

## South Atlantic Modern Language Association

---

Iago the Psychopath

Author(s): Fred West

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May, 1978), pp. 27-35

Published by: [South Atlantic Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3198785>

Accessed: 13/03/2012 15:55

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



South Atlantic Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *South Atlantic Bulletin*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



## IAGO THE PSYCHOPATH

FRED WEST

IT IS NOT SUFFICIENT to simply drape Iago in allegorical trappings and proclaim him Mister Evil or a Machiavel or a Vice. Such a limited view of Iago is an injustice to the complexity of his character, since Shakespeare's studies in personality are acclaimed by psychologists for their accuracy and profundity. Although the influence of the miracle plays and the later morality plays with their type-characters still lingered in some Elizabethan drama, the English Renaissance is widely recognized as a period of great interest in that branch of science which has become known in modern times as psychology. Dramatists were particularly intrigued by the more bizarre working of the human mind, often creating characters whose personalities could form the subjects of contemporary psychological case studies. This is certainly true of Iago, who is an accurate portrait of a psychopath.

One of the best-argued essays on Iago-as-Machiavel is that of Daniel Stempel, who depicts Iago as the Jesuitical Machiavel, a popular combination the Elizabethans conjured up against the Papacy. Yet in developing his thesis, Stempel does much to explain the psychology of Iago. "The individual cannot escape the nature he is born with," he says, "but must act as this nature requires him to act. . . . Iago is entirely unconcerned with the moral consequences of choice; it is all one to him if we 'plant Nettels, or sowe Lettuce, set Hysop, and weed up Time.' . . . His stated motives are flimsy rationalizations that have little to do with either fact or logic; they are flotsam tossed up from depths that even his subtle intellect cannot plumb." And, "Iago, the champion of the absolute autonomy of the will, shows no remorse, but simply withdraws behind a wall of defiant indifference after he has lost his power to manipulate circumstances."<sup>1</sup> Here we have, as we shall see, the salient characteristics not just of the Machiavel, but also of the psychopath.

In criticizing those who see Iago as mere symbol, a personification or extension of Satan, or the Spirit of Evil, Marvin Rosenberg says, "They fail to do justice to Iago's flesh and blood qualities in seeing him as a symbol. . . . He was wonderfully shaped by Shakespeare into a first-rate dramatic character, as well as a clearly recognizable type of human being, with passions and frustrations—and even physical symptoms—characteristic of a type of troubled humanity common enough so that psychologists in our time regularly en-

counter it. Shakespeare was not content, in *Iago*, to load his play with yet another stock Machiavel, another version of an old Morality figure . . . with a great playwright's searching insight, he was probing into the roots of human wickedness. . . ."<sup>2</sup> While Rosenberg nowhere labels *Iago* as a psychopath, he does quote from Karen Horney at length to show that *Iago* is a kind of human being "so common in society that in psychological writing we may find it charted as a type . . . of a familiar neurotic pattern." This indeed comes close to the mark, but *Iago* is considerably more than the familiar "ulcer" type that Rosenberg calls him.

Inevitably, *Iago* has been likened to Aaron, the villainous Moor of *Titus Andronicus*, who is something more like the stock figure of Evil. That Shakespeare was under the influence of the morality play in this early work is made clear by such scenes as the appearance of Tamora and her two son in the allegorical garb of Revenge, Rape, and Murder. Yet, even Aaron gives evidence of being more than a mere symbol of Evil. He has certain very human motives that urge him on to evil deeds: the illicit love of the queen with its concomitant chance of power, and the threat to the life of his baby son. In Aaron, Shakespeare foreshadows some of the characteristics of *Iago*.

*Lucius*: What shall I swear by? Thou believest no god:  
That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?

*Aaron*: What if I do not? As indeed I do not;  
Yet, for I know thou art religious,  
And hast a thing within thee called conscience.<sup>3</sup>

(V.i.71-75)

A bit later in the same scene Aaron's defiant lines to Lucius (124-44) proclaim not only a lack of remorse but also a baneful wish that he could have committed even more evil, both directly and *by manipulating others*. This speech is significantly indicative of Shakespeare's early awareness of the characteristics of the psychopath. As if to discount the notion that his role is merely symbolic Evil, Aaron says, "If there be devils, would I were a devil" (147). But whereas Aaron makes his final exit lusting to do more evil, and calling evil by its name, *Iago* is a more complex psychopath. He does not regard his own actions as horrendously evil.

Interestingly enough, A. C. Bradley, at the turn of this century, came very close to diagnosing *Iago* as a psychopath. At the time Bradley wrote, very few clinical studies had appeared on the subject of the psychopath. Long regarded as a sort of wastebasket category

for aberrant types who did not fit well into more clearly defined categories of behavioral variants, the clinical profile of the psychopath is only now becoming sharply delineated. Furthermore, the general reading public is just now becoming aware of the term—and the type. *The Mask of Sanity*,<sup>4</sup> Hervey Cleckley's landmark study of the psychopath, was first published in 1941, almost half a century after Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*<sup>5</sup> appeared. Yet, in comparing Bradley's analysis of Iago with the profile of psychopath in Cleckley, it is astonishing how close Bradley's analysis comes to the psychiatrist's description of the psychopath. Bradley, however, did not delineate a major characteristic of the psychopath: he could not quite stomach his own analysis that Iago is a moral blank, so he protested that Iago is not a monster, but a man with a conscience, however faint. But the play itself shows clearly enough that Iago goes off as he comes on, devoid of conscience, with no remorse. "This guiltlessness," according to McCord and McCord, "is one of the central features of psychopathy."<sup>6</sup>

Bradley died before Cleckley wrote. Whether Cleckley was acquainted with Bradley's work is not really to the point. He does indeed devote a chapter (Chapter 40) to fictional characters of psychiatric interest, and even mentions Iago: "Perhaps the most interesting and ingenious creation of vindictiveness known to man, [he] carries out his schemes of hate and treachery without adequate motivation in the ordinary sense" (pp. 370-71). Cleckley's analysis of the psychopath, however, is based not on fictional works, but on thirteen in-depth case studies and close observations of still other cases.

Early in his analysis Bradley cites Coleridge's astute phrase—"the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity"—with approval, qualifying it as a "disinterested delight in the pain of others" (p. 170). He is most certainly on the right track. He also supports Coleridge's "passionless character of Iago"; according to Bradley, Iago, "was by no means a man of strong feelings and passions . . . but decidedly cold by temperament" (p. 177). This matches closely with Cleckley's statement that "the psychopath always shows general poverty of affect. While it is true that he sometimes becomes excited and shouts as if in rage or seems to exult in enthusiasm and again weeps in what appear to be bitter tears or speaks eloquent and mournful words about his misfortunes or his follies . . . mature, wholehearted anger, true or consistent indignation, honest, solid grief, sustaining pride, deep joy, genuine despair, are reactions not likely to be found within this scale" (p. 397).

As Coleridge said, Iago is motiveless. His motives—or excuses—come more as afterthoughts, not as stimuli toward the heinous

actions he perpetrates. Like the psychopath described by Cleckley, Iago is impulsive, but he sees nothing basically wrong with his own behavior, no matter how erratic or antisocial; therefore, he doesn't bother to find or invent excuses unless prodded. The very first lines of *Othello* contain just such prodding on the part of Roderigo, Iago's gull. Roderigo says to Iago: "Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate" (5-6). Iago's resentment toward Othello begins to burn, as he replies: "I know my price . . . And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship's ancient" (10, 30). Roderigo fuels the heat: "By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman" (31) and "I would not follow him then" (37). To which Iago finally replies: "O, sir, content you. I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (38-39).

The psychopath, in Cleckley's words, seems "sweetly free" of any doubts that his behavior is perfectly compatible with normal standards of morality, reliability, and so on. Even Iago's insidious speeches—"I am not what I am" (62) and "Virtue? a fig!" (I.iii.314)—are not reflective soliloquies revealing his true being and his awareness of his innate evil; they are boastful speeches to Roderigo. As a psychopath, he has no real insight into his own true nature, hence it would never occur to him to inquire if he were evil or malignant. Also, he projects his own views and shallowness of affect upon others, so he has no reason for making an unfavorable evaluation of himself against anyone else. Only in matters of intelligence does he see any difference: he considers himself more complex and more intelligent than anyone around him.

Bradley more or less anticipates this clinical view, arguing that Iago, "though thoroughly selfish and unfeeling, was not by nature malignant." On the contrary, "he had a superficial good-nature, the kind of good-nature that wins popularity and is often taken as a sign . . . of a good heart." Bradley asserts, "It may be inferred that before the giant crime which we witness, Iago had never been detected in any serious offence and may even never have been guilty of one, but had pursued a selfish but outwardly decent life, enjoying the excitement of war and of casual pleasures" (p. 177).

True enough, Iago seems always to support his general. He moves jovially and at ease among the gentlemen of Cyprus, even as he sets up Cassio for a drunken fall (II.iii). He is more convincing yet in his ribald but humorous description of women to Desdemona, who is far more amused than offended (II.i). All of which fits Cleckley's description: "More often than not such a person will seem particularly agreeable and make a distinctly positive impression when one first meets him. Alert and friendly in his attitude, he is easy to talk with and seems to have a good many genu-

ine interests. Signs of affection or excessive affability are not characteristic. He looks like the real thing" (p. 382). But, Cleckley goes on to say, "Not only is [the psychopath] undependable, but also in more active ways he cheats, deserts, annoys, brawls, fails and lies without any apparent compunction. He will commit theft, forgery, adultery, fraud, and other deeds for astonishingly small stakes and under such greater risks of being discovered than will the ordinary scoundrel. He will, in fact, commit such deeds in the absence of any apparent goal at all" (p. 390).

How, then, are we to account for Iago's never having performed any horrendous deeds before? Again, Bradley has, perhaps unwittingly, given the answer in suggesting that Iago has enjoyed "the excitement of war and of casual pleasures." As a bluff, hearty soldier, he had indulged himself in all the peccadilloes that are generally more excused in the uniformed warrior than in the civilian; his more excessive asocial whims had been pretty well channeled off in the violence of war where even killing was not only accepted but honored. The psychopath is asocial; war is asocial; Iago was in his element, and praised for his actions, not condemned. He did what heroic Othello did, the difference being that Othello was supremely motivated and master of himself, while Iago was satisfying his quest for instant pleasure in excitement. This search is another indication of his psychopathic nature, for, according to McCord and McCord, the "psychopath often seems willing to sacrifice everything for excitement. His satisfactions have always been fleeting and highly changeable from childhood through maturity. Consequently, he seems to know no greater pleasure than constant change, and the search for excitement at any cost becomes an important motive" (p. 9). Similarly, Cleckley points out that "in a life devoid of higher-order stimuli, of primary or serious goals and values, of intense and meaningful satisfactions, one can better understand the patient who, for the trivial excitement of stealing a dollar (or a candy bar), the small gain of forging a \$20.00 check, half-hearted intercourse with an unappealing partner, sacrifices his job, the respect of his friends, or perhaps his marriage" (p. 444).

Plainly enough, the "motive" for Iago's eventual crime is no motive in the normal adult sense, but only the whim of a very young child. As the play opens, there are no immediate wars to occupy him. Othello, his chief, has moved into domesticity, a constant guest in the home of Brabantio for months before his marriage to Desdemona. The scene is now set for an exciting prank by the lateness of the hour, Roderigo's distress, the proximity of

Brabantio's house. Perhaps on the spur of the moment an idea occurs to Iago:

Call up her father,  
Rouse him. Make after him, poison his delight,  
Proclaim him in the streets, incense her kinsmen.

(I.i.64-66)

But what about his disappointment at the placing of Cassio, an "arithmetician," over himself, a seasoned warrior; his suspicions that the Moor "twixt my sheets has done my office"? It is unnecessary here to repeat in full the ample, detailed argument of Bradley that Iago is a consistent and consummate liar, that "one must constantly remember not to believe a syllable that Iago utters on any subject . . ." (p. 172). What he *says* in reference to the causes of his frustrations and hatred is not borne out by any evidence in the play. On the contrary, as Bradley shows, the opposite is generally true.

Yet he is never suspected of lying—until the final scene, of course, when even his wife Emilia, the closest of all human beings to him, is thunderstruck to discover that Iago has lied. And Othello still calls him "honest, honest Iago" almost to the end. How does he bring it off so well?

The psychopath does not set out to lie in the selfconscious, guilt-beset way that a normal person would. Lying does not bother him. Cleckley says, "One gets the impression that he is incapable of ever attaining realistic comprehension of an attitude in other people which causes them to value truth and cherish truthfulness in themselves. Typically he is at ease . . . His simple statement . . . carries special powers of conviction. Candor and trustworthiness seem implicit in him at such times. Though he will lie about any matter, under any circumstances, and often for no good reason, he may, on the contrary, sometimes own up to his errors (usually when detection is certain) and appear to be facing the consequences with singular honesty, fortitude, and manliness" (p. 387). What better description could one find of "honest" Iago, who protests that his rough-hewn probity is his greatest fault:

O wretched fool  
That liv'st to make thine honesty a vice!  
O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O world,  
To be direct and honest is not safe.

(III.iii.375-78)

Is Othello a fool for being duped? No, he merely shares the opinion of everyone else who knows Iago. Of the play—and Iago—Bradley says accurately: “Evil is . . . united with an intellectual superiority so great that [one] watches its advance fascinated and appalled” (p. 145). And, “Such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily with exceptional powers of will and intellect” (p. 189). An early question of psychiatrists in regard to a psychopathic personality was, “Can the moral sense be diseased and the intellectual faculty remain unimpaired?”<sup>7</sup> While at least one study indicates that on the whole psychopaths share the same IQ distribution as normal individuals,<sup>8</sup> specific psychopathic individuals have demonstrated exceptional intelligence. For instance, the subjects of Cleckley’s case studies generally show a higher-than-normal intelligence. Of one of these subjects Cleckley reports: “His ability to plan and execute schemes to provide money for himself, to escape legal consequences . . . could be matched by few, if any, people whom I have known. In such thinking he not only shows objective ingenuity, but also remarkable knowledge of other people and their reactions (of *psychology* in the popular sense) at certain levels, or, perhaps one should say, in certain modes, of personality-reaction. At any sort of contest based on a matching of wits, he is unlikely to come off second best” (pp. 60-61).

Iago consistently dramatizes these characteristics, from his self-serving admonition to Roderigo to “put money in thy purse,” to his astute management of Cassio’s drunkenness, to his first sly hint to Othello that Cassio’s relationship with Desdemona is not entirely honorable. Even Othello remarks upon Iago’s keen perception of human nature: “This fellow’s of exceeding honesty, and knows all qualities, with a learned spirit of human dealings” (III.iii.257-59). Not only does he prove his exceptional skill at planning events, but when he finds himself in an exceedingly dangerous situation, not once does he falter or display uncertainty, but adroitly shifts the circumstances to his own favor. Othello’s threat of horrible death (III.iii.) does not faze Iago in the least, but rather seems to reinforce his self-assurance. Thus we see Iago as a perfect example of Cleckley’s psychopath in whom we find “extraordinary poise rather than jitteriness or worry . . . . Even under concrete circumstances that would for the ordinary person cause embarrassment, confusion, acute insecurity, or visible agitation, his relative serenity is likely to be noteworthy” (p. 384).

We have already established the poverty of affect in the psychopath. He may weep and shout with rage, but all this is a readiness of expression rather than a strength of feeling. This would preclude any honest indignation on the part of Iago over Othello’s pre-

ference of Cassio, or any sincere jealousy or true conviction that Othello was committing adultery with Emilia. We have also considered that conditions in the opening scene of the play were suitable for Iago to yield to an immature urge to excitement, setting into motion circumstances and happenings that developed into tragedy. But another facet of Iago's psychopathic personality contributed to the trouble-making: Cleckley says, "The psychopath is always distinguished by egocentricity. This is usually of a degree not seen in ordinary people and often is little short of astonishing" (p. 395). Part of Iago's egocentricity is his vanity. In his "motive-hunting" Iago picks on what is closest at hand (the psychopath has no difficulty in finding "plausible" excuses for his actions, then believing them himself), the upbraiding by Roderigo for his seeming cowardice in serving the Moor while professedly hating him. Bradley remarks, "What is clear is that Iago is keenly sensitive to anything that touches his pride or self-esteem" (p. 179). And so, in justifying his behavior to Roderigo, Iago sets his course of action. He must now manipulate people and outwit his adversaries to demonstrate his superiority. As we have already noted, it doesn't really matter to Iago whether or not Othello has committed adultery with Emilia: "I known not if't be true, but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do, as if for surety" (I.iii.377-79).

As Bradley so acutely observes: "The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved secondly, the triumphant exertion of his abilities, and, thirdly, the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated. And the moment most dangerous to such a man would be one when his sense of superiority had met with an affront, so that its habitual craving was reinforced by resentment, while at the same time he saw an opportunity of satisfying it by subjecting to his will the very persons who had affronted it" (p. 185).

As stated earlier, Bradley could not accept fully this creature which he had so accurately diagnosed. These characteristics, he protested, are too frightful to constitute a man. Such a being would be a monster. The evidence, however, has been accumulated overwhelmingly by psychologists and psychiatrists that such a moral blank does indeed exist, and in frightening numbers. Shakespeare knew the type well enough, and though the "wicked Ensign" was furnished him by Cinthio, he constructed Iago so that he fulfills the clinical profile of the psychopath. Shakespeare had observed that there exist perfectly sane people in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is extremely weak while egoism is virtually absolute, and thus he made Iago. Aggressive and highly impulsive like all psycho-

paths, Iago's only motivation is an immature urge toward instant pleasure. Bluff and affable among his fellows, he is still unable to form lasting bonds of affection, not even with his wife. He has no real loyalties, but serves only his own ends, using people ruthlessly with no concern for their feelings. Shakespeare's crowning touch to his creation is the absolute lack of remorse in Iago, when at the very end, Iago views with equanimity all the hideous results of his manipulations. To quote Cleckley once more: "All the horror is in just this—that there is no horror" (p. 153).

*Savannah Beach, Georgia*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Stempel, "The Silence of Iago," *PMLA*, 84 (1969), 252-63.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin Rosenberg, "In Defense of Iago," *SQ*, 6 (1955), 145-58.

<sup>3</sup>All quotations from *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* are from Sylvan Barnet, ed., *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

<sup>4</sup>Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1950).

<sup>5</sup>A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; rpt. Cleveland: World/Meridian, 1955).

<sup>6</sup>William McCord and Joan McCord, *The Psychopath* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1964).

<sup>7</sup>McCord and McCord, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>McCord and McCord, p. 43.