The Establishment of the Theme of Evil Through Imagery in *Othello*

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Abstract

*Othello*, hailed as one of four major Shakespeare’s tragedies, is a play in which various types of imagery can be found. As with most of Shakespeare’s plays, the function of imagery is to aid not only characterization but also the reinforcement of the main themes as it helps to convey meaning, establish the dramatic atmosphere of the play and facilitate the audience’s understanding of the play. This essay tends to examine the symbolic and contrasting imagery employed in *Othello* and discuss its relevance to the theme of evil in the play. In *Othello*, the symbolic theft and animal images, loaded with evil content and evil intention, are evily employed to manipulate and destroy others while the contrasting black and white images as well as Othello’s lofty and low images picturesquely highlight the devastating effect of evil. By this approach, the theme of evil is thereby elucidated.

Keywords: *Othello*, theft imagery, animal imagery, black and white imagery, theme of evil

1. Introduction

1.1 Imagery

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, a reference book edited by M. H. Abrams, “imagery” is defined as one which is “used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by illusion, or in the vehicles (the secondary references) of its similes and metaphors” (1999). Based upon this definition, the term “imagery” is widened to cover any reference to a distinct object, whether used figuratively or directly. As for the functions of imagery in Shakespeare’s plays, S. L. Bethell claims it mainly performs the functions of clarifying the meaning of the passage where it occurs, of establishing characters and of elucidating a theme (1977).

1.2 Othello

*Othello*, ranked with other three major Shakespeare’s tragedies, shares with these plays a fascination with evil in its most virulent and universal aspect (Cressler, 2019). The evil originates with Iago and later is passed on to others. Iago, whose resentment towards Othello’s success and Othello’s happy marriage to the attractive fair lady Desdemona and Cassio’s promotion and Cassio’s fine manners, plots against all the others and tries to poison others’ mind. Under Iago’s manipulation, Othello, Brabantio and Roderigo more or less become evil Iago’s party (Torkamaneh, 2021), with Othello killing Desdemona, Brabantio’s discriminating accusation of Othello and Roderigo’s complicity in plotting against Othello. Thus, the whole play is imbued with evil. Nevertheless, the establishment of the theme of evil owes its debt to the imagery employed in the play which is loaded with evil intention and evil content and meanwhile reveals the devastating effect of evil. The symbolic animal and theft images are evily employed to poison others’ mind; color imagery in the play not only functions as a tool to manipulate others but also exhibits the devastating effect of evil; Othello’s lofty imagery is served as a contrast to his later low imagery, highlighting the devastating effect of evil.

2. Symbolic Imagery

In *Othello*, characters frequently employ symbolic images to achieve their ends—vicious manipulation and destruction of others. For example, at the sight of Othello and Desdemona’s happy reunion at Cyprus, Iago promises to lower the pegs on the viol and destroys the exquisitely tuned music of Othello’s joy, claiming: “you are well tuned now! / But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music” (Shakespeare, 1988). Iago’s endeavor to destroy the tuned music—a symbol of order indicates his evil determination to turn the world from order to
chaos. Beside imagery of music, the conspicuous color imagery is symbolic too, which would be covered in the latter part, together with its contrasting function. The focus of this part will be two of the main images in the play—thief images and animal images.

2.1 Theft Imagery as a Symbol of Deprivation

Devil-like Iago, devoting himself to destroy Othello, invents thief images, as a symbol of deprivation, to vex and manipulate Brabantio. He yells to Brabantio with a dire accent:

Brabantio! thieves! thieves! thieves!

Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!

Thieves! thieves! thieves! (Shakespeare, 1988)

He further repeats: “you’re robbed…/ Your heart is burst; you have lost half your soul” (Shakespeare, 1988). Evil suffuses theft imagery, not only from the perspective of the unpleasantness attached to “theft” but also from the perspective of Iago’s evil intention in creating such an image. Taking advantage of people’s intolerance of being deprived, Iago employs theft imagery as a symbol of deprivation to convey viciously the message to Brabantio that Othello has deprived him of his daughter, his property and even his fame. Thus, Iago infuriates Brabantio. Led into Iago’s trap, Brabantio later utters exactly the same imagery Iago has passed on to him in his accusation of Othello. The time he finds Othello, he curses: “[down] with him, thief!” (Shakespeare, 1988). Such words as “thou foul thief”, “stolen” keep appearing in his later speeches. Brabantio’s later adoption of theft imagery manifests Iago has successfully manipulated Brabantio and has passed evil to him through constructing theft imagery as a symbol of deprivation.

Brabantio is not the only victim of the symbolic theft imagery; actually, Othello is the one who suffers most from it. In Act Three Scene Three, sly Iago maliciously distorts the fact that Cassio comes to Desdemona to get her help in getting Othello’s forgiveness to their adultery. He blackens Cassio’s character by insinuating to Othello that Cassio is guilty of the crime he commits—adultery and that’s why “he would steal away so guilty like” (Shakespeare, 1988). This is Iago’s first try to taint Cassio’s and Desdemona’s reputation. Theft image here is employed to insinuate that Cassio has deprived Othello of his wife’s chastity. Resorting to the symbolic meaning contained in theft image, Iago plants doubts in Othello’s mind about Cassio’s loyalty and Desdemona’s fidelity. What’s more, in the same Act he takes a step further to aggravate Othello’s doubts by emphasizing the significance of one’s good name and the intolerance of its deprivation, remarking:

[good] name in man and woman…

Is the immediate jewel of their souls.

Who steals my purse steals trash…

…

But he that filches from me my good name

Rob me of that which not enriches him

And makes me poor indeed (Shakespeare, 1988).

Iago offers a judgment of values by overemphasizing that good name is more valuable than material wealth (Xu, 2008). Villain Iago takes good advantage of the assumption how severely a man’s social vanity might be hurt when knowing he has been deprived of his wife’s fidelity to irritate Othello. That’s why Othello gets out of his mind and flies into a full rage since the insinuation means to defy his authority as a man and greatly challenge or question his own manhood and lower his self-esteem, something definitely unbearable. A point finds echo in the Bible: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife” (Exodus), since no man can bear the thought of the deprivation of his own wife’s fidelity. Othello’s utterance: “[a] horned man’s a monster and a beast” confirms that cuckold is humiliating and definitely unbearable to a man (Shakespeare, 1988). Such an image also works well on Othello, which is testified from Othello’s later employment of the same image to console himself: “[he] that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen,/ Let him not know’t and he’s not robbed at all” (Shakespeare, 1988).

Harboring a malevolent intention of destroying all, Iago resorts to the symbolic meaning contained in the evil theft imagery to poison their mind and under Iago’s manipulation, they all repeat the same evil imagery later. Thus, evil spreads all over the play.

2.2 Animal Imagery as a Symbol of Degradation

In the play characters hunting, snaring, trapping or preying upon each other, mischievous, lascivious, cruel or
suffering, is well suggested by the accumulation of animal imagery, as in Iago’s utterance in relation to Othello, Desdemona, Cassio or in Othello’s remarks about Cassio and Desdemona. Thus, the whole play is full of “stain and blackness of evil” (Spurgeon, 1958) and the theme of evil is strengthened.

In the first Act the audience is assailed with Iago’s wicked comparison of Othello and Desdemona’s sexual love to an act of animals, endowed with evil intention:

- an old black ram
- Is tupping your white ewe...
- ...
- ...the devil will make a grandsire of you (Shakespeare, 1988).

A few lines later he furthers poisons Brabantio’s mind with the same image:

- you’ll
- Have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll
- Have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers
- For cousins and jennets for germans (Shakespeare, 1988).

To arouse fury from Brabantio, Iago constructs animal imagery as a symbol of degradation. He conveys provocingly to Brabantio the hint that he’ll have a ram, horse, beast, devil as his son-in-law and horses, coursers, jennets, beast as his descendents. Contriving to break up their marriage, he reduces and degrades Othello, Desdemona and even their not-yet-born offspring to animals. His nasty statement:

- your daughter
- and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs (Shakespeare, 1988).

presents a pornographic picture of two animals mating not only to Brabantio but also to the audience, with the meaning implied extremely obscene and indecent. Merely the thought of having animals as offspring will make one furious, let alone be presented in such an obscene way. The holy love and marriage are degraded by Iago to nothing more than “a set or scion” of “raging motions”, “carnal stings” and “unbitted lusts”.

Dissatisfied with his present life and status, Iago is determined to make use of Othello’s weakness—credulity and sensibilities to manipulate and lead him “by the nose / As asses are” (Shakespeare, 1988) and eventually takes place of him. Using ass as a metaphor and thus degrading Othello, Iago shows his contempt and resentment towards Othello. Furthermore, he cooks up a story out of spite that Cassio has an affair with Desdemona, viciously presenting an obscene and irritating picture through appealing to animal imagery:

- [were] they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
- As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross
- As ignorance made drunk (Shakespeare, 1988).

In the foul imagery Desdemona and Cassio are degraded to goats, monkeys, wolves and fools, with humanity totally deprived; hence a general sense of unpleasantness is much increased and kept constantly before us (Spurgeon, 1958). Iago, by false aspersions and by presenting the most revolting images to Othello’s mind, easily turns Othello’s fondest love for Desdemona to a trembling agony of doubt and hatred. In this way, Othello’s faith in Desdemona, at first only staggered by broken hints and insinuations, is shattered into pieces and his smothered jealousy breaks out into open fury, a point to be confirmed from Othello’s adoption of a way of thinking in animal imagery which has already been powerfully established as Iago’s.

Under Iago’s manipulation, Othello eventually falls into the deep deceit of the belief of Desdemona’s infidelity. Agonized, he laments:

- [if] I do prove her haggard,
- ...
- I had rather be a toad
- And live upon the vapor of a dungeon (Shakespeare, 1988).

The haggard image employed by Othello—an image echoing Iago’s animal images manifests that Iago’s evil begins to take effect on Othello and Othello starts to adopt a way of thinking as evil as Iago’s. In the image
Desdemona is degraded to a haggard; her body “is spoken of by Othello as the chamber in which lewdness occurs, to which chamberers resort, and in which Othello is trapped” (Xu, 38) and the thought of a corner reserved for others’ uses therein is so intolerable to Othello that he rather chooses to degrade himself to a toad. A similar image is constructed in Act Four, in which Desdemona is compared to “a cistern for foul toads to knot and gender in” (Shakespeare, 1988). With Desdemona and himself degraded to a cistern and a toad respectively, Othello’s nausea and bitterness towards Desdemona’s supposed loose sexual behavior is unfolded. Presently after, he takes a step further to liken and degrade Desdemona to summer flies in the shambles which “quicken even with blowing”, painting a repellent and pornographic picture that Desdemona is sexually and morally loose.

With animal imagery as a symbol of degradation, which is loaded with evil content and evil intention, Iago successfully stirs up jealousy and fury inside Othello while Othello’s suffering and revenge in reverse testify the devastating effect of evil.

3. Contrasting Imagery

3.1 The Contrast Between “Black” and “White” Images

“Black” and “white” literally are just two opposite kinds of color; however, in Shakespeare’s time people had the basic and ancient sense that “black” was the color of sin and hence symbolized inferiority and wickedness while “white” symbolically stood for superiority and purity (Hunter, 250). The reason why black men suffer from contempt and self-depreciation is somewhat related to people’s thoughtless equation of black with evil or inferiority. In Othello the audience is repeatedly assailed with the theme of evil through the contrast between two symbolic colors.

Just at the beginning of the play Iago plots against Othello through stirring up the anger and hatred in Brabantio, shouting: “an old black ran/ Is tupping your white ewe” (Shakespeare, 1988). This is the first time in Othello that black and white images are put together. Such contrasting images are evil in two aspects. For one thing the implication of the color contrast is evil. By emphasizing “black” and “white” Iago not only shows his own vulgar prejudice and contempt towards Othello but also successfully implants the bad connotation associated with black in Brabantio and conveys the idea that a mixed-race marriage is unnatural and extraordinary unacceptable. For another thing the intention is full of evil. From Iago’s conversation with Roderigo, we learn of his motive—making a tool of Brabantio to conspire against Othello to relieve his hatred and resentment. Ironically, Brabantio, with his own mind poisoned accuses Othello of poisoning his daughter’s mind with similar contrasting images as Iago’s in lines “a maid so tender, fair” and “the sooty bosom/Of such a thing as thou” (Shakespeare, 1988). Sharp contrast between “fair” and “sooty” testifies that Iago succeeds in his evil efforts to implant his “black-evil” reference in Brabantio’s mind.

Indeed, Othello is another and the most lamentable victim who hands his soul into Iago’s keeping and falls into the deep deceit of taking good for evil and evil for good (Bethell, 42). When Othello is induced in himself the belief of Desdemona’s infidelity, surprisingly the first imputation coming to his mind is his black skin color instead of other things; he laments: “[haply], for I am black” (Shakespeare, 1988). Under Iago’s manipulation, Othello has internalized the equation of black with evil. He even shows self-contempt and depreciation towards the blackness—his own skin color. Such a point is reinforced in Othello’s agonized ejaculation:

[her] name, that was as fresh
As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face (Shakespeare, 1988).

The contrasting imagery of “fresh” and “black” here for one thing manifests Othello’s suffering and bitterness at Desdemona’s descending from purity to supposed infidelity; for another it also demonstrates that Othello’s doubts upon blackness have obviously turned to sort of hatred after his mind is poisoned and himself falls into the sin of jealousy. All his former high praise of Desdemona: “whiter skin of hers than snow/ And smooth as monumental alabaster” (Shakespeare, 1988) vanishes completely. Emily’s cry: “the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!” (Shakespeare, 1988) is thought-provoking. At the prompting of a diabolical counselor the white “reality” of Othello has been reduced to the black “appearance” of his skin color (Hunter, 258). The deeds of Othello, who is led right into Iago’s trap, are at last made to fit in with the prejudice his face at first excited (Hunter, 259).

3.2 The Contrast Between Othello’s Lofty and Low Images

Besides color contrast, contrast between Othello’s so-called “lofty” and “low” images (Morozov, 23) also sheds light on the theme of evil in Othello by revealing the devastating effect of evil. It’s noteworthy that imagery
found in Othello’s speeches falls into two sharply contrasting groups—lofty ones and low ones. In the first phrase of the play Othello is presented as a figure of integrity and nobility, which is discerned from poetic and lofty images employed in his speeches. He employs “the sea’s worth” to show his love for Desdemona; when confronted with fiery Brabantio’s charge, he recommends to “more command with years/ Than with your weapons” (Shakespeare, 1988); he uses “years” and “weapons” to refer to wisdom and force respectively; he employs “nine moons” to replace “nine months”; he speaks of “light-winged toys/ Of feathered Cupid” (Shakespeare, 1988); he describes waves as “hills of seas Olympus-high” and Desdemona’s skin as whiter than snow and “smooth as monumental alabaster” and her name “as fresh as Dian’s visage”; he creates a poetic image “declined/ Into the vale of years” to refer to his growing older. Before the interference of Iago, lofty and poetic imagery is so abundant in Othello’s role that we’re justifiably in “calling it the dominant theme in his world of images” (Morozov, 23).

In contrast to Othello’s lofty and poetic imagery is his low and mean imagery. This sharp contrast is strikingly conveyed in the scene of Othello and Desdemona’s reunion at Cyprus where Othello exclaims:

…let the labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high, and duck again as low

As hell’s from Heaven (Shakespeare, 1988).

Obviously the first, poetic, image is probably Othello’s while the second, low, image, indicative of evil, is borrowed, as we shall see later (Morozov, 24). When induced in himself by devil-like Iago the monster of jealousy, Othello begins to think in Iago’s images. He starts to employ bloody images in his language, exclaiming: “[had] all [Cassio’s] hairs been lives, my great revenge/ Had stomach for them all” (Shakespeare, 1988). His utterances are imbued with pictures of “foul toads breeding in a cistern, summer flies in the shambles, the ill-boding raven over the infected house, a toad in a dungeon, the monster ‘too hideous to be show’, bird-snaring, aspiscs’ tongues, crocodiles’ tears, … ‘goats and monkeys’” (Spurgeon, 335). To these are added more diabolic images such as “whore”, “dog”, “damnation”, “minister”, “haggard” and “prey”.

Othello’s ‘images’ descending from lofty ones to low ones demonstrate that he has been frantically led to believing in Desdemona’s infidelity. Undoubtedly, it’s evilness that has made Othello deviate from a fully noble and confident figure with a great personality and become a party of evil willy-nilly. Hence the devastating effect of evil is exhibited vividly.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the whole play spreads the dark reality originating from Iago, who uses imagery as his tool to kindle in the brain of others a notion that will push ahead with his intrigue. He malignantly constructs and devises images loaded with his evil intention and evil content to make evil effect on others for his own ends. Resorting to the symbolic meaning contained in theft imagery, he stirs up Brabantio’s fury and successfully creates conflicts between Brabantio and Othello; by constructing animal imagery as a symbol of degradation he further infuriates Brabantio, escalates the conflict between the two and more importantly leads Othello to the sin of jealousy; contrasting imagery of black and white contributes to aggravate the relation between the two and shatter Othello’s confidence and faith in Desdemona. Under Iago’s manipulation both Brabantio and Othello begin to adopt the same way of thinking as Iago’s by employing similar theft, animal and color imagery. Therefore, Othello’s original lofty images descend to low ones. In this approach the devastating effect of evil is picturesquely highlighted. Thus, the theme of evil is elucidated.

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