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English 173, Period 7

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Honest Iago tends to be like a “toxic friend.” Explain.

In the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare, Shakespeare presents Iago as a highly clever and perceptive villain. The characters and friendships that are introduced and formed as the play progresses are guided by Iago. Iago is referred to, and refers to himself, as honest. Iago depicts himself as a good friend to Othello and the others. Iago acquires the friendship of several characters in the play, with the intent of advancing his goal for Othello. He uses the trusting nature of these individuals to advance his own interests, and his motivation to ultimately destroy Othello, to whom he refers in derogatory terms. Iago tends to be a toxic friend through his exploitation of others' desires. This is revealed when Iago fools Roderigo, deceives Cassio, and cuckolds Othello.

Near the beginning of the play, Roderigo remarks of Othello to Iago, “By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman.” (1.1.36). Roderigo's trusting nature is used by Iago to fuel his hatred for Othello. Iago conveys his mutual hatred toward Othello with Roderigo. Following this remark, Iago makes a plan to rouse Desdemona's father, Brabantio, by informing him of his daughter's situation with Othello. Iago calls to Brabantio, “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daugh- / ter and the Moor are (now) making the beast with / two backs.” (1.1.129-131). Brabantio loses his trust in his daughter due to Iago's friendship with Roderigo. When Desdemona's faith to Othello is established, Roderigo tells Iago that “It is silliness to live, when

to live is torment, / and then have we a prescription to die when death is / our physician.”

(1.3.350-352). Iago is a friend to Roderigo. Roderigo then tells Iago that it is not in his virtue to amend it, whereupon Iago says that virtue is a fig. Iago persuades Roderigo to make money, and give his money to Iago. Roderigo does not understand, however, that his money is being used not for his benefit, but for his injury. Roderigo becomes a sick fool to Iago. As such, in his words, “I’ll sell all my land.]” (1.3.425), he assumes that Iago will use his money to gain Desdemona’s approval toward Roderigo. Roderigo assures himself that Iago is a good friend.

Iago’s fear of Cassio is unknown by Michael Cassio himself, and Iago is determined to carry out his plan. Iago decides that Cassio must be drunk enough that he will engage in Iago’s plan. After Iago urges his friend to drink, Cassio tells Iago:

“I have drunk but one cup tonight, and that was  
craftily qualified too, and behold what innovation it  
makes here. I am (unfortunate) in the infirmity and  
dare are not task my weakness with any more.

(2.3.40-43)

Iago needs Cassio to respond appropriately to his words, and he says, “What, man! ‘Tis a night of revels. The gallants / desire it.” (2.3.44-45). Cassio does not understand Iago’s true purpose in his remarks, and is convinced that Iago is honest. Iago plans to put Cassio in a situation that will offend Othello, namely, a fight with Roderigo. Cassio’s ensuing quarrel is largely caused by his previous drinking. Iago creates negativity through his friendships, and Cassio becomes violent due to Iago’s actions. Montano observes Cassio in his drunken state, and asks, “But is he often thus?” (2.3.133). Iago replies, “’Tis evermore (the) prologue to his sleep. / He’ll watch the horologe a double set / If drink rock not his cradle.” (2.3.134-136). Montano then decides that it

must be known to Othello. Iago implies that he loves Cassio, and that he is a good person who simply needs to be cured of his evil. Cassio pursues Montano and engages him, at which point Iago calls for Othello. Iago is highly trusted by Othello, and Iago later receives Cassio's position as lieutenant to Othello. Iago advises Cassio to request that Desdemona appeal to Othello. Desdemona promises to bring Cassio back into his place as lieutenant. Cassio replies, "You advise me well." (2.3.346). Iago plans for Desdemona to lose her credit with Othello, and hopes to exaggerate Othello's suspicions toward Desdemona.

The toxicity of Iago is seen as honesty by Othello, who does not suspect him to be of any dishonest nature. Iago, however, would not spend time with Othello for a purpose other than his own profit. Iago's suspicion of Othello leads him to gradually condition Othello into a jealousy that causes his destruction. Cassio is a Venetian, and as such he is fairly polite in his interactions with Desdemona. Iago tells Othello, "Did Michael Cassio, / When (you) wooed my lady, know of your love?" (3.3.105-106). Othello replies that Cassio did know of his love. Othello begins to question Desdemona's faith to him, through the subtle influence of Iago in his thoughts. Iago will not let Othello know his thoughts, and informs Othello that he is a good friend and does not want to see faults in others that do not truly exist. He knows that Cassio is an honest man. Iago uses Othello's trust in him to tell Othello that "She did deceive her father, marrying you, / And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most." (3.3.238-240). Iago is a trusted friend of Othello, who does not recognize any malevolence in the friendship. Othello knows that Iago is extensively educated in all human relations. Iago uses Othello's jealousy to undermine his intrinsic goodness of heart.

The significance of Iago's friendships is known only to Iago. Iago is portrayed throughout the play as an honest man. He is a toxic friend, and uses others' desires for their

ultimate destruction as he sees fit. Iago confirms suspicions that may otherwise have been ignored. Iago influences Othello to eventually murder his wife. Iago fulfills his plan, through the trapping of Cassio and Desdemona, and his commitment to himself. Iago uses the integrity of Othello's character, and his knowledge of his trusting nature to bring about his trap for Othello and Desdemona. Iago understands the impact of jealousy on the mind. Iago hates Othello, and spends his time with Roderigo for the sole purpose of acquiring money. Iago's friendships are not genuine, and he is a toxic friend due to the fact. Iago poisons Othello's mind, and fools Roderigo with his deceitful friendship.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009. Print.