DECEPTION IN OTHELLO Essay, Research Paper

Deception, which by its definition is a bad thing and has only one level or degree, is truly not this way at all. Deception appears many times in Othello, but in almost every incident the degree of deception is different. There are only a few characters that use deception, and those characters all use different degrees of deception to get what they want in the play. Deception is almost always used through verbal language or body language because it is the easiest way to deceive a person. The reasons, or intentions, a person has for deception determines the goodness (or badness) and (or) severity of the deception. If a person deceives others with good intentions, then, in a way, the deception is partially good. However, if a person has bad reasons or intentions in deceiving others, then the deception is bad. There is also, in contrast to the definition of deception, debate over what is deception because it is always different in the eyes of different people.

Although deception is always meant to deceive, the degree of deception varies upon the context of the situation. Desdemona gives one example of deception when she hides her relationship with Othello from her father. Brabantio says, ?O, she deceives me Past thought!? (1.1.166) Desdemona had reasons for deceiving her father. Her reasons were very simple, because she loved her father she wanted to protect him. Desdemona knew that her father would eventually find out the truth, but she felt that by hiding her relationship with Othello she would be delaying the inevitable pain that her father was going to feel. Since Desdemona loved her father, she felt that by delaying his pain she would be doing him a service, and because Desdemona deceived her father out of love, this deception was not severe. It was however bad, because there was no way in which Desdemona could avoid hurting her father. This shows that even though Desdemona deceived her father and the outcome was bad, it was not severe because her intentions were good hearted. Another example of the degree of deception was when Iago said to Othello, ?She did deceive her father, marrying you? (111.3.205). Iago?s deception, which in appearance looks similar to Desdemona?s deception, is in fact very different. When Iago says this to Othello, he is trying to anger Othello, and place doubt in Othello?s mind. Iago?s intentions are bad and hurtful, and that is why this incident is in fact much worse and much more severe than the previous one. The definition of deception in ?THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY? is,

DECEPTION-

1. The action of deceiving or cheating

b. The fact or condition of being deceived

2. That which deceives; a piece of trickery; a cheat, sham

This definition states that deception is a trick, a cheat, or a sham, and this implies that all deception is of the same degree. However, it is clear from the previous two scenes that in different situations deception can have different degrees, and that one thing can be more deceitful than another.

Deception, which is described as trickery, a cheat, or a sham, is considered a very bad thing. However, it is possible for deception to have good intentions, and this would make deception partially good. There are many occasions where a person may deceive another and feel he or she has done a good deed. When Othello asks Desdemona for the handkerchief, because he has suspicions that she is cheating on him, Desdemona lies and says she has it.

Othello ?Lend me your handkerchief.?

Desdemona ?I have it not about me.?

Othello ?Is?t lost? Is?t gone? Speak: is?t out o?th way??

Desdemona ?It is not lost? (111.4.52-83)

Desdemona lies to Othello, and tries to deceive him. This, according to the definition of deception is bad. However, it is not bad. Because Desdemona knew that if she told Othello the truth he would become very angry, she lied to him and said she had the handkerchief. Desdemona?s intentions for lying were good, because Desdemona loved Othello she decided to protect him from getting angry. Desdemona thought she had just misplaced the handkerchief, and that she would soon find it, but if she told Othello she had lost it he would become furious. Since Desdemona thought she would find the handkerchief soon, she felt that lying about it would do no harm because she would soon find it and Othello would never know that she had lost it. Desdemona?s intentions for deceiving Othello were good; because she loved him she did not want to up set him over a minor detail like misplacing the handkerchief. Because Desdemona?s intentions were good, to protect the one she loved, her deception was therefore good.

Deception can also be completely bad in it?s intent. The person who always has bad intentions in his deception is Iago. Iago deceives many people in the play, and one incident is in act 4 when he tricks Othello into thinking that he is talking with Cassio about Desdemona, when he is actually talking about Bianca.

Iago ?Ply Desdemona well and you are sure on?t.

Now if this suit lay in Bianca?s power,

How quickly should you speed!?

Cassio ?Alas, poor caitiff!?

Othello ?(aside) Look, how he laughs already!?(1V.1.106-109)

Iago told Othello that he would discuss Desdemona with Cassio, and that he would talk about the affair. Iago does not do this, instead he talks about Bianca with Cassio and Cassio laughs at things Iago says, Othello seeing Cassio laugh thinks that Cassio is laughing at Desdemona, and this angers Othello very much. In this scene Iago used both verbal and body language to deceive Othello. Iago used verbal language on Othello by telling him he would discuss Desdemona with Cassio, which he did not do, and he used body language to deceive Othello by having Cassio move his body in ways that would upset Othello. This deception by Iago was bad because he had no good intentions and only wanted to upset Othello, using deception and illusion. It is clear that there is bad deception, but it is also clear that deception can be good, because of its intentions, which is shown by Desdemona?s deception.

Deception is also open to debate, because what is deception to one person may not be deception to another person. At the end of the play when Iago is discovered his wife Emilia says that he has deceived Othello and told lies.

?You told a lie, an odious damned lie:

Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie!

She false with Cassio! Did you say with Cassio??(V.2.179-181)

Emilia says that her husband has deceived Othello and that what he did was wrong. But Iago disingenuously defends himself by saying,

?I told him what I thought, and told no more

Than what he found himself was apt and true.?(V.2.176-177)

Iago says that all he did was say what he thought, and nothing more. So Iago asks what he did wrong, he says he told no lies, just opinions and that there is nothing wrong with that. He said what Othello believed was not his fault because all he did was say his opinion and give advice. Iago tried to justify himself to the other characters by this statement, but it did not work for Iago because he did not truly believe it himself. Earlier in the play Iago asks himself if he does anything wrong, he says, ?And whats he then that says, I play the villain, When this advice is free I give, and honest,? (2.3.326-327) this, once again shows that Iago feels that he does nothing wrong. He says that he gives good, honest advice, and the advisee is under no obligation to follow the advice. What Iago does is obviously deceitful, but because deception is different in each interpretation, Iago is able to ask this question and honestly believe that what he does is not deceitful.

Even though deception is defined as malicious, trickery, cheating, and as a sham, it is evident that deception can be good through its intentions, can have different degrees, and is open to debate because of different interpretations. Because Desdemona wanted to spare her father from pain, it was not as deceitful as when Iago lied to Othello to put doubt in his mind. Desdemona?s deception to Othello was good because she did not want to upset him when she thought that she could fix the situation without him knowing. Iago?s deception was bad however, because he tricked Othello by lying to him and wanted to hurt him. Finally, Iago was able to believe that he was not a villain because deception is open to debate because it is different to each person. Shakespeare showed how deception is far different than it?s definition in the ?OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY? by giving examples of deception which all differ from the standard definition.

Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd Ed. Volume 4. 1989.

Shakespeare, William. Othello. New York: Penguin Books, 1968.