

The Concept of Villain in Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Received: November 7, 2016 Accepted: November 25, 2016 Online Published: November 29, 2016

doi:10.5539/ells.v6n4p75 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v6n4p75>

This research is funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Zarqa University, Jordan.

Abstract

The concept of evil has been researched since the Medieval era, leading to the conclusion that human beings have the freedom to choose good from bad, or evil from good. The origin of evil based on the religious teachings is Satan, who is described as the Rebel Angel, as explained by Dante in *The Divine Comedy* (Alighieri, 1957). Satan tempts human beings into sinning, as revenge against God for placing him in Hell. Based on the psychological point of view developed by Sigmund Freud, the source of evil is id which is distinctive (Freud, 1966). Villain motivations are driven by the tendency of the ego to make realistic decisions about meeting the unrealistic and unreasonable desires by the id. The other aspect that motivates villain actions include jealousy, anger and revenge, as indicated in the play. Shakespeare presents the villain character perfectly in his play *Othello* (1604) through Iago, whose main focus in life is to destroy others "So will I turn her virtue into pitch And out of her own goodness make the net That shall enmesh them all" (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 99). Through his manipulative skills, he makes the other characters trust him "Iago most honest" (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 75) and then fuel conflicts among them. Iago is motivated by anger, revenge and jealousy to commit the evil acts.

Keywords: evil, Medieval era, freedom, Rebel Angel, Satan, psychological, villain, jealousy, revenge

1. Introduction

1.1 The Development of Evil

Over the decades, the concept of evil has attracted attention of different parties including moral and legal philosophers, as well as political theorists. Due to the complexity of the concept, different philosophers have defined evil from varying perspectives. However, the common aspect of evil is that it causes suffering to the victims (Neiman, 2015). Research about the concept of evil reveals that there are two broad categories of evil; moral and natural. The latter refers to the actions that cause human suffering, but which they have limited control over such as the occurrence of earthquakes. Moral evil mainly refers to the type of actions that are intended to hurt others such as theft and murder. Due to the fact that natural evil is unintentional, most of the studies on the concept focus on moral evil. Among the resources that inform about whether actions are evil or good is religion. The development of the concept of evil dates back to the Middle Ages or the medieval period.

During the Middle Ages, the society was well informed about the concept of evil from a religious point of view. The good things that happened in life such as good harvest were associated with God, while the bad occurrences such as violence and theft were referred to as evil. The society believed that life comprised of both good and evil aspects, which presented God and the Devil respectively (Neiman, 2015). Further, the society believed that individuals were free to choose whether to side with God or the Devil through their actions. It was believed that God helped the people to be good, but only if they were committed to praying, confessing sins and attending church services. The concept of evil was regarded as something that was caused by the Devil and was against God's will.

1.2 Man's Psychology

The extensive research in the field of psychology has led to the development of different theories that explain human behavior. Sigmund Freud's Theories are among the approaches that explain the reasons behind different personalities in the society. The theorist explains that to some extent, human beings have no control over their

actions. This is because the actions are dependent on their personalities, which they have little control over. There are three aspects that Freud identifies as the primary determinants of one's personality, that is, id, ego and superego (Freud, 1966). Freud further explains that the determinants of personalities develop at different stages in life and together they define an individual's behavior.

The feature of personality that develops first is the id, and it influences the behavior of infants. It is primitive and works mainly through instinctive deduction. The unique feature of personality determines factors such as one's gender, and any other biological features. The component of personality also determines the level of aggression that an individual has, as well as Eros that determines aspects such as libido (Granek, 2010). The impulsive nature of id explains the emotional responses used by infants to communicate their needs. Freud further explains that id is unconscious and the responses it causes are influenced by instincts. It remains infantile throughout one's life, even after the development of other components of personality. Additionally, the id is not subject to influence by external pressures and remains constant. It is not in touch with reality or logic and it is unconscious. One of the influences that trigger reaction of id is the pleasure principle, which requires that instinctive wants should be satisfied with immediate effect regardless of the consequences. When the id is involved in the primary thinking process, the individuals become irrational and primitive and their minds revolve around fantasies or wishful thinking.

Unlike the id component that is independent of external influences, ego is directly influenced by the external environment experienced by the individuals. The ego plays a crucial role in decision-making because one cannot rely on id alone due to its unrealistic nature. Through reasoning, the personality feature enables individuals to make the most appropriate decisions considering the external environment. The ego helps in making realistic decisions to meet the unrealistic demands by the id component of personality. Similar to the id, the primary focus of ego is to avoid pain by seeking pleasure (Cramer, 2012). However, the ego does not differentiate a rightful act from an offensive one because any action that meets the pleasure demanded or that helps avoid pain is considered right. Unlike the id which is involved in the primary thinking process, the ego engages the secondary thinking thus leading success.

The id and the ego components of personality do not enhance the ability of individuals to know right and wrong, which are defined by the superego (Freud, 1966). Based on the morals and values learnt by the individual, the superego helps in making the right decisions. It controls the impulses developed by the id and ensures that one makes decisions that are consistent with the moral values in the company. The personality component also influences the ego to make realistic decisions that are morally acceptable. One of the variables that comprise the superego is consciousness, which leads individuals to feel guilty when the ego gives in to id demands that are unacceptable (Cramer, 2012). Ego-ideal is the other component of the superego, which informs one of how they are supposed to be. It influences self-perception about aspects such as career advancements and how to conduct oneself in public. The conscience mainly punishes one through guilt for doing wrong while the ideal self rewards individuals with pride when they conduct themselves well. Freud's theory is among the crucial approaches that helps one understand the concept of evil better.

1.3 *The Great Epic of Dante*

Dante's literature is among the resources that develop deeper meaning of the concept of evil from the perspective of Middle Ages. The poet's imagination of life after death is similar to the belief of the society about the concepts of life, death, good and evil developed in the Middle Ages. The *Divine Comedy* describes an awful journey of the poet from hell where he suffers greatly, to purgatory and finally heaven. The journey to heaven is full of hardships, but the joy experienced in paradise makes it worth the suffering (Gragnotati, 2005). In the poem, Dante explains the harsh conditions that are experienced by the people in hell "All hope abandon, ye who enter in!" (Alighieri, 2008, p. 16). He expresses his surprise to find people he least expects there, based on the pretentious lives they led on earth. Famous personalities such as cardinals, Alexander the Great and popular lawyers suffer the tortures experienced in hell due to their sinful nature.

The use of metaphors in the poem aims at provoking readers' imagination to understand the aspects morals discussed. For example, the dark forest could be used to imply the factors that may lead one to evil without their will such as corruption. The lion in the forest symbolizes the hardships and temptations that people strive to avoid in their pursuit for good. The poem makes it clear that redemption is a task faced by a lot of challenges (Szajnberg, 2010). To emphasize the adverse consequences of evil, Dante explains that people do not just go to paradise but have to be judged for the sins they commit on earth (Alighieri, 1957). The poem describes the good life or rewards experienced by the righteous and the harsh punishment that awaits the evil people in hell.

1.4 John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

John Milton's literature is among the resources that support the Medieval Age view of evil in the world (Milton, 1954). Considered as an epic piece of literature, *Paradise Lost* (2007) describes the fall of man and how evil ruined the perfect relationship that existed between human beings and God in the beginnings "... and with ambitious aim Against the Throne and Monarchy of God Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud" (Milton, 2007, p. 14). The result of evil actions leads one to Tartarus or the Hell, and the temptations to do evil acts are mainly caused by Lucifer, a rebel angel (Steiner, 2013). With the help of his agents including Moloch and Mammon, Lucifer accomplishes his mission to destroy the Earth and human beings who are God's best creation. Milton indicates that human beings at the time had the freedom to eat anything on Earth except the tree of knowledge between good and evil, failure to which they would die. The human beings heed to the command until Lucifer disguises himself as a serpent and tempts them to eat the forbidden fruit. The feelings of guilt and shame that the human beings face after committing sin are evident that evil actions have dire consequences.

Milton defines a villain as someone who makes conscious decisions to hurt others, as evident in the Elizabethan villain (Milton, 1954). Most of the ancient literature presents the villain characters in their stories as protagonists or heroes. The villains are given heroic characters that see them succeed in their awful missions. In *Paradise Lost* (2007), Milton assigns Satan a heroic character, as he is able to lead human beings to sin. In the beginning of the poem, Satan is referred to as a Rebel Angel and the source of all evil. His action of tempting human beings to sin makes them to be expelled from the holy garden and they face the consequences of sins. However, towards the end of the poem the readers gain a new perspective of Satan as he is presented as a victim (Woods, 2013). Milton explains that Satan is trapped in Hell "Here in the heart of Hell to work in Fire," (Milton, 2007, p. 16) a place he describes as having very harsh conditions. The description of harsh conditions that Satan experiences in Hell makes the readers understand his strong need to destroy the Earth and human beings, God's favorite creation. The character turns the events and describes God as a merciless and unjust tyrant, leading the readers to sympathize with him. The way that Milton presents Satan as a villain and a hero is similar to Shakespeare's presentation of Iago in *Othello*.

1.5 Shakespeare's Villain

In *Othello*, Shakespeare presents Iago as the villain as indicated by the evil actions that he does. His strong disrespect for morals makes him do evil actions that end up hurting others, including his own wife as when she tells him "Do not you chide; I have a thing for you" he responds to her disrespectfully: "A thing for me? It is a common thing" (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 129).

However, Shakespeare tries to justify the actions of the villain by explaining the motivations behind his actions. One of the forces that drive Iago's evil actions includes jealousy. When Cassio gets a promotion at the workplace, Iago feels jealous and is willing to see him lose his job (Hawkes, 2013). He expresses his disappointment at the fact that the promotion is given to Cassio, arguing that he deserved it instead. He plans with Roderigo to get Cassio drunk and act like a fool and when his plan fails, he tells Cassio's colleagues that he is a drunkard. Iago's strong desire to make Othello suffer is driven by his sexual jealousy because he believes that he has slept with his wife.

The other motivation of Iago's evil acts is anger, which is triggered by the fact that Othello does not recognize his efforts (Grunes & Grunes, 2014). The anger he has, leads to his desire to kill Othello and Cassio. The other motivation that led Iago to commit the evil acts is revenge, which is indicated by his strong desire to disgrace Othello's wife. He plans a situation where Othello's wife is talking with Roderigo and convinces Othello that his wife has an extra-marital affair with Roderigo. The motives that justify Iago's actions do not make him a villain, but his evil character is defined by the fact that he goes ahead to execute the evil plans (Spencer, 1961). The following discussion applies the psychological theories by Freud Sigmund to explain the concept of villain in Shakespeare's *Othello*. The discussion also compares the concept of villain as presented in classic literature by Milton and Dante.

2. Discussion

2.1 Shakespeare's Villain Character in *Othello*

Literature is among the tools that are used to teach the morals of the society through the creative ways that describe stories. In *Othello*, Shakespeare describes a villain character that causes harm to the society in effort to satisfy his selfish ends (Shakespeare, 1993). The villain character is portrayed as having an unhappy life as he is always focused on destroying other people's lives. Iago's destroying Othello is indicated by his words "But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor, And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets He has done my office"

(Shakespeare, 1993, p. 49). Through the character, Shakespeare intends the audience to reflect on their lives and evaluate the extent to which they play villain to other people. The unhappy lives that people lead may be due to the anger, revenge and jealousy that characterize villains. Shakespeare also aims at warning the audience about the possibility of being misled by the villains into being involved in unacceptable behavior to meet their needs (Shakespeare 1993). The character of Roderigo is played by many people in the society, where one acts an accomplice to evil acts that are planned by the villains.

To make literature more interesting, authors often portray the evil character of the villain and then explain their actions in a way that leads the audience to sympathize with the villain. Shakespeare's presentation of the villain character is similar to Elizabethan villain used in classical literature (Grunes & Grunes, 2014). Milton's *Paradise Lost* is among the pieces of literature that bring out a heroic character of the villain (Milton, 1954). The scary imagery used to describe Hell makes the audience sympathize with Satan and at the same time blame God for having sent Satan to Hell. The readers sympathize with the villain because they understand the reasons he is willing to destroy the Earth and everything created by God. In *Othello* (1604), Shakespeare uses a similar description of the villain character, where he describes the evil acts he does and justifies them by providing reasons for the motive. An evaluation of the role played by the villain in the story leads to the conclusion that he is not evil, but his actions are caused by the external environment. For example, his desire to destroy Othello is brought about by the realization that he has an affair with his wife. This is obvious when Iago says:

... I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office. I know not if 't be true,
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety. (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 49)

The explanation of the villain's motive to hurt Othello makes the readers shift the blame to the victim, who is considered promiscuous and immoral.

2.2 Sigmund Freud's Theories

The theory developed by Freud enhances the ability of Shakespeare's readers to understand the actions of the characters well. In the theory, Freud asserts that the behavior of individuals is greatly determined by their personality that is influenced by the id, ego and superego components (Fromm, 2013). The id is the unreasonable component of personality, responsible for unrealistic expectations that individuals have about life. It explains the unreasonable actions by villains because its actions are highly dependent on instinct. To Freud "The id is, in short, the source of all our aggressions and desires. It is lawless, asocial, and amoral. Its function is to gratify our instincts for pleasure without regard for social conventions, legal ethics, or moral restraint" (Guerin, 2005, p. 157).

In *Othello*, the factors that motivate the villain to hurt other characters are based on his unrealistic expectations about life. For example, the complaint that he deserves the promotion instead of Cassio is unrealistic because he cannot get the job as it is already given to someone else. The strong desire to kill Othello for failing to recognize his efforts is a response to his instincts, which is controlled by the id. The villain is also unreasonable in his action to disgrace Othello's wife, simply because he suspects that he has an affair with his wife. Throughout the story, it is clear that the villain's actions are unreasonable although he tries to justify them with motives.

Freud further explains that the behavior of an individual is determined by their ego, which is a realistic component (Wittels, 2013). It plays a crucial role in enabling one make realistic decisions about how to meet the demands of the id, which are unrealistic. In *Othello* (1604), it is evident that the villain's ego plays a significant role in influencing his decision to commit evil actions against the begrudged individuals. The ego helps the villain fulfill the evil desires of the unreasonable id so that the villain becomes satisfied. For example, the plot by the villain to have Cassio drunk and make a fool out of himself "If I can fasten but one cup upon him, With that which he hath drunk tonight already," (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 79) is a fulfillment of his id demand to destroy him (Altman, 2010). The action is strongly driven by jealousy and he believes that he will get the job by destroying Cassio's reputation. His ego also leads him to plot a marital conflict between Othello and his wife, due to the need to fulfill the id demand of disgracing Othello's wife. The id leads him to believe that he could get even with Othello by sleeping with his wife, now that he had an affair with his wife. When efforts to fulfill the id fail, the ego devises other plans that may be helpful. In the story, when the villain fails to succeed in destroying Cassio, his ego develops another plot to meet the demand of the id. He tells Cassio's colleagues about how bad a drunkard he is, with the hope that he would get a demotion.

One of the differences between the id, ego and superego is their ability to distinguish right from wrong. Freud explains that the id does not help one differentiate between good and evil because it is not in touch with the reality. The ego is influenced by logic and is influenced by activities in the external environment, but it still does not distinguish between good and bad. In his argument, Freud explains that the ego influences decisions that meet the unreasonable demands of the id regardless of their impact on the society of the victim “the ego stands for reason and good sense” (Guerin, 2005, p. 157). In *Othello* (1604), the villain did not care about the consequences of his evil actions to the victims because his ego was responsible for the decisions (Mullen, P. E. (2001). The superego is the only component of personality that considers the moral implications of the actions by punishing wrongful actions through guilt. However, in *Othello*, it is evident that the villain’s actions are mainly influenced by the id and the ego. He has unrealistic expectation of his career, which lead him to make evil and unreasonable decisions. The actions by the villain are a response to his instincts, implying that he is mainly influenced by the id. The fact that the villain makes decisions devoid of their moral implications implies that he is influenced by his ego.

2.3 The Unconscious Self

The decisions made by individuals are enhanced by the extent to which individuals are aware of their desires. One’s ego plays a significant role in informing them about their self-knowledge, but it does not inform them fully about their desires. The unconscious self is the aspect responsible for some of the actions that people do because it is driven by unrealistic demands. The term unconscious implies that the demands do not consider the reality or logic because the external environment is not considered (Jung & Shamdasani, 2010). One’s ego is unaware of the unconscious factors in the external environment, thus does not provide an accurate presentation of the self. Based on one’s ego, the self is defined by the social and other external factors in the environment without considering the unconscious aspects that may influence their behavior. Therefore, it is clear that human beings have limited control over their behavior because they are only aware of the factors in their immediate environments. The unconscious self may be highly influential compared to the ego.

Concerning villain character observed among individuals in the society, it is clear that they have limited control over their actions. The individuals are mainly influenced by factors such as anger and jealousy, which may be brought about by the unconscious self (Hallaq, 2011). The villain’s unreasonable and unrealistic demands are out of their control because they are influenced by the unconscious self. In *Othello* (1604), the villain has a character that hurts many people and who does not seem to care about the effect of his actions on others. Shakespeare explains the motives that influence the villain’s actions and it is evident that he is not in control of his actions. The unconscious self of the villain has desires or demands that the villain is not aware of. The villain’s ego is unaware of the demands by the unconscious self, making him act towards satisfying forces that he cannot control. Therefore, the evil actions by the villain as presented by Shakespeare cannot be blamed on the villain but his conscious self.

2.4 Shakespeare’s *Othello*

Shakespeare’s primary motive of writing the play is to enlighten the society about the consequences of jealousy in the society. The author aims at educating people about the reality of being jealous in the society (Grunes & Grunes, 2014). Throughout the play, the characters which are jealous are busy plotting and executing evil plans to destroy the others. Jealousy is shown since the beginning of the play where Roderigo and Iago approach Brabantio, Othello’s father-in-law and inform him that his daughter was ‘stolen’ by Othello (Tomlinson, 2010). At first, one may think that the two characters act on good faith but this is not the case because they want to destroy Othello’s marriage. The interest of the Roderigo is to see Othello’s marriage break because he hopes to woo his wife to love him. Othello is accused by Brabantio as having bewitched his daughter, but the Duke sides with him and he is allowed to continue with the marriage. Iago is obsessed with hurting Cassio, and he lies to Roderigo that Cassio has an affair with Othello’s wife (Cefalu, 2013). Iago succeeds in making sure that Cassio loses his current position by telling Othello about the conflict between him and Roderigo. Cassio becomes desperate and needs his job back and Iago finds another chance to break Othello’s marriage. He waits for a chance when Cassio is with Desdemona and tells Othello that he thinks his wife has an affair with Cassio. Iago goes to the extent of planting false evidence in Cassio’s room and ensures that Othello sees it.

2.5 Iago as Shakespeare’s Villain Character in *Othello*

A villain is an individual who is willing to go to any extent to harm others through evil and cruel actions. In *Othello* (1604) Iago’s actions perfectly represent the villain in him because he is focused on destroying others due to jealousy. The failure by Othello to recognize his efforts makes Iago angry and he is determined to see him suffer. He is aware that the most effective way to hurt Othello is through breaking his marriage and he seeks the

collaboration of Roderigo. He takes advantage of the love that Roderigo has for Desdemona to convince him to join him in the plot to separate her from Othello. The jealousy that Iago feels when Cassio gets a job promotion drives him to convince Roderigo to kill him.

2.6 Iago's Way of Manipulating Others and Achieving His Goals

Iago pretends to be a good friend to Roderigo, Othello and Cassio yet he manipulates them to rise against each other to fulfill his evil desires. He takes advantage of the love that Roderigo has for Desdemona to ensure that he helps him take Othello down. Further, he convinces Roderigo that the best way to get Desdemona to love him is by killing Cassio, who he claims has an affair with her. Filled with anger and jealousy, Roderigo falls for Iago's manipulative strategies. He says: "Were I the Moor I would not be Iago. In following him I follow but myself" (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 7). In this quote, Iago expresses his desire to manipulate Roderigo by citing that he was using him for his selfish desires but not love. Iago also manipulates Othello, by making him believe that his wife has an affair with Cassio but his only motive is to destroy Cassio and break Othello's marriage (Grunes & Grunes, 2014). Emilia explains Iago's intentions to plant evidence stating:

My wayward husband hath a hundred times
 Wooed me to steal it, but she so loves the token—
 For he conjured her she should ever keep it—
 That she reserves it evermore about her
 To kiss and talk to. I'll ha' the work ta'en out,
 And give't Iago. What he will do with it,
 Heaven knows, not I. (Shakespeare, 1993, p. 129)

He also manipulates Cassio and makes him believe that he is on his side but his plan is to make him get closer to Desdemona so that he can lie to Othello that his wife is unfaithful. It is evident that Iago has perfected the art of manipulation and carries out his evil plans through other characters who regard him as a friend (Isaksson, 2014). Shakespeare uses the villain character to encourage people to think before getting involved in any action.

3. Conclusion

Shakespeare succeeds in portraying the villain character in the play through Iago, whose main focus throughout the play is to destroy others. One of the realities shown by the characters is that the source of all evil is jealousy. In the play, evil actions are perpetrated by individuals who are jealous of others and are willing to do anything as long as it hurts the other parties. The author also succeeds in warning the audience about the villains who manipulate them to do their actions, by making them believe that the actions are justified. The conflict between Roderigo and Cassio and between Othello and Cassio is a result of the success of Iago in manipulating the individuals. When reading the play, one wonders how anybody can be so evil but a deep analysis of the literature reveals that Iago could have been responding to the desires of his unconscious self. The personality theory by Sigmund enhances the understanding of the villain's actions by explaining the motives behind his actions. Based on the theory, Iago seems to be influenced by the id and ego because he does not show any remorse or guilt for his actions. Additionally, the villain reacts to fulfill his unrealistic desires that are driven by the id.

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