The Villain Iago as the Pinnacle of Badness

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The Villain: Iago as the Pinnacle of Badness

William Shakespeare’s play *Othello* embraces a villain that has come to constitute the true definition of the word villain. Iago is able to successfully manipulate almost every character around him without succumbing to guilt or exposing his own duplicity. Carl Jung, well-known personality theorist and psychologist, developed a theory of personality in which the individual is founded upon the collective unconscious that is a conglomeration of archetypes which typically coincide in an individual, explaining the varying roles that are adopted by the unique human being. In Iago however, relentlessly seeking revenge on Othello for some unknown wrong, Jung’s archetypes become one dominant identity that Iago is able to manipulate. In reflection of Jung’s theories on personality, Iago becomes the most realistic and believable character in Shakespeare’s play *Othello*, despite the glaring holes in his motivations and the inhuman nature of his remorseless actions.

Iago is a selfish self-centered character who functions in society in pursuit of ends that will best benefit him. Iago’s character is so varying that it is hard to pin down. At one point in speaking to Roderigo he states, “Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago. / In following him I follow but myself” (Shakespeare I.i.57-59). This exemplifies the twisted nature of his character reflected in the cunning twists of his language. He openly seems to admit to his duplicity further in this dialogue saying, "I am not what I am" and by being open about this, is purposefully more cryptic in the way he communicates it (I.i.65). The first line in particular "Were I the Moor I
would not be Iago," says very little about him in all actuality while appearing to be
communicating much. Iago openly declares that his persona is not true to the definition that
Jung describes. His person is a front, a farce, deeply set up and layered by adopted types in order
to outwit and dominate his peers.

There is some reality, however, behind Iago’s constant shifts in his types or roles as a
character in his interactions with his fellow characters. Each individual has a number of faces or
titles, friend, husband, wife, son, daughter, student, teacher, etcetera. There is a conscious shift
between these roles; they are adopted to fit the demands and responsibilities that are a natural in
the course of life. Different pressures come up and there is a determined shift that occurs to
benefit a race of beings who all act on an intrinsic selfish motivation. Not selfish in a very
negative sense, but a motivation nevertheless driven by self-motivation, whether consciously or
unconsciously. The difference between Iago and the rest of humanity is that he exhibits these
habits a more merciless and coldly calculating fashion. It could be argued that he is an
unconscious chameleon, reacting out of jealousy or greed, but his actions are planned and
precise, he reflects on them without mercy or remorse and looks forward to future actions with
purposeful planning.

Iago’s motivations behind these merciless acts are very hazy. He declares that he acts out
of jealousy for Othello’s position on one side, “But he that filches from me my good name /
Rob me of that which not enriches him, / And makes me poor indeed. (III.iii.159-161). On the
other he clearly says it is because Othello bedded his wife, “But for my sport and profit. I hate
the Moor: / And it is thought abroad, that ‘twixt my sheets / He has done my office: I know not
if’t be true; / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety” (I.iii.12). His mixed
motivations are possibly further proof of the corrupted dynamics and easy absorption of ill-
willed roles. He uses different stories to gain the trust of different characters around him. He hates Othello’s love life for the heartsick Roderigo while simultaneously hating Othello for his position on behalf of Cassio. The most disturbing aspect of this latter quote is the final two lines however. Despite the lack of certainty in the claims against Othello, he acts vindictively anyway, as if his nature is evil independent of vengeful motivations and Othello has just become an easy and ready victim. This line, if anything, proves that Iago acts evilly for evil’s sake, and Othello is a target out of convenience, providing Iago with some twisted sense of justification. Or perhaps it is a mechanism that enables the remorselessness of his actions. If he feels justified, he need not feel guilt.

Many of Shakespeare’s characters are bred for a definitive purpose. Often referred to as “stock characters,” these characters play a distinct role in the play, a role that can be traced between Shakespeare’s many plays. It is important to note these types of characters within a play because they are plot feeders. Shakespeare is still famous for plays written years and years ago. He certainly had a winning formula for writing plays and stock characters were and important piece of that puzzle. They guaranteed a definitive influence on the plot, one that had succeeded before. The shrew wife and the tragic hero will provide humor or despair under whatever name they are given. They are important and beneficial to each play, and the creativity in transforming these character is there, but they nevertheless can be united into a single definable being across the plays.

As such, these characters have the potential to become very flat if they can fall under a certain label. There is little potential for substance in a character of repeated use that can fit into any plot and have the same affect. Iago could simply lie under the broad title of villain, but usually the villain of the story has some deep driving motivation, a clear past wrong or some
deep seeded greed and jealousy. Iago seems to be lacking either. He is such a dynamic character because he seems to be evil itself. Contrary to being made flat through a lack of motivation, his explanation-less behavior adds depth in closer analysis. It calls into question the individual and what motivates every person. Iago is cold and calculating and he is a maze of heavily layered driving forces and intentions. The more analysis done of his character seems to yield more confusion as the deeper delved, the more discovery, the less understood. Perhaps it is his lack of remorse, “The Moor is of a free and open nature, /That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will tenderly by led by th’nose...” (I.iii). Or even further, his dynamics stem from his clear lack of definition of character, “I follow him to serve my turn upon him” (I.i.42). Iago himself describes Othello as honest and good and then further rubs lemon juice into the paper cut by continuing on the same strain of complements to say that he will “tenderly” be led “by th’nose.” He insults Othello more clearly than he complements, pointing out his foolish blindness. He is mocking of those who are good and derogatory of the innocent as naive or foolish. Exhibiting his chameleon-like nature, Iago does give some motivation for his forbearance in dealing with those he deems beneath him. He follows Othello only so that he can more easily revenge himself upon him. By connection, he only interacts positively with his peers in order to meet his own ends. Even his own wife, whom he labels as a motivation for his cruelty to Othello, is victimized by him, becoming a tool in his higher plans rather than a poor maltreated life companion.

Iago’s character and dynamics as an important and unique role thus defined, Carl Jung, famous personality theorist and contemporary of Sigmund Freud sheds some light on Iago as a very unique and realistic character despite his apparent inhumanity. Among the dizzying theories on the psychology of personality, Jung himself described his studies in this way:
Anyone who wants to know the human psyche will learn next to nothing from experimental psychology. He would be better advised to abandon exact science, put away his scholar's gown, bid farewell to his study, and wander with human heart through the world. …through love and hate, through the experience of passion in every form in his own body, he would reap richer stores of knowledge than text-books a foot thick could give him, and he will know how to doctor the sick with a real knowledge of the human soul. -- Carl Jung (from "New Paths in Psychology", in Collected Papers on Analytic Psychology, London, 1916).

It follows than that the there is little to be done to define the individual and the depths of personality and what makes a person who he is. Perhaps by Jung’s reckoning, Iago’s indefinability makes him more human than any stock character Shakespeare ever used.

Jung’s theory includes an “ego” similar to features that Freud’s theories possess, but the one aspect of his theory that truly makes it stand out is the “collective unconscious,” (Boree). The collective unconscious is in essence a trough of every the experiences of the human race, what C. Boree, a research psychologist calls a “psychic inheritance” that every human being is born with. Love at first sight and Deja vu are just some examples that explain this principle. Archetypes are what make up the collective unconscious that make up the individual. These many archetypes, in theory, coincide peaceably in the individual. These archetypes are by no means biological like Freud’s instincts, but they do constitute a vital part of his theory and just as fairly explain personality as Freud’s ideas because of how difficult personality is to clearly define. A different way of viewing these archetypes and their role in the individual is that they are “a universal thought form or predisposition to respond to the world in certain ways,” (Engler
74). Looked at in this way, archetypes constitute the commonalities between every human being and the driving instincts.

Once archetype represented in Jung’s personality theory is called the shadow which represents to dark side of the ego or unconscious. The shadow is amoral, neither good nor bad, but simply is capable of storing potential evil. This particular archetype is significant especially as concerns Iago. The shadow is supposedly a derivation from the supposed animal predecessors of human beings. Iago has great potential for evil without the burden of guilt, just as the shadow is an amoral state of being. On top of this shadow being that Iago seems dominated by is the persona which Jung has prescribed as the “the social role that one assumes in society and one’s understanding of it,” (74). The persona is the “public image” more or less and Iago seems to have mastered his persona, making it appear that he is a complexity of different archetypes, the trickster, the original man, the wise old man, the hero among others, but these all combine into a guise that stems from the shadow. It is interesting to note than that through the shadow, this potential for evil, Iago has sucked a number of other archetypes, in essence fulfilling Jung’s assumptions that these archetypes occupy the individual peaceably, but in a more twisted, demeaning fashion. They certainly constitute a part of Iago, but it is a much more conscious effort.

Iago is layer upon layer twisted up on confused motivations and lacking in continuity. He is a villain, suited to the needs of Shakespeare and his use of stock characters to fit the frame of his tragedies. Iago in particular, however, represents an interesting connection between reality and drama. In the midst of declaring openly his own deception, Iago does assert that his actions are an illustration of who his truly is by saying, “For when is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end” (1.i.59-60). He goes so far as to declare his own
motivations to be peculiar which many would interpret to mean strange but which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “Distinguished in nature, character, or attributes from others,” (OED). Iago’s motivations as “distinguished” from the motivations of others are examined in Daniel Stempel’s essay entitled, “The Silence of Iago.” He says specifically concerning the revelation that Iago is the villain, “…he spurns Othello’s demand for explanation, and, despite the threat of torture, maintains an obdurate silence…cloaking the native act and figure of his heart in darkness for all time,” (Stempel 252). The “figure of his heart” to which Stempel refers is a reference to Iago’s boasts to Roderigo in the first scene previously analyzed, his declaration that “I am not what I am” following his ironic determination to wear his heart on his sleeve (I.i.65). The idea that Iago, of all characters, would be open about himself is fulfilled in his ultimate silence and when applied to Jung’s theories, demonstrates a certain irony in the extent to which these archetypes that Jung has described factor into the individual, specifically Iago. Iago is a maze, who is consistent with his final act of silence and his boast of mystery to Roderigo in the beginning, but he is consistent only in the way in which his character exhibits transience and mystery. Jung’s archetypes seem to attempt to attack the idea that, like Iago, there is no easy way to pin down character. The shadow again erupts in representation in Iago and comes to explain to some degree the manner in which Iago behaves and interacts.

In a sense Iago does wear his heart on his sleeve despite the shrouded mystery in which he envelopes himself. The persona that is Iago, however mixed and confused in its servicing of “peculiar” motivations, his behavior is in alignment with any villain. Many characters within plays or books, any media in which there is limited space to truly lay down a complete character profile, can tend toward flatness, definable by key words like selflessness, bravery, greed, etc. Usually, a lack of purpose and a general meandering of actions would denote a lack of
believability in that character. Characters need a drive or purpose for their actions to be credible to an audience. Iago lacks both and yet, he is one of Shakespeare’s most well-known and even loved villains. He is accepted because he exhibits drive without stating it. He, as a character, his role in the play itself, seems to be purpose. His lack of motivation makes him hard to pin down other than the label of villain. He appeases those around him all the while seeking only his own ends. This would appear to make him very flat as a character, self-motivated it would seem, but framed around the theories of Jung, he is a dizzying maze of mixed archetypes that could simply be a part of the shadow wholly dominating a single individual. It seems overdeveloped and his persona, his chameleon like nature, renders it most useful to a maligning character.

This concept is further exemplified by Iagos’ attempts to convince a lovesick Roderigo to and win Desdemona’s heart, when, in reality, Iago needs him to bring about the ultimate ends of his seemingly unfounded revenge on Othello. “How poor are they that have not patience! / What wound did ever heal but by degrees? / Thou know’st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft; / And wit depends on dilatory time” (II.iii.376-379). While he is trying to convince Roderigo to stay, he reveals a bit about himself; the patience he has seems to be his only true and consistent personal characteristic besides an overabundance of energy dedicated to vengeance, that and his consistent inconsistency which seems to make him more human than otherwise. Jung’s theory, in relation to the idea of this inconsistent consistency, ultimately is an attempted explanation of the confusing nature of mankind and the archetypes that he incorporates are meant as explaining factors of the personality of every individual. The collective unconscious is a single explanation for a world full of unique identities, and Iago certainly is unique in his singleness of archetype.

Iago’s character fits well with Jung’s theories and his shadow archetype. It, to some degree, explains his conscious change in personality and behavior to other characters in
Shakespeare’s play, *Othello*. He is made realistic in this. He is all the more realistic for the sheer humanness of him. He is imperfect, confused in his own motivations, taciturn, manipulative, ruthless, and self-driven. He is made interesting in his lack of impetus and compelling in his cunning. His excess of the shadow archetype, and manipulation of other archetypes represented in Jung’s theory on personality makes him appear even more clever and his determined brilliance in interactions with others that aid him in reaching his triumphant and tragic end make him all the more believable.
Bibliography


