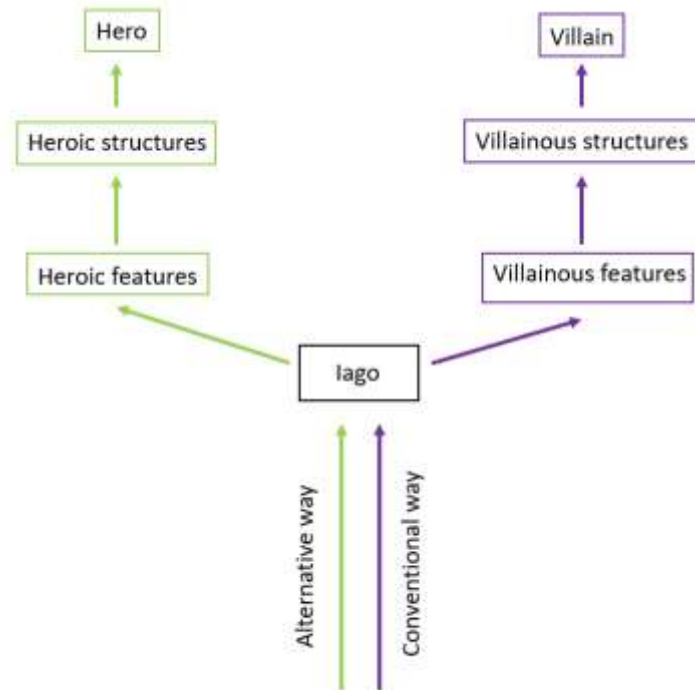


Figure 1: Different ways of framing Iago's character

Iago is the one for whom the story develops. If he were missing in the play, there would be no rising action, climax, denouement. What we have now for reading is because of Iago's contribution through intricacy, conspiracy and all. In fact, Iago is responsible for turning Othello into a round character and thus nominate him to be the protagonist. It's like the sun-moon relationship. Moon comes to our visibility just because sun supplies the energy. Here, sun suffers the identity crisis. Othello comes to limelight in the flame of Iago who is disavowed. Maybe there would be no play written on the flat self of Othello. Perhaps the reason why the play is named after Othello is because of the metamorphosis of Othello's entity generated from Iago's mechanism. The use-value of Othello's story, why Othello has become the interest of widely ranged study owes to Iago's contribution.

The paper does not mean to follow the strategy of Cinderella story that there is only one allocated place for none other than Iago to belong to. Rather it aims to discover the compatible chances which have been least grabbed for a while or ignored in record for whatever reason that's not the purpose but which inevitably makes sense according to our comprehension and should not go unapplied, therefore it wants to give a try. The usually practiced deferred notion should step forward and be foregrounded this time. This experimentation will get strength to continue ahead and put on hue if the argument goes convincing eventually. Rest of the plausibility depends on the individual choice of perception on which the paper doesn't have a claim.

William Hazlitt opines, “Iago is to be sure an extreme instance of the kind; that is to say, of diseased intellectual activity, with an almost perfect indifference to moral good or evil, or rather with a decided preference of the latter, because it falls more readily in with his favourite propensity, gives greater zest to his thoughts and scope to his actions. He is quite or nearly as indifferent to his own fate as to that of others.” (55) The statement can be opposed because Iago holds the sense of the good and bad moralities as well as he can impart that knowledge upon others. This will be clarified by giving some paradigms from the play.

“As men in rage strike those that wish them best”
(Shakespeare 2.3.233)

“But we have reason to cool our raging
motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts”
(Shakespeare 1.3.327-329)

Iago is telling human psychology and behavior, at the same time informing how to act reasonably.

Iago has also the knowledge of an ideal woman who doesn't brag her beauty, shows off her prosperous condition, or behave autocratically, her anger doesn't turn into vengeance, is wise enough not to let go of cod's head for salmon's tail, becomes the idol but doesn't seek for followers.

“She that was ever fair and never proud,
Had tongue at will and yet was never loud,
Never lacked gold and yet went never gay,
Fled from her wish, and yet said “Now I may,”
She that being angered, her revenge being nigh,
Bade her wrong stay and her displeasure fly,
She that in wisdom never was so frail
To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail,
She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind,
See suitors following and not look behind”
(Shakespeare 2.1.146-156)

Then Iago also realizes that fairness is never considered as fool and the wise always knows how to use fairness in own benefit.

“She never yet was foolish that was fair,
For even her folly helped her to an heir”
(Shakespeare 2.1.136-137)

“If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit,
The one's for use, the other useth it”
(Shakespeare 2.1.129-130)

Iago is prudent about the drawback of a country which is responsible for the downfall.

“Tis pride that pulls the country down”
(Shakespeare 2.3.87)

Iago also gives philosophy about reputation of being put in wrong hand. Nobody can count oneself undignified as long as he himself looks down upon him like so.

“Reputation is an idle and
most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost
without deserving. You have lost no reputation at
all, unless you repute yourself such a loser”
(Shakespeare 2.3.258-261)

“Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash. ’Tis something,
nothing;
’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to
thousands.
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed”
(Shakespeare 3.3.158-164)

In several quotations, Iago shows the understanding of disguise and real face,
difference between concealed and exposed nature of human. He also indicates the
practice of bad motifs that are allowed in front of God but censored from the husband.
“Men should be what they seem”
(Shakespeare 3.3.129)

“There’s many a beast then in a populous city and many a civil monster”
(Shakespeare 4.1.63)

“In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands. Their best
conscience
Is not to leave ’t undone, but keep ’t unknown”
(Shakespeare 3.3.204-206)

Iago understands that nothing in this world is utterly pure or perfect free of
adulteration.

“As where’s that palace whereinto foul things
Sometimes intrude not? Who has that breast so
pure
But some uncleanly apprehensions
Keep leets and law days and in sessions sit
With meditations lawful?”
(Shakespeare 3.3.140-144)

Iago has good observation of jealousy. It devours the man of doubt, suspicion,
insecurity, discontent.

“O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But O, what damnèd minutes tells he o’er
Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!”

(Shakespeare 3.3.167-172)

“Poor and content is rich, and rich enough;
But riches fineless is as poor as winter
To him that ever fears he shall be poor.
Good God, the souls of all my tribe defend
From jealousy”

(Shakespeare 3.3.174-178)

Iago perceives that the consequence of conceit is another side of the same coin of jealousy.

“Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons,
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
But with a little act upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulfur”
(Shakespeare 3.3.326-329)

Iago is concerned about what threatens honesty faces.

“To be direct and honest is not safe.”

(Shakespeare 3.3.379)

“I should be wise; for honesty’s a fool
And loses that it works for”
(Shakespeare 3.3.383-384)

The sly or dishonest men escape but the innocents often are entrapped and dejected unjustly.

“Thus credulous fools are caught,
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,
All guiltless, meet reproach”
(Shakespeare 4.1.45-47)

But still Iago thinks of hope because guiltiness reveals itself without even opening its mouth.

“Guiltiness will speak
though tongues were out of use”
(Shakespeare 5.2.108-109)

Iago cannot tolerate Othello but he can recognize Othello’s good quality.

“The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,
And I dare think he’ll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband”

(Shakespeare 2.1.282-285)

He’s able to judge his hatred person, Cassio, as well and does not deny.

“A devilish knave! Besides, the knave is handsome, young
and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green
minds look after.”

(Shakespeare 2.1.241-243)

Iago has also the skill of consoling people. In case of Cassio, he has adopted additionally the artfulness to pinch mixed with consolidating.

“One would
beat his offenseless dog to affright an imperious
lion.”

(Shakespeare 2.3.264-265)

If we separate intricacy and conspire activities of Iago, he'll be left with good core qualities. The instances of his dialogues shown here are the evidence of philosophizing and leaving impression about life, advising, counseling and healing people's psyche, observing reality, perceiving life with the eyes of a mature person who has the knowledge to differentiate between good and bad. If we go through his words without being biased or simply without knowing who the speaker is, the words will seem enough powerful, spiritual, motivational and vivid to get better understanding of practical life as well as universal truth. According to Joseph Campbell, “hero stories reveal life's deepest psychological truths.” (1949) Here, we find Iago as the figure who manifests himself like that and carries out these tasks. So, his attributes fall into the structure of the hero. His structuring is supported by another quote of Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals:

“The earliest known hero tales, such as Gilgamesh, Etana, Odysseus, and Hesiod, taught important values, offered role models, provided inspiration, and healed psychic wounds” (2014)

Now, if we look back to what William Hazlitt has said previously, we see that he thinks Iago performs the evil act merely out of pleasure and to fulfill satiety. But actually, we find the drive-force which made him act like one is the deprivation of deserved right. The suffering compelled him to take action. If we let to trace the heroic structure behind that, it can be stated as:

“Effective leaders intuitively know how to use suffering to rally people behind a cause. This leadership skill can be used to achieve evil ends” (Allison, S. T., & Setterberg, G. C., 2016)

“Suffering is one of many recurring phenomena found in classic hero tales” (Allison, S. T., & Setterberg, G. C., 2016)

“Leadership that uses suffering to achieve a moral or higher purpose can be said to be heroic leadership” (Allison, S. T., & Setterberg, G. C., 2016)

Here, Iago is that hero who uses his sufferings to aspire after a higher purpose. His sufferings are presented in his words below:

“And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
Christened and heathen, must be beled and
calmed

By debtor and creditor.”

(Shakespeare 1.1.25-28)

“’Tis the curse of service.

Preferment goes by letter and affection,
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to th’ first”

(Shakespeare 1.1.32-35)

He is vexing inside because of Othello’s decision.

“Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time, much like his master’s ass,
For naught but provender, and when he’s old,
cashiered.”

(Shakespeare 1.1.42-45)

“Others there are

Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them;”

(Shakespeare 1.1.46-50)

His resentment is on Cassio too because:

“Mere prattle without practice
Is all his soldiership”

(Shakespeare 1.1.23-24)

“That never set a squadron in the field,

Nor the division of a battle knows”

(Shakespeare 1.1.19-20)

Consequently, he sets mind to take revenge. But it cannot be generalized that taking revenge is the villainous act. William Hazlitt asserts that Shakespeare has the better understanding in this regard because, “He knew that the love of power, which is another name for the love of mischief, is natural to man. He would know this as well or better than if it had been demonstrated to him by a logical diagram, merely from seeing children paddle in the dirt or kill flies for sport.” (54-55) So, Iago cannot be generalized as villain for this.

“We have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god.” (Campbell 1949) So, both saintly and abominable attributes can be the part of a heroic character.

Another trait of the heroes is that they slay. In *Othello* Iago slays the flat self of Othello and gives birth to the protagonist Othello incorporating round characteristics. This new emerged self of Othello comes into interest of readers and the play is written on that very developed self. Otherwise maybe the play would face existential threat or would not center around Othello, let alone named after Othello. So, everything became possible due to Iago. He operates Othello in such a way as if Iago is the brain and Othello is the body. Iago's extended entity is the new Othello whom we have been

studying all this time. So, even if anyone calls Othello as the hero, he is actually denoting Iago's heroism consciously or unconsciously.

“And when heroes slay the dragon, they are slaying their false selves or former selves, thereby allowing their true heroic selves to emerge.” (Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. 2014).

It's not Iago who is moulded with a veil that we have to uncover. He exposes himself transparently to the audience by dramatic irony, soliloquy etc. It is us whose sight have probably been obscured by the opaque lens we are wearing. Once the layer is removed, we won't act blind to Iago's revelation hopefully.

CONCLUSION

Iago uses Othello as instrument. Who possesses the power over the protagonist like this and designs the storyline of the entire play, what can he be called anything else and anything less than the hero of the play? As Iago's contribution cannot be altered for the sake of the play, neither should the name of his performance should be altered. He deserves to be reckoned as the hero, and hero cannot be replaced by villain. Therefore, we better think second time what tag should be associated to his contrivance. We can't afford the absence of the hero, or else the play's existence would come to at stake. Thus, we are not expected to demean his demeanor by placing him arbitrarily and stereotypically. The discussion section of this paper has demonstrated how the mainstream idea can be overmatched by the offspring idea. It is vindicated that Iago has the proximity towards the heroic structure. Yet, it's always welcome to consider perceptions that vary from person to person.

This paper is the port from where Iago has set the sail to make his journey towards becoming the hero amidst the ocean of probable framing. In order to join him in the occasion, we are to board on the vessel of defamiliarizing the automatic recognition process, chase him looking through the perspective glass and focus on the subtle detailing of his character. The voyage ends with the argument of this paper being anchored on the celebration of conferring Iago the possession of heroism.

Confronting Iago's proper recognition and handing over the deserved right may put the title of the play at stake which will undergo existential threat. Is it one of the prime causes for concealing his credit then? This query may serve for another research proposal in future work whereas the current paper tends to reward Iago as per credentials for the time being.

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