Othello 5 Essay, Research Paper

‘Othello is a study into the potency of evil’

Discuss this view of the play, paying careful attention to Iago’s motives and destructive achievements (you should concerntrate on Act III Scene III though you will have to relate it to other parts of the play).

Potent in its literal sense means powerful. This essay therefore is based on a statement saying that the play is a study into the power of evil. Evil is conveyed in many different ways in Othello, but they all seem to radiate from Iago. Therefore it would only be appropriate if I did a study into the evil of Iago, and how it affects everything and everybody in the play.

Shakespeare conveys Iago’s evil in many ways throughout Othello, and shows the methods that Iago uses in order to make Othello trust him. These methods obviously work, shown by the fact that he is repeatedly called honest; I will be commenting on these throughout my essay. He is much like the character ‘Vice’ from ‘miracle plays’ of the 16 and 17th Century that tell the audience what their plan is, and so they all become fellow conspirators in a way. This was done well in the production I saw in Manchester, as the actor playing Iago was good and convincing at talking to the crowd and making us realise that it is the enemy within we should fear most.

Some people could argue that Iago was extremely lucky to have all the opportunities put in front of him, such as Emilia finding Othello’s handkerchief. I, however believe that whatever the situation, Iago would be able to take the situation, and therefore Othello’s downfall was imminent. An example of this would be in Act III, Scene III. Iago says, ‘Look to your wife; observe her well with Casio,’ which is taking advantage of knowing that Desdemona will try to defend Cassio and seem to be in love with him. In adapting to new situations, Iago uses people’s strengths and weaknesses, also like in the extract above. This is a sign of his evil, reversing good things and making them bad.

Over the course of Act III, Scene III, Iago turns Othello into the same kind of evil person he is. It is almost like a possessive type of evil, like in the old morality or ‘miracle’ plays I mentioned in a previous paragraph. One of the ways the audience can tell what state of mind Othello is in, and how much Iago’s ego has influenced him, is by the his of language. In most of Shakespeare’s plays, the evil one speaks in riddles, and the good character, even if temporarily good, speaks like a clear minded, rational person. For example, in the beginning, Iago says, ‘If I were Othello, I would not be Iago,’ meaning that it is in Othello’s best interests not to have employed Iago. However this kind of language slowly rubs off, and certain recognisable riddles are repeated by the ‘possessed’ Othello; terms like ‘tupping’, which is a term for animal sex. Othello even admits to his ‘heart having turned to stone’ on page 225. Iago manages to change a perfectly reasonable Othello into a lunatic with murder on his mind in just one scene.

Iago believes that there is no such thing as love, and that everything boils down to lust. This is shown many times, often in a subtle manor. This trait along with others, infects Othello, and this is shown where he says, ‘O, blood, blood, blood!’ With blood being a symbol of lust. Another sign that Iago does not understand love is in the fact that Iago does not seem to care whether Emilia has had an affair with Cassio, but sees it as a possible motive. If he loved her even half as much as Othello loved Desdemona, he would be very upset, and certainly not use it to his advantage.

A part of Iago’s evil, is how he makes himself seem to be telling the truth, when really he is scheming intelligently. A part of this is the ‘injured innocence’ that he uses, such as where he says, ‘I hope you will consider what is spoke comes from my love,’ coming just so that Othello does not question Iago’s motives. Iago continues to use comments like this throughout the play, just so that Othello is not suspicious; until finally Othello does not even question Iago, when his only evidence is a handkerchief and some stories.

Another technique Iago uses is telling people what to do before they even know what they are thinking. With this, people already have the idea, and come back to consider it and believe it was theirs. A very good example of this is where Iago says, ‘But let her live,’ referring of course to Desdemona, whom Othello had hardly even thought about killing, and had only just found out was dishonest. There are many other examples of this, and it is one of Iago’s key ways in which to persuade. In this way, by telling Othello what to do, Iago takes control of the situation and ends up taking control of Othello. By the end of the scene, almost all of the ideas Othello has come from Iago.

Iago’s style of speech and use of language also make it possible for him to convince Othello, such as by making himself seem genuine when he is lying. He is devious in that he understates information’s importance, therefore making it seem more important. He also ‘plays hard to get’, and adds words making some things he just said sound as if he doesn’t truly believe them. For example Iago says, ‘I think that he is honest,’ where think is the operative word. In other words, Iago is saying that Cassio might or might not be honest. Statements like this mislead Othello, making it seem as though his ‘honest’ Ancient really doesn’t want to get Cassio in trouble.

The language used by Iago reflects the kind of person that he is supposed to be. Sentences like, ‘I am not what I am,’ reverse the Bible’s teachings, and in Shakespearean times heathens were seen as evil, which the Turks were as well. Some of the ideas expressed by Shakespeare must have been quite surprising to an Elizabethan audience, and in some many ways challenges the thoughts of the church and people. It is not the Turks that the Venetians should be afraid of, but the enemy within, which is obviously Iago. Othello, who is a Moor from Africa, and therefore not seen as a good man to Elizabethans in the beginning, in fact is the most reasonable of them all. When Brabrantio claims Iago has stolen his daughter, Othello is the first one to ask for the other side of the story when he says, ‘Send for the Lady.’

In Othello, Language is used to reveal the potency of evil. Shakespeare uses lies and the way they are told, such as where Iago, after telling Othello what to look for says, ‘Much will be seen in that’. Iago uses clever hidden lies like that to make Othello believe the evil, which is being spoon-fed to him. And when Iago then tells us of his next plan, making us co-conspirators, it makes us appreciate the irony and devices that are actually used.

When Iago talks about the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio, he deliberately puts up a poor defence that could not possibly be true, and therefore by Othello thinking how this is impossible, he believes he is thinking for himself. An example of this is where he says, ‘Or to be naked in bed and not meaning any harm,’ which is obviously an impossibility and therefore intentionally weak excuse. However, Othello is not thinking for himself here, and Iago is using another method of making it seem as though they are coming to their own conclusions and seeming rational, when Iago is feeding him the information.

Shakespeare uses certain ironies in the play, where he seems to be saying something to a person, but in fact is saying something completely different and evil. An example of this is in Act III, Scene III, where Othello says to Iago, ‘I am bound to thee forever.’ When Othello says this, he means how he is indebted to Iago, but the hidden, ironic meaning is that Othello is now the property of Iago, and will not escape his evil grip until death. These sorts of ironies again bring out the idea of the villains talking in riddles, which gets passed on to Othello. This whole idea I think is showing how evil is so powerful that once it has you, there is no escape.

I think that one of the main themes in the text is how evil can make one do incredibly bad things, without even knowing what one is doing. Othello at the beginning was a defender of the Christian faith, and in Shakespeare’s era the church had a lot of say, particularly as the puritans had nearly taken over then. ‘The potency of evil’ manages to turn Othello into a morally blind, senseless fool. The play is a kind of warning against evil, telling even the groundlings at the Globe to be wary. It tells them to be wary because even someone like Iago, someone who was known to be honest, and in the beginning would seem more acceptable than good Othello, can be the evil one.

I don t think that any real motives were shown for the evil, and perhaps Shakespeare is trying to say that the reason for evil is not important, but the effects, power and ability to recognise evil are. Iago suspects that Cassio has had an affair with his wife and also says he resents Cassio for being his superior. However, these reasons are more excuses, as Iago says says how he will use them to make people think that is why he dislikes Cassio. He says this while convincing the foolish Roderigo, whom he uses as an instrument of his wickedness.

In conclusion, the power of evil is very effectively shown in Othello in many different ways. Iago is the representative of evil, and manages to almost possess Othello with his evil. The play shows how someone you would not expect to be evil, may in fact be. There is very much a moral implication within the play, and evil manages to do great damage throughout the play to almost everyone who is acquainted with Iago. The story takes place in only a matter of days really, and this shows how fast evil can work. Othello truly is a ’study in the potency of evil’.

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