

Iago from Othello – A Character Analysis

Possibly the most heinous villain in Shakespeare, Iago is fascinating for his most terrible characteristic: his utter lack of convincing motivation for his actions. In the first scene, he claims to be angry at Othello for having passed him over for the position of lieutenant (I.i. 7–32). At the end of Act I, scene iii, Iago says he thinks Othello may have slept with his wife, Emilia: “It is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / He has done my office” (I.iii.369–370). Iago mentions this suspicion again at the end of Act II, scene i, explaining that he lusts after Desdemona because he wants to get even with Othello “wife for wife” (II.i.286). None of these claims seems to adequately explain Iago’s deep hatred of Othello, and Iago’s lack of motivation—or his inability or unwillingness to express his true motivation—makes his actions all the more terrifying. He is willing to take revenge on anyone—Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, even Emilia—at the slightest provocation and enjoys the pain and damage he causes.

Iago is often funny, especially in his scenes with the foolish Roderigo, which serve as a showcase of Iago’s manipulative abilities. He seems almost to wink at the audience as he revels in his own skill. As entertained spectators, we find ourselves on Iago’s side when he is with Roderigo, but the interactions between the two also reveal a streak of cowardice in Iago—a cowardice that becomes manifest in the final scene, when Iago kills his own wife (V.ii.231–242).

Iago’s murder of Emilia could also stem from the general hatred of women that he displays. Some readers have suggested that Iago’s true, underlying motive for persecuting Othello is his homosexual love for the general. He certainly seems to take great pleasure in preventing Othello from enjoying marital happiness, and he expresses his love for Othello frequently and effusively.

It is Iago’s talent for understanding and manipulating the desires of those around him that makes him both a powerful and a compelling figure. Iago is able to take the handkerchief from Emilia and know that he can deflect her questions; he is able to tell Othello of the handkerchief and know that Othello will not doubt him; he is able to tell the audience, **“And what’s he then that says I play the villain,”** and know that it will laugh as though he were a clown (II.iii.310). Though the most inveterate liar, Iago inspires all of the play’s characters the trait that is most lethal to Othello: trust.