

Iago character analysis

The villain Iago from "Othello" is a central character, and understanding him is key to understanding Shakespeare's entire play. His is the longest part with 1,070 lines. Iago's character is consumed with hatred and envy. He is jealous of Cassio for obtaining the position of Lieutenant over him, jealous of Othello—believing that he has bedded his wife—and jealous of Othello's position, despite his race.

Is Iago Evil?

Probably, yes! Iago has very few redeeming qualities. He has the ability to charm and convince people of his loyalty and honesty—"Honest Iago," according to Othello—but the audience is immediately introduced to his vitriol and desire for revenge, despite his lack of proved reason. Iago represents evil and cruelty for its own sake.

He is deeply unpleasant, and this is revealed to the audience in no uncertain terms in his numerous asides. He even acts as an advocate for Othello's, telling the audience that he is noble: "The Moor—howbeit that I endure him not—Is of a constant, loving noble nature, and I dare think that he'll prove to Desdemona a most dear husband" (Act 2 scene 1, Lines 287–290). In doing so, he comes across as even more villainous, now that he is prepared to ruin Othello's life despite his acknowledged goodness. Iago is also happy to ruin Desdemona's happiness just to get revenge on Othello.

Iago and Women

Iago's opinion and treatment of women in the play also contribute to the audience's perception of him as cruel and unpleasant. Iago treats his wife Emilia in a very derogatory way: "It is a common thing...To have a foolish wife" (Act 3 Scene 3, Lines 306–308). Even when she pleases, him he calls her "A good wench" (Act 3 Scene 3, Line 319).

This could be due to his belief that she has had an affair, but his character is so consistently unpleasant that the audience does not assign his malignancy to her behavior. An audience may even collude in Emilia's belief that even if she did cheat, Iago deserved it. "But I do think it is their husband's faults If wives do fall" (Act 5 Scene 1, Lines 85–86).

Iago and Roderigo

Iago double crosses all the characters who consider him a friend. Most shockingly, perhaps, he kills Roderigo, a character with whom he has conspired

and been mostly honest throughout the play. He uses Roderigo to perform his dirty work, and without him would have been unable to discredit Cassio in the first place. However, Roderigo seems to know Iago best. Perhaps having guessed that he may be double-crossed, he writes letters which he keeps on his person that eventually discredit Iago and his motives completely.

Iago is unrepentant in his communication with the audience. “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I will never speak a word” (Act 5 Scene 2, Lines 309–310). He feels justified in his actions and does not invite sympathy or understanding as a result.

Iago's Role in the Play

Though deeply unpleasant, Iago must have considerable intellect to devise and deploy his plans, and to convince the other characters of his various deceptions along the way. Iago is unpunished at the end of the play. His fate is left in Cassio's hands. The audience believes that he will be punished, but it's left open for the audience to wonder whether he will get away with his evil plans by concocting another deception or violent act. Unlike the other characters, whose personalities are transformed by the action—most notably Othello, who goes from being a strong soldier to an insecure, jealous murderer—the unrepentant and cruel Iago is unchanged.