

THE GAP

This paper was written in response to the following prompt: What's the relationship between skepticism and jealousy in Othello?

In his poem “The Hollow Men,” T. S. Eliot wrote, “Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act falls the shadow.”¹ This poetic wisdom highlights the substantial gap between the abstract, internal, unperceivable reality and the tangible, external, perceivable reality. And within this gap falls not Eliot’s “shadow,” but also Iago. In *Othello*, the reoccurring statements that are perfectly false, and the few that are perfectly true, act as a reminder of reality and humanity’s experience of it. Half-truths, half facts, and half the story are inherent to the human condition. Idealists, like Othello, choose to remain ignorant by denying this reality. Others, like Iago, use the half-truths of life to their advantage by achieving power.

Othello, by William Shakespeare, tells the story of a tragic downfall. Othello, the main character, is a decorated war hero of the Venetian army. Despite this status, he is an obvious foreigner in Venetian society for he is a Moor and has darker skin. Desdemona, a noble woman of Venice, falls in love with him after hearing his dazzling, heroic stories. She states, “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind, and to his honors and his valiant part did my soul and fortunes consecrate,” thus showing her love for Othello and his successes.² Desdemona and Othello elope secretly in part because of Desdemona’s controlling father, Barbantio, and also because of societal expectations. The play opens on their wedding night with Iago, the deceptive villain who seeks to destroy Othello out of jealousy, and Roderigo, his ignorant sidekick, planning to expose the lovers’ secret union.

People lie while telling the truth. Motives are exposed while being concealed. Actions are seen while not seen. This is the reality of human existence that few characters in *Othello*, and maybe many people in the world, fail to understand. “Half-truths,” meaning not the complete truth, are inescapable facts of human existence. The issue is inherent to speech, actions,

and motives. Any sort of communication, verbal or nonverbal, is laced with problematic half-truths. For example, when asked by an acquaintance, "How are you?" I may respond, "I am well." This simple response is very problematic for I could be emotionally well but not well in other ways. Perhaps I got an A on a test, had a great date, and am eating chocolate ice cream resulting in feeling emotionally well. However, I may simultaneously also have chronic knee pain due to a couple knee surgeries, have gotten a restless four hours of sleep, and even have a stomach ache from the pint of Ben and Jerry's I consumed. I am definitely not physically well, and so my conventional response is partly a lie and partly a truth. We operate and exist with the tiniest fractions of truth and knowledge of others, and maybe even ourselves. "The problem of the other" is an interesting issue tackled by philosophical skeptics like Descartes. In psychology, Piaget categorized this issue as "theory of mind," or the realization that one's own mental states, such as beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, may differ from those around him. The issue of the half-truth is also a central theme in the play *Othello*.

Iago, the ultimate deceiver speaks the first perfectly false statement of the play. This speech foreshadows his central role as the chief manipulator of the play. He states, "I am not what I am," after having revealed part, and only part, of his evil plan to destroy Othello. This is an essential line that defines Iago as a character and foreshadows his extreme manipulation and deception. Iago, by being aware of and accepting about both the reality of the human experience and other's extreme epistemological limits, is able to manipulate those around him. He demonstrates this knowledge a few lines before his perfectly false statement when he says, "For when my outward action doth demonstrate the native act and figure of my heart in complement extern, 'tis not long after but I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at."³ This statement may hint at a negative experience that Iago had with honesty and which has now resulted in his choice to conceal his internal world. Or perhaps he is just commenting on the ignorance of the total honesty of others. In the words of Eliot, Iago lurks in the "shadows;" he speaks deceptively in riddles and half-truths. His "shadowiness" is further emphasized in his stage movements

and physical portrayal; Iago is often seen crouched behind other characters, such as Roderigo, to diverge blame and conceal his plan. Iago is clearly knowledgeable and experienced in using uncertainty to his advantage, making him a vicious villain.

Now, what does “I am what I am not” mean? Here, Iago denies his nature as a human being by stating something and then immediately contradicting it. He means that his insides, which are motives, reason, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and other unperceivable aspects, do not match his outsides, which are how he speaks, behaves, appears, and all other perceivable aspects. This denial of himself opens a gap between his being and his actions, which allows for deception and lies. This aspect of Iago epitomizes his character and is essential to his art of deception. This statement may also be interpreted as Iago representing the devil. As God said, “I am what I am” in the book of Exodus, Iago states the opposite. God’s insides are his outsides and vice versa. There is no gap between his internal motives and outward appears. Therefore, ultimate evil is when one’s external is in complete opposition with one’s internal. However, I do realize the limitations of this argument due to the fact that attributing human characteristics, experiences, and ways of knowing to God is reductive and not exactly parallel.

Is complete truth and knowledge necessarily good? For example, in Plato’s *Republic*, the perfect society participated in The Noble Lie; it consisted of the elders of the community telling the young people of false successes of their ancestors. By this deception, the community was made better because the young people strove for excellence because of the pride they felt for their people. Would the complete truth have been better in this situation? Is the deception of this society an evil? Or can it be seen as necessarily good for it made the society better? In regards of adapting this line of questioning to *Othello*, is Iago’s lifestyle, one of falsehood and deception, truly the ultimate form of evil? Since deception is benefiting him, is it necessarily good?

Now, Iago’s use of half-truths is compelling for it supports our daily experience and is often essential to success. For example, when I meet someone, they have no knowledge of me other than what I tell them, what others tell them, and what I appear

to be. These are all aspects that are only externally perceivable and can be easily manipulated. Human beings do not have a sort of X-ray vision into others minds and our pasts are not directly knowable to outsiders. Uncertainty and half-truths are inherent and arguably necessary to experience. For example, an experienced poker player works for years to master his poker face. This skill, after much practice, allows the player to control his facial and body language in order to puzzle or deceive his opponents. The use of half-truth is essential to the success of a poker player. As for Iago, his innovative mixtures of truths and lies are necessary to gain power and achieve his objectives.

Othello's view of human nature completely opposes Iago's, which allows Othello to easily fall victim to deception. It is clear from the first appearance of Othello that he has a very "all or nothing", black and white, view of nature. He is unaccepting of half-truths and contradictions; when these undesired realities do arise, he simply looks for empirical proof and definitive answers. For example, when Othello is accused by Barbantio of manipulating Desdemona into marriage, Othello simply tells the others to look to his past merits and successes as a means of proving his character. Later on, when Iago calls into question Desdemona's loyalty, Othello states, "I think my wife be honest, and I think she is not. I think that thou art just, and I think thou art not; I'll have some proof."⁴ When confronted with a contradiction or half-truth, Othello immediately runs in search of adequate evidence and understandable proof to stop the dissonance. Iago further encourages his polar views with comments like, "men should be what they seem."⁴ These comments, along with his incessant echoing and falsified "empirical proof," eventually drive Othello to an ecstatic state of jealous rage, causing him to murder his loyal wife.

Desdemona, Othello's counterpart, also shares in Othello's drastically extreme views of human nature and truth, making her an easy target for someone like Iago too. Driven to madness by jealous suspicions, Othello strangles Desdemona in their bed. Just before she dies, her close companion, Emilia, asks her who has done this horrible deed. Desdemona responds with a perfectly false statement, "No one, I myself. Farewell.

Commend me to my kind lord.”⁵ This puzzling statement calls into question Desdemona’s character and beliefs. Up until this point, Desdemona has seemed to be oblivious, ignorant, and painfully compliant. However, this statement redeems her because it reveals her depth of knowledge about the complexities and uncertainties of truth. Desdemona takes responsibility for her fate and at the same time completely denies it. However, her realization is tragic for she has achieved this knowledge but it is still unable to escape the consequences of her prior ignorance.

The most memorable of these tautologies occurs in the last few lines of the play. After Emilia desperately reveals the truth of Desdemona’s loyalty and the evil of her husband, Iago, Othello demands from Iago, “why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?” Iago replies with his final words of the play, “What you know, you know,” a perfectly self-evident truth.

Truth, a necessary good, is both ironic and tragic in the case of Othello. Iago, the master of deception and catalyst of this tragedy, is the only one who speaks and knows truth. Perhaps this is because he knows that tragedy completes truths, not only half-truths. Unlike Othello, he is able to see through the absurdity in feebly attempting to draw sharp distinctions between a truth and a lie. Iago chooses the gaps, the shadows, and the half-truths for he sees the potential for power in the gray areas of life.

NOTES :

1. T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men." *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 58.
2. William Shakespeare, *Othello* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), I.iii.252.
3. *Ibid.*, I.i.59.
4. *Ibid.*, III.iii.389.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, V.ii.125.