

The Nature of Evil in Shakespeare

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Abstract: Shakespeare should be studied in every age and by every men of genius. The present research paper is a sincere tribute to this great Bard whose might with the pen needs no oracular debate. The more we read Shakespeare, the more layers of meaning we get. Although innumerable works have been done on him, yet a new study on Shakespeare always means something new. It is propelled by pure joy of reading and appreciating Shakespeare. Without doubt, Shakespeare has been extensively read and commented upon. As pointed by T.S. Eliot, ‘the volume of creative criticism on Shakespeare’s original writings far outweighs any other conceivable domain of English Literature.’ Literature is a fruit of imagination, an ecstasy of the heart, the revelry of a mind steeped in the high floods of passion. Every great author has a special point or message to communicate. ‘The critic’s primary job, is to make the reader understand, to make him delve into the deeper recesses of the author’s mind, to throw light on those hidden treasures which lie buried beneath the dusts of anonymity.’ Works of criticism on Shakespeare are themselves inexhaustible, simply because of the reason that, Shakespeare; the man; is the man of a ‘genus’; he is one in whose revelry mankind would continue to sing for all time to come.

The present research paper is a different study in the sense that the researcher here has not kept himself confined to the traditional way of studying the nature of evil in Shakespeare, rather he has tried sincerely to explore the realms of critical adventures by keeping within the margins of literary scholarship and at the same time his effort has been to let imaginative instinct have free play. This is not an easy task because to work on a writer traversed by innumerable critics and to bring a special point in focus – one requires an intellectual blessing and also his originality in thought and approach. The four major tragedies – King Lear, Hamlet, Othello & Macbeth, have been critically analyzed and the different forms of evil have been strategically dealt with. A conscious attempt has been made to concentrate on the text with special care by alluding relevant speeches wherever it was felt needful. In this regard the researcher consulted ingeniously the commentaries of distinguished critics which served only as guiding points towards the research paper. However, emphasis has been made to correlate and present their time tested ideas and theories to be best of the researcher’s ability. This certainly gives a new dimension in approach of the researcher and his thought, enabling him to present an original treatment of the major focus areas.

The present research paper deals with Shakespeare’s treatment of evil, its working and its inimitable presence in life as a constant principle of the universe. Shakespeare being a man with kaleidoscopic vision could easily perceive that the forces of darkness are more venomous and they strive persistently to overrun the palisade of light and virtue. This constant war or in other words, the conflict of evil and good is a concept dealt with in all major religions, and Shakespeare deals with the quality of evil in his plays, and more so in his major tragedies with an acute awareness that man is a helpless creature battling it out with the elements. Evil is predominant, say the least, but a single ray of goodness and virtue is enough to dispel the gloom and the ghastliness of all-pervading evil.

Shakespeare is interested in human-beings; his characters are creatures of feeling and emotion; they think and are capable of growth and change. The study of how Shakespeare’s characters change in the course of the development of the action provides an interesting perspective to his profound insight into human psychology. The characters created by Shakespeare are not, as in Moliere, types of this or that vice, but living beings, filled to overflowing with many passions and many vices: circumstances mould their varied and many-sided characters before the eyes of the audience. Shakespeare’s situations nor his characters and their actions are true to life, but full of inconsistencies and impossibilities and he knew that such “artifices” would never be noticed in a theatre. Shakespeare was not concerned with an image of life but with an illusion, and real life is not to be confused with dramatic art. The world of Shakespeare is not the world of reality but a world of mirage; it is the magic of his sublime imaginative poetry that gives the mirage the resemblance of reality.

Keywords: Evil, Shakespeare.

T.S Baynes remarks on Shakespeare:

“But after all, it is of course in the spirit and substance of his work, his power of piercing to the hidden centers of character, of touching the deepest springs of impulse and passion, out of which emerge the issues of life and of evolving those issues dramatically with a flawless strength, subtlety, and truth, which raises him to immensely above and beyond not only the best of the playwrights who went before him, but the whole line of illustrious dramatists that came after him...”

It is Shakespeare's unique distinction that he has an absolute command over all the complexities of thought and feeling that prompt to action and bring out the dividing lines of character. He sweeps with the hand of a master the whole gamut of human experience, from the lowest note to the very top of its compass, from the sportive childish treble of Mamilius, and pleading boyish tones of Prince Arthur, up to the spectre-haunted terrors of Macbeth, the tropical passion of Othello, the agonized sense and tortured spirit of Hamlet, the sustained elemental grandeur, the Titanic force the utterly tragical pathos of King Lear.

Shakespeare's work possesses the organic strength and infinite variety, the throbbingness, vital complexity and breathing truth of Nature herself. He is above all writers, the poet of Nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of man and his environment, manners and life. His characters do not belong to this country or that, one profession of the other, but come from all lands and all walks of life. They are the rightful progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply and observation will always find, unaffected alike by the vagaries of fashion, the accidents of custom, and the change of opinion. They run the whole gamut of the world, the flesh and the devil, motivated by general pattern of life. Shakespeare's persons are not individuals; they are a species eternal and true taken from nowhere in particular, though met here, there and everywhere.

Shakespeare's artistic horizon being immensely vast, it is wiser to focus on those illuminated stretches of his works where evil is treated at a level basically humane and shows how it can permeate the nature of even the best as well as those who are its main propagators. Hence it is best to deal with his great tragedies piecemeal to get at a holistic view of the power of portrayal (of evil) of the master dramatist:

1. Macbeth 2. Hamlet 3. King Lear & 4. Othello.

Macbeth examines the nature of evil and the corruption of the human soul. In Macbeth evil is the opposite of humanity, the deviation from that which is natural for humankind, yet evil originates in the human heart. Supernatural and unnatural forces are the agents of human beings, not their instigators. The witches' words do not seduce Macbeth. He is compelled by his own ambition and his wife's ruthlessness. Similarly, spirits do not solicit Lady Macbeth, rather she invokes their aid for her purposes.

The character Macbeth, like the play itself, is a collection of contradictions. His wife believes that his “nature/... is too full o' th' milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way (I.5.15-17). At the beginning of the play, he seems the epitome of a loyal subject, valiantly fighting the rebel forces to protect the king and preserve his power. Described as an almost superhuman warrior on the field of battle, brave Macbeth “carv'd out his passage”(I.2.20) through the enemy till he reached the traitor Macdonald, “unseamed him from the nave to the chops, / And fix'd his head upon ... [the] battlements (I.2.22-23).

When one actually meets Macbeth and Banquo, however, one sees interesting contrasts that belie the great hero. His first words, “So fair and foul a day I have not seen” (I.3.36) echo the Fair is foul, and foul is fair (I.1.10) of the three witches in scene one and immediately link him to them. Upon his bidding, the witches speak, greeting him with three titles: Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter (I.3.46-48). Macbeth hears their words not with the detached skepticism of Banquo but with a kind of fear. For him, this is not a revelation of the future but an invasion of his private, hidden thoughts. His first reaction is like one who has been discovered. Banquo asks him, “Good Sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair (I.3.49-50)

After Ross and Agnes inform him that Duncan has bestowed upon him the title of Thane of Cawdor, validating the witches' second title, Macbeth analyzes their words: “This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill, hath it given me earnest of success/ Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor. / If good, why do I yield to that suggestion / whose horrid image doth unfix my hair/ And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of

nature ? (I.3.129-136) The witches' words were neutral. It is Macbeth that puts a moral value to them, concluding that he must perform an unnatural act to acquire the title of king.

But the clear knowledge that killing a king, a kinsman, and a guest in his house is against all social propriety, natural order, and human or humane behavior puts Macbeth at war with himself. As he says, he dares to do all that may become a man: / who dares do more is none" (I.7.46-47). It is impossible to murder Duncan, a man of great virtue and sound leadership, and remain human. His desire for the crown and his revulsion at the means he must use to obtain it cause him to vacillate. At Lady Macbeth's urging, he agrees, "I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat (i.7.79-80), putting aside his earlier refusal: "We will proceed no further in this business (I.7.31).

Having performed the act, he is immediately filled with remorse. His bloody hands are a "sorry sight" (II.2.19). He cannot voice an amen to an overheard prayer, "I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' / stuck in my throat" (II.2.30-31), having made himself no longer a man, no longer worthy of blessing. He imagines a voice crying "Sleep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep" (II.2.33-34). He is incapable of returning to Duncan's chamber to put the bloody daggers with the grooms. Hearing the knocking at the gate, he says, "Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou could'st (II.2.72)

Despite his profound remorse, he does nothing to right the wrong. His fear of earthly justice compels him to make more inhuman choices. He proceeds with his plan to place the blame upon the grooms and kills them before they can establish their innocence. He believes Banquo suspects him and attempts to have Banquo and Fleance killed, succeeding only with Banquo's death and Fleance's escape. Murder becomes his primary tool of leadership. Having missed the opportunity to kill Macduff, he resolves to kill Lady Macduff, her children, "and all unfortunate soul / That trace him in his line." (IV.1.168-169). By the end of the play, Macbeth is a bloody tyrant, disappointed in all aspects of his life – his reign, his marriage, a family for a potential dynasty – and damned for eternity in his death.

Lady Macbeth's decline mirrors her husband's. Denying her humanity, she too turns against human nature. To contempt such horror and steel Macbeth to kill Duncan she calls upon spirits "that tend on mortal thoughts [to] unsex ... [her] / And fill... [her] from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (I.5.40-42), turning her into an unnatural creature like the witches, who are neither male nor female. Her denial of her essential nature is unsuccessful. She cannot bring herself to murder Duncan for the human reason that he resembled her father as he slept. Despite her assurance that "A little water cleans us of the deed" (II.2.65), she cannot forget her actions. The innocent dead haunt her dreams as she walks through the castle in her sleep, washing her hands, trying to remove the stain of her inhuman acts. But no water can clear the blood from her hands; no power can free her from her guilt. "What's done cannot be undone" (V.1.65).

The evil of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is so great that ultimately it destroys both of them. The human soul cannot endure such evil. One way or another evil destroys the soul. Knowing he is doomed to lose, Macbeth still battles against Macduff, the representative of virtue and the redresser of the play. Lady Macbeth is defeated by madness and death. Evil is incompatible with humanity.

Is Macbeth's evil a wholly impersonal or is there a fatalistic touch to it. This question has puzzled critics on numerous encounters with the text of the play. On one plane, the protagonist is riding an appletart of doom and destruction. As soon as he (Macbeth) lets his evil mind overtake his generous conscience, he becomes a player on the arena of crime and murder. Satan plays foul with him and his intelligence deserts him. If Lady Macbeth ignites Macbeth's hidden ambitions, Macbeth is driven by an attraction towards glory which is clearly satanic. His actions in the later part of the play is totally divorced from the faculty of reason. For once a character like Macbeth slips from the path of righteousness, it climbs the reverse side of the ladder of impunity. Towards the end, Macbeth is a confirmed villain, devoid of sense, friends and glory. He is a ghost to his former lustrous past, a personality petrified and engulfed by his own 'hamartia' – the quest for something or everything but resulting in nothing.

Hamlet's first speech in the play itself reveals his contempt for what "seems" and his passionate commitment to what "is" (I.2.76). Unaware at this point of the extent to which the truth is concealed from him, Hamlet will be forced to undergo a tragic struggle to distinguish reality from appearance and come to terms with the true nature of evil. This struggle can be clearly traced in his attitude to his mother. Initially preoccupied with what he unjustly deems to be Gertrude's overwhelming guilt, Hamlet realizes, after great anguish, that his matter is largely a victim of Claudius and that it is this "vice of kings" (III 49 with whom the ultimate blame must lie.

In Hamlet's first soliloquy his state of mind is characterized by a profound depression and sense of meaninglessness. Seeing "all the uses of this world" as "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" (I.2.133-134) he longs for the oblivion of death.

It soon becomes evident that the source of this deep-seated melancholy is markedly more complex than grief over his father's death. Hamlet's principal concern is the remarriage of his mother to his uncle which he sees as "rank and gross" (I.2.136). His focus is on Gertrude, on the "wicked speed" (I.2.156) with which she seems to have forgotten his god-like father, whom she appeared to love deeply, and entered into an incestuous marriage with the beast-like Claudius. Hamlet's attitude to his mother here, is one of vehement disgust. Important to note is that he mentions Claudius only in terms of his relationship to old King Hamlet, and perceives Gertrude in active terms as instigator of the marriage, as rushing "with such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (I.2.157). At this point Hamlet is enmeshed in a web of deception, unaware that his uncle is a murderer and malicious manipulator. Gertrude is by no means guiltless, but her guilt is marginal in comparison to that of Claudius. It is not that Hamlet's emotional response is excessive, but rather unjustly proportionate in its direction.

When the Ghost first appears to Hamlet he displays preoccupation similar to his son's. As with Hamlet he speaks of the "seeming-virtuous (I.5.45)" of Gertrude and the patent inferiority of Claudius to himself. But there is a fundamental difference in his attitude to Gertrude. Instead of perceiving her as prompting the incestuous relationship, his focus is on Claudius as wicked seducer who "with witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts. Won to his shameful lust" the "will of Gertrude (I.5.42-46). The ghost accurately identifies Claudius as the primary bearer of guilt, at the same time acknowledging that Gertrude's main flaw is her weakness. This is only right considering that he is too well aware of the evil nature of his brother and presumably has intimate knowledge of Gertrude's character.

The factors that delay Hamlet's arrival at a justified attitude to his mother (and certainly in general) are varied and complex. Influential among them is that he finds himself demanding more concrete evidence of Claudius's guilt than is provided by the ghost. Since knowledge of Claudius's evil and manipulative nature is necessary for an accurate conception of Gertrude this is obviously a hindrance to him. It is apparent from Hamlet's letter to Ophelia (II.2.109-123) that he was once idealistic where it came to love. That the corruption of an idealistic person is the creation of a cynic is starkly illustrated in the inherently unjustified misogynistic mind-set that Hamlet develops. The shift from the specific to the general is already in motion in his first soliloquy when he exclaims "frailty, they name is woman" (I.2.146). In submitting to a generalized view of women Hamlet necessarily depersonalizes his relations with the women in his life, seeing them less as individuals than as members of a group he deems homogenous in its contemptibility. The hurt this inflicts on them is clearly unjustified (and in Ophelia's disastrous).

The feat that Hamlet almost casually glosses over his murder of Polonius, an act that will have serious repercussions for him, is indicative of his obsessive focus on Gertrude (Beard, tutorial). Now for the first (and only) time in the play Hamlet is alone with his mother. The end of his first soliloquy was marked by the caution "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (I.2.159), and the fact that Hamlet has been forced to suppress his attitude to Gertrude does much to explain (although not justify) the emotion intensity of the attack he now launches against her. Hurling his verbal daggers one by one he tells her how her act of remarriage. "calls virtue hypocrite" (III 4.43 making any appearance of virtue in her suspect, utterly poisons the innocent love" (III 4.44) old Kind Hamlet had for her and in its incestuous nature, "plucks/The very soul" (III.4.47-48) from the marriage contract and renders religious doctrine a meaningless "rhapsody of words" (III.4.49) Gertrude's resistance to acknowledge her transgression possibly contributes to a mounting hysteria in Hamlet that continues well after she has admitted her guilt and pleads for him to desist, culminating in the graphic image of her living in "the rank sweat of an enseamed bed/stewed in corruption, honeying and making love/Over the nasty" (III.4.83-86).

The image Hamlet used to describe his mother's guilt is wholly appropriate to describe Claudius himself. He is the "rank corruption, mining all within" that "infects unseen" (III.4.144-145) the metaphysical rottenness health and wholeness impossible for anyone. (Walters, lecture). Hamlet's struggle is also one of coming to terms with what it means to be human being existing in a world in which evil and deception are rife, in which "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I.5.109). It is a struggle to understand how people not essentially evil themselves can all too easily become embroiled in the most evil activities. Hamlet is unjustified in his attitude to Gertrude for much of the play and treats her with a brutality she does not deserve. However, it is not difficult to sympathize with him, a man charged with the immeasurably heavy burden of setting fight a time that is "out of joint" (I.5.196) though no fault of his own. He deserves

admiration for not buckling under the weight of the tragic vision but confronting it, uncovering what “is” from what “seems” distinguishing true evil from human weakness and, in the process, arriving at a far more justified attitude to his mother.

King Lear is the tragedy in which evil is shown in the greatest abundance. Here, the evil characters are peculiarly repellent from their hard savagery and good is mingled with their evil. The ‘effect is therefore more startling than elsewhere; it is even appalling.’ [Bradley A C] But ‘in substance it is the same as elsewhere;’ [ibidem] The evil in King Lear is merely destructive. It founds nothing, and seems capable of existing only on foundations laid by its opposites. It is also self-destructive. It sets those beings at enmity that can scarcely unite against a common and pressing danger. The sisters do not even wait till it is past. Finally these beings [all five of them] are dead a few weeks after one sees them first. Three at least die young. The outburst of their evil is fatal to them. The statement of Dr. Johnson that ‘King Lear is a play in which the wicked prosper’ [Johnson Samuel] doesn’t seem appropriate. Thus the world in which evil appears seems to be at heart unfriendly to it and ‘this impression is confirmed by the fact that the convulsion of this world is due to evil, mainly in the worst forms, partly in the milder forms which we call the errors or defects of the better characters. Good, in the wildest sense, seems thus to the principle of life and health in the world; evil at least in these worst forms to be a poison. The world reacts against it violently, and, in the struggle to expel it, is driven to devastate itself.’ [Bradley A C]

The eminent Russian writer Tolstoy criticized the incredibility of the play that characters were unreachable and the conflict didn’t conform to the natural process of the plot (Tolstoy :501-519). What’s striking is the contemporary American writer Jane Smiley, the Pulitzer Prize winner, in 1992, provides a modern version of King Lear and his daughter in her ‘A Thousand Acres’ she mentioned in an interview, “In King Lear there’s a little scene where Goneril and Regan are talking about the number of knights that Lear should be allowed to have around the castle what’s going on with these women? Any they really evil, wicked vipers or are they just women whom the play is casting as evil wicked vipers? It’s really clear that the women are very angry about something that they are who Lear has made them”. (Bacon, 1998:28).

In King Lear, good and evil seem to be presented clearly. Though the old king is really ridiculous on the decision of the inheritance just through those empty words of love, it seems to be reasonable considering the father’s eagerness of daughter’s filial piety. The two seemingly filial daughters are condemned so much because of their evil deeds to the King while the tender and virtuous youngest daughter wins a lot of praise. Actually the former is the devil while the latter is the angel. Once the elder sister – Goneril & Regan get control over the land, they turn to be so “Cruel”. Goneril commits adultery unscrupulously and conspires to kill her sister and husband. She is so cruel and cold-blooded that she signs her name in the order of executing Cordelia and Lear without any hesitation. And even when the conspiracy is disclosed, she shows no sense of regret with a sneering cry, “An interlude!” Regan is no less cruel than her elder sister. Faced with the old father, she is cold and indifferent, she is so bloody with faithful Earl of Gloucester that she urges her husband to kick the Earl’s eyes they are the devil – immoral, terrible and conscienceless. There younger sister Cordelia is just the angel – tender, kind and sincere. In fact, she is the most beloved daughter of Lear. Maybe it is just because of his deep love to her that he expects the most passionate words of love from her. Cordelia is concerned a lot about the old father fearing that her evil sisters may ill-treat the old father. Even when the French army is defeated, and Cordelia and Lear are captured, what she concerns is her father.

“For the, oppressed king, and I cast down; /Myself could else out-frown false fortune’s frown. She reconciles with her father and is still the beloved angel of her father.

Earl of Kent, King Lear’s faithful minister laments, “It is the stars, / The stars above us, govern our conditions, /Else one self mate and mate could not beget/such different issues”. It is it really the case that good or evil of a person is destined? When the fundamental human nature the relationship between father and daughter is broken, the father is no longer respected. He is not a protection to the daughter, but the evil molesting the daughter. As Goneril & Regan speak out in disgust “ than must we look to receive from his age,/not alone the imperfections of long engrafted/condition, but there with the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them”. Evil recoils on the evil doer. King Lear is then no exception. He too gets his due and his unruly ghastliness is punished by death & destruction of friends & foes alike.

‘Evil’, says Bradley ‘has nowhere else been portrayed with such mastery as in the character of Iago’. [Bradley A C] Bradley finds only in Goethe’s Mephistopheles a fit companion for Iago. Mephistopheles, in fact in the strict sense is ‘not a character [ibidem] rather ‘half person, half symbol’. [ibidem] He is ‘earthy, but could never live upon the earth’. [ibidem] Iago’s character in fact has been considered on different levels. At one level, he is simply a man who has been

slighted and revenges himself; or a husband who believes he has been wronged and will make his enemy suffer a jealousy worse than his own; or an ambitious man determined to ruin his successful rival. At the other level Iago is a being that hates good simply because it is good, and loves evil purely for itself. His action is not prompted by on plain motive like revenge jealousy or ambition. It springs from a 'motiveless malignity', or a distinguished delight in the pain of others, and Othello, Cassio and Desdemona are more than the material requisite for the full attainment of this delight.

In order to see the tragedy in Othello and the working of evil it is important to look closely into Iago's inner man. He had in fact very remarkable powers both of intellect and of will. His 'insight, within certain limits into human nature; his ingenuity and address in working upon it; his quickness and versatility in dealing with sudden difficulties and unforeseen opportunities have probably no parallel among dramatic characters [ibidem] Equally remarkable is his strength of will. 'Not Socrates himself not the ideal sage of then stoics, was more lord of himself than Iago appears to be'. [ibidem] He seems to be 'master of all the motions that might affect his will. [ibidem] In the most dangerous moments of his plot he never shows a trace of nervousness. When Othello takes him by the throat he merely shifts his part with his usual instantaneous adroitness. When he is attacked and wounded at the end, he is perfectly unmoved.

Iago, in fact, 'surpasses nearly all the other inhabitants of Shakespeare's world.' [ibidem] He appears almost destitute of humanity, of sympathetic or social feeling. Iago has extraordinary deadness of feeling, for when he has no dislike or hostility to a person; he does not show any pleasure in the suffering of that person. He shows at most the absence of pain. There is for instance, not the least sign of his enjoying the distress of Desdemona. But his sympathetic feelings are so abnormally feeble and cold that when his dislike is roused or when an indifferent person comes in the way of his purpose, 'there is scarcely anything within him to prevent his applying the torture.' [ibidem]

Now the question rises as to what provokes Iago's hostility. Iago, in fact has been represented as an incarnation of envy, which is determined to get on in the world and regards everyone else with enmity as his rival. This may be true or half true, but what is clear is that Iago is keenly sensitive to anything that touches his pride or self-esteem. He has a high opinion of himself and great contempt for others. He is quite aware of his superiority to them in certain respects, and he either disbelieves in or despises the qualities in which they are superior to him. What disturbs or wounds his sense of superiority irritates him at once, and in that sense he is highly competitive. This is why the appointment of Cassio provokes him. This is why Cassio's scientific attainments provoke him. This is the reason of his jealousy of Emilia. He does not care for his wife, but the fear of another man's getting the better of him, and exposing him to pity or derision as an unfortunate husband is wormwood to him; and as he is sure that no woman is virtuous at heart, this fear is ever with him. For much the same reason he has a spite against goodness in men. He has a spite against it not from any love of evil for evil's sake but partly because it annoys his intellect, partly because it weakens his satisfaction with himself, and disturbs his faith that egoism is the right and proper thing, partly because the world being such a fool, goodness is popular and prospers. But he, a man ten times as able as Cassio or even Othello, does not greatly prosper. Somehow, for all the stupidity of these open and generous people, they get on better than the 'fellow of some soul'. And this, though he, is not particularly eager to get on, it wounds his pride. 'Goodness therefore annoys him.' [ibidem] He is always ready to scoff at it, and would like to strike at it. In ordinary circumstances these feelings of irritation are not vivid in Iago – no feeling is so – but they are constantly present.

Iago, in fact 'stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters' [ibidem] because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that 'perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices – such as ingratitude and cruelty – which to Shakespeare were far the worst.' [ibidem] The second is that such evil is compatible, 'and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect' [ibidem] In the latter respect Iago is nearly or quite the equal of Richard, in egoism he is the superior, and his 'inferiority in passion and massive force only makes him more repulsive.' [ibidem]

It is important to consider Iago as not merely negative or evil. He is rather far from it. These very forces that moved him and made his fate – sense of power, delight in performing a difficult and dangerous action, delight in the exercise of artistic skill – are not at all evil things. We sympathize with one or other of them almost every day of our lives. We sympathize with one or other of them, and accordingly though in Iago they are combined with – 'something detestable, and so contribute to evil, as perception of them' is accompanied with sympathy. In the same way, Iago's insight, dexterity, quickness, address, and the like, are in themselves admirable things which every perfect man would possess

them. And certainly he would possess also Iago's courage and self-control, and, like Iago, would stand above the impulses of mere feeling, lord of his inner world. All this goes to evil ends in Iago but in itself it has a great worth; and although in reading of course, we do not sift it out and regard it separately, 'it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror.' [ibidem]

Iago's failure in perception is closely connected with his badness. He was destroyed by the power that he attacked i.e. the power of love. That he was destroyed by it because he could not understand it and he could not understand it because it was not in him. Iago never meant his plot to be so dangerous to himself. He knew that jealousy is painful, but the jealousy of a love like Othello's he could not imagine and he found himself involved in murders which were no part of his original design.

The tragedy of Othello and Desdemona is made by Shakespeare one of the most soul-stirring subjects in the play. It is not merely the story of jealous husbands but the type and symbol of fate which causes the suffering of people who are really innocent. Othello, a great figure worthy of our awe and admiration on account of which we feel his tragedy as one that might as well happen to every one of us. The turning loving husband into a vindictive foe is the real tragedy of Othello. This is done by introducing Iago as the cause of tragic misunderstanding. Iago is indeed the type of tragic fate. And his villainy is so subtle that there is an element of universality in his evil nature.

Tragedy arises out of the suffering of good people. A jealous man cannot be a good man. The suffering of Othello is due to his victimization at the hands of fate, chance, and evil man like Iago. Tragedy becomes interesting and pitiful because of virtues becoming the instrument of vices. Iago uses the good qualities of his victims in order to bring destruction and suffering. Iago is not conceived as an evil person so much as the embodiment of evil itself. He is the extreme opposite of Desdemona who is wholly good. It is malignity, that of fate and chance, and mysterious. Iago's actions are inhuman, and therefore humanly motiveless Coleridge has considered the actions of this man as the motiveless malignity of a motive hunting villain. It is indeed mysteriously surprising that the human nature a villain like. Iago is so much morally depraved and debased as to bring final ruin of innocent persons. His action is devilish and not human by any sense of human morality and human conscience.

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