

Worksheet 4 – Iago

Review: Lecture Religion

Can you answer these questions, which are based on the previous lecture from Professor Lisa Hopkins about race?

- A. Who said “’tis such a vulgar error to allow nothing of humanity to any but of our own acquaintance the Fairer hue”?
- B. What was Charles Lamb (1811) response to seeing on stage “the courtship and the wedded caress of Othello and Desdemona”?
- C. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1812) said that Othello could only be acted by who?
- D. Meredith Anne Skura (2008) say that historically “the Moor was a tragic hero whose color was irrelevant and whose greatness and savagery could be considered together without contradiction.” What century did this change?

Recall: Lecture Race

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.

- 1. Complete the word from the quotation from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s description of Iago: “The Motive-Hunting of _____ Malignity’. (Time 0:40)
 - a) Evil
 - b) Malevolence
 - c) Motiveless
 - d) Driving
- 2. Iago motives could be: he is upset he didn't get Cassio’s job; he desires Desdemona; he thinks Othello slept with Emilia; he wants some money; he is fed up with life; he is racist about Cassio as a Florentine and Othello as a Moor. What is curious about his motives? (Time 0:50)
 - a) He has too many
 - b) He doesn’t have any
 - c) He has one clear motive
 - d) He doesn't tell the audience
- 3. Who explored the difference between jealousy and envy, suggesting Cassio is an object of envy whereas Othello is jealous of Desdemona?
 - a) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1812
 - b) Oliver Parker, 1995
 - c) AC Bradley, 1945
 - d) Barbara Everett, 2007
- 4. Who presented the link with Iago’s name and the Patron Saint of Spain - Santiago, who is often known as Santiago Matamoros - the Moor slayer? (Time 4.52)
 - a) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1812
 - b) Oliver Parker, 1995
 - c) AC Bradley, 1945
 - d) Barbara Everett, 2007
- 5. Which film director presented Iago as a homosexual who desires Othello?
 - a) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1812
 - b) Oliver Parker, 1995
 - c) AC Bradley, 1945
 - d) Barbara Everett, 2007

Analysis

In the lecture Professor Hopkins presents Bernard Spivack’s formalist approach to the play, in which Iago represents the character of the Vice, a popular (if villainous) figure in Mediaeval morality plays.

(Time: 5:10)

Can we consider Iago as a devil? Read the soliloquy below and then answer the questions.

Iago 245 And what's he then that says I play the villain?
When this advice is free I give and honest,
Probal to thinking and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue
250 In any honest suit. She's framed as fruitful
As the free elements. And then for her
To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
His soul is so en fettered to her love,
255 That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function. How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
260 When devils will the blackest sins put on
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
As I do now. For whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
265 I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:
That she repeals him for her body's lust.
And by how much she strives to do him good
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch
270 And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

6. In this soliloquy Iago twice questions whether he is a villain (lines 245 and 257); what effect does this have?
7. In lines 252 - 257 Iago describe how devoted Othello is to Desdemona, but how does his language associate Iago with the devil?
8. Iago describes himself as a devil here, but how does he explain that devils act before they commit their worst deeds?
9. Pestilence is a fatal epidemic disease, so what is meant by "pour pestilence into his ear" line 345?
Bonus Point: Which other evil Shakespearean character has a similar line/action?
10. What is significant about the imagery in the phrase "virtue into pitch" (line 350)?
11. How does this image present Iago: "Her goodness shall make the net / that shall enmesh them all" (line 351-352)?

Evaluation

In the lecture, Professor Hopkins describes Kim F. Hall's view of Iago as a 'white devil' and the problematisation of the idea of 'whiteness' as a marker of moral purity. (Time 6:30)

Read through this extract from Andrew Dickson article.

While black Moors are potent indices of evil in the culture and women are notoriously accused of false seeming, in this particular play, the concupiscence and demonic impulses of the other characters are both revealed and concealed. The audience clearly sees Iago's methods (if not his motives), yet his demonic nature is quite hidden from all the play's characters until the very end, when he is "revealed" and then tarred with that language of sin and materiality. The wish to destroy and exclude evil is expressed in terms of blackness and cultural difference. Othello's response to the structure of impossibility that disallows his nobility and Desdemona's chastity is to "blacken" himself and Desdemona: "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.380–91), and to render himself the conflicted foreign other ("turbaned Turk"; 5.2.351). However, few have noted how the public revelation of Iago's crimes moves Cassio to proclaim him alien and sinful: "Most heathenish and most gross" (5.2.310). Rymer's earlier insistence that Iago is "no blackamoor soldier" proves strangely compelling when we consider that Iago's theatrical predecessors, the Vice, these figures from mediaeval morality plays, were often portrayed in blackface or black disguise (Fryer 1984). If the "white" courtesan, Bianca, is a sly symbolic foil for the chaste Desdemona, Iago is the "white devil," whose seeming "belonging" and adept directing of attention to others' transgressions (he accuses Othello, Emilia, Desdemona, and Cassio of adultery) locates potent fears of "grossness" in others. Iago, the omniscient, controlling citizen, operates under the cover of whiteness; he is the evil within who escapes notice by projecting sin onto others.

Hall, K.F. (2007). Othello and the Problem of Blackness.

12. Consider this contextual information and write a paragraph outlining whether you believe the play to be racist.

Glossary

- **Motiveless** - Without a reason for an action.
E.g. The character was motiveless.
- **Florentine** - A person from Florence, in the Tuscan region of Italy.
E.g. Cassio was a Florentine.
- **Malignity** - The quality of having an intense desire to cause harm.
E.g. The attack was an act of genuine malignity.
- **Envy** - Desire to have a quality, possession, or other desirable thing belonging to (someone else).
E.g. He envied people who did not have to work at the weekends.
- **Jealousy** - Jealousy means unpleasant suspicion, or apprehension of rivalry.
E.g. She was jealous of her boyfriend's ex.
- **Formalist approach** - A school of literary criticism, focused on studying the text without taking into account any outside influence.
*E.g. A formalist critic would approach *The Great Gatsby* as a structure of words, ignoring the influence of 1920's America.*
- **Morality play** - Popular in 15th- and 16th-century Europe, the stories taught a moral message, underpinned by Christian teachings.
E.g. 'Everyman' was the name of a character in Morality Plays.

- **Allegorical** - Having a deeper, symbolic meaning.
E.g. Augustine's 'City of God' is an allegory of the triumph of good over evil.
- **Vice Character** - A stock character of Morality Plays who tempts others to evil.
E.g. Originally, the Vice was a serious role, but over time his part became largely comical.
- **Historicist approach** - A literary theory which studies literature within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic.
E.g. Historicism is based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt.
- **Emblematic** - Serving as a symbol of a particular quality or concept; symbolic.
E.g. This case is emblematic of a larger problem.
- **Moral turpitude** - An act or behaviour that gravely violates the sentiment or accepted standard of the community.
E.g. Moral turpitude is an offence or crime that is vile or an insult to morality.
- **Tantalising** - Tormenting or teasing with the sight or promise of something unattainable.
E.g. A tantalising glimpse of the career he might have had.
- **Elucidate** - Make (something) clear; explain.
E.g. Work such as theirs will help to elucidate this matter.