SELECTED LITERARY CRITICISM:

Irving Ribner: Tragic Pattern.

Othello is a tragedy of human weakness and imperfection leading to a wrong moral choice. There is consequent degeneration and a destruction of human value, but the end, through the operation of divine grace, there is a recognition of error, with consequent remorse, expiation, and the promise of salvation. Othello asserts the mercy of God as surely as Shakespeare proclaimed it in *Measure for Measure*.

John Bayley: The Complexity.

In claiming for the play a far greater degree of complexity than is generally assumed, I am not saying that it closely resembles Shakespeare’s other great plays, or that it works in the same way as they do. Othello is a tragedy of incomprehension, not at the level of intrigue but at the very deepest level of human dealings.

M.R. Ridley: The Character of Emilia.

She is one of those ‘ordinary’ people whom Shakespeare was fond of introducing passing through the turmoil on an even keel, with reasonable perceptiveness and much common sense, acting as a foil to one or more of the leading characters, and acting also on occasion as chorus or commentator.

Bradley: Cassio’s Character.

Cassio is handsome, light-hearted, good-natured young fellow, who takes life gaily, and is evidently very attractive and popular. Othello, who calls him by his Christian name, is fond of him; Desdemona likes him much; Emilia at once interests herself on his behalf.

R.B. Heilman: Dramatic Irony.

There are a number of ironic relations in which the future reverses the certainly, promise, oath or hope expressed in the present. Othello is sure that his love of Desdemona will not interfere with his execution of duties at the front. It is just this domestication of the warrior that takes place.

………………

William Shakespeare’s

Othello

# “Never before had Shakespeare so vividly pointed to the moral contradictions of love and jealousy and Othello’s feelings for Desdemona are tellingly paralleled in the perverted love and jealousy of Othello’s lieutenant, the ‘honest Iago’.”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The pathos and painfulness in “Othello” is profound, excruciating, and intense, and no play of Shakespeare, even “King Lear”, oppresses us with the same feeling of acute painfulness as does the tragedy of Desdemona and Othello. There are certain scenes in “Othello” which are intensely pathetic and painful and far excel the pathetic scenes of “King Lear”, “Macbeth”, and “Hamlet”. “Othello” is undoubtedly, the most painfully exciting and the most terrible of Shakespeare’s tragedies. It is a painful, gloomy and harrowing tragedy.

What are the causes responsible for the acute painfulness and pathos in “Othello”? A number of factors combined to make the tragedy so excruciatingly pathetic and moving. In the first place, the secular atmosphere of the play had much to do with the element of pathos in the play. In “Othello” we are circumscribed to a narrow and limited world of worldly value without any feeling of spirituality coming to our relief. There is practically no allusion in the play to a spiritual significance of human sufferings and sorrows. The feeling of painfulness and unhappiness experienced at the tragic spectacle of misery, would have considerably allayed if Shakespeare had established even some distant relationship between human suffering and some higher reality or super-human fate crushing human beings. “There is nothing in the play which would make us aware of a vaster significance enveloping the tragic experiences embodied in it.” Secondly, in “Othello” there is very little of dramatic relief. In other tragedies of Shakespeare, scenes of suffering and pathos alternate and this change brings relief to our frayed and jagged nerves. This device is very skillfully used by Shakespeare in Macbeth. But at, in Othello the action of the tragedy after the third scene of the Third Act advances in a mounting crescendo of tragic painfulness without any pause and with ever accelerated speed to the final catastrophe. The tension after Othello’s firm resolve to murder Desdemona is kept on a very painful height and it never descends. It eventually ends in the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona. Thirdly, the subject of sexual-jealousy is in itself very ambition might have been that of a guilty man, but there is something of nobility and dignity about it. The element of sexual-jealousy appears to be very revolting and disgusting. “What spectacle”, says Dr. Bradley, “can be more painful than that of this feeling turned into a tortured mixture of longing and loathing, the ‘golden purity’ of passion split by poison into fragments, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness in naked grossness, and he writhing before it but powerless to deny its entrance, gasping inarticulate images of pollution and finding relief only in a bestial thirst of blood.”

**BRABANTIO**

O heaven! How got she out? O treason of the blood!
Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds
By what you see them act. Is there not charms
By which the property of youth and maidhood
May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,
Of some such thing?

Othello’s stabbing of himself makes the tragic story of his life extremely pathetic. Fate and character act and react upon each other in every Shakespearean tragedy. Both of them contribute to the final catastrophe. Opinions may differ about the relative importance of fate and character. We can arrive at a decision only after a careful study of the part played by them.

Desdemona, more than Othello, provides matter for grief, tears, and sorrow. She is a spectacle which moves our sympathy, pity and grief. The suffering of Desdemona was almost unendurable because it is intense and undeserved. It is not of her own creation. It is thrust upon her by the sinful machinations of an arch-villain. She is pure and innocent, and yet she has to go through slanderous attacks on her fair name and suffer all this timidly and submissively without raising a voice of protest against her oppressor. She is innocent, pure, helpless, has to undergo unmerited suffering without any reasonable cause at the hands of the man whom she loves so dearly. “She is” says Mrs. Jameson, “a victim consecrated from the first, ‘an offering’ without blemish, all harmony, all grace, all purity, all tenderness, all truth. But at, alas to see her fluttering like a cherub in the talons of a friend!-to see her- O poor Desdemona.’’ The smothering of Desdemona-in her bed by Othello without permitting her to live till the next day is truly very moving. The murder scene of Desdemona is intolerable and unbearable. Dr. Johnson was repelled by it and simply could not stand it. It is so tragic and so pathetic. The helplessness of Desdemona and the spectacle of tragic pity produced by her suffering find nice expression in the words of Dr. A. C. Bradley, who says: “Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever; she cannot retaliate even in speech, no not even in silent feeling. And the chief reason of her helplessness only makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. I would not challenge Mr. Swinburne’s statement that we pity Othello even more than Desdemona; but we watch Desdemona with unmitigated distress. We are never wholly uninfluenced by the feeling that Othello is a man contending with another man; but Desdemona’s suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being she adores.”

Almost all the tragedies of Shakespeare are characterized by the element of pathos and painfulness. By its very nature the basis of a tragedy is pathos. The tragedy of the hero and the heroine melts our hearts and stirs us deep enough to pity them. The atmosphere of a tragedy is composed of pathos and pity, and pathos wring tears from our eyes fir the unfortunate sufferers.

Let us now study this problem with special reference to Othello. Let us at first examine the part played by fate in shaping the tragedy of Othello. There is no supernatural element in Othello, but the part played by accident is so great that our minds are haunted by a sense of fatality. We feel that some strange and unseen power is driving Othello to his doom from which no escape is possible. For example, Desdemona drops her handkerchief just at the time when Othello’s mind has been clouded with suspicious against her. Chance seems to be working against Othello and not in favour. A chance meeting of Othello and Cassio would have revealed Iago’s plot and thus saved the life of Desdemona but this never takes place till the very end when it is too late. Cassio comes in the presence of Othello only when he is in a trance. Had he arrived a few moments earlier, Othello would certainly have put questions to him about the handkerchief and the whole plot would have been revealed. Again we find that Bianca arrives with the handkerchief in her hand just at the time when Othello is watching Cassio from a distance. The sight of his own handkerchief in the hand of Bianca completes his misunderstanding of the real situation and transforms his jealousy into extreme fury. Even the innocent words of Desdemona are uttered at a time when they are liable to mis-interpretation. When Othello says, “Who can control his fate?” we find that he is voicing our own sentiments. Even in the last scene, we find that Emilia comes and knocks at the door just after Othello has strangled Desdemona in bed. It is the cruel irony of fate that she should have come a minute earlier. Had she come a bit early her severe knocking on the door might have disturbed Othello and things might have taken a different course. All these things taken together produce a strong impression on our minds that fate plays a considerable part in bringing about the tragedy of Othello. Stopford Brooke remarks, “Fate dominates Macbeth but here in Othello chance or unreason, blind and deaf, is at the centre of human life. The conception of the play, the movement of it, the events in it, the bringing about of the catastrophe, are all apparently in the realm of chance.”

The introduction of the supernatural agency in the tragedies also gives us an impression of the strange and unseen power. The witches in Macbeth seem to have foreknowledge of the future and their prophetic saying comes to be true. The operation of chance or accident is another factor which contributes to this feeling of fatality. It is a mere chance that Edgar arrives in the prison too late to save Cordelia. The attack by the pirate ship in Hamlet is also an accident which brings back hamlet to Denmark. We find that a mere accident sometimes exerts a very great influence on the future course of events. Thus, the sense of fatality as present in Shakespearean tragedies. At the same time, the importance of character or responsibility cannot be minimized. The tragedy of Hamlet is due to his inability to adjust himself to his surroundings. The tragedy of Macbeth is due to his ambitious nature and not to the prophetic saying of the witches. Shakespeare’s tragedies are therefore tragedies of character.

Of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum

Pathos and painfulness are experience owing to the magnitude and intensity of the sufferings of Othello and Desdemona. Othello’s speeches, when he is in a state of excruciating pain and suffering, are painfully pathetic and the villain Iago gloats over them. Othello’s speech in the Third Scene of the Third Act-

“O, now for…occupation’s gone! (Lines 353-363)

and this lamenting cry:

Had it pleas’d heaven/To try me with affliction, ……

………..

To knot and gender in!” (IV- II-48-63)

are truly pathetic and touching. Othello’s last speech is characterized by a note of pathos.

The last words of the above quotation are significant because they suggest an important aspect of Othello’s character. We should remember that Iago’s plot would not have succeeded in the case of any other person than Othello. If we closely study the Third Scene of the Third Act, we shall find how Othello arrives at the conclusion about the disloyalty of his wife without a proper investigation of the case. Othello’s peace of mind is completely disturbed by the mere suggestion of Iago about the possible infidelity of Desdemona. Othello cries out, “Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content…Othello’s occupation is gone.” These words reveal a bitter agony in his mind. But of, we know that he has not yet received any concrete evidence of his guilt of his wife. He demands a living reason from Iago that his wife is disloyal. The only living reason that Iago offers is the story of Cassio’s dream and his mutterings. Othello is terribly upset to hear about this dream of Cassio. The next evidence that Iago gives is that he saw Cassio wiping his beard with the handkerchief which Othello had given to his wife. These two so-called ‘living reasons’ are sufficient evidence to Othello to convince him about the guilt of his wife. He cries out: “O that the slave had forty thousand lives! One is poor, too weak for my revenge.” This is about Cassio.

Let us now consider the tragedy of Othello in the light of the ideals as set forth above. It has been spoken of by competent critics as the most tremendous tragedy even among the masterpieces of Shakespeare. The tragedy involves the ruin of three characters- Othello, Desdemona and Iago, the former two giving rise to true tragic pathos, the later only involving the ruin of evil by the force of evil itself. The central character of the hero Othello is as important as the character of Desdemona. It is doubtful if the latter is not more inherently tragic than the former. Othello is a noble-minded, generous soldier, utterly ignorant of the world of wickedness and its mean designs. His gross stupidity is irritating, his blind trustfulness is appalling.; but far from being vexed at his simplicity or enraged at this blindness , we are numbed by the infinite pathos of his situation and the malice of chance which puts him in the hand of the one man in the world who could have the heart to ruin him. Desdemona is pure as a saint, innocent as a child, generous as the fruitful earth. She does not know even to defend herself in circumstances which irritate even the simplest lamb to rebel. The force of evil- causeless envy, cold intellectual malice, heartless delight in egoism- is made concrete in the person of Iago. He takes the meanest advantage of the noble trustfulness of the Moor, abuses his simplicity, and out of the single weaknesses of his character forges the weapon which kills the souls of two of the noblest in imaginative creation. The noble Moor is subjected to an external conflict between his love and his sense of honour. He finds himself in situations which seem cruelly determined to undo him. Chances array themselves against him and poor Desdemona; while not a single chance that might at one stroke bring down the whole fabric of Iago’s plot favours him by timely occurrence. He discovers everything, but discovers a bit too late. It is as if fate had appointed the inexorable tragic catastrophe for him only to relent when it was sure that the discovery of his mistake would lead him to end his own life by violence.

“Damn her, lewd minx; O, damn her!

Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw

To furnish me with some swift means of death,

For the fair devil.”

The first time that Othello accuses Desdemona of presenting the handkerchief as a token of love to Cassio is in the closing scene of the play. But of, at that time his mind is already made up about killing Desdemona. He accuses Desdemona not to find out the truth but only to give her a chance for confession and prayer. All the denials by Desdemona of her guilt cannot convince Othello about her innocence. This is the man who once said to her father, “My life upon her faith!”

Thus, we find that Othello has not only decided that Desdemona and Cassio are guilty of adultery with each other but also has finally determined to put both of them to immediate death. We should also remember that Othello has not yet met Desdemona and demanded the handkerchief from her. The fateful meeting takes place in the next scene. The man who can decide about the disloyalty of his wife and thinks of putting her to death even before asking her a single question is extremely rash and impulsive in temperament. This rash impulsiveness is the tragic trait in his character which is really responsible for the tragedy. But for, this tragic weakness in his character all the accidents in the play and all the evil designs of Iago combined together could not have destroyed the peace and happiness of Othello’s life.

About Desdemona he says:

The strongest drawback in Othello’s character is that he is primarily a man of action who is totally incapable of calm and cool reflection. He is not suspicious by nature but once he is excited he has neither the capacity nor the time for cool and calm consideration. It is this drawback in the character of Othello that is finally responsible for the tragedy.

If we closely examine the progress of action in this play, we shall find that the tragedy despite many chances and accidents is ultimately due to the characters of Iago and Othello. In the first place, we should remember that Iago is reputed to be extremely honest. Everyone in the play refers to him as ‘honest Iago’. It is natural that Othello reposes trust and confidence in his honest friend. Iago is also an expert in utilizing every possible occasion to his own advantage. He has a wonderful presence of mind which saves him from every difficult situation. For example, Cassio arrives at the time when Othello is in a trance. His stay till the recovery of Othello would have brought them face to face. That would have revealed the plot of Iago and brought about his death and ruin. Iago therefore manages to send Cassio away from the place. Had Iago been less tactful and astute in dealing with the situation, the plot would not have succeeded. The success of the plot against Othello, therefore, depends not so much on chance or accident but on Iago’s mastery in utilizing those chance occurrences and accidents to his own advantage. It is not the dropping of the handkerchief that brings about the tragedy but it is the way in which Iago utilizes this accident to his own advantage and to the misfortune of Othello. Charlton rightly remarks: “Iago is a consummate master of villainy, but he shows it not so much by subtlety of intrigue as by astuteness in diagnosing the situation and in daring them to put his whole trust in a device appropriate to that occasion, but to that occasion alone, knowing full well that what will infallibly trap Othello would be ineffective against another man.”

In the final analysis, we find that the plot of Iago is successful because of the characters of Iago and Othello. Othello trusts Iago because he is universally reputed honest. Besides, Othello is a man of action who cannot think calmly over the problems which face him. Character plays a more prominent part than fate in ever y tragedy of Shakespeare and Othello is no exception to this rule. Dr, Bradley has beautifully summed up the whole position in the following words; “Iago’s plot is Iago’s character in action; and it is built on his knowledge of Othello’s character, and could not otherwise have succeeded.”

When Shakespeare was at work at Othello, i.e., about 1604, he had before his mind certain ideals of tragic effect which he sought to achieve, of course, with varying diversity of details in different cases, but with a certain common artistic method. The ideal and the artistic method may be put in the following general terms, more or less applicable to “the four scheme tragedies and the three only less wonderful Roman plays”:

 (a) The focus of the tragic interest is always the character of the central figure, the hero. “Where Shakespeare in his conception of tragedy,” observes Herford, “went beyond his predecessors (and his own early efforts) was above all in the character of the hero.” (b) The hero is generally a man of lofty and almost superhuman dispositions, thinking and doing great things in a sordid world which is opposed to him. (c) he is one who has some inherent weakness- may be the weakness of excessive greatness or goodness, may be the weakness of personal ambition or personal pride, through which his ultimate fall is to come about. (d) He is subjected to both external and internal conflicts which oppress his soul and madden him into what the world always calls folly. (e) The situation and circumstances in which he is placed are such as are specially suited to work upon his peculiar weakness, bringing about his ultimate ruin. (f) There is always a sinister, mysterious force, call it chance or fate or destiny, or accident which seems bent upon undoing him and against which he is powerless. (g) The fall of man is calculated to excite pity, horror, fear etc., but pathos and sympathy of the audience are never lost by him; the moral order of the universe is rather justified than violated by the tragic end. (h) The death of the hero and that of some others mark the close of the drama; but death is of little account in accounting for the tragic feeling because it is the defeat of ruin of the soul which precedes the death that is the real culmination of the action issuing from character.

Thus in the tragedy of Othello Shakespeare has made his characters fight in the dark, and Fate has brought each to his destined end. But at, the close of tragedy raises us “above despair, Desdemona’s adhesion to her husband and to love survived the ultimate trial. Othello dies upon a kiss. He perceives his own calamitous error, and he recognizes Desdemona pure and loyal as she was. Goodness is justified of her child. It is evil which suffers defeat” (Dowden). The villain Iago does not turn out victorious in the end; he is caught at last in his own toils and is led to his trial.

**IAGO**

O villainous! I have looked upon the world for four
times seven years; and since I could distinguish
betwixt a benefit and an injury, I never found man
that knew how to love himself.

A study of the Shakespearean tragedy always fills our mind with a feeling of the presence of a mysterious power which governs human actions. There are many passages in the tragedies which also give an expression to this feeling. For example, we find the following passage in King Lear:-

“As flies to wanton boys, so are we to gods;

They kill us for their sport.”

In Othello, the external conflict occurs between Brabantio and Othello in the early part of the play. Here, Brabantio opposes the marriage between Othello and Desdemona. He says that the daughter has no right to choose her own husband. We see that Roderigo and Iago arouse Brabantio from his sleep at midnight and inform him of the elopement of his daughter with Othello. Brabantio sends his party in search of Othello and Desdemona. We find that there are two opposite groups- the supporters of Brabantio and the supporters of Othello who face each other with drawn swords. Othello succeeds in preventing the clash between two groups. In the council chamber of the Duke of Venice, Brabantio accuses Othello of practicing witchcraft upon his daughter. Othello replies to the charges of Brabantio by narrating how he had won the heart of Desdemona through the romantic tales of his adventures. In this conflict Othello wins because Desdemona supports Othello. This external conflict, however, does not add to the crisis of the play. Othello and Desdemona then leave for Cyprus and we witness the enormous joy of Othello as he is reunited with Desdemona and in honour of his marriage, Othello proclaims public revelry and festivity. Thus the external conflict reaches climax.

Shakespeare is a consummate artist and his technique in his tragedies is unique. The plot construction in Othello is different from the other Shakespearian tragedies. In Shakespearian tragedy, the action develops through conflict. The conflicts are of the kinds- external and internal conflict. In an external conflict, the conflict may occur between two persons or group of persons representing different interests or points of view. In an internal conflict, there may be a conflict between two ideas in the mind of an individual. This individual who is generally the hero is torn within himself and as a result he suffers immensely. Through the conflict, the soul of the hero is laid bare before us and his sufferings arouse terror and pity in our hearts. The conflicts begin rather late in Othello but once it begins, it advances without pause to the final catastrophe which is horrible and extremely painful.

Some critics are of the opinion that Othello’s suffering is more intense than that of Desdemona. In Othello, Shakespeare has presented before us the torn soul of Othello. In our mind’s eye we see the agonies which he suffers. There is chaos within him and torture he undergoes in his mind is beyond expression. When Iago’s villainy is revealed he kills himself because the pain is unbearable to him. According to Swinburne, Othello offers more textual and editorial problems than most of the other plays of Shakespeare. So it is not surprising that Swinburne thinks so because the conflict that the play has within itself and the conflict that causes within us, is so profound that it is not surprising that it arouses conflicting emotions in our minds and it leads to the difficulty to interpret the play.

Othello’s spiritual agony and suffering is terrible and intense as he wavers between love and honour. He thinks himself to be the priest of honour and justice. As he is convinced of his wife’s faithfulness, he finds no option but to kill and sacrifice her. For him, the murder of Desdemona is a sacrificial ritual. When Othello comes to know that Iago has cheated him and that Desdemona was in fact chaste and virtuous, the sacrifice seems to him the murder of his innocent wife. It is now no more a religious act. It is a sin and a crime and in order to expiate for his sins, he coolly directs his dagger into his own mortal body. His death finally relieves the tragic tension. We are owed by the rise and fall of a noble soul. The terrible cost, at which the sins are expiated, if we can judge that they indeed are, fills us with revulsion and horror.

In Othello, Shakespeare has given us a realistic picture of life; he is not a pessimist giving us an unclear picture of life. The sexual jealousy and lop-sided passions have resulted to greater catastrophes in everyday life through centuries. What makes Othello such a painful and terrible tragedy is the conflict in Othello’s mind which causes tremendous suffering and agony in his mind. Othello is also a tragedy of misunderstanding; Othello is deceived by one whom he considers to be his true friend. Othello’s trusting nature and his inability to reason out things by his own faculty to think leads to the tragedy. The same thing can occur in anybody’s life who is driven by blind passion, impotent rage and brutality. Shakespeare thus conveys the message that we should be guided by our existing capacity to think, which in turn can only be based on an inviolate moral code of conduct.

The real conflict and crisis of Othello differs from other Shakespearian tragedies because in this tragedy the real conflict that sends the hero to his doom begins rather late. The real conflict comes to life in the Temptation Scene i.e., Act III, Scene iii and then it moves forward without any intermission till it reaches its catastrophe in Act V. the action is so thrilling and horrible that we tend to shrink. When in the final catastrophe a completely maddened Othello murders Desdemona, our revulsion is complete. We are simply driven by the whirlwind movement in the action. Like other Shakespearean tragedy, there is no tragic relief. The internal conflict in the play is seen in the mind of Othello and he waves between love and jealousy and between loyalty and honour. Othello is frank, honest, truthful and confiding and Iago works upon his noble nature, inflames his passion and instigate him to murder both Desdemona and Cassio. The Moor is of a trusting nature which leads him to be susceptible to suspicion and he falls an easy prey to the scheming of Iago. Othello suffers the torments of hell in the process. The thought of Desdemona’s love and beauty haunt him and her purity and virtue are in conflict with what Iago tells him. When his faith in her is shattered, life seems to be meaningless for him. Finally he comes to the conclusion that she cannot live and he must sacrifice her to the cause of honour and chastity. He utters:

***It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul;***

***Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!***

***It is the cause.***

Othello is a play about sexual jealousy. As a result, the conflict is of a gigantic proportion. The burning passion of sexual jealousy is the most tormenting one and this passion of revenge. Macbeth has the passion of ambition; Lear has the passion of fotial ingratitude. But at, no other passion can come close to that of sexual jealousy. The passion of Lear, Hamlet and Macbeth is not contemptible and their jealousy does not bring with it a sense of hatred. But in, Othello’s jealousy i.e. sexual jealousy brings with it a sense of humiliation and shame. If it is not hidden, it arouses in us a sense of hatred than pity and as we are faced with it, we turn our eyes away. In Othello, the effect of sexual jealousy is so overwhelming that it transforms Othello’s human nature into something bestial and the moral world is disintegrated into total chaos and it liberates the beast in the human being. The purity of passion of love is destroyed by the suspicion in the mind of Othello. As Othello suffers within himself from the pain of jealousy he also suffers from hatred. We disgust the witness of the degradation and downfall of a man who was once noble and ‘great at heart’. As a result our moral world is polluted and we have to witness the most heart-rending spectacle that Othello finds relief in his animal thirst for blood. In the scene of Othello’s striking of Desdemona in public and in the ‘brothel scene’ where she is treated as an inmate of a brothel, our sense of hatred reached its culminating point- and the pain is much more intense than when Othello finally murders her. Desdemona, who is so innocent and vulnerable and loyal towards her husband has to suffer without any fault of her and her passive suffering is the most painful and terrible spectacle that Shakespeare ever offered.

A close examination of Othello, however, makes it clear that it is not the correct interpretation of the tragedy. In the ultimate analysis we shall find that Othello is the tragedy of character and not the tragedy of intrigue. It is quite true that there is a considerable element of intrigue in this play. What is remarkable about this play is that Shakespeare by his dramatic art transmutes a tragedy of intrigue into a tragedy of character. The reason is that the intrigue cannot possibly succeed without the help of characters. Let us see how the success of the intrigue depends upon the characters of Othello and Iago.

Othello undergoes terrible emotional and spiritual suffering. He sheds tears of heart-rending agony and he murders Desdemona, the object of his love because for him it is not a murder but a sacrifice.

Othello is a man of an open mind and simple nature. As he is simple hearted he believes others also to be simple and honest. He easily trusts others and does not allow any suspicion in his mind. This is a weakness in his character. Besides, he is hasty in judgement and rash in action. Othello sums up his own character in the following words: “One not easily jealous, but, being wrought, perplexed in the extreme.” Once there is a feeling of excitement in Othello’s mind he cannot sit down and think about pros and cons of the whole affair in a cool and calm manner. Had Hamlet been in the circumstances of Othello, there could have been no tragedy in spite of the best efforts of Iago. Hamlet would not have so easily believed the story of the handkerchief and that of Cassio’s dream as Othello does. We remember how even after the revelation of the ghost Hamlet manages to stage a play in order to catch the conscience of King Claudius. Hamlet would have surely questioned Desdemona and Cassio about their supposed love-affair before coming to the final conclusion. Othello behaves rather foolishly in many respects. Iago himself says that the Moor has a free and open nature and he ‘will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are.’ Emilia expresses our sentiment when she says “What should such a fool do with so good a wife?” thus we find that the free and open nature of Othello, his incapacity for calm contemplation and his rash impulsiveness are responsible for the tragedy. It is ultimately the tragic flaw in Othello’s character that brings his ruin and destruction.

The tragedy of Othello is brought about as a result of action and counter-action of Othello, the hero and Iago, the villain. The character of Iago also makes a great contribution to bring about the ultimate ruin. Iago is not an ordinary villain. He is a shrewd observer of human character. He has an acute intellect and has also the wonderful capacity to utilize which helps him to tide over difficulties and make the best use of every occasion. We know how he is placed in a difficult situation as Cassio comes to meet him when Othello is in a trance. Iago sees the danger and at once drives away Cassio. The meeting between Othello and Cassio would have foiled his plan but Iago is always successful in preventing such a meeting. We know again how the timely appearance of Bianca is also used by Iago to his own advantage to convince Othello about the guilt of Desdemona. Iago’s plot is therefore his character in action and so it is his character which brings about the tragedy. Besides, we should also remember that Othello should put absolute confidence in the honesty of his friend. Had Othello been less credulous or if Iago were not reputed to be honest perhaps the tragedy would not have taken place. So we find that the success of the intrigue depends on the character of both Iago and Othello.

It is quite true that the element of intrigue plays an important part in the tragedy of Othello. This is the special feature of this play which distinguishes it from Shakespeare’s other great tragedies. The fundamental difference between the other tragedies and Othello lies in this that in the former the hero is fully aware of his hostile circumstances and he tries to face them as best as he can. His failure to adjust himself successfully to the circumstances is due to the weakness or one-sided of hi character. Hamlet knows fully well that King Claudius is the villain who killed his father. He knows that it is his duty to take revenge by killing the villain as soon as possible. He has promised to do so to the ghost of his father. In spite of all this, he fails to achieve his object on account of his contemplative habit of mind and excess of idealism. The character of Hamlet is therefore, responsible for his tragedy. Macbeth is fully aware of the fact that by killing Duncan he would arouse the hatred and anger of the people against him. He takes the risk at his own responsibility. It can therefore be said that Macbeth’s character is responsible for his tragedy. This is not the case with Othello. Othello does not know the adverse circumstances in which he is placed. He does not know that Iago is a villain. He is ignorant of Iago’s hatred and the spirit of revenge against him. He is blissfully unaware of Iago’s devilish plan to bring about his ruin. His actions are therefore not controlled by his own character but by the evil suggestions of another person i.e., Iago. In these circumstances we cannot say that Othello is responsible for his tragedy. We should say that the intrigue of Iago brings about his ruin and not any defects in his character. The German critic Ulrici remarks, “In short, the distinguishing peculiarity of our drama consists in its being a tragedy of intrigue, whereas all Shakespeare’s other tragedies are rather tragedies of character.”

Othello is a tragedy of character and this is the reason why it has been regarded as tragic master-piece of Shakespeare.

As against the opinion that Othello is inherently or easily jealous, there is another point of view held by S.T. Coleridge and Dr. A.C. Bradley, Dowden, Herford, etc., that Othello is not jealous by nature, but he falls a prey to the insinuations of a subtle villain. “Othello”, says Coleridge, “Does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost super human art of Iago; such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained, who had believed Iago’s honesty as Othello did.” Coleridge further defends Othello in the following words- “I have often told you that I do not think there is any jealousy, properly so called, in the character of Othello. There is no predisposition to suspicion, which I take to be an essential term in the definition of the word. Desdemona very truly told Emilia that he was not jealous, that is, of a jealous habit, and he says so as truly of himself. Iago’s suggestions, you see, are quite new to him; they do not correspond with anything of a like nature previously in his mind.” Prof. G. Brandes also subscribes to the same opinion. He says-“Othello’s is no jealous nature: jealous men and women think very differently and act very differently. He is unsuspicious, confiding, and in so far stupid- there lies the misfortune; but jealous in the proper sense of the word, he is not.” There is great deal of difference between the noble agony of Othello caught in the snares of a villain and the wrecked jealousy of Leontes in the “Winter’s Tale’’.

The question whether Othello is really jealous or not, has not been finally decided, but we would like to subscribe to the view held by Coleridge and Bradley that Othello was not jealous by nature. Jealousy was not the chief motivating force of his character as it is presented by Shakespeare in the character of Leontes in “The Winter’s Tale”, or by Ben Jonson in the character of Killasy, the jealous husband in “Every Man in his Humour.” Iago also recognizes it well and therefore he craftily, carefully, and cautiously proceeds injecting the germs of jealousy into Othello’s mind by such remarks as:

O beware, jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monstor, which doth mock

That meat it feeds on.

It would not have been at all difficult for Iago to incite Othello’s jealousy, if he had known that the Moor was a man of jealous temperament. Iago is quite sure of the fact that the Moor is not of a jealous mind, and possesses nobler qualities of character. He bases his intrigue on the belief that:

The Moor is of a free and open nature:

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so too,

Charlton aptly remarks: “Iago is a consummate master of villainy; but he shows it not so much by subtlety of intrigue as by astuteness in diagnosing the situation and in doing then to put his whole trust in a device appropriate to the occasion, but to that occasion alone., knowing full well that what will infallibly trap Othello would be ineffective against any other man.” Thus we find that in spite of the element of intrigue in this play, Othello should be regarded as a tragedy of character. Dr. Bradley says “His tragedy lies in this that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to deception, and , if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable.” This is the fundamental tragic trait of Othello’s character which is responsible for the tragedy. We agree with Dr. Bradley who says that we must not call the play a tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character. Iago’s plot is Iago’s character and it is built on his knowledge of Othello’s character and could not otherwise have succeeded.

In the Fifth Act a few minutes before his death, Othello makes his position clear by pointing out that he was not jealous by nature; but was wrought to that jealous state by Iago, who worked the poison of jealousy quite craftily in his simple soul. Othello presented a true picture of his life when he stated- “One not easily jealous, but, being wrought, perplex’d in the extreme;’ (Act V. Scene II 346-347). Had Othello been endowed with penetrating intelligence of Hamlet or his infalliable insight into men, he would not have fallen a prey to Iago’s sinister suggestions. He was a man of simple, sincere, credulous nature and it was his easy gullibility and faith in the honest Iago that occasioned the tragedy of his life.

Besides describing the jealousy of Othello, Shakespeare brings out the jealousy of Roderigo against Cassio and Othello. Roderigo is thoroughly infatuated with the beauty of Desdemona and desires to possess her. So he is extremely jealous of his rivals. He is prepared to kill Cassio under the instructions of Iago. The villain himself is jealous of Othello because he believes that the Moor had been false with Emilia and between his sheets he had done his work. But of, his jealousy is merely pretence. Iago tolerates adultery and is not angry with Emilia on that score. Cassio and Desdemona are the two characters who are not jealous and they are tortured and persecuted by jealous persons.

 Desdemona also has a high opinion of the character of her husband. When Emilia asks the question-“Is he not jealous?”-Desdemona replies-“Who, he? I think the sun where he was born drew all such humours from him”, and in support of her opinion she says: “My noble Moor/Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness/ As jealous creatures are, “

Othello himself says that jealousy cannot touch him nor can have its hold on him-

Since we have exonerated Othello of charge of jealousy, we should now discuss the second part of the question regarding the growth and development of the feeling of jealousy in Othello’s mind and its final culmination in the murder of Desdemona. When we study the element of jealousy in the character of Othello, we will also have to take stock of various other characters in the play who are governed by the feeling of jealousy, and who provide an interesting study of this instinct of jealousy in the play. So far as Othello is concerned, the feeling of jealousy begins to work in him in the Third Scene of the Third Act. It begins at the time when Cassio, after soliciting Desdemona for his restoration, is returning to his cabin. He has been noticed by Iago as well as by Othello. Iago utters a few words at this stage which at once hold the attention of Othello. In a very cunning fashion Iago says-“Ha! I like not that.” Othello is attracted by the words of Iago is –What dost thou say? Iago makes pretence of innocence and in his next remark he pours the poison of jealousy into the eaters of his general. When Othello asks Iago whether it was not Cassio who had parted from his wife, he cunningly replies- “Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot think it, that he should steal away so guilty-like seeing you coming.” In these words of Iago there is the veiled suggestion that Cassio is guilty and his leaving the place quietly and stealthily is an indication of the fact that he is guilty of secret meetings with Desdemona. Othello leaves Iago and meets Desdemona after a few minutes. His mind is slightly disturbed on account of Cassio and it is all the more prejudiced when Desdemona presses unreasonably for the restoration of Cassio as lieutenant.

The question whether Othello was jealous by nature or as he himself-“one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplex’d in the extreme;” (V.ii.347-347)-has not been conclusively answered so far, and critics are divided on the question whether jealousy was ingrained or inherent in Othello’s nature or was forced upon him by the cunning insinuations and suggestions of Iago. Frank Harris is of the opinion that the passion of jealousy is deeply rooted in Othello, and the moment Iago drops the hint, “Ah! I like not that” (III. iii), it flares up and Othello is in a receptive frame of mind to swallow the suggestions of Iago. It is contented by the critics of this school that if Othello had not been jealous by nature, he would not have given ears to Iago’s crafty insinuations, and would not have cared to listen to his suggestions incriminating Cassio and Desdemona. But of, Othello is thoroughly inclined to listen to the remarks of Iago and proceeds ahead with the inquisitive question-“What dost thou say?” When Iago replies- “nothing, my lord; or if- I know not what”, the jealous nature of Othello is much in evidence when he himself makes the remark- “Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?” Frank Harris says that this question clearly indicates that Othello is jealous and he begins to feel jealous of the lady. And even when they admit that Othello is not by birth a man of jealous temperament, they think that he is ‘easily jealous’ , because in their opinion that if Othello had not been inclined or proved to jealousy, “the slightest enquiry, the exercise of common judgement, the smallest thought, would have, in a moment, undone Iago’s net.” This is one view about the question of Othello’s jealousy. It is the opinion of these critics that “Othello’s jealousy of Desdemona is almost inevitable. It is reason-founded on difference of colour, education, and surroundings, and is whipped to madness by vile and envious suggestions.”

The following words of Desdemona

“Why the tomorrow night: or Tuesday morn;

On Tuesday noon, or night; on Wednesday morn;

I prithee, name the time, but let it not

Exceed three days: “

create a suspicion in the mind of Othello, and he dismisses her with the remark:

“I will deny thee nothing,

Whereon, I do beseech thee grant me this,

To leave me but a little to myself. “

Now Iago continues with his business of creating jealousy in the mind of Othello because now he feels confident that Othello is well prepared to pay heed to his words. He does not come forward with some tangible or visual proof of Desdemona’s infidelity and unchastity, but advises Othello:

The play provides an interesting study in jealousy.

After the departure of Iago, Othello feels greatly disturbed. He is extremely confused and deeply troubled but at this stage “he is not yet jealous in the proper sense of the word.” (A.C. Bradley) He still believes in the chastity and honesty of Desdemona. He himself declares:-

When Iago meets Othello again, he has in his possession the handkerchief of Othello which Iago’s wife Emilia had picked up when it had inadvertently fallen from Desdemona’s hand. Iago finds Othello in possession of great anger. His words against Desdemona have made the moor very angry, and before Iago once again begins his malicious campaign, Othello rebukes him very severely.

Iago feels hurt at these words, but he continues to slander Desdemona. He narrates the concocted story of his lying with Cassio and how he heard Cassio say-“Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor.” Othello is further asked to demand from Desdemona the handkerchief which he had given to her as a token of love. She has handed over the handkerchief to Cassio. When Othello hears about the handkerchief, he experiences a shock and he resolves to chastise Desdemona if she is found guilty.

Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio;

But at, Iago cunningly keeps back his thoughts by pointing out to Othello:

“The more Iago refuses to tell his thoughts, the more he sharpens the desire of knowing them.”

Othello might be slightly jealous, but the monster of jealousy did not make its presence fully felt at this stage. As Othello watches Desdemona going away, his passion of sublime love for the lady asserts itself, and in the ecstasy of his overpowering love he utters these endearing words:

Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul;

But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,

Chaos is come again,

Gradually Iago comes out with the thought , but at the very beginning he makes the remark- “As I confess, it is my nature’s plague to spy into abuses and oft my jealousy shapes faults that are not,” but Othello is so much after Iago’s hidden thoughts that he does not take these remarks seriously. Iago exalts “good name in man and woman” and this is done by the villain not out of appreciation for good name but to bring home to the mind of Othello “that nothing but tenderness for others restrains him from uttering what would blast them.” In this way, Iago encourages Othello to press him to disclose his thought, and Othello demands a frank disclosure of it by saying- “by heaven I’ll know thy thoughts.” Then Iago indirectly warns Othello to guard against jealously, the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on. Iago seeks to pour the poison of jealousy into the ears of Othello, but the Moor rebukes Iago by pointing out that he is not likely to fall an easy prey to jealousy.

“’Tis not to make me jealous

To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,

Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well;”…

Then in order to poison the mind of the Moor against Desdemona, he traduces Venetian women may not be applicable to Desdemona. Hence, Iago makes a direct hit at Desdemona by pointing out that she is very proficient in the art of deceiving people. She had deceived her father by marrying Othello. She had rejected proposed matches of her own clime, complexion, country, and degree. These words of Iago greatly upset Othello and bids farewell to Iago with the remark- “if more thou dost perceive, let me know more; set on thy wife to observe.”

Othello asks Desdemona to produce the handkerchief. She fails to do so, and pleads the case of Cassio in a foolish and tactless manner. This confirms Othello’s doubts against Othello. Then Iago manages to show to Othello that Cassio had a poor opinion of Desdemona. Iago arranges a discourse with Cassio, and talks about Bianca. Othello, standing at a distance, misunderstands allusions to Bianca as references to Desdemona. Now he feels sure that Cassio has illicit relations with Desdemona and he is now perfectly convinced of her infidelity. Now he resolves to tear Desdemona to pieces and gives an order to Iago to put an end to Cassio’s life. He appoints Iago as his lieutenant and on his advice he murders Desdemona in cold blood. Iago’s machinations are eventually successful in poisoning the mind of the Moor, and in paving the way for the ruin and tragedy of Desdemona and her husband. Othello was not jealous by nature but the poison of Iago made him suspicious and jealous of Desdemona. He was, as he acknowledged in his last speech- “not easily jealously but, being wrought, perplex’d in the extreme.” This is the whole truth about the jealousy of Othello.

…“Where virtue is, these are more virtuous:

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw

The smallest fear, or doubt of her revolt,

For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago,

I’ll see before I doubt, and when I doubt prove.”

Othello made this significant and pregnant statement in his last speech in Act V. He asserted that he loved Desdemona very well and intensely though not wisely. There is a great of truth in what he says. If we study the play between the lines, we will be able to discover that Othello’s love for Desdemona was profound and intense, though his approach to the lady under the infernal insinuations and sinful suggestions of Iago, was not wise and reasonable.

Othello was appointed the Governor of Cyprus. He was forced to leave behind Desdemona, who was later escorted to the island of Cyprus by Iago on a separate ship. When Othello met Desdemona in Cyprus after their short separation, he was elated and beside himself with ineffable joy at the happy union with his beloved Desdemona, and the words that emanated from his mouth at this time exhibit his deep and intense love for his deep and intense love for his extremely charming and lovable wife:

Iago realized the intensity of Othello’s love for Desdemona, and made the ill-willed remarks:

During this extremely happy meeting with Desdemona, Othello, in spite of the malicious intentions of Iago, “expresses the spiritual exaltation of love with an intensity nowhere surpassed in literature.” (Herford)

Othello loved Desdemona sincerely and the sympathetic ways in which she listened to his tales of high adventure and heroism attracted the Moor towards the charming lady. Othello bound himself to Desdemona in bonds of marriage because he had genuine and sincere love for her. He gave expression to these real feelings of love for the lady when he informed the villain Iago:

Othello always referred to Desdemona as “My gentle love” and talked endearingly with his wife. Even when Iago had poured the poison of jealousy into the ears of Othello, he called back, in a reminiscent mood, his old love for Desdemona with an anguished wail. Othello did not believe the sinful insinuations against Desdemona readily, and it was on account of his deep and intense love for Desdemona that he cried out. At a later stage he rebuked Iago for slandering Desdemona whom he loved dearly.

Othello loved Desdemona with great intensity and earnestness and the anguished feelings of his heart at the visible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity; show how profound and strong was his love for his wife.

These comments of Othello indicate that though he has begun to respect Cassio, yet he does not harbor any doubt about Desdemona’s chastity and fidelity in his heart. He feels a little disturbed when Iago, during his next meeting, resumes the thread of Cassio- Desdemona meeting and puts the cunning question- “Did Michael Cassio, when you woo’d my lady, know of your love?” this question “stealthily creates the impression in Othello’s mind that there is some darker mystery behind, some monster in his thought too hideous to be shown.” When Iago learns from Othello that Cassio had already been acquainted with Desdemona and had served as a go-between them, he utters that mysterious single word “Indeed!” which upsets Othello, and he seeks to find out from Iago what the underlying mystery is between Cassio and Desdemona. But of, Iago is nobody’s fool. Instead of expressing his views at the first enquiry, he keeps back his thoughts from Othello. He excites curiosity in the mind of Othello and the Moor presses him to disclose what lies concealed in his mind.

Tears welled out of Othello’s eyes at the thought that he was about to put an end of the life of his dear wife, but he proceeded with his cruel business as a vindicator of honour, chastity, justice, and honour.

After committing the murder, Othello grew mournful and sorrowful, indicating by his words how profound was his love for the lady whom he had stabbed.

His uncountable sorrow at the death of Desdemona, after he had known his mistake, was genuine, heart-rending, melting, and heart-stirring. He was very greatly tortured at the thought that he had murdered an innocent lady.

In the Second Scene at the Fifth Act when he got ready to murder Desdemona, his old love was awakened in his heart, and her beauty and fragrant breath almost persuaded him not to kill her. He kissed her several times before inflicting the fatal injury oh her person.

As the forgoing remarks and quotations bear out, Othello loved Desdemona too well. But at, he exhibited a singular lack of wisdom and insight into the proceeding against the lady. He allowed himself to be guided by the villain Iago who poured the deadly poison of jealousy into his ears and thus prepared him against his wife. He put greater faith in the words of Iago than in chastity, fidelity, and devotion of his innocent wife who had left her father for his (Othello’s) sake. His behavior with Desdemona grew to be harsh and rough, so much so that he even struck her in the presence of men who had come from Venice. He did not act wisely in hitting Desdemona and in rebuking her in the presence of Lodovico and Iago. His behavior with Desdemona was unwise and his words.

He revealed his lack of wisdom and his coarseness in traducing an honest, chaste, and faithful lady. He had absolute faith in Iago and he never doubted his suggestions. He allowed the poison of jealousy to course through his blood because he was black and lacked these soft and gentle parts of conversation that chamberers had. He subjected himself to unnecessary self-reproach and allowed those thoughts to take roots in his mind which a wise man would not have allowed to germinate.

Some critics are of the view that Othello’s choice of Desdemona as his wife was not wise. He, being a foreign adventurer and a black Moor, should not have chosen the beautiful and young daughter of a reputed and popular Venetian Magnifico. He should have felt that they could not, in all fairness, unite and live peacefully as husband and wife for long. As Bodenstedt writes:”We see before us perfect womanhood in the most graceful shape, and perfect manhood in a form most repulsive; and it is as if, day and night came together; the two cannot unit.” Othello should not have married Desdemona, because there was the difference of age, colour, and clime, and the young passions in Othello had grown defunct. It was not an act of wisdom for a middle-aged man to have united himself with a beautiful and bashful maiden with whom he had no community of taste, complexion, and country.

“The truth is “, says the editor of the Wawick edition of the play, “that Othello’s love has all the traits of a deep and noble passion save one- insight into the soul of the woman he loves.”

Othello’s love was deep and intense, but his approach to the problem of love was not that of a wise man, but of a credulous and gullible fool who readily believed without any ostensible and palpable foundation every infernal insinuation that emanated from a crafty and double-dealing villain.

Othello has his weakedness’ which are, in certain circumstances, dangerous. In the first place, his intellectual power is nowhere near at par with other qualities. He is not an intelligent child, whenever Othello rusts his instinct, he is almost invariably right. For instance, he is right when he says “If she be false, oh then Heaven mocks itself. I’ll not believe it.” But of whenever he thinks, or supposes himself to be thinking, he is almost invariably and ruinously wrong. For instance, he is ruinously wrong when he compares her to “a cistern for foul toads to knot and gender in”, or to “summer’s flies in the shambles, which quicken even with the blowing.”

His control, though strong, is far from unbreakable. He knows this himself, as appears in the scene of his dismissal of Cassio. He swears that, if he is not immediately told the truth, his blood will rule his safer guides and his passion will cloud his judgement.

For all his dignity and calm, he is by nature full of the most vehement passion. Shakespeare emphasizes his self control, not only by the wonderful pictures of the First Act, but by references to the past. Lodovico, amazed at his violence, exclaims:

In this the noble Moor whom our full Senate

Call all in all sufficient?

Even Iago is surprised and asks: “Can he be angry?” indeed, his temper once excited is uncontrollable.

Undoubtedly Othello is the most romantic and poetic of Shakespeare’s heroes. Macbeth and Hamlet too are poetic, but in their case it is not poetry that is always in the ascendant in their utterances. Othello’s speeches are surcharged with a romantic and poetic glow and in his speeches we discover the sparkling vivacity and romantic fervor of an adventurous hero nourished in the thick of romance, adventure, war, and dangers of life.” He does not belong to our world and he seems to enter it we know not whence almost as if from the wonderland.” He is not an ordinary soldier but a man of royal lineage “who fetches his life and being from men of royal siege.” His life from the days of his childhood had been of a romantic adventurer, who had seen the dangers of life and had undergone most thrilling and adventurous experiences in remote and distant lands. He had seen a life of “moving accidents by flood and field, of hair-breadth escapes in the imminent deadly breach.” Several times in his life he had been taken prisoner by the “insolent foe and sold to slavery.” Like a romantic adventure, Othello had undertaken dangerous and perilous voyages in remote and uninhabited parts of the world. He had seen strange sights and met strange people who were couched in a romantic glow. He had been among “cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropological and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders.” These adventures of Othello in deserts and far off lands make him a romantic figure among Shakespeare’s tragic heroes.

Othello is simple and straightforward himself, and he demands simplicity and straightforwardness in others. He wants to be certain about things and does not like a state of doubt. He cannot bear to feel perplexed or baffled. It is this desire for certainty that makes him say to Iago: “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore.” even that black certainty would be better than doubt. His “free and open nature” carries unsuspicious trust to the point of folly. Iago is right when he expresses the view that Othello will “as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are.” Othello listens to Iago throughout with unsuspecting confidence. His trust, where he trusts, is absolute. Hesitation is almost impossible to him. He is extremely self-reliant, and decides and acts instantaneously. If stirred to indignation, as “in Aleppo once”, he answers with one lightning stroke. Love, if he loves, must be to him the heaven where either he must live or bear no life. If such a passion as jealousy seizes him, it will swell into an almost uncontrollable flood.

Furthermore, Othello is unduly sensitive and humble about his own deficiencies in certain fields, particularly his own inexperience in the world of society. He thinks that he is rude in his speech and is lacking in “those soft parts of conversation” which young gallants possess. Othello from self-examination and is not given to reflection. Emotion, excites his imagination, but it confuses and dubs his intellect. Besides, lie has little experience of the corrupt products of civilized life, and is ignorant of European women.

Iago works against and tries to ruin Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio in the play and the chief aim of his life is to destroy the happiness of all these three honest and innocent people. He is eminently successful in the plans and schemes which he engineers against these three sinless victims. The question that naturally rises is: what are the motives of Iago’s actions and schemes against his enemies? Apparently and so far as all outward appearances are concerned, Iago has certain definite and well-defined motives for the action which he undertakes against Cassio and Othello.

The main cause of complaint and grudge which Iago has against Othello is that instead of appointing him as his lieutenant, he has chosen Cassio for this post, and has given to him (Iago) the humiliating and low rank of the ensign or the ancient or the standard-bearer. The appointment of Cassio as lieutenant in preference to his own valiant self gnaws deep into the heart of Iago and makes him angry with the Moor because he has chosen a mere arithmetician, a debitor and creditor, and a countercaster, meaning thereby Cassio, as his lieutenant and has ignored his claims, when he knows that Michael Cassio:

“Never set a squadron in the field,

Nor the devision of a battle knows,

More than a spinster”,

Why have all these critics came to the same conclusion that the motives of Iago are other than what he states to the audience? Dr. A.C. Bradley enumerates his reasons. He says, “A man moved by simple passions due to simple causes does not stand fingering, his feelings, industriously enumerating their sources, and groping about for new ones, but this what Iago does. And this not all these motives appear and disappear in the most extraordinary manner. Resentment of Cassio’s appointment is expressed in the first conversation with Roderigo, and from that moment is never mentioned in the whole play. Hatred of Othello is expressed in the First Act alone. Desire to get Cassio’s place scarcely appears after the first soliloquy, and when it gratified, Iago does not referred to it by a single word. The suspicion of Cassio’s intrigue with Emilia emerges suddenly, as an after-thought, not in the first soliloquy but in the second, and then disappears forever.”

What Coleridge actually means by the “motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity” is exactly what Dr. Bradley has explained so clearly in the above quotation. Iago’s malignity is deep-seated. He simply tries to hunt out motives for vindicating his malignity. He fishes out flimsy motives to convince the audience that he has reasonable grounds to work against the Moor. But of, as a matter of fact the grounds on which he proceeds are vague and well-defined and nebulous in their nature. The maliciousness and malignity of Iago does not spring from the causes to which he himself alludes in his speeches and soliloquies.

His malignity is very deep-seated. It is founded on envy and jealousy. It torments Iago that Cassio, who is far inferior to him in every respect including military prowess, should be appointed lieutenant and be happier than himself. He is jealous of Iago on account of the gifts and qualities which the latter possess. His charming and handsome personality makes Iago look ugly in his comparison. So Iago resolves to wreck his vengeance on the man who is superior to him every way.

 He hates Othello for under-estimating him and preferring Cassio him. He engineers cunning plots to penalyse and chastise Othello for the wrong which he has done to him.

But in, all the same there is a deep seated malignity in Iago. It is not possible for him to endure the sight of happy people. He cannot tolerate the happiness and martial bliss of Othello and Desdemona. He must try to undermine their happiness and destroy their lives. The malignity of Iago is visible in his wicked remark.

Later on, he derives morbid delight out of laying out his plan for destroying Cassio and Desdemona. He feels extremely happy at the prospect of turning Desdemona’s virtues into her ruin.

It is Iago’s wicked nature that he experiences great happiness at the suffering and misery of other people. He derives a diabolical pleasure of the frustration and ruin of his victims, and it is merely a sport for him to watch his victims squealing owing to pain. The words that come out of his sinful lips at the disturbed and agitated state of Othello are devilish and disclose his inherent malignity.

Iago is incensed because the Moor who had seen him fighting on the battlefield at ‘Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds, Christian and heathen’, should completely ignore him and give the post of the lieutenant to Cassio who was not half so brave and experienced in military matters as Iago was. Another reason for Iago’s hatred for the Moor is that he has established illicit relation with his (Iago’s) wife.

There are some motives, which Iaho professes to have, which are motivating him to act against Othello and Cassio. Actuated by these motives he seeks to bring about the ruin of these people. But of, these motives are too feeble for the kind of action that Iago actually takes against his victims. Prof. C.H. Herford is of the opinion that the motives which Iago had made out for the satisfaction of the audience are, in fact, not his real motives, because he is not the kind of man whom offences like these goad into action. He is too profoundly immoral to feel the sting of wounded honour, and too conscious of his power to be gravely concerned about office and rank. In his soliloquy he gives us the above stated motives of action against Othello and Cassio, but, in fact, they are not his true motives. He is simply trying to hunt motives in order to justify his malignity against virtuous and innocent people. As Dr. A. C. Bradley points out, ‘Iago did not clearly understand what was moving his desire, though tried to give himself reasons for his action, even those that had some reality made but a small part of the motive force.’ Brandes is of the opinion that Iago’s apparent motives of action against Othello and Cassio are not his real motives. His real motives lie elsewhere and are deeply rooted in his inherent malignity and evil-mindedness. “this demi evil”, says Brandes, “is always trying to give himself reason for his malignity is always fooling himself by dwelling on half motives, in which he partly believes, but disbelieves in the man.”

Iago is infuriated against Cassio primarily because of his appointment as lieutenant and secondly because he thinks that he has illicit sexual relations with his wife.

Iago is the embodiment of wickedness and evil, and Dr. A.C. Bradley calls him “a bad man of supreme intellectual power.” Richard III and Edmund pale into insignificance before this monster of villainy. The nearest approach to Iago’s evil-mindedness is furnished by Goethe’s Mephistopheles.” Here there is something of the same deadly coldness, the same gaiety in destructions. But then Mephistophilis, like so many scores literary villains, has Iago for his father. And Mephistophilis besides, is not, in the strict sense, a character. He is half person, half symbol. A metaphysical idea speaks through him. He is earthly, but could never live upon the earth.” (Dr. Bradley)

The fact is that Iago is motivated by malignity and evil mindedness. It is his nature to seek delight in tormenting and persecuting his victims. The more they smart under pain and suffering, the greater grows his happiness. This is the malignant nature of Iago, and to rationalise this malignity of his nature he hunts for motives. Even if there had been no motives to direct him to these revengeful misdeeds against Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio, he would have proceeded against them merely for the joy of watching their ruin and discomfiture. This is the essential malignity of Iago and the motives which he enumerates to vindicate his malignity are simply based on vague and non-descript grounds and hardly justify the actions that Iago had taken against his victims. The fact is that the actions against his victims are motivated by a sense of pride in self and contempt for persons inferior to him in intelligence and will. Othello’s ruin and the death of Desdemona are hardly commensurate with the supposed injury they had caused to Iago by choosing Cassio in preference to him for the post of lieutenant. Perhaps Iago himself had not originally planned to work their ruin to the extent it takes place in the play. When Iago first cultivated hatred against Othello he had no idea that it would be pushed to such frightful extremity. He was led on to the ultimate catastrophe by the current of deceit and in iniquity on which he had embarked himself: “Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, Emilia, proved other than he had expected, and taking their games into their own hands forced him to play out as tragedy what he had begun as a comedy of self-gratification.” (Donovan).

If there is any character who stands on the level of Iago in villainy and wickedness, it is Wordsworth’s Oswald in the play “The Borderers”. It is said of Oswald that “where he cannot govern, he will destroy.” The same is applicable to the character of Iago. He takes delight in destruction and it is a part of his nature to bring his characters on the rack and sting them so fiercely that they may shriek and pine in grief. He is thus serpent-like and in the words of Dowden ,” the same malignant powers that lurks in the eye and that fills with venom, the fangs of the serpent would seem to have brought into existence of Iago.”

Iago intends to take revenge against Othello and he desires to be ‘even’d with him, wife for wife’’. So far as Cassio is concerned, Iago has the suspicion of illegitimate sexual relationship between the lieutenant and his wife Emilia. He says :-

“For I fear Cassio with my night-cap, too-“

At the very beginning it should be remembered that Iago is a self-seeking, self-aggrandising villain who cares more for his own benefits than for anything else in the world. He serves his own ends and feathers his own nest in any exploit or activity which he undertakes in his life. Supreme selfishness is the chief maxim of his life. Altruism and fellow feeling do not form part of his character. Then Iago is a liar and a hypocrite. He is conscienceless and not governed by moral scruples. He behaves according to a philosophy that vindicates evil means to gain one’s ends. Ends justify means in the case of Iago. He is not governed by moral scruples. He is unscrupulous and he is prepared to sacrifice even his best friend if by sacrificing him he can achieve his ends. He knows no bounds or check on his moral and immoral actions. He is equally proficient in the act of telling lies and manufacturing monstrous fabrications to ensnare and entice innocent people. He feels no twitching of conscience in telling glaring lies and abusing innocent and simple-minded persons in whom virtue predominates. He can be hypocritical in his approach and utterances and can assume dissembling airs to deceive persons. He can sneak into the confidence of his friend and betray the trust and confidence reposed in him. Such is the general frame and texture of Iago, the villain, whose every action in the drama is an exhibition of his wickedness and evil-mindedness.

Iago is very angry with Othello and Cassio, possibly because the Moor has chosen Cassio as his lieutenant and has bypassed Iago who has been appointed his Ensign or standards-bearer. This is his grouse against Othello and Cassio. Iago nurses a bitter grudge both on this score, and it becomes the object of his life to ruin them both and all those who are connected with them. Innocent Desdemona must also suffer because she is the wife of Othello, and the happiness of Othello cannot be destroyed without the suffering of Desdemona. Hence, in his evil-minded scheming he must implicate Othello, Desdemona and Cassio and bring about their ruin. Then alone he will be satisfied. This is his evil-minded motive, and for the gratification of his evil designs he employees all kinds of base, low, and ignoble methods.

Iago makes use of Roderigo as his chief instrument of action. He professes friendship with Roderigo, but he is not at all sincere to his dupe. He simply makes him his agent and supplier of money. Iago milches Roderigo dry and deceives him with false hopes of winning Desdemona for his sexual gratification. When Roderigo fails to serve his purpose, he stabs him and brings about the end of the life of the man who had all through been his benefactor and supplier of money. Iago is such an inhuman and unthankful dog. True, he is what he is not! At an earlier stage he had said about himself-“I am not what I am”-and his activities show that he is actually not what he apparently appears to be.

This is Iago’s villainy and evil-mindedness. Outwardly, he is the most obedient and servile servant of Othello, but at heart he is most insincere and faithless to him. He provokes Roderigo to create unhappiness in the life of Othello and let not enjoy his life of love with his beloved wife Desdemona-

Plague him with flies: though that his joy be joy,

Yet throw such changes of vexation on’t,

As it may lose some colour.

Then Iago meets Othello and begins to abuse Roderigo in his presence. A few moments back he had been talking in a very friendly manner with Roderigo, but at the first opportunity, he begins to abuse and scandalize Roderigo in the presence of the Moor. This indicates his villainy and wickedness.

Denouncing Roderigo, Iago says to Othello:

…Nay, but he prated

And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms

Against your honour,

That with the little goodliness I have,

I did full hard forbear him:

What does Iago’s villainy or wickedness consists? In several ways Iago is wicked, evil-minded, and villainous. It is his character and activities that provide an interesting study of villainy in the drama. With these general remarks about Iago’s villainy and evil-mindedness, let us study his villainous activities and wicked actions in the play.

Even Milton’s Satan is not so wicked and malignant as Iago. Satan shed tears at the sight of goodness and pined for the loss of heaven. The sight of Adam and Eve, whom he was out to ruin, brought soft feelings of pity in his heart. But in, Iago is without any feelings of pity and sympathy for his victims and is not governed by feelings of compunction. He cannot bear the sight of happy persons and it is ever his intention to spell ruin in their life. When Iago finds Othello and Desdemona happy at their reunion after the storm, the first words that come out of his lips show his wickedness and evil-minded nature.

The following remarks about Iago’s villainy, wickedness and evil mindedness will bear out the truth of Dr. Bradley’s remarks that evil has nowhere been delineated with such mastery as in the character of Iago.

After sometime Iago meets Roderigo once again. He wins him to his side. He inspires him with the hope of winning Desdemona and so asks him to follow him to Cyprus with money in his pocket. He proposes a plan of taking revenge against Othello, their common enemy. He says to Roderigo:

….let us be communicative in our revenge against

him: if thou canst cuckold him, thou doest

Thyself a pleasure, and ma a sport.

This is Iago, the faithful ensign of Othello, planning revenge against the Moor. His villainy is apparent in his move. His plan at the end of the First also shows his villainy and wickedness of character.

BRABANTIO

O heaven! How got she out? O treason of the blood!
Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds
By what you see them act. Is there not charms
By which the property of youth and maidhood
May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,
Of some such thing?

Iago’s wickedness and villainy do not cease or come to an end here, but make a further advance, this time with greater energy, strength, and force. Iago consoles Cassio and advises him to approach Desdemona, to supplicate her to plead his case with her husband. Cassio is advised to go direct to the wife of the General because she is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested. Cassio does not smell a rat in this advice of his friend Iago and he goes to Desdemona. In the meanwhile, Iago meets Othello and brings him to the place where he finds Cassio supplicating his wife. Othello notices that Cassio stealthily slinks away at his approach. Iago, the villain, makes use of this incident to pour poison of jealousy into the ears of Othello. He makes a cunningly suggestive remark- “Ha! I like not that.” This remark does not fail to catch the ear of Othello; and finding the Moor well inclined to receive his judgement and suggestions, Iago poisons the mind of Othello against Desdemona and Cassio. He traduces both these innocent and guiltless persons, and so directs the Moor that he begins to suspect both Cassio and Desdemona. Iago manages to get Desdemona’s handkerchief through his wife Emilia, who, at this command, steals the handkerchief. First of all, he fabricates monstrous lies that he had once slept with Cassio and he had heard Cassio murmuring in his sleep- “cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor”. This incites jealousy in the mind of Othello, and then he brings him round to the place where he can hear him talking to Cassio about Desdemona. The villainy of Iago lies in the fact that he silently speaks the word Bianca to Cassio, and then loudly talks with him in such a manner that the stray remarks of Cassio alluding to Bianca might be construed by Othello as referring to Desdemona. Iago’s plan succeeds very well and the Moor gets ready to kill Desdemona. At this stage, Iago advises Othello to strangle Desdemona. He says- “Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.” (Act IV. Scene 1). Those words of Iago show how wicked and evil-minded he is. The readers are apt to ask as to what harm Desdemona had caused to Iago that the villain provokes Othello to strangle her in her bed! This is nothing but pure villainy to involve an innocent and guiltless women and be indirectly responsible for her murder.

Then in the Second Act he directs his villainy against Cassio whom he denounces as ‘pestilent knave’ though outwardly he is very friendly to the lieutenant. He invites Cassio to drink wine and much against his (Cassio) will he fastens another cup on the lieutenant. Then he incites Roderigo to pick up a quarrel with Cassio, who is on duty, by upraiding and criticizing his discipline. His villainous plan meets with success. Cassio is provoked in his drunken state and the drunken lieutenant beats Roderigo. He hits Montano also. Montano is the ex-governor of the island. In this way, the wicked plan of Iago is eminently successful. Then he manages to get Othello on the scene, and presents the picture of Cassio’s guilt in such a subtle, cunning, and knavish manner that Othello dismiss Cassio who no more remains lieutenant. Iago’s wickedness and villainous plotting brings about the humiliation and disgrace of Cassio, his rival in the office of the lieutenant and to the satisfaction of Iago, Cassio is cashiered as lieutenant.

But at, in the end Iago is exposed and all his acts of wicked villainy are disclosed to Lodovico and Othello. Then all of them wonder at his wickedness and the malicious evil-mindedness of the subtle villain. Othello is thoroughly disillusioned and disenchanted, and he discovers that his honest Iago is a perfect and thorough going villain. Lodovico regards Iago as a:

…Spartan dog,

More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!

It is not a question of conscience to Iago, whether Roderigo kills Cassio or Cassio kills Roderigo. Since Cassio is not killed Iago kills Roderigo and hits Cassio in the leg so ferociously that Cassio is mutilated for the rest of his life. And the villainy lies in the fact that after hitting Cassio and killing Roderigo, he professes absolute innocence in the matter and claims to be friend of Cassio. The villain has hit Cassio and killed Roderigo, but in the presence of Lodovico and others, he assumes saintly airs as if he is absolutely ignorant of all that has taken place. This is the wickedness and villainy of Iago. Later on, the villain stabs his wife Emilia to death when she discloses his guilt to Lodovico and Othello.

Iago’s activities, machinations, and villainous wickedness provide an interesting study of villainy in the play and opens the eyes of all those who desire to prosper by means of villainous activities. Nemesis eventually overtakes the evil-doers and the villain is ensnared in the very coils which he lays for his victims. This is the moral of the play “Othello”.

Iago is thoroughly unscrupulous. He advises Roderigo to murder Cassio. At a later stage, Iago himself stabs Roderigo to death when he finds that the dupe cannot serve his purpose any more. The crookedness and villainy of Iago are unmistakably manifested when he makes this remark:

Now: whether he kill Cassio,

Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,

Every way makes my game:

In Othello, Iago is the principal character though we cannot assign him the title of the hero. From the very beginning, he takes full control of the plot and arrogates himself the coveted role of the director of the play. Iago not only determines the course of the plot but also the destiny of the other characters. Like an expert puppet-master he holds the strings of all and makes them dance to his tune. In other tragedy of Shakespeare, the villain is so conspicuously omnipresent and omnipotent as in Othello. The only possible exception is Macbeth where the hero himself transforms into a villain. But at, in case of Macbeth, there is no hero against whom his villainy works-Duncan is not cast for heroism of the type we find heroes.

*Enter OTHELLO*

**OTHELLO**

*….*

***Kissing her***

***Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade******Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.******Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,******And love thee after. One more, and this the last:******So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,******But they are cruel tears: this sorrow's heavenly;******It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.***

The usual formula for tragic conflict might be said to be the hero planning and fighting against the villain. In Othello, the hero is a passive agent on whom Iago practices his villainy. It is he who is active, diabolically active from the beginning to the end. The play opens with his entry and he announces his motives and intentions most clearly. The story of Othello is nothing, if it is not the story of Iago’s scheming and plotting against Othello and others. Aesthetically, Iago’s plotting is most entertaining, though morally, it is most reprehensible. The villainy of Iago is delightful in its own way, regarded as an intellectual feat of extraordinary subtlety.

Iago has a grudge against Othello; Iago hates Othello so much because he thinks that Othello has overlooked his merits. Iago also hates Othello because he is a Negro, a thick-lipped Moor. In Othello, racial basis is nowhere demonstrated clearly, but it can be seen from the vulgar and foul language he often uses against Othello. But at, racial basis is not a logically justifiable explanation for Iago’s motive in his villainy against Othello. But of, the more important cause for his grudge against Othello is that Othello has not promoted Iago to the post of lieutenant to which Iago had a strong claim and to which he had been aspiring. But in, instead of Iago, Othello has made Cassio his lieutenant. Even this denial of promotion would not be sufficient to motivate him in view of the fact that Cassio is better qualified in the matters of policy-making. Iago has to invent more plausible motives to justify his concept for Othello and his perverted imagination quickly creates another motive. Iago has a suspicion that the Moor has slept with his wife and his rumour is taken to be true by Iago and a sufficient cause to take revenge against Othello. His dislike for Cassio has no logical basis, though his intention to rob Cassio of his job and to get the same for himself appears to be a sound explanation. From his earlier conversation, we come to know that Iago belongs to the category of the opportunistic servant. We also see that his interest in lieutenancy is not for the job itself, but he wants to get closer to Othello whom he hates. The position can bring him closer to the victim, i.e. Othello and thus he can be able to hit him closer to the victim, i.e. Othello and thus he can be able to hit him at will. But of, he must have a sounder cause to act against Cassio. So Iago invents not one but two causes: Cassio is extremely handsome and popular with women. And Iago also expresses his suspicion that Cassio too has slept with his wife –a cause sufficient in itself. Iago’s contempt towards Cassio and his determination to kill Cassio has other motives also; he says that the ‘daily beauty’ in Cassio’s life ‘makes me ugly’ and he thinks that if Cassio remains alive, he might expose him to the Moor. On the basis of this true or self-invented and imaginary causes that Iago prepares to launch a fierce battle of wits, a strategy which ultimately ruins all his victims- Othello, Desdemona, and even Roderigo whom he had so dexterously used to attain his selfish goal.

There is no doubt that Emilia is loyal and devoted to Desdemona. If she had the least notion of her husband’s intentions, she would never have given him the handkerchief. As far as she is concerned, she gives him the handkerchief just to satisfy his fancy. She knows that Desdemona loves that token intensely, but the desire to please Iago’s fancy is at the moment uppermost in her mind. She feels very uneasy when Othello speaks to Desdemona in a taunting manner about the loss of the handkerchief and asks, “Is not this man jealous?” And, if she does not even now disclose the fact about the handkerchief, it is not because she loves Desdemona less but she fears Iago more. Or, perhaps she is just stupid. She feels genuinely distressed when Othello uses such terms as “whore” and “strumpet” for Desdemona. Seeing Othello insulting and humiliating, Desdemona Emilia replies that it is but natural for her to weep when she, who sacrificed everything for the sake of Othello, calls her a “whore”. She would like the villain to be punished who slandered Desdemona and wishes that Desdemona had never met the Moor: “I would you had never seen him.”

Iago uses Cassio and his own life, Emilia in the second stage of his conspiracy. Iago has no grudge against Desdemona and has no intention to ruin her, although he hates Desdemona’s rash act of running into the sooty bosom of Othello. But at, Desdemona’s ruin is incidental and necessary for Othello’s destruction.

In the First Act of the play, Iago professes great devotion to Othello and addresses him as “My lord” and so on. He pretends to be Othello’s most devoted and dutiful standard-bearer. But of, actually his designs and inclinations are against the betterment of Othello. He says to his dupe Roderigo:-

In following him, I follow but myself

Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,

But seeming so, for my peculiar end.

Discovering that Cassio is mentally shaken and disturbed, Iago advises Cassio to plead Desdemona who is the general’s general and she would certainly help him and get him reinstated. He assures Cassio that his dismissal is a matter of policy, not a matter of malice. According to a Iago’s plan, Cassio goes to Desdemona. A little earlier, Iago himself had removed Othello on some pretext. So when Cassio is seriously pleading his case with Desdemona, Iago brings the General back to the scene. Cassio then slips out through the side exit. It is at this moment that Iago shoots the first arrow- “Ha I like not that!” And then he starts his insinuations to arouse jealousy and suspicion in the mind of Othello. He explains the infidelity of the Venetian women in general. Then he invents the story of having spent a night at Cassio’s and relates how during his sleep Cassio is muttering about his intimacy with Desdemona; in his dream, Cassio is supposed to have spoken to Desdemona in passionate terms and to have cursed the Moor for having married her. Othello is terribly shaken. As chance would have it, Iago gets hold of the handkerchief through Emilia. He now refers to the handkerchief and tells Othello that he had seen a similar handkerchief with Cassio. Immediately thereafter, he brings about a scene between Cassio and himself with Othello in the hiding. Iago speaks the word ‘she’ louder though the entire conversation is about Bianca. But of, Othello thinks that the two are talking about Desdemona. Cassio’s remarks which actually pertain to Bianca have the effect of maddening Othello. All of a sudden Bianca appears on the scene with the handkerchief which is at once recognized by Othello. Othello’s mind is so poisoned and he needs further proof as to the infidelity of Desdemona. He orders Iago to murder Cassio within three days and that he would decide the fate of Desdemona himself.

Thus we see that Iago like an expert in criminology, leaving no proof of his involvement in the crime. His planning is meticulous. But of, even the biggest criminals do sometimes make fatal mistakes and Iago too makes such a mistake. He makes use of his own fatal mistakes and Iago too makes such a mistake. He makes use of his own wife whom he trusts too much; he thinks that the affair of the handkerchief would remain a secret. Emilia, like a good wife does not reveal the truth even when Desdemona weeps over the loss of the token. She hardly takes the matter seriously and thinks that her grief is due to some disturbance in domestic relationship. But of, when she discovers that the handkerchief is the chief cause of her expose him. Though Iago kills Emilia, his villainy is exposed. Thus, ironically the trick of the puppet-master are exposed by his own wife who seals his fate, though in the process she too suffers the same fate as that of Othello, Desdemona and Roderigo.

Emilia is “one of those ordinary people whom Shakespeare was fond of introducing, with reasonable perceptiveness and much common sense, acting as a foil to one or more of the leading characters, and acting also on occasion as chorus or commentator.”

 Emilia is a worldly woman having adequate knowledge of human beings and their nature, like her husband. She is capable of making generalizations which carry conviction and go home to the reader’s heart. For instance, she is perfectly realistic in her description of husbands who, she says, enjoy their wives’ love for sometime and who, after they are satiated, neglect or ignore their wives. Her analysis of the jealous mind is realistic, too. Jealous natures, she says, do not need any grounds to feel generated and without any external origin. She gives apt reasons why wives may prove unfaithful to their husbands. Men make love to women other than their wives either because they want fun, or because of their passions and they too have their frailties, her argument may be on the side of bad morality but its logic or consistency is undeniable. Again, her description of a rogue who might have instigated Othello against Desdemona does her credit. It shows how well she understands human motives and the villainy that some human beings are capable of. The insinuating rogue, some cogging, cozening slave, some outrageous knave, some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow.” She feels that this rogue has “devised this slander” in order to get some office (and that, no doubt, was one of the motives of Iago).

But at, though she has enough knowledge of the world and enough common sense to understand that some rogue has been at work against Desdemona, she does not have insight enough to perceive, or even to suspect, that her own husband is the culprit. She gave him the handkerchief, indeed, but it could not have occurred to her what evil use he would make of it. Nor is it possible for her to believe that her husband was the one who slandered Desdemona. When told about it by Othello, she is amazed and stunned. “My husband?” she asks and twice more, as if she cannot trust her ears, she repeats “My husband?” and then says incredulously “My husband say that she was false.”

Emilia nowhere shows any signs of having a bad heart but she is common, sometime; vulgar, in minor matters almost unscrupulous, blunt in perception and feeling, and quite devoid of imagination. There is a certain coarseness about her which is seen not only in her repeating Othello’s words “whore” and “strumpet” without any hesitation but also in her conversation with Desdemona about the infidelity of wives. Nor should we forget that Iago suspects her of having slept with both Othello and Cassio.

But of, the crowning proof of her loyalty to Desdemona comes when she discovers that Othello has murdered Desdemona because he thought her unchaste. At this stage she becomes reckless. She uses very strong and abusive language for the Moor. To her husband she speaks with equal bluntness. She is no longer afraid of him: “You told a lie, an odious damned lie, a wicked lie”. She goes almost crazy with grief: “Villainy, villainy, villainy; I‘ll kill myself for grief.” She speaks with a “glorious carelessness of her own life” and her out-bursts against Othello lighten our hearts because she is voicing our feelings when she rebukes him. She calls the Moor a “murderous coxcomb” who has killed the “sweetest innocent that ever did lift up eye”; and she dies a martyr’s death.

In short, it is Iago who dominates the play from the very beginning to the end. It must be stated clearly that but for Iago’s cunningness, the plot could not have taken such a tragic turn as it does. It is because of Iago that we feel the pity and terror at the tragic ending. Both Othello and Desdemona are passive victims of the villainy of Iago. Thus we see whatever turn the plot takes, Iago’s hold on all characters is evident. He makes them dance to his tune; but his “tune” proves ultimately to be his own “swan song” too.

It is interesting to inquire how Shakespeare has changed the original story of common domestic life, so as to bring out the new conception of Othello’s character.

The Italian novelle”, from one of which Shakespeare borrow he story of the Moor, were usually tales of bourgeoise’s life, breathing an almost domestic atmosphere and therefore suitable to the purposes of realistic comedy. But at, for tragedies Shakespeare needed protagonists of greater stature- persons considerably above the common level of life in their ways of feeling and thinking- in order that the tragic impression may be of a sufficiently high magnitude. In the words of Dr. Bradley, some of Shakespeare’s heroes “are not merely exceptional men, they are huge men; as it were survivors of the heroic age living in a later and smaller world.” Othello is one of them.

Shakespeare had also to adapt the original story from another point of view. All great tragedy concerns itself not with the mere course of external events but with human characters and passions displayed through those events. This is especially true of Shakespeare’s tragedy. In it, it is not merely the defeat of the hero in his external conflict which makes us purposes, which engross our attention. The plots of his tragedies are therefore, so adapted as to bring out these movements of passions most effectively. Let us now discuss the changes made by Shakespeare of the original story so as to raise it to a tragic height, and to bring out the most effectively the tragic conflict within Othello’s own mind.

For our purposes we may divide the action of the story into three stages: Desdemona’s marriage with Othello, the inception and development of Iago’s plot, and its consequences. Shakespeare’s artistic genius is portrayed throughout these stages. During the first two stages of the action, he generally accepts the external circumstances as they are given in Cinthio’s narrative, but rearranges them so as to bring out his original conception of the characters of Othello and Desdemona both before and during the crisis. In the last stage, he departs from his original altogether, and devises a catastrophe more in keeping with his tragic conception.

The other difficulty that would have been have been raised had Shakespeare followed his original faithfully in the matter of Desdemona’s struggle against parental opposition, he would have found it difficult to preserve our sympathies for her. Even as it is, her peremptory reply to her father in the Council scene has prejudiced some critics against her. A third advantage of the secret marriage is that it makes us feel how utterly indifferent to the world around them their mutual love has made them, how completely regardless of the consequences of their action how they could have their being only in each other’s affections and could spare little thought for external realities. Lastly, had Shakespeare represented Desdemona’s struggle against her parents in accordance with Cinthio’s narrative, one of the principal causes of Othello’s easy acceptance of Iago’s vile suggestions would have been removed, namely, his lack of an intimate knowledge of Desdemona’s character. A protected struggle against her parents would have been felt as a sufficient test of Desdemona’s faithfulness. Othello would not then have so readily listened to Iago’s insinuations, unless he were a common jealous husband which Shakespeare did not intend to make him.

The main changes in the first stage concern the circumstances of the marriage and Iago’s conduct. In the original story there is no mention of a secret marriage. Besides, the Italian writer speaks of Desdemona’s having consented to marry Othello in spite of parent’s opposition. Shakespeare has made the marriage secret because, for one thing, he did not want to introduce Desdemona as struggling against parental opposition previous to her marriage. Had he done so, he would have been faced by two difficulties. In the first place, the play would have lost the unity of interest which at present it possesses. The play then would have consisted of two almost independent actions, the marriage of Othello and Desdemona in spite of parental opposition and destruction of their love and happiness through the deception practiced by Iago. But at, in the play as it is, our interest in the consequences of the runaway marriage is interwoven with our interest in Iago’s action, for it is Iago who brings the marriage to light. Shakespeare has thus linked up the representation of marriage with the development of Iago’s plot which forms one of the principal factors in the tragic conflict.

Iago is subjected to torture for the rest of his life. Lodovico makes Cassio responsible and gives him the charge of tormenting and torturing Iago:

….to you, lord governor

Remains the censure of this hellish villain,

The time, the place, the torture:

Iago knows well that as long as Cassio is around Othello, he would not be able to cause any harm to Othello because Cassio is intelligent and he would easily see through Iago’s game. Iago’s ultimate aim is to ruin Othello. But at, to achieve his goal, it is essential for him to ruin Cassio also. With this purpose,

Another important change which Shakespeare has introduced in this first stage of the action- a change the technical effects of which have been already noticed-is the conduct of Iago. In the original story, the Ensign (Iago of the play) falls in love with Desdemona after she is married to Othello, and tries various means to win her heart. Failing in this object, he determines to destroy the Moor’s love for Desdemona by way of taking revenge on her, and to plot the death of the Captain (Cassio in the play) whom he imagines to be the lover accepted by Desdemona. In the play, Iago’s motives for his conduct are entirely different. He mentions his love Desdemona only casually, and never refers it again. What his real motives were has been discussed elsewhere. What we have to notice here is that whatever they were, they were working in his mind before Othello’s marriage, so that he utilizes the secret marriage as the first step in the pursuit of revenge. From the technical point of view, Iago’s conduct in the First Act secures dramatic continuity between it and the remaining course of the action. From the point of view of character delineation, the effect of Iago’s conduct is to make him appear less human than he would have done if he had pursued his revenge out of disappointed, even though illegitimate, passion. The Iago of the play is incapable of any warm passion: either of love or of hatred. This lack of human passion endows his character with diabolical strength, proportionate to the heroic stature of Othello’s personality.

Iago uses Roderigo to get Cassio dismissed. He convinces Roderigo that there is intimacy between Cassio and Desdemona and that Cassio would come in the way to his, achieving Desdemona. Iago asserts that unless Casio is not removed out of the way, Roderigo would never achieve Desdemona’s love. Iago says that Othello will soon get fed up with Desdemona and so will Desdemona. Desdemona will seek some younger man and she may choose Cassio. According to Iago plot, Iago’s would make Cassio drink. Iago instigates Roderigo to pick a quarrel with him or to provoke him to such extent that Cassio hurts him. The foolish Roderigo enacts the dramatic scene where he himself is hurt and when, one citizen, Montano tries to intervene, gets a serious wound. In the meantime, Iago raises a hue and cry while Roderigo rings the danger bell. The noise arouses everyone and Othello and Desdemona comes to the scene. Pretending to be Cassio’s friend, Iago narrates the incident. Othello finds Cassio drunkard as is expected, the drunken Cassio misbehaves and is dismissed by Othello from his post. Thus Iago succeeds in his first stage of conspiracy.

If again, Othello had succumbed to the practices of a less artful villain, he would have appeared a smaller man. It was there more necessary to make Iago an impenetrable villain, one whom no one in the play could recognize for what he was. He was, therefore, to be deprived of ordinary human qualities, so that he could not be represented as pursuing his revenge out of disappointed love.

The moment doubt enters his mind concerning the virtue of his wife, he is throws off his balance. What we have to notice here is that his behavior during and after the deception, which, by the way, is effected during a very short time, reveals him not as jealous husband, but one who was so secure in his possession of Desdemona that the very thought of her possible guilt produced a violent commotion in his mind. Shakespeare does not allow Desdemona any opportunity to explain herself.

The third change, concerning the part played by the Ensign’s wife in the plot, has an obvious advantage. In the original story, the wife is in the Ensign’s confidence throughout the course of the deception, though she is Desdemona’s friend. She does not reveal to Desdemona anything out of her fear of her husband. In Shakespeare’s plays, Emilia is one of the dupes of Iago. Though she serves as an instrument in the undoing of Desdemona, she does it all unknowingly. She is so attached to Desdemona that she resents Othello’s treatment of her more than Desdemona herself does. She therefore, very often echoes our own indignation. But of, her supreme function is to expose Iago’s full confidence from the beginning. She has no knowledge of the depth of her husband’s wickedness and this fact renders Iago’s powers of dissimulation all the more awful.

Consistently with his new conception of Othello’s character, Shakespeare could not use the device of the overhead conversation and the sight of the handkerchief as they are used in the original. These incidents have been severely censured as being grossly improbable. Othello, it is pointed out, must have been an egregious fool not to have seen through the imposition. But at, those who regard the scene in this light do not appreciate Shakespeare’s intention in it. that Othello appears an incredible fool is the measure of Shakespeare’s success and not a defect in his art; for he did not want to use the overhead conversation and the sight of the handkerchief as means of proving Desdemona’s guilt in Othello’s eyes, but to bring out the utter chaos which has come to prevail in Othello’s mind as a result of his having listened to Iago. He becomes fully convinced of Desdemona’s guilt much before Iago has thought of making Othello overhear a conversation between himself and Cassio. The whole of the first scene of the Fourth Act is intended to depict the state of Othello’s mind under his new conviction.

In the last stage of the action, namely, the consequences of Iago’s intrigue, Shakespeare completely abandons his course. The main changes concern the manner of Desdemona’s murder, the discovery of the crime, and the nature of the punishment.

The contrast between the noble Othello of the earlier scenes and the incredibly foolish dupe and almost raving ‘madman’ of this scene cannot but heighten the tragic impression.

According to the original story, the assault on the Captain and the murder of Desdemona were planned in cold-blooded deliberation and were carried out by the Ensign with revolting cruelty.

 The tragedy would lose all its meaning if the reader’s sympathies for Othello were to disappear even during the murder-scene, for it is the essence of the tragic impression that we should feel unhappy for the hero even though we may realize his mistakes and errors. Shakespeare has preserved our sympathies in the murder-scene by accompanying the act of murder with an inner conflict in the mind of Othello which causes him intense misery and unhappiness. He does not commit the murder in the same mood of blood-thirstiness in which he had vowed revenge, but kills her by way of executing justice upon her for her supposed misconduct. He intends her death to be a sacrifice and not a murder. In the original tale, on the other hand, Desdemona is murdered by the Ensign with inhuman cruelty while the Moor watches with delight from another room the execution of his revenge. Such a character could only excite in us an acute feeling of disgust and hatred. Shakespeare has changed all this, and has made out of the act of murder one of the most poignant scenes, in which we feel acute unhappiness for the murdered person, and yet do not in any way hate the murderer.

The second change, concerning the discovery of the crime, has been the source of a relief as intense as the painful tension of preceding scenes. In the original story, it is the Ensign who betrays the Moor, for the latter, filled with remorse after the murder of Desdemona, had deprived the Ensign of his rank, thinking him to be the cause of his unhappiness. In Shakespeare’s play, it is Emilia, Iago’s wife, who reveals the truth about the handkerchief and so ruins Iago’s plot at the very moment when it has attained its highest point of success. Her defiant exposure of the Moor and of Iago immediately after the consummation of the latter’s intrigue gives us so tremendous a sense of relief as could never have been given by a delayed and gradual revelation of crime, as in the original story.

The exposure of Iago through the instrumentality of Emilia and Cassio has been cited as an instance of poetic justice in Shakespeare. The phrase “poetic justice” usually means a kind of ideal justice, such as is seldom found in real life, but is represented in second-rate works of literature in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished. But in, that is not the sense in which the phrase can be used in the present context. As applied to the manner of Iago’s exposure, what the phrase “poetic justice” signifies is that Iago’s being brought to justice not only satisfies our moral sense, but also heightens our pleasure in his downfall through the manner in which it is brought about. Iago’s downfall would have pleased us in any case. But at, it gives us keener pleasure when we find that his intrigues to ruin the conjugal happiness of Othello and Desdemona were in the end brought to ruin by his own wife, who was actuated by unselfish devotion to her mistress, an attachment which her husband could not even conceive of. Similarly Cassio, who had been one of the victims of Iago, and had also been used to further his plot against Othello, escapes the fate intended for him and completes the exposure of Iago begun by Emilia. It is on account of this extraordinary manner of Iago’s downfall that it gives so keen a satisfaction and is regarded as an instance of poetic justice.

The main changes in this stage concern the occasion of Cassio’s dismissal, the arrangement of the arguments used to prove Desdemona’s supposed guilt, and the part of Emilia in the plot. In the original story, the Captain happens to strike a soldier on his own account, and is consequently deprived of his rank by the Moor. But of, Desdemona pleads his cause so insistently that the Moor feels compelled to reinstate him. He communicates the whole matter to his Ensign, as yet without the slightest suspicion concerning his wife’s fidelity; and the Ensign utilizes the opportunity for insinuating his dark suggestions. In Shakespeare’s play, Cassio’s falling out with Roderigo is a result of Iago’s contrivance, and so is also his solicitation of Desdemona’s influence on his behalf. The effect of this change is to be viewed from a technical standpoint as also from a psychological one. By representing Cassio’s disgrace as brought about by Iago’s contrivance, Shakespeare has linked it up with the other events of the play. Our interest in the incident is not merely on its own account, but on account of its being the initial stage of Iago’s elaborate plot. The incident is thus taken up as a part of a single dramatic design, so as to preserve unity of interest. This is a purely technical advantage. Another advantage of the change is that the success of Iago’s plot at this stage prepares us for his further success with Othello. During the scene of the quarrel he has demonstrated to all his truthfulness and his concern for Cassio. These points could not but have weighed with Othello when he was forced to consider the value of Iago’s insinuations against Desdemona.

The second change, concerning the arguments used in proving Desdemona’s supposed guilt, is of greater significance with reference to Shakespeare’s dramatic method. It is this part of the play which, more than any other, Shakespeare’s original conception of Othello’s character. In the original story, the Ensign is more direct in his accusations against Desdemona from the very beginning; and the Moor broods over these charges, alternately seeking explanation s from Desdemona and demanding proof from the Ensign. The latter mentions by way of proof the Captain’s own confessions to himself, and undertakes to produce more convincing proofs. He manages to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief and drop it in the Captain’s room. The Captain, finding it, attempts to return it to Desdemona, but his knock is answered by the Moor instead of by Desdemona, so he has to slip away stealthily. The Moor becomes more suspicious and again consults the Ensign. The villain then arranges a conversation between himself and the Captain, with the Moor watching them from a distance; and finally makes the Moor see the Captain’s wife taking out upon her own handkerchief the embroidery of Desdemona’s. In the original story, then, the deception of the Moor takes a considerably long time, and reveals the Moor as a mean of jealous husband. It did not suit Shakespeare’s purposes to represent the original material in the same manner for he did not conceive of Othello as a common jealous husband. He therefore makes Iago a more subtle villain than the Ensign of the original story. But in, what is more important, he does not represent Othello brooding over his suspicions for any length of time.

Othello’s suicide, by way of self-punishment, is an equally significant change. In the original story, the Moor, when accused before the Council of Venice, refuses to confess his crime even under the most painful torture, and is therefore banished. The Ensign meets with a painful death later on in connection with a further crime. How immeasurably above the original Moor is Othello of the play who realizes his mistake, he loses all interest in life. He had punished Cassio and Desdemona for what he believed to be their misdeeds. He punishes his own errors of judgement even more sternly, so that we cannot but echo Cassio’s words after Othello’s suicide, “…he was great of heart.” By that act of suicide, Othello has recovered all our original admiration for his noble personality which has been so painfully impaired in the course of the play.

But of, it is not just for money that Iago spends time and argument upon this fool of a man. With his shrewdness and cunning he would like to use him as a tool for other ends. Accordingly, he instigates him to rouse Brabantio from sleep and to inform him about Desdemona’s elopement and marriage with the Moor. Roderigo promptly obeys Iago and rouses Brabantio to tell him that Desdemona is gone to “the gross clasps of a Iascivious Moor.” Acting upon Iago’s instructions again, he leads Brabantio and party to the Sagittary to find Desdemona and the Moor. Iago’s obvious motive here is to bring about a clash between the Moor and Brabantio or at least to create a very awkward and embarrassing situation for the Moor and to bring him into disrupted with the duke and the nobles.

Othello contains three well-defined intrigues-against Roderigo, against Cassio, and against Moor and his wife. The villain in each case is Iago.

Iago’s intrigue against Roderigo and the Motives behind it.

It will thus be seen that the changes made by Shakespeare in the original story were inspired mainly by three purposes to interrelate the various incidents so as to preserve unity of interest to bring out his enlarged conception of Othello’s character, to reveal his inner conflicts and the movements of his passions under the stress of his disillusionment, and to preserve our sympathy and admiration for him even during the darkest moments of his life and finally provide adequate relief to the painful feelings produced in the reader’s heart during the course of the conflict.

We meet Roderigo in the very opening scene and we find that Iago has been spending Roderigo’s money as if it were his own “That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse, as if the strings were thine.” Thus one of the motives of Iago against Roderigo is mercenary. Roderigo is a fool and a gull who can easily be exploited. The mercenary motive is confirmed later when Iago asks Roderigo (with an amusing iteration) to ‘put money in thy purse’, and to ‘follow these wars’ to Cyprus. Roderigo has been a suitor of Desdemona and though Desdemona is now married to the Moor, his passion for Desdemona has neither dissolved nor diminished. Iago has been feeding him with hope in this respect and feeds him with hope still. He talks in a very plausible manner to convince Roderigo that soon Desdemona will be tired of the Moor and that the field will then be clear for him. And Roderigo feels easily convinced.

The next move of Iago against Roderigo proves fatal to the latter. Having been deprived of most of his money and his jewels and having got nothing in return, Roderigo demands an explanation and threatens to reveal the facts to Desdemona. Iago would not like to face an awkward situation. So he contrieves a plan by which he may not only get rid of Roderigo but also of Cassio. He suggests that Roderigo should attack Cassio and kill him. If Roderigo does that, he can enjoy Desdemona “the next night following.” The offer is too tempting for Roderigo to resist. As for Iago’s motive here, this is how he states it “Whether he kill Cassio,/ Or Cassio kill him, or each do kill the other/ Every way makes my game.’’ Roderigo, the fool and the dupe, ways lays Cassio, attacks him and is himself seriously wounded. Minutes later, he is stabbed by Iago and dies with the words “O damn’d Iago, O inhuman dog” on his lips. At Cyprus, Iago not only obtains jewels from Roderigo on the plea that they are to e passed on to Desdemona but makes further use of him for his evil purposes. He wishes to discredit Cassio and he forms a plan for the purpose. Roderigo can well fit into that plan. Accordingly, he tells Roderigo that Cassio is the only impediment between him and Desdemona, and that he (Roderigo) can have a shorter journey to his purpose of the impediment (that is, Cassio) can be eliminated from the picture. After a little resistance, Roderigo believes Iago and carries out Iago’s behest by provoking the drunken Cassio dismissed from the post of lieutenant and Roderigo’s role as a dupe in the play is confirmed.

The chief grievance of Iago against Cassio is that the latter has superseded him by having been promoted to the rank of lieutenant in preference to himself. In his opening dialogue with Roderigo, Iago refers to Cassio contemptuously as an ‘arithmetician’, a ‘counter caster who has absolutely no knowledge or experience of military affairs. In soliloquy, Iago make up his mind to get the office of the lieutenant by poisoning Othello’s ears against Cassio and thus displacing that man. Cassio’s handsome looks and smooth manner are the very qualities that will help Iago because Iago sees that the readiest means of discrediting Cassio is to rouse Othello’s suspicions of Cassio’s illicit relations with Desdemona.

The first direct move that Iago makes against Cassio is to make him drunk. Cassio had already taken a cup of wine, and Iago prevails upon him to have another. Iago has, at the same time, tutored Roderigo to provoke Cassio into a quarrel when Cassio is drunk. Iago’s plan goes very well. The drunken Cassio chases Roderigo and strikes him. The consequence of this brawl is the dismissal of Cassio by Othello. Iago’s purpose of discrediting Cassio and having him cashiered (or dismissed) has been fulfilled.

At Cyprus, before Othello has arrived, Cassio greets Desdemona by kissing her fingers. Iago, in an aside, thinks that this gesture of Cassio will serve his purpose very well. Referring to Cassio’s kissing of Desdemona’s fingures, Iago says that “as little a web as this will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio.” He proposes to use Cassio’s courtesies and gallantries towards Desdemona as material for poisoning the ears of Othello against Cassio. He would, by using this material, strip Cassio out of his “lieutenancy”. Thus he confirms his motive, which has already been stated, of getting Cassio dismissed from office and obtaining for himself the post of lieutenant. In a soliloquy that soon follows, Iago adds another motive against Cassio. He expresses his suspicion that Cassio too has slept with his wife Emilia and he would, therefore, like to have Cassio “on the hip” (that is, completely at his mercy or in a position from which he can give Cassio the decisive blow).

But of, Iago has yet to drive the Moor mad with jealousy. He has yet to create in the Moor a suspicion, amounting to conviction, that Desdemona had adulterous relations with Cassio. He now directs his efforts to that end. He advises Cassio to approach Desdemona and beg her to intervene on his behalf and secure his reinstatement from Othello. The trustful Cassio acts upon that advice. When Othello sees Cassio speaking to his wife and then withdrawing from her presence at his approach, Iago seizes the opportunity he was waiting for. By his clever insinuations, he creates a doubt in Othello’s mind about Desdemona’s relation with Cassio. Then he invents a dream in which Cassio is supposed to have spoken lovingly to Desdemona and to have cursed Moor for having married her. On hearing the dream, the Moor says “O monstrous, monstrous.” Next, Iago refers to the handkerchief (which he has already dropped in Cassio’s apartment) and says that he has seen Cassio’s guilt Othello calls upon Iago to kill Cassio within three days while he will himself put an end to the life of “the fair devil” (that is, Desdemona). And with that Othello appoints Iago to the post of lieutenant also. Thus Iago has secured not only the dismissal of Cassio but the post to which he aspired.

That does not, however, mark the end of Iago’s intrigue against Cassio. Iago has yet to take his revenge upon Othello. He now invents the falsehood that Cassio had admitted having illicit relations with Desdemona. A few moments later he questions Cassio about Bianca while Othello, overhearing this dialogue thinks that the two are talking about Desdemona. Cassio’s remarks (which actually pertain to Bianca) have the effect of maddening Othello who thinks that Desdemona is the subject of the conversation. Othello has also seen his handkerchief in the hands of Bianca who returns it to Cassio in a mood of anger.

When a little later, Iago tempts Roderigo to go to Cyprus in order to cuckold the Moor, his only purpose is to have Roderigo at hand for money and to make a tool of him again if the need arises. He cannot be serious about his proposal that Roderigo should cuckold the Moor (“if thou canst cuckold him, thou doest thyself a pleasure, and me a sport”). He knows full well that the seduction of Desdemona is impossible and he merely offers what is a bait to Roderigo to lure him to Cyprus. In a soliloquy, Iago reveals that his main purpose in his dealings with Roderigo is money and another is fun. “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse/ For I mine own gain’d knowledge should profane/ if I would time expend with such a snipe/ But for my sport and profit.” It is obvious, too that he holds Roderigo in contempt.

Everything seems to be working into Iago’s hands. Hearing from Desdemona of Othello’s anger Iago hurries off to ply with his lies. Cassio, he tells Othello, has confessed all and he has no longer any room for doubt. Again, Othello fails to distinguish between probability and proof and in the miserable condition of his disgrace falls into a trance. Then Iago convinces that Othello should play the eavesdropper to a conversation between Cassio and himself. He draws gestures of a loose temptation from Cassio by his talk of Bianca and distracted Othello applies them all to Desdemona. As this juncture, by an incident Bianca comes in at the moment and flings down the very handkerchief at the feet of Cassio. He asks Desdemona to leave him alone for a little while. She obeys and leaves along with Emilia. One phrase of Desdemona, “What! Michael Cassio, that came a wooing with you” especially catches the observant ear or Iago. He enquires from the Moor if Cassio had been the confidant of his love-making days. Othello replies in the affirmative and asks reason for this question. Iago with the skill of a consummate hypocrite partly by unconnected suggestions, and partly by an apparent reluctance to answer inquiries, but more than all by the subtler devices of manner and expression, to instill into Othello the idea that he himself is the possessor of some secret about Cassio’s character which makes him doubt the perfect honesty of his present intentions. By subtle steps, he draws from Othello his views on matrimonial jealousy and learns to his delight that Othello, confident of the complete integrity of Desdemona, regards jealousy of her as an absurdity.

Iago’s final step against Cassio is intended to prove fatal to that man but it fails. At Iago’s instigation, Roderigo attacks Cassio in order to kill him, but is himself seriously wounded (and then stabbed to death by Iago). Cassio is wounded by Iago from behind in the leg but he survives the attack. Iago’s motive to kill Cassio was two fold: (i) The daily beauty of Cassio’s life made Iago look ugly and (ii) Othello might have directly spoken to Cassio and this might have led to an exposure of Iago’s wicked schemes.

From now on, Iago’s intrigue against Othello and Desdemona becomes more grim. In a most subtle manner, Iago exploits the trustful nature of Othello and leads him, by his clever reasoning, to believe that Desdemona is having illicit relation with Cassio. His wife having found Desdemona’s handkerchief, Iago takes it away from her and drops it in Cassio department. The handkerchief becomes afterwards a vital piece of evidence against Desdemona. Othello’s jealousy has been roused by Iago’s reasoning to such an extent that he becomes almost mad, but he demands proof of his wife’s disloyalty. Iago invents a dream in which Cassio is supposed to have been making love to Desdemona. And to have cursed the Moor for having married her. He then tells the Moor that he has seen Cassio wiping his beard with Desdemona’s handkerchief. Othello’s suspicion now turns into a conviction and he swears to kill Desdemona, changing Iago with the task of murdering Cassio. Othello now appoints Iago to the post of lieutenant (‘now art thou my lieutenant”)

From the opening dialogue between Iago and Roderigo, in which Iago in Act I we learn that Othello has promoted Cassio to the lieutenant’s post but Iago had a strong claim. Iago says that Cassio knows nothing about military affairs and that Cassio’s appointment to the lieutenant’s post is a great injustice to him (that is Iago). With this grievance against the Moor, Iago will follow him only “to serve my turn upon him”, and not “for love and duty”. Iago’s first move against Othello is to instigate Roderigo to rouse Brabantio from sleep and to acquaint Brabantio with the fact of Desdemona’s elopement from home and her marriage to Othello. Iago’s object in doing so is to bring about a clash between Brabantio and Othello, or at least, to create a most awkward situation for the Moor. In a soliloquy that soon follows, Iago tells us that he hate the Moor and that he suspects the Moor of having slept with his wife Emilia (“that twixt my sheets/ He’s done my office). But of, at this stage his chief concern is to discredit Cassio and to oust Cassio from the office of lieutenant, and his plan is to poison Othello’s ears against Cassio by telling the Moor that Cassio is “too familiar with his wife”. In his second soliloquy Iago tells us that he must get even with the Moor, “wife for wife” or failing that, he “put the Moor/Atleast, into a jealousy so strong, That judgement cure”, and practice “upon his peace and quiet, Even to madness.” Thus his purpose is merely to drive Othello mad with jealousy. His plan does not yet go further than that.

Having gone so far, it is now impossible for Iago to retreat. Both aims of Iago’s original “double knavery” have now been achieved, but Iago cannot stop here without endangering his own position. He is propelled forward by the very situation he has created. Othello is obsessed with thoughts of his wife’s adultery. Iago becomes bolder and cruder in his references to adultery which he has alleged against Desdemona. He tells Othello that Cassio has been talking about his love-affair with Desdemona and that he has admitted her or to have laid with. Othello over-powered by his grief and anger, faints while Iago congratulates himself on the success of his designs (“Thus credulous fools are caught, / And many worthy and chaste dames, even thus/ All guiltless, meet reproach”. When Othello recovers, Iago executes another of his vile schemes. Iago questions Cassio, in Othello’s hearing, about Bianca. Othello completely misunderstands the conversation, thinking that Desdemona is the subject of it. Othello also sees his wife’s handkerchief in the hands of Bianca who throws it at Cassio. Othello can bear no more. He says that he will chop his wife into pieces for having cuckolded him. Othello carries out his plan and strangles his wife in bed.

The impression that we get is that Iago did not, from the outset, aim at Desdemona’s murder. It is just that, having achieved a certain purpose, he is in no position to withdraw from the whole affair. The murder of Roderigo, the murder of Desdemona and the attempted murder of Cassio are a logical development of Iago’s achievement of his original purpose. His motives against Othello are not so strong or compelling as to cause him to bring about such suffering and bloodshed. But of, he is carried away by his own sense of power over his victims and by his intellectual superiority over them to go much beyond the original purpose he had in mind.

 Iago’s villainy in the play Othello is considerably helped by the part played by chance. The skill of Iago was extraordinary, but chance too operated in his favour. Again and again, a chance word from Desdemona, a chance meeting. Of Othello and Cassio, a question which anyone in Othello’s place might have asked, would have destroyed Iago’s plot and ended his life. In their stead, a series of chances or accidents occur to abet Iago’s schemes and to bring about the ruin of Iago’s victims.

The first accident is the circumstance of Desdemona’s dropping of her handkerchief. Iago had several times urged his wife Emilia to steal that particular handkerchief but Desdemona had always kept it in her possession with great care. And then, by chance Desdemona drops it after having offered to bind Othello’s aching head with it. If Desdemona loses the handkerchief by chance, it comes into Emilia’s possession by chance too. Hardly Desdemona leaves after dropping the handkerchief when Emilia enters by chance and discovers it. The accidental loss of handkerchief by Desdemona and the accidental discovery of it by Emilia are vital to Iago’s intrigue against Othello. When, subsequently, Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief, he thrice repeats the words “the handkerchief” in a tone of great and disappointment. His insistence on the handkerchief makes Desdemona say to Emilia “Sure there’s some wonder in this handkerchief, / I am most unhappy in the loss of it.”

But at, we know that Desdemona’s inability to produce the handkerchief has confirmed Othello’s suspicion against her. Indeed, Desdemona’s accidental loss of the handkerchief came at a moment most favourable to Iago.

The second important accident occurs when Cassio blunders into the presence of Othello only to find him in a swoon. If Cassio had happened to meet Othello at any moment, Othello would definitely have burst into rage and holding the man by his neck, would have asked him how he had got the handkerchief, and Iago’s falsehood would have been exposed. But of, Cassio comes when Othello happens to be in a fit and then it is an instant’s job for Iago to get rid of him by any means. Here, again, accident serves the purposes of Iago. Not only that, Iago makes positive use of Cassio’s accidental appearance on the scene. He sends him away and asks him to come back a little later. By the time Cassio comes again, Iago has already prevailed upon Othello to hide himself and be ready to overhear his conversation with Cassio. Iago asks Cassio cleverly-worded questions and Cassio’s answers have for Othello a meaning which is far from Cassio’s thoughts.

The part played by chance or accident in this play strengthens in us a feeling of fate. The influence of accident is incessant and terrible. It gives us the feeling that for these star-crossed mortals there is no escape from fate. Not only that; we also get the feeling that fate has taken sides with villainy. Who is responsible for accidental happenings? Fate, of course. If accidental happenings favour Iago, it means that fate has sided with the devil. This feeling gives us a shock. It disturbs our faith in Divine Justice. It makes us believe that our lives are governed by the forces of unreason and evil. Human goodness is overpowered and crushed not merely by the human evil which opposes it but also by the unseen supernatural forces which join hands with evil human beings like Iago. Thus, the element of chance or accident does not give rise to any elevating or cheering thoughts which we but live to depressing and morbid thoughts about the universe in which we live.

When Cassio has been dismissed from his post as a result of Iago’s machinations, Iago’s planning becomes wider in scope and more vicious in character. He has suggested to Cassio that he should seek Desdemona’s help and in a soliloquy, he tells us that while Cassio “plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes”, he will pour this poison into Othello’s ears that Desdemona wants the reinstatement of Cassio “for her body’s lust”. In this way he will not only drive Othello mad with jealousy but also turn Desdemona’s virtue into pitch and “out of her own goodness wake the net/ That shall enmesh ‘’em all’. He now decides to make use of his wife in urging Desdemona to speak to the Moor. He also decides to draw the Moor apart and to bring him exactly when he may see Cassio soliciting Desdemona for her intervention on his behalf.

Iago gives several reasons for hating Othello. He accuses him of being unfair to his merit and promoting above him Cassio, an obviously incompetent person, as his lieutenant. He has a suspicion, grounded on nothing but his own foul thoughts, that by Othello he has been wronged in his wedded life.

Here is fine material for an intrigue and Iago works upon it with the consummate skill of an artist.

At this point, another accident occurs to help Iago’s plot. Bianca appears on the scene. She scolds Cassio for having given her a handkerchief which, she says, must be a love-token from some mistress of his. Bianca’s references to the handkerchief further confirm Othello’s suspicion when Cassio is gone. Othello advances from his hiding place and asks Iago, “How shall I murder him, Iago?” Having seen the handkerchief being returned to Cassio by Bianca, no doubt is left in Othello’s mind as to Iago’s account of how the handkerchief had originally come into Cassio’s hands.

Hearing the approach of the General, Cassio cuts short his meeting with Desdemona and slinks away. Iago maliciously draws the attention of Othello to the identity of the departing figure.

The general intention is clear. He leaves the details of his plot to be worked out or modified as circumstances arise. The first necessity of the situation is that Cassio be retained about the head-quarters of the General. To effect this he represents himself to be the friend of the cashiered officer and advises him to make his appeal to Desdemona to intervene for his restoration. By doing so he draws Cassio into a course of action which may be represented to the Moor as compromising both himself and Desdemona. “For while this honest fool plies Desdemona to repair his fortune, and she for him pleads strongly to the Moor” he will under the guise of a friend, pour into Othello’s ear the poisonous notion that Desdemona’s real object is guilty love for Cassio.

With perfect innocence Desdemona chooses this somewhat inopportune moment to press Cassio’s claims upon her husband. That the vanished suitor was Cassio she makes no concealment. With honest eagerness she presses her suit. Othello, apparently glad for an excuse to relax his severity, readily complies.

Thus Iago has cleverly drawn in Othello to put the trust of Desdemona to an intellectual test. And we know it well that he (Othello) is incapable of any intellectual distinctions. Othello has now staked his peace of mind upon the hazard that in any given case he could distinguish satisfactorily to himself between probability and proof. Having achieved this success, Iago carries his attack on Othello’s faith a step further. As if glad that Othello was slow to believe ill of his lady, Iago frankly declared that he had no proof , but begged Othello to observe her behavior well when Cassio was by, not to be jealous, nor too secure neither, for that Iago knew the disposition of the Italian ladies, his country-women, better than Othello could do. He artfully insinuates that Desdemona deceived her father in marrying Othello and almost broke his heart. This argument moves Othello much and a suspicion passes his mind that is she deceived her father she may deceive him also.

Then Iago makes Othello’s sure ground of trust-Desdemona’s strange preference for himself-a suggestion of rank intemperate nature. Othello is distracted with jealousy. Chaos has come and he does not know what to do and what to believe.

Worse than all, Othello learns from Bianca’s mouth that the magical handkerchief had been given to her by Cassio, but then, this is no evidence against Desdemona, for it has not been proved that she had given it to Cassio. Othello once again stakes suspicion for evidence and resolves that no punishment can be too severe for the culprits. He would’ have Cassio one years a killing’. Desdemona he would chop to pieces- kill her with poison-strangle her in her bed. Iago himself will undertake the punishment of Cassio.

He calls Desdemona to his presence. Gesture and word alike are terrifying to Desdemona. His ‘horrible fancies’ transform the whole man. It is in vain that she protests herself as his ‘true and loyal wife’- Othello is far past the stage of investigation. His mind is all confusion. He interprets Desdemona’s innocent beauty as making the deeper sin.

Then follows the murder scene with its awful calmness. Othello’s beliefs in his wife’s guilt is deep enough to give this act the deliberateness of justice. Desdemona’s protestations of innocence are met with: ‘Sweet soul, take heed, Take heed of perjury; thou art on thy death-bed.’

He will not kill her unconfessed. But of, Desdemona has no confession to make. Othello for the first time accuses her of guilt with Cassio and she denies it utterly. But in, the denies comes too late and serves only to exasperate him. He tells her that Cassio has confessed, Desdemona is horrified at these words. She asks him to send Cassio but is told that he is dead: “Her mouth is stopped.” On hearing, this Desdemona cries: “Alas! He is betray’d, and I undone. “

Before killing Desdemona Othello thinks it well to cross examine Emilia, his wife’s maid. Emilia denies utterly the truth of his suspicion. He treats Emilia’s honest indignation as a procuress’s braze-facedness.

Othello enters his wife’s bed-chamber with alight in his hand. Desdemona is in bed, asleep. Othello is speaking to himself in a soliloquy. Desdemona’s unchastity, he says, is the cause for what he is going to do. But at, he would not kill her by shedding her blood, nor strain her skin which is whiter than snow. Yet she must die, because otherwise she will ensnare more men as she did Cassio. But of, he would like to kiss her before he extinguishes the light of her life. He kisses her once, twice and a third time. Tears begin to flow from his eyes. His sorrow over her is divine because she is going to die. Desdemona sees his eyes rolling and conveying the signal of death. He speaks about the handkerchief which he gave her and changes her with having passed it on to Cassio. She swears by her life and soul that she did no such thing. She swears that she never loved Cassio in an improper manner and that she never have him a love-token. Her answer, which is in Othello’s eyes only the denial of a false woman, enrages him. He will have to kill her with the rage of a murderer when he had thought of sacrificing her to justice with the calmness of a priest. When, on being, told that Cassio is already dead, she says “Alas, he is deceived and I am ruined”, her remark has for him a meaning opposite to what she wished to convey. He is now more convinced than ever before and he strangles her.

An innocent remark from Desdemona to Lodovico as to the will between Othello and Cassio, “A most unhappy one. I would do much to atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio,” ends Othello mad and he slaps her in public. He imagines unspeakable things and flings himself from the room.

Emilia comes, shouting for Othello, Othello hears Emilia’s cries and presses Desdemona’s throaty once again. He then opens the door to let Emilia in. She tells him that Roderigo has been killed and that Cassio is yet alive. Othello is surprised that Cassio is alive. It means that murder has missed its proper mark. At this point Desdemona; who was not yet dead, mumbles the words “O falsely murdered; murdered on a false charge.” She dies wishing her husband well. Emilia is shocked by Desdemona’s death. At first Othello says that he doesnot know who killed her but presently he declares himself as her murder. He says that she was a wanton and a whore. Emilia calls him a devil for telling such lies about her. He tells her that her own husband will confirm what he has said. Emilia is unable to imagine what her husband had to do with this affair. She shouts for help saying that the Moor has murdered Desdemona.

This unfortunate phrase is interrupted by Othello as a confession and seals her fate. All her pleadings for mercy are in vain. Not a night, not an hour will he grant-not even time for the saying of prayers. She must die in her sin, and furious with anger, he stifles her.

Othello questions Desdemona as to the handkerchief unfortunately, she evades the question as she knows not what has come of it. Othello’s suspicion throws and he talks wildly which further bewilders Desdemona. Not knowing what to do she foolishly presses Cassio’s case with a passionate persistence which makes the situation worse.

The poison has entered Othello’s soul. In his torment he sees various ways to relief, sometime abusing Iago for opening his eyes, sometimes fiercely demanding ocular proof. Iago tells him that in such a case circumstantial evidence only is to make up his mind by weighing of probabilities. He produces two pieces of evidences (i) Cassio in his dream has talked of loving Desdemona; (ii) Othello’s handkerchief has been seen in Cassio’s hands. Both are fabrications but the falseness of the first is beyond detection. As regards the second, Iago has secured the handkerchief from Emilia who had picked it up from Desdemona’s room, and had left it in Cassio’s chamber. No more is needed. Othello in a sublime poetic image declares that his purpose is fixed. He vows vengeance and Iago kneeling down by his side places himself at the Moor’s service. Othello orders Iago to put Cassio to death within three days and appoints him his Lieutenant. He adds that he himself will kill Desdemona.

This scene arouses a number of feelings in our hearts: pity, horror, disgust, grief, etc. when Othello makes his soliloquy over his sleeping wife, we feel impressed by his poetic eloquence and by his “heavenly sorrow”. Subsequently, he creates in our hearts the feelings of disgust and horror. The words “O strumpet” and “Down, strumpet” addressed by him to Desdemona are foul to our ears and for a moment we hate the Moor. But of, we also pity this man who is the victim of his own nature. The predominant feeling in our hearts, however, is one of profound grief over the extinction of one of the finest specimens of womanhood. The fate that Desdemona meets is both pitiful and dreadful. Some critics have found this scene unbearably painful and so it is.

There are two groups of characters in Othello. One group of characters consists of those who are self-deceived or the victims of deception practical on them by others. In the other group, there are characters who deceive others and thus bring and tragedy in their life. In Othello, Iago deceives the other characters and thus he achieves his own selfish goals. He is an arch-villain and he ruins the life of others. Iago is the intriguer and deceptor and other characters in the play are duped by him.

In the play, Roderigo belongs to those groups of characters who are deceived by Iago. He is a tool in the hand of Iago and is duped by Iago. Roderigo loves Desdemona and Iago makes him believe that one day he will be able to attain Desdemona’s love because Desdemona’s love for Othello is a temporary phase and her love for the Moor cannot last forever. Iago tells Roderigo that Othello is black and there is much age differences between them and so Desdemona will be tired of him very soon. In this way Roderigo is deceived and duped by Iago. Iago uses his money as his own and makes him hope that one day he will be able to enjoy the love of Desdemona. Iago promises to help Roderigo to attain Desdemona’s love and takes jewellery from Roderigo as gifts to Desdemona. Iago continues to dupe him and at the end he uses him to murder Cassio. Cassio does not die but Roderigo is fatally wounded by Iago. Roderigo is a character who is not only the victim of Iago’s deception but is self deceived also. He is self-deceived because he believes that he can get the love of Desdemona even after her marriage, only if Iago helps him. He is not able to understand the noble and virtuous nature of Desdemona.

Allardyce Nicoll’s views on Othello illustrate how a fundamentally moralistic approach to literature warps one’s judgement. He believes that “throughout the play runs the keynote of deception and self-deception”. He reminds us that Desdemona is shown to us first in the play as deceiving her father. Did she not tell that unfortunate lie about the handkerchief? And “she ends her life on a lie. Othello has smothered her, and when help arrives, she can summon only sufficient breath to murmur, “Nobody I myself”. It is a pitiful lie, but all our pity for her should not blind us to the fact that this is entirely characteristic of her lack of self-respect, her tendency towards concealing of truth by prevarication. In this way, she is responsible for her doom.” Nicoll proceeds to point out how Desdemona deceives herself. She lives in a world of romance and idealism, ignorant of the existence of evil. When reality rudely bursts into her world of dreams, she is bewildered and at a loss, and tries to persuade herself that it doesnot exist. Othello too is an idealistic living in a world of illusions. Prof. Nicoll holds that Othello was prone to jealousy. “Othello perhaps cheats himself, certainly cheats others in his affirmation that he is ‘rude of speech’…presenting instead of ‘a round unvarnished tale’ one of the most subtle pieces of oratory outside of Antony’s similar harangue.”

Hardly has her panting ceased when Emilia arrives at the ghastly scene. Desdemona makes last efforts to save her murderer and tells Emilia that she has done it herself and asks her to command her to ‘my kind lord.’ Othello, however, confesses and when he tells Emilia the cause, Emilia wild with anger calls him a ‘gull and a dolt’-and tells him that he has been befooled by Iago. She shouts murder and people rush in. Othello and Iago are surrounded by them. Iago makes a vain attempt to shut the mouth of his wife and when she does not heed he stabs her to death.

The discovery comes like a thunder stroke to Othello who now plainly sees that he is no better than a murderer, and that Desdemona has ever been faithful to him. He falls upon his sword and throws himself upon the body of Desdemona and ‘dies upon a kiss”.

Ransom presents another point of view about this play. He shows that Shakespeare in Othello was trying to deal with the problem of the intermingling of the races. According to him, the basic cause of the tragedy may be traced ‘in the unsuitability of the marriage itself. That like should wed like is a fundamental rule of Shakespearean morality. For setting aside the mere external differences of colour, age and the like, what is at the bottom of Othello’s misfortune. Surely it is this: Othello and his wife have and can have no real community of feeling…. I feel most strongly the existence of a want of complete unison of feeling between the two. Perhaps it is more a want of unison on the mental than on the moral side. Nor have they lived in the same social sphere. Desdemona is a girl accustomed to move freely in Venetian society –a society never remarkable for the strictness of its etiquette. She carried with her the freedom of the Western woman. Othello, on the other hand, though himself a Christian, is essentially an Eastern. His violence of passion, his innate disposition to jealousy, his inability to realize the existence of Platonic affection between the sexes, stamps the man. Shakespeare knew well enough that the prejudices of race are not eradicated in a moment. He was well aware, too, that there is no quality which the Eastern finds so hard to cast off as suspicion. It is part of the very blood of the uncivilized man.”

Nemesis turns upon Iago. He is caught in the toils of his own villainy and is left in the hands of Cassio who “remains the censure of this hellish villain.”

Thus, we see that Iago is the arch-deceiver and all the other characters in the play are deceived by him. But at, ironically enough, he himself is self –deceived because he cannot understand the true nature of his own wife, Emilia. She lacks imaginative power and at first fails to understand her husband’s devilish nature. But of, Emilia is brave and honest and at the same time loyal to her mistress, Desdemona. Iago is self-deceived because he never imagines that his own wife Emilia would be the means of exposing his villainy. It is Emilia who tells the true story of the handkerchief. As a result she is killed by her own self-deceived husband. Iago is self-deceived also in the sense that he does not realize that the power which rules on high, is a moral one and wicked people like him are bound to be destroyed in the long run.

Brabantio is a victim of self deception. He is a character who is entirely self-deceived. He is of the opinion that his daughter Desdemona “is a maiden never bold”, one who blushes at her own motion. There are many suitors of her own country who want to marry him, but she has not paid any attention to them. So it is impossible for him to believe that she would have fallen in love with the black Moor. He cannot believe the news of his daughter’s elopement and secret marriage with Othello. When Roderigo awakens him to inform him of his daughter’s secret marriage, he becomes furious at having been awakened at this odd hour. He does not believe even a single word uttered by Roderigo. But of, before the Duke and his council, Desdemona boldly declares that Othello has not used any charm or witchcraft to win her. She admits her love for the Moor and says that she is half the wooer. She declares Othello’s black complexion did not come in the way of her love because she loved him for his nobility and generousity. Now Brabantio’s disillusionment is complete and he accepts his defeat.

Another character who is deceived by Iago is Cassio. Cassio becomes a victim of Iago’s deception and thus he ruins Cassio. Iago has a grudge against Cassio and so he decides to work against him. In Cyprus, Iago makes Cassio drunk and thus bring about Cassio’s disgrace. Cassio is dismissed from the post of the lieutenant by the Moor as a result of Iago’s intrigue. To achieve his purpose, Iago suggests Cassio to plead Desdemona so that he can regain Othello’s favour. Then he insinuates to Othello that Desdemona wants Cassio’s reinstatement in order to satisfy her lust. As a result of Iago’s insinuation, the more Desdemona pleads for Cassio, the more the Moor’s jealousy is excited and he grows more and more suspicious. Iago plans to kill Cassio and instigates Roderigo to kill Cassio. But of, Cassio is not killed and at the end he becomes the Governor of Cyprus.

It is true that character is the source of tragedy. As we have noticed, the credulousness of Othello and the simplicity of Desdemona largely account for their sufferings, and their weaknesses spring from their very greatness. But, Allardyce Nicoll pushes too far the view-point ‘Character is destiny’, and appears to be prompted by a desire to identify the tragic trait with a graver moral aberration in the light of which the tragedy is justified. Anyway, it is difficult to share his view that Othello deceives himself and others when he says that he is not inclined to jealousy. His whole tragedy lies in the fact that he was not easily jealous and yet fell a prey to jealousy through the simplicity of his character and the machinations of a villain. Whatever may be the truth about Desdemona’s lie regarding the handkerchief, it is impossible to see in her last angelic lie any attempt at, or effect of, deception. To regard it as characteristic of “her tendency towards concealing of truth by prevarication” is to miss some of the most concealing of truth in her character. Nor does she deceive her father in any but a very narrow formalistic sense of tie word. It was not certainly out of timidity that Desdemona concealed her love for Othello from her father. The experience of a strange love had made her unexpectedly bold. Simple though she was, she must have realized that her father would never approve of the marriage. Her behavior emphasizes her extraordinary courage rather than her timidity or deception. It looked like deception to a father who had not fully understood his daughter, and to villain who saw in it a potent means of furthering his plot. One may suggest that Prof. Nicoll is deceiving himself and others when he attaches so much importance to deception and self deception in Othello as to find in it the keynote of the play which gives it unity.

It has always been a matter of controversy whether or not Shakespeare wanted tragedies. In the opinion of Dr. Johnson, Shakespeare “sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose. Shakespeare’s plays are not certainly inspired by any special moral purpose they are not designed to be moral treatise. He is not a preacher, but a poet. Still, it would be incorrect to say that he is indifferent to morality, he was a poet and, as such, he sought to render imaginatively his experience of and reaction to life through the symbols of his characters. There is no direct moral purpose in his works, he does not answer the riddles of the universe but he certainly helps us to see them better.”

In the case of Othello, critics have expressed different opinions regarding the spiritual import of the play. Let us give brief extracts from some of these critics.

Othello and Desdemona are duped by Iago and he deceives both of them. In the guise of honesty, Iago ruins both of them and brings tragedy in their life. Both Othello and Desdemona considers him “Honest, honest Iago”. But of, in reality he deceives them from the very beginning and is an arch-enemy of their happiness. It is due to Iago’s insinuation that Othello’s mind is poisoned against Desdemona and as a result he murders Desdemona who is innocent and loyal to Othello. When Othello discovers the truth that Desdemona is innocent and realises that he is deceived and duped by Iago, he commits suicide.

There is, therefore, Shakespeare would make us understand, something more inimical to humanity than suffering-namely, an incapacity for noble pain. To die as Othello dies is indeed grievous. But of, to live as Iago lives, devouring the dust and stinging-this is more appalling.

Such is the spiritual motive that controls the tragedy. And the validity of this truth is demonstrable to every sound conscience. No supernatural authority needs to be summoned to bear witness to this reality of human life. No pallid flame of hell, no splendor of dawning heaven, needs show itself beyond the verge of earth to illumine this truth. It is portion of the ascertained fact of human nature, and of this our mortal existence.”

To quote Verplanck, “Were Othello but the spirited portrait of a half-tamed barbarian we should view him as a bold and happy poetical conception, and as such, the poet’s work might satisfy our critical judgement; but it is because it depicts a noble mind, wrought by deep passion and dark devices to agonies such as every one might feel, that it awakens our strongest sympathies. We see in this drama a grand and true moral picture we read in it a profound ethical lesson for while the matchless work is built up to the noblest height of poetry, it rests upon the deepest foundations of true philosophy.”

Loosely, it may be defined as that ideal judgement which rewards virtue and punishes vice among the characters of a drama…Poetic Justice, in the higher sense, is however, something greater than the mere rewarding of virtue and the punishment of vice it is the logical and motivated outcome of the given condition and terms of the tragic plan as presented in the earlier acts of the drama even though, from a worldly sense, virtue meets with disaster and vice seems temporarily rewarded. So in the modern sense poetic justice may be considered as fulfilled when the outcome, however fatal to virtue however it may reward vice, is the logical and necessary result of the action and principles of the major characters as they have been presented by the dramatist.

In comparison to the other plays of Shakespeare, Othello offers more and textual and editorial problem. At the surface level, Othello seems to be very simple to the interpretative critics. If we compare Othello with the other Shakespearian plays, it seems to us Othello has nothing to dispute about; the dazzling complexities of Hamlet, the cloudy sublimities of King Lear or the delicate poetic symbolism is not seen in Othello. The play makes its terrific impact on us and we respond to it deeply or shallowly according to our deep or shallow natures and there, it may seem, is the end of it. It appears that our response to play is enough and the critics have nothing to do with the play. But of, in reality Othello is a difficult play to interpret.

Othello offers a great variety of conflicting opinions and this fact accounts for the complex nature of the play. Critics after critics have proposed conflicting interpretations of the play and so we see that the play is very difficult to interpret. As we go through the representative criticism of the play, we feel that we are walking placidly down a quiet corridor and after opening a door, suddenly encountered with a crowd of people who are arguing with one another at the top of their voice. In all of Shakespeare’s four tragedies, Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear and Othello; the dramatist continually surprises his audience with the complexity of his character portrayals. The personality and temperament of Hamlet, for example, has probably generated more critical debate than any other single figure in English Literature. And this is almost equally true of the other three heroes- the nature of Macbeth’s ambitions, the problem of Lear’s state of mind, the riddle of Othello’s jealousy, all provide never ending sources of interest and discussion. The problem of character presented by Othello’s behaviour has been approached by the critics in two ways: according to the traditional view, Othello is the victim of Iago’s villainous schemes but remains essentially the ‘Noble Moor’ throughout the action. But of, according to more recent critics, Othello himself possesses serious defects of character which are the basic reasons for his downfall. There are one section of critics who praises Othello attributing to him a generous share of every virtue under the sun; another section is busy in destroying his character and they opines that Othello is a coarse, vain, lustful, and a brutal ruffian who would be apt, Iago or no Iago to murder his wife on some delusory grounds. Critics are horrified to see the wickedness of Iago; at the same time some of them are full of admiration at his villainy. In another corner, he is dismissed as a more creature of the plot, a shallow liar and braggart who could never have taken in anyone less stupid and self-centered than his master. Others, again dwells on the wrongs and murmur that revenge is, after all, a kind of wild justice. Some critics are full of praise and adoration for Desdemona and shed tears at the suffering and tragic end of such an innocent creature. There are other critics, who become narrow and suspicious at the mention of her name.

According to Stopford Brooke, Shakespeare had lost his moral hold on life at the time when he wrote his tragedies. He suggests that this was perhaps due to some bitter experiences of his life. “His belief in a divine justice is shaken in Hamlet, is almost mocked at in at in Measure for Measure, is really absent in Macbeth, is replaced by a belief in Chance as at the root of the universe in Othello, and in King Lear it is altogether gone… He has a deep and personal sympathy with the sorrows he records and this is mistakable…but it is a sympathy which sees but little light beyond; and which at least in Othello and King Lear, walks in darkness and weeps as it walks…The noble, the good, and the beautiful are there sacrificed without any good arising from their sacrifice… Cordelia perishes by a villain’s love of cruelty; Desdemona dies of her frank innocence; Othello of his love and of his foolishness, the blind victim of a miscreant. And there is no explanation, no reason why such things happen in the world; nor is there any use,any far-off interest in these tears. That, I, believe, was now the temper of Shakespeare…Everywhere in Othello we seem to feel in the writer’s opinion should his dark consciousness of the inexplicable aspect of the world, of the answerless problem of evil and sorrow; of his doubt with dismay that accompanied it, whether all that happened was by soulless Chance or by Unreason, blind and deaf, is at the centre of human life…something of such questioning and the temper which arises from it seems to have been in Shakespeare’s mind when he wrote Othello.”

So far as Othello’s race and complexion is concerned, he is vastly different from Desdemona and others and this fact also seems to have something to do with the tragic outcome. Brabantio believes that Othello has applied witchcraft on his daughter and thus has persuaded her to do such an ‘unnatural’ act of marrying a black man. We see that throughout the play the characters who dislike Othello tend to make it an additional point against him that he is a Negro. Those who like him tend to make no fuss about his colour one way or the other. However, there is nobody in the play who says that he is all the more admirable because of his race.

It is to be noted that noted that not only the characters, but the play as a whole is interpreted in a variety of ways e.g. that the idea of magic is central to it, or that it is not central to it. Many other interpretation of the play are offered: Othello is a Christian tragedy and the fall of Othello is a version of Adam’s fall; the fate of Desdemona is an inversion of Eve’s. According to some critics, the plot of Othello is incredible or that the plot ha ‘surrealistic rightness’. It is also said to be the part of the response to James I’s heroic poem Lepano. It is also claimed that the play is a diagram of Spanish political history and Othello is Philip II and Iago is his enemy Antonio Perez. One critic is of the opinion that Othello is “Perhaps the greatest work in the world”, whereas another critic describes the play as “A bloody force without salt or savour”!

Iago, the matador, is excited of his fight with the bull. Iago abandons all thought of motives from that point onwards and works from contingency to contingency. Of course, Desdemona must die, for if she lives, Iago’s lie would be detected and as a result Othello will never trust him again and chase him throughout his life. Cassio has to die for the same reason. It is due this same reason, Roderigo must die because he knows too much, though like everyone else in the play, Roderigo understands too little. Whatever be the motives of Iago, his original intention is do as much harm as possible to Othello and Cassio as his perverted imagination can suggest. But of, that harm turns out to be as far beyond his original conception as Othello’s love for Desdemona is beyond his vulgar notion of love as ‘a lust of the blood’ . Once he realises the huge suffering and destruction he has caused, he cannot stop or even slow down because it is too late. Thus we see that Iago is the erect type of all those insignificant little man, who all at once feel the urge to destroy another human being and get drunk on the realisation that his large, important action is suddenly and incredibly in their power.

Othello is interpreted as a tragedy of misunderstanding by some critics. No character in the play understand the other; nor are they, for the most part understands themselves either. If Othello was strong enough to understand Desdemona, he would realise that she is not the kind of girl who would start a love-affair with his lieutenant Cassio during their honey-moon. If Desdemona was speculative enough, she would understand that Othello does not yet see her as a real human being, but as something magical that has happened to him and that he will go mad if anything should happen to make him believe that her white magic has turned to black. Emilia is also unable to understand her husband. If she understood Iago, she would certainly know that he is not only a domineering husband who has forced her into endless petty compromises for the sake of peace but also is an arch-villain who is the source of tortures for others. Iago himself is not strong enough to understand his own nature. Unaware of the power of love, he cannot imagine the suffering into which he will plunge Othello by slandering Desdemona, and therefore cannot imagine the destruction and disaster at the end. Even he cannot forsee the transformation that will occur to himself. The ‘Temptation scene’ is convincing because it presents authentically the downfall of both Iago and Othello. At the beginning of the scene Othello and Iago are both same where they turned out to be insane at the end.

Now, a question arises: how do these misunderstandings arise? But of, Shakespeare has provided sufficient explanation in each case. Desdemona, who is young and inexperienced, is overprotected by her father and that is why she has less knowledge of life and people. Roderigo misunderstands because in any case he is rather stupid and is always misled by Iago. Iago misunderstands because when it comes to anything that concerns the more generous emotions, he turns out to be a fool and a brute. Othello is duped by Iago because Iago’s previous record shows that he is honest and so everybody including Othello regards him to be trustworthy; and also because inspite of all his power and importance in Venice, Othello is an alien. Venice needs him. His acceptance in Venice is partial and this fact becomes clear at the behaviour of Brabantio. Brabantio has been glad to have Othello as a guest in his house and he loves Othello, but he feels betrayed when the same Othello marries his daughter. The justification for the elopement of Othello and Desdemona is that if Othello had asked in a normal way for Desdemona’s hand in marriage, Brabantio would certainly have refused the marriage proposal.

The difference of race and complexion seems to be responsible for causing an underlying sense of insecurity in Othello. This sense of insecurity seems to influence his conduct at crucial moments. It is an outward symbol of his isolation. Throughout the play, whether in Venice or in Cyprus, he is surrounded by people who are different from himself in every way, just as he was on that far off day that comes back to his mind in the last few seconds of his life, when in the Turkish city of Aleppo he intervened to protect a visiting Venetian businessman who was being beaten up in the street; a street full of people whom he chose to defy and dominate, whereas the Venetians were people he had chosen to serve him. In each case it was a choice, a conscious decision of the will, not the blind natural instinct that makes a man fight for his own hearth and his own gods. Othello willed himself into a relationship with Venice and the will is terribly limited in what it can achieve. Hence his insecurity ; hence his pride in the way e has carried out his side of the bargain (‘I have done the state some service); hence the fact that Desdemona’s love, which provides him an intimate, living link with Venice and promises to break down his unfamiliarity is central to his whole being. So when he thinks that Desdemona’s love is withdrawn, he despairs of going on with anything, even his trade of fighting.

Prof. Dowden: “the central point of its spiritual import lies in the contrast between Iago and his victim. Iago, with keen intellectual faculties and manifold culture in Italian vice, lives and thrives after his fashion in a world from which all virtue and all beauty are absent. Othello, with his barbaric innocence and regal magnificence of soul, must cease to live the moment he ceases to retain faith in the purity and goodness which were to him the highest and most real things upon earth. Or if he lives, life acknowledge that self-slaughter is a rapturous energy- that such a prolonged agony is joy in comparison with the earthly life –in-death of it is noble. Iago suspects his wife of every baseness but the suspicion has no other effect than to intensity his malignity. Iago would not he captured and constrained to heroic suffering and rage. The shame of every being who bears the name of woman is credible to Iago, and yet he can grate from his throat the jarring music:

“And let me the canakin clink, clink I

And let me the canakin clink I”… .

(EXCEPT SETTING, REFERENCES, CONTEXTS, THOUGHTS, SEQUENCE; WORDS AND SENTENCES FROM DR. SEN)

-RITUPARNA RAY CHAUDHURI.