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Author(s): John C. McCloskey
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THE MOTIVATION OF IAGO

JOHN C. McCLOSKEY

The basic motivation of Iago is hate. Wounded pride, a feeling of personal injustice, and jealous suspicion coalesce into his master-passion of hate for Othello the Moor. As early as the sixth line of the first scene of the first act this motive is predicated as basic data for the action which follows. Roderigo says to Iago: “Thou told’st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.” Iago answers: “Despise me, if I do not.” In the same scene:

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.

Again, in the third scene of the first act, lines 373-77, he remarks to Roderigo:

I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted; thine hath
no less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our re-
venge against him; if thou canst cuckold him,
thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport.

In line 393 of the same scene he reiterates: “I hate the Moor . . . .”

Iago, a Venetian soldier of so good reputation that he is known to everyone as “honest Iago,” feels bitterly and deeply that he has been done a gratuitous injustice. His past life has been exemplary; his private actions and public deeds have been above reproach; his superior, the great Moorish general Othello, has trusted him, confided in him, relied on him. Othello has had proof of his soldiership at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds Christian and heathen. Three great ones of Venice have used their personal influence on Iago’s behalf. The lieutenancy has gone, nevertheless, to Michael Cassio, a Florentine and a mere theoretical soldier who has never set a squadron in the field. The “old gradation” has yielded to pre-

1 Assistant professor of English, University of Oregon; author of Modern English Composition and Handbook of Business Correspondence.

2 Act I, scene 1, ll. 155-58.
ferment "by letter and affection." In Iago's eyes, therefore, Othello is not a just man; he has ignored past service and proved worth. Efficiency and intelligence devoted to good have availed Iago nothing, for he remains the Moor's ancient. His tragic intrigue has its genesis, consequently, in his determination to secure justice for himself; if Othello through an act of injustice has deprived him of his due, then Iago through craft and policy will get it yet. At the beginning of the play Iago is a man seeking justice who, having right on his side but no recourse to law in what is a personal rather than an actionable matter, takes affairs into his own hands and devotes his intelligence and efficiency to obtaining for himself what he interprets as justice.

Not only has Othello deprived Iago of professional advancement, but there is a report abroad that Othello has played him false with Emilia, and since it touches his reputation with the world he will take the report for surety. Intellectual, crafty, subtle, and efficient as he is, Iago cannot, however, control his jealous suspicion. With far less reason than Othello his mind is preyed upon by jealous conceits.

Now, I do love her too;
Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin,
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife,
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure. 3

Thus the Venetian soldier's suspicious jealousy merges with his conviction of personal injustice into the dominant passion of hate for the Moor. To satisfy his hate he has two ends to accomplish: to get the lieutenantship away from Cassio and to abuse Othello with the same suspicious jealousy which corrodes his own soul. Justice and revenge are what he seeks. To Iago justice has meant getting his due honestly through faithful and competent work; but having

3 Cf. Act II, scene 1, ll. 300–311.
failed in that, as he obviously has even before the opening of the play, it now means getting his due in whatever way he can. Revenge, in connection with his wife Emilia, means to this subtle schemer "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," which in the action of the play translates itself into "a wife for a wife."

In pursuit of his end of justice Iago employs the method of craft and intrigue, and in pursuit of revenge, the method of psychological suggestion. Without difficulty he soon has Cassio's place, and then he goes on to satisfy the second reason for his hate, that is, jealous suspicion of his wife's fidelity, which becomes the more powerful as he cannot control it. Normally, his intrigue should have stopped with his defeat of Cassio, but his mind, as well as Othello's, is suggestible to suspicious jealousy, and he cannot cease until he is evened with the Moor wife for wife or failing that has put him into a jealous frenzy. Through the medium of psychological suggestion, aided by eavesdropping, false report, and manipulation of the evidence, he so works upon the imagination of the suggestible Othello that the catastrophe is inevitable. For Iago's pathetic victim the tragedy lies in the fact that he allows his emotions to usurp his reason; and judging, therefore, by appearances and hearsay evidence, he confronts neither of the accused parties with their alleged crimes. Desdemona is thus found guilty without a fair chance to defend herself. Where Othello is culpable is in his emotional conviction that Desdemona has no right to her own defense—that, in justice, he himself is judge, prosecuting attorney, jury, and executioner. His verdict is that of the emotional man who judges as he feels, and when the emotional conviction which proceeds from the train of psychological suggestion generated by Iago translates itself into action, the result is murder. Thus Iago accomplishes his revenge in the matter of his wife, for even though failing to be evened with Othello wife for wife in the manner he first intended, he has put the Moor into "a jealousy so strong that judgement cannot cure."

4 Cf. Act II, scene 1, ll. 300–311.

5 If he apparently does with Desdemona (Act V, scene 2, ll. 1–83), he is as incapable of listening as was Hotspur in I, Henry IV.

6 If sympathy with the Moor is carried too far, it becomes mere romantic sentimentality.
But in making himself the minister of justice and the agent of
revenge for the satisfaction of his hate, Iago becomes so deeply in-
volved in intrigue that he cannot extricate himself. By tempera-
ment and training he is no better fitted to take civil justice into his
own hands than is Othello. For both of them the application of
military habits of mind to civil and personal affairs is fraught with
danger, in so far as each acts with the self-reliant egotism charac-
teristic of a commander in the field. As a self-appointed minister of
justice Othello proceeds according to a concept of justice in personal
matters which is that of the soldier in battle, not that of the magis-
trate in peace; emotional conviction and hasty judgment divorced
from reason impel him to judge his wife as he would a traitor in the
heat of battle and to punish her, similarly, by death. With Iago,
hard intellectuality and practical efficiency divorced from goodness
or from concern with public affairs degenerate into rascality. In
pursuit of justice and revenge Iago becomes an Elizabethan Ma-
chiavel, who is not bothered by moral values in the ordinary sense;
he has two objectives to reach, and whatever the means, his prac-
tical efficiency does not quibble. For he is the kind of man who gets
things done whether at Rhodes, or Cyprus, or on other grounds
Christian or heathen, and the qualities in him which would be virtue
on the battlefield become rascality in personal and private affairs.

Possessed of a keen intellect and a cold emotional nature, a prac-
tical knowledge of psychological processes and an ability to manipu-
late men, an opportunistic boldness and an unmoral attitude toward
things, he has precisely the qualities best fitted to success in battle.
Although to hypersensitive critics his actions may seem sheer devilry
and his soliloquies the revelation of the motive-hunting of a motive-
less malignity, his deeds are, in reality, nothing but the application,
by a professional soldier without private ethics, of military tactics
to private and personal affairs. The “honest Iago” applies to civil
life the technique of the professional soldier—that is, strategy and

? Without pushing the parallel too far, how essential is the difference between Iago
and Henry Bolingbroke beyond the fact that Iago’s intrigues are personal, those of
Bolingbroke public and political, and therefore, presumably, sanctioned by the general
good?
craft, armed conflict and death. For the practical, efficient military
man in action moral scruples are a hindrance to success; so Iago
merely ignores them. The only immediate question for him is how
to attain his ends, and his first error is in failing to recognize that in
civil life, at least, the end does not justify the means. To maintain,
as some writers do, that he delights in evil for its own sake or that he
is a symbol of evil rather than a human being is to ignore his plainly
stated motivation and to overlook the stages by which his intrigue
reaches its tragic culmination. His ends are, indeed, relatively no
more diabolical on a private scale than are many of the actions of
armies on a public scale and many of the deeds of sovereign states on
an international scale. He is a villain, of course, but not merely
because he is guilty of evil deeds; more fundamentally he is a villain
because he transfers from one sphere of action the deeds proper
therein to another sphere in which they are decidedly improper. It
is the ethical blindness of Iago which prevents him from seeing that
the methods of war, legitimate as they may be on the field of battle,
are not equally applicable to the affairs of peace where different
ethical standards and moral judgments prevail.

As the plot works itself out, Iago goes further than he originally
intended; he kills Roderigo and Emilia, attempts the murder of
Cassio, and is accessory to Othello's slaying of Desdemona. At the
outset he did not contemplate murder; he did not foresee the con-
sequences of his plot; he met each contingency as it arose and solved
his problems as they presented themselves. It is remarkable that
his honesty is not suspect until the very end of the play and that it is
extraneous forces which trip his heels. The miscarriage of his at-
tempted murder of Cassio, the letters found in Roderigo's coat, and
the forthright honesty of Emilia, his own wife, defeat him.8 A bun-
gled job, his dupe, and his wife—that is, accident and honesty—
bring retribution upon him. The irony of his pursuit of justice and
revenge is that he himself suffers in the end, and all his villainies re-

8 The time comes in Iago's intrigues when he becomes so deeply involved, as with
Roderigo, that he must murder to protect himself. He can set a train of events in mo-
tion, but he cannot control the consequences of those events, and so his plot gets out of
hand.
coil upon the "honest Iago" himself, so that at last he is far worse off
than if he had meekly accepted the original injustice, had ignored his
jealous suspicion, and had done nothing about them at all.

His downfall is brought about not so much by the principle that a
moral evil corrupts the heart and undermines the judgment as by the
fact that as a soldier Iago is a tactician rather than a strategist. As
Mr. Parrott points out, Iago fails as a strategist, brilliant though he
may be as a tactician, because his plot is pieced together as events
proceed instead of having been planned in advance as a unified cam-
paign. He is opportunistic enough to meet exigencies as they arise,
but he cannot successfully anticipate events. The accidents of for-
tune overwhelm him in the end, and treachery from within conquers
him. Even as a soldier, then, who applies to private life the actions
and ethics of the military sphere, he fails. Herein lies the tragedy
for Iago—what is justice for him is injustice for others, and out of
this conflict comes his defeat.

But there is, nevertheless, something magnificent about Iago. He
has fallen into evil ways, it is true, and is therefore not to be ad-
mired, and he is too strong to be pitied, except as one feels sad that
so much intelligence, efficiency and competence should be led astray
by a sense of personal injustice. Yet he is so consistent in his drawing
from start to finish, so plausible in his motivation, and so in charac-
ter in his actions that he is artistically a great creation. He never
relents, and he never repents.

Demand me nothing: what you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word.

Iago is what he is, and no failure or success can change him. His is a
magnificently one-track mind, a faithfulness to purpose that were it
concerned with good instead of evil would be admirable. It is the
sort of devotion to purpose that makes a fine soldier and an efficient
statesman. But, unfortunately for Iago, it is not in accord with the
ethics of civil and private life.