

Act V Scene I

Characters: Iago~ “motiveless malignity”?

The nineteenth-century poet and writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge was intrigued by the character of Iago, whose activities he described as arising out of “motiveless malignity” (wickedness that cannot be explained). Iago himself has already given several reasons for his vendetta against Othello and Cassio, but these seem rather flimsy and inconsistent.

- Read through Iago’s aside in lines 11-22. What reason does he give here for his behavior?
- What other reasons has Iago already given for his hatred of Othello and Cassio? Cite the lines.
- Write a paragraph outlining your thoughts about Iago’s motivation (or lack of it) to do harm to others.

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Write about it: Clever Iago? Or helped by chance?

Iago continues to play the role of the concerned friend. He bustles about, accusing Bianca, feigning distress at discovering Roderigo, and calling for a chair for Cassio. Iago seems to have avoided personal disaster very narrowly, through a combination of chance and his own skill. However, if Lodovico and Gratiano had immediately and properly investigated the screams from the street (line 37), the scene might have unfolded in a very different way.

- Write a paragraph explaining which aspects of this incident you think are down to Iago’s skill. Then write a second paragraph outlining how you think chance works in Iago’s favor at this point.
- Write about another incident in the play where chance helped Iago and he has been lucky to get away with his scheme without anyone discovering what he’s up to. What general observations can you make about the relationship between chance and intention in the play?

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Themes: Attitudes to women

Iago immediately casts doubt on Bianca, calling her “this trash” (language similar to that used by Cassio in Act 4). He even insinuates Bianca might be an accessory to the murder attempt (lines 105-110). Iago can rely on other characters sharing his insulting view of women. Bianca becomes an easy target for Emilia, too, who calls her a “strumpet” (whilst Cassio is thought of as a poor victim!).

- Read up to line 129, noting the way Iago and others treat Bianca, and how she responds. Then imagine you are Bianca, arrested on suspicion of being accessory to murder. In role, write a short statement defending yourself (as Bianca) against Iago’s charge of being “a party in this injury”. Explain how you know Cassio, what your movements have been this evening, how you came to be in the street at this time, and what you heard or saw. Practice reading it in role, adjust any awkward lines or statements.

Act V Scene II

Themes: “Justice”?

Desdemona’s request to “send for the man and ask him” (line 50) is reminiscent of Act 1, when Othello calls for Desdemona to support his testimony against Brabantio’s accusations of abduction. In that case, the Duke agreed to send for Desdemona, who was able to corroborate Othello’s story. Here, Othello cannot hear what the key witness (Cassio) has to say, and he merely accuses Desdemona of “perjury”. Othello’s view of justice and of evidence has changed in the course of the play.

- There is much legal language in this bedroom episode, almost as if it were some kind of courtroom in session, with Othello taking on the roles of both judge and executioner. Read through lines 47-76 and pick out any examples of legal-sounding language. Identify what constitutes the case for prosecution, what the case of the defense, and what is presented as evidence.
- How would you perform this section of the play? Think about different tones and styles.

Act V Scene II

Themes: Contrasts and opposites

Lines 107-136 contains a number of sharply contrasting images: angel/devil, false/true, water/fire, hell/heavenly, sweet/harsh.

- Locate each pair and explore ways of presenting them through movement only (mime). Describe in a paragraph or two the significance of each pair of contrasts in their dramatic context (what they suggest about characters, themes, and mood).