



IAGO - A Psychopathic Personality

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's dramas display intense knowledge of psychology. His characters are as varied as the human race and as vivid as we all are. His deep interest in psychology of men and women is reflected in his superb character delineation of his dramas. Many attempts have been made by the students of literature to touch the different facets of the genius bard and many will continue to make more. This paper intends to study Iago, a destructive agent, as a psychopathic personality. An attempt is made to study Iago with the help of James C. Coleman, who has written his treatise on abnormal psychology with the title 'Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life'. Some of those aspects are, that the psychopathic people have an ability to put up a good front, are irresponsible, impulsive, with low frustration level and few more characteristics. Studies like this develop a critical thinking and a better understanding of the society.

KEYWORDS

Coleman, Shakespeare, Iago, Abnormal psychology, psychopathic, antisocial, exploit, impulsive, inadequate conscience.

Psychology being the study of psychic process can be brought to bear upon the study of literature. Some may say that literature cannot provide either the theoretical or practical basis for understanding different behavioral patterns but it would not be wrong if we say that it does compliment psychology to understand life better. All major tragedies of Shakespeare gives an insight into the matter of fact as to how and why a particular character behaves. This paper focuses on a very interesting and talked about character of Shakespeare who has so many traits mixed into one but no doubt can be tagged as a devil of a morality play. He seems to be a catalogue of bad motives: social enemy, sexual jealousy, lusts, greed and pride. He has explained that he resents Othello for promoting Cassio over him, but (In soliloquy) he has also attributed his vengefulness to love of Desdemona, and hatred of Othello; he is jealous of Othello and Emilia or perhaps Cassio and Emilia; he covets Roderigo's money. From the beginning to the end of the play Iago is the vice of street crime, of sexual violation and murder in the dark, the waking embodiment of Brabantio's wicked dream, all the fears that make people lock their doors at night.

He has a pathological tendency to see other people in his place—his rank and even his sheets. His revenge against those he suspects of stealing his share of human authenticity is to bankrupt their love, their trust and even their socially constructed identities. Brabantio declares in anguish he no longer has a daughter, Cassio that he has lost his name and rank, Desdemona that she has lost her lord and Othello that his occupation is gone, that he has no wife and finally that he is no longer Othello.

We can study Iago as an antisocial or in other words psychopathic personality. Their outstanding characteristics are marked as lack of ethical or moral development and an inability to follow approved model of behaviour¹. Basically they are incapable of significant loyalty to other persons, groups or social values. They are typically intelligent, spontaneous and very likable on first acquaintance. They seem to live in a series of present moments without considering for past and future. They are also careless for the rights and wellbeing of others. Following are some traits of a psychopathic personality given by Coleman and this paper further studies Iago's character in the light of those traits.

The most striking aspect of Iago's personality is an ability to put up a good front to impress and exploit others. Often the psychopath is charming and likable, with a manner that easily wins friends. He seems to have good insight into the needs and weaknesses of other people and is very clever at exploiting them. He readily finds excuses and rationalization for his anti-social conduct, typically projecting the blame onto someone else. Thus he is often able to convince other people as well as himself that he is free of fault. Apparent absence or minimal functioning of conscience, aggressive, malevolent or irresponsible conduct without feeling guilt is traditionally associated with psychopathic personality. In his classic study of this type of abnormality, *cleckly* (1955) defines it in terms of what he calls "*the mask of sanity*"². Smooth talk and outward charm mask a seriously deviant and sometimes even dangerous personality.

Iago's personality is that he has put on an honest countenance for years without ever letting anyone know his real self. Even his wife believes that he is an honest man. He poses to be subservient and loyal to others in all weather. This "*honesty*" is one thing that is perfectly obvious about him. *Honest* is the word that springs to the lips of every one who speaks of him. It is applied to him some fifteen times in the play. No doubt he is able to put up a good front. So troubled was he at his friends disgrace that his own wife was sure "*it grieved her husband as if the case was his*". What a wonder that everyone in trouble like Desdemona, should send at once for Iago "*call thy husband hither*" (1V,ii, 106). Cassio thinks that Iago is helping him, Othello believes that Iago is his honest man who can make things clear to him and as already stated even Desdemona finds her solutions from him.

All the time he seems to be honest. When Cassio misbehaved and was found fighting with Montano, did Othello not see the "*honest Iago looked dead with grieving*" (11, iii, 156) and further says: "I know, Iago / Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter / Making it light to Cassio, Cassio I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine"³.

Further Iago's soliloquy too makes his ideas clear: "Though I do hate him as I do hell pains / Yet, for necessity of present life, / I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign."⁴ He is a villain but poses to be the most honest as Cassio puts in, "*I never know a Florentine more kind and honest*".

Secondly a psychopath is irresponsible and impulsive; who has a low frustration level. Antisocial personality like Iago generally has a callous disregard for the rights, needs and wellbeing of others. He is typically a chronic liar and has learned to take rather earn what he wants. He lives in the present without considering the consequences. In the first act he reflects his inner thoughts while talking with Roderigo:

Iago: O, sir content you;
I follow him to serve my turn upon him.

And further:

...for, sir
it is as sure as you are Roderigo
were I the moor I would not be Iago:
in following him, I follow but myself;
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end :
...I am not what I am.⁵

It is clear that he has a low frustration level and nurses a general grievance against everybody because of extreme egoism. He has a particular grievance against Othello and Cassio. The former offends him because he was ignored for the post of lieutenant in favor of Cassio and he also suspects that the moor has a liaison with his wife. He bears a grudge against Cassio because he was preferred to him. He suspects that Cassio has a special grace and attractiveness in his personality, by comparison it makes him think look ugly. He is envious of male rivals who are better placed. We can define the feeling of envy in this way : *Malignant or hostile, ill will, malice, enmity. A longing for the advantages enjoyed by another person*⁶ Othello, an outsider who has risen above others in the social as well as the sexual context particularly irks Iago.

He intends masterminding a plot, which could destroy the powerful Othello and is now in a position to make or mar the career of others. He would also strip Roderigo of his wealth by kindling in him the hope of gaining Desdemona even after her marriage. He supplants Cassio by blemishing his career. This extraordinary selfish man who lacks money and status, possesses an ingenious mind and thus he succeeds to snatch what he does not possess. Iago is envy incarnate and would bring havoc by inciting jealousy in the private life of unjealous Othello: "*Moor thank me, love me and reward me / For making him egregiously an ass / And practicing upon his peace and quiet / Even to madness. 'Tis here, but yet confused: / Knavery's plain face is never seen till used.*"⁷

He has a very clear outline of his plot in his mind but must wait for time to mature and then work upon it. Johnson rightly says about Iago: "*An honest man acts upon a plan and forecasts his designs: but a knave depends upon temporary and local opportunities, and never knows his own purpose but at the time of execution.*"⁸

Rejection of authority is the next characteristic of a psychopath. Iago feels his "*honesty*" has not fetched him any substantial gains. The royalty's use of him as a lowly servant requiring him to do odd jobs was just overlooking his capabilities. They are degrading his self-image. So to prove his might, he would retaliate the mighty. Iago's longing to satisfy the sense of power is we think the strongest of the forces that drive him on. Bradley views that: "*The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority and if it involved, secondly the triumphant exertion of his abilities and thirdly the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated.*"⁹

Iago also has an inadequate conscience development and lack of anxiety or guilt. The antisocial personality is unable to understand and accept morals. Coleman suggests that because of the marked discrepancy between his level of intelligence and his conscience development, a psychopath has been referred to as a "*moral moron*"; often hostile and aggressive, he has no sense of guilt. His lack of anxiety and guilt, combined with his apparent sincerity may enable him to avoid suspicion and detection. From the '*Voices Of Shakespeare*', the character of Iago tells his own story: "*In my complete psychological collapse, there were only three courses open to me—suicide, wait and revenge... I spurned aside suicide: the coward's way to take the line of least resistance. And I had fought under the command of a general of Othello's caliber... thus if suicide would naturally go against the very grain of any true soldier, the wait is also rejected. That is why I offered it to...*"¹⁰.

Iago never thinks about the soul. He believes but little that man has a soul and does not care whether he has one or not. His aim is to get the moor out of the way. Iago first suggests suspicion, how cunningly he hinds at Desdemona's deception of his father and by warning Othello he takes the surest way to make him jealous: "*She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most*".

He even brings Desdemona directly into the picture and impresses on him the fact of his being alien and so unaware of the Venetian women's custom of infidelity:

Look to your wife: observe her well with Cassio;
...
I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but keep it unknown¹¹.

He makes two points clear

- 1) Touching on the inexperience in the Venetian way of life of which Othello is unaware.
- 2) The fact of Desdemona's deception of her father in marrying Othello. Iago echoes Brabantio's earlier warning to Othello.

His real thoughts expresses itself when he says: "Virtue! a fig! 't is in ourselves that we / are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens / to which our wills are gardeners; so that if we / Plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop and / weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of / herbs, or distract it with many, either to have / it sterile with idleness, or manured with / industry, why, the power and corrigible authority / of this lies in our wills."¹²

For Iago there is nothing in the Universe that he professes without shame save his egoism and duplicity: "*I follow him to serve my turn upon him; / We cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly follow'd.*"¹³.

Some men are cynical because life has treated them badly and it may be natural if they look back in anger. Some may be cynical by nature, for a need to destroy in them and in other people all truth, beauty and goodness. The motives of personal and professional jealousy with which Iago bolsters himself are no more than the signs of fundamental cynicism.

Now if we contemplate that what remains with the audience to carry home with them for their use and edification? Then the answer which Shakespeare might have suggested is that if it is disturbing to suspect a devil in the dear most friend then it is even more disturbing to realize that this devil may be a reflection of our own destructive nature or tendencies. Even in our life every day we meet evil tempters and good angels in human forms like Desdemona and Iago. Torn between them is Othello, a kind of every man. This though is very disturbing but at the same time gives us a better understanding of life. And here is when literature serves its true purpose, offering what its reader is ready to grasp.

If we try to find out the reasons of man's suffering? Then answer can be according to the two prevalent thought currents: Worldly and ideal. Worldly means that we always find some outer or worldly reason for our sufferings such as our friends, circumstances and time but when we try to find out an ideal reason for our sufferings then the solution lies somewhere within us. The whole Cosmos lies within us. Thus good or bad, evil or holy all reside within us. Therefore from the example of Iago's life we can say that when mind runs after the roving senses, it carries away the understanding, as the wind carries away a ship on the waters. Lord Krishna enlightens Arjun in The Bhagvadgita that whose senses are all withdrawn from their objects his intellect is firmly set. He preaches about the delusion of senses and reason of man's suffering:

There is no wisdom for the unsteady
The uncontrolled. Without wisdom,
There can be no contemplation;
Without contemplation there is no peace;
And without peace, how can there be joy?¹⁴.

Thus a man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of senses without attachment; he attains purity of mind and intellect which alone turns him capable to discriminate just from unjust, right from wrong and good from evil. If not so, the result is like the tragedy of Othello.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. OTHELLO, I, i, 143 – 146.
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11. OTHELLO, III, iii, 199 – 206.

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13. OTHELLO, I, i, 42 - 44

14. *The Bhagvadgita* II, 66.

