



# Analysis of the Behavior of Iago in Othello Based on Descartes' Philosophical Theory

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**Abstract.** In recent years, the analysis and research methods of Shakespeare's characters have gradually become more and more formatted. This paper attempts to apply Descartes' philosophical theory to analyze the role of Iago in Othello, combining his psychological activities with skepticism and other theories, in order to have a more novel and comprehensive understanding of the image. This article focuses on the embodiment of skepticism in Iago's behavior, analyzing the motivation and rationality of his role behavior through the case study. The skepticism held by Iago is reflected in the excessive skeptical attitude toward the people around him and the inconsistency of his own words. Besides, Iago's racial and gender discrimination has also proved the correctness and necessity of the appliance of Descartes' rationalist epistemology.

**Keywords:** Descartes · Skepticism · Rationalist Epistemology · Othello

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the analysis and research methods of Shakespeare's characters have gradually become formatted, limited by simple personality analysis and social influence. This paper attempts to use Descartes' philosophical theory (mainly skepticism and rationalist epistemology) to analyze the role of Iago in Othello which combine the psychological activities of the characters with philosophical theory, in order to have a more novel and comprehensive understanding of the image. As a typical villain in Shakespeare's works, Iago catalyzed a regrettable tragedy through some vicious scheming and plotting. Why is Iago so evil that conducts those immoral actions? This is undoubtedly the most fundamental motivation driving his behavior. The skepticism of Descartes, a French philosopher in the same period of Othello, can just provide theoretical explanations for the various choices of the role, thus providing a new way for readers to peek into their inner worlds. Born in the same age, Shakespeare and Descartes' life periods are relatively similar, and the social background also provides favorable conditions for the narration of this article. In contrast, when it comes to today's society, where the COVID-19 has not stabilized, traditional values of the human world have been shaken. How to learn from the tragedy, face classical philosophy with an appropriate and sublimating attitude, and avoid excessive interpretation, to restrict our behavior with a higher moral standard are all urgent tasks waiting to be discussed.

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## 2 Background Information

### 2.1 Social Background

Born at the end of the 16th century, for nearly 200 years, Descartes embodied the French spirit, which no other person can match. Although this is a gradually constructed logic, Descartes' thought is established with more and more authority [1]. He lived in the era of the alternation of old and new knowledge, which is an important period of France's transition from a feudal society to a capitalist society. From the 16th century, the capitalist production relations in France began to sprout and develop. The opening of the new route shifted the focus of France's foreign trade from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic area, and since the 17th century, France has expanded its colonies to North America, Central America, Africa and India. In the first half of the 16th century, the wounds of the hundred-year war between Britain and France had not yet healed. Francis I and Henry II of the Valois Dynasty launched another war of aggression against Italy and competed with the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V for the border land between Germany and France, thus opening the prelude to the long-term hegemony struggle between France and the Habsburg family [2]. There are also two strong warm currents in the ideological, spiritual and cultural fields of Europe, namely, the Renaissance and Religious Reform.

In contrast, in the 16th century, the British economy was highly developed. The enclosure movement and the primitive accumulation of capital were prevailing, and the rule of autocratic monarchy increasingly relied on the new aristocracy to protect and reward industry, commerce and navigation, so as to enhance national strength. English culture also flourished in the 16th century. T. Moore, a humanist, wrote *Utopia* and became the pioneer of Utopian socialism. Poet E. Spencer first wrote pastoral poems, and then wrote *Fairy Queen*, praising the era of Elizabeth I. F. Bacon, as the "first founder" of materialism, advocated a new philosophy of induction and experiment. In the second half of the 16th century, the drama was the most prosperous part of English literature, and Shakespeare, a literary giant, left many immortal masterpieces, as a result, Shakespeare and Descartes, two giants in the history of literature, met unexpectedly. The Renaissance and Religious Reform have provided a place of literary nourishment for the European continent, with more and more new ideas emerging, building an influential milestone in the history of human thought.

### 2.2 Brief Introduction of Othello

*Othello*, one of Shakespeare's four tragedies, tells the tragic story of a Moorish general named Othello falling in love with and marrying Desdemona, the daughter of a Roman noble patriarch, but being maliciously plotted by his officer Iago. Finally, he killed his wife out of resentment, jealousy and inferiority. People often discuss the themes of love, trust, sexism and racial discrimination when it comes to this work, but few may pay attention to the psychological motivation of being a villain out of Iago's mind. What drove him to do such vicious behavior? Just because of his overwhelming jealousy? Or is it because of deep-rooted racial discrimination? No matter what it is, these questions are worthy of our further exploration of "why", and of what contributed to the most primitive motivation of this behavior.

### 3 Behavioral Analysis

Why is Iago so evil? This is a problem few people think about. He pays too much attention to personal interests, contradicts himself with his words, and also holds deep-rooted racial and gender discrimination. Focusing on this typical villain, this paragraph first analyzes Iago's excessive individualism through Descartes' general skepticism, and then analyzes his deep-rooted ideological prejudice through Descartes' rationalist epistemology.

#### 3.1 Excessive Individualism

When talking about Descartes, one of the indispensable propositions is "I think therefore I am". As the most fundamental theory in Descartes' philosophical system, mastering a comprehensive understanding of this discourse is the prerequisite for our analysis and application of Descartes' philosophical theory. "I think" refers to ideological activities. He said, "what is an ideological thing? It is something that comes from doubts, cares, affirms, denies, willing, unwilling, imagines and feels [3], and "therefore" does not mean reasoning from the known to the unknown. "I think" is the essence of the being of ourselves, while "I am" is the reflection of that essence. In Descartes' eyes, thinking means existence, and "I am" is just the external entity of thought [4]. Thinking is universal, that is, the suspicion and questioning toward everything in the world. Based on this argument, Descartes established the foundation of universal doubt. "I think therefore I am" built a high-rise of universal doubt in the deep corner of the subject's consciousness, and all deterministic things can only obtain the premise of complete self-reliance in the deep heart of the subject [5]. Descartes' universal suspicion covers everything in the world, including all subjective and objective existence. His general suspicion, combined with the rise of humanism, emphasized the importance of the human subjective initiative, liberating medieval humanity from the shackles of traditional religious theology, encouraging people to participate fully, and greatly promoting individualism.

However, excessive individualism will lead to the prevalence of egoism, which is the case with Iago, the villain in Othello. In Descartes' view, the world of objective existence cannot be correctly perceived, and the view or understanding based on objective existence is doubtful. Just as in the eyes of Iago, Othello's talent, Desdemona's loyalty, and even the lives of others are not worth mentioning, and only his own interests and ambitions are worth his efforts to calculate the gains and losses. From the beginning, he was dissatisfied with his subordination to the Moor general Othello. Holding resentment and hostility toward Cassio who replaced his position, Iago plotted every step for his own benefit. As he said when he persuaded Rodrigo: "If sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and < a > supersubtle Venetian be not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her." Because he attached too much importance to his achievements and interests, he didn't think that anyone around him was trustworthy and worth protecting, including his accomplice Roderigo. When he persuaded Roderigo to kill Casino, he sacrificed Roderigo's interests without a second thought, carefully constructing a perfect conspiracy.

*"Now, whether he kill Cassio,  
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,*

*Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,  
He calls me to a restitution large  
Of gold and jewels that I robbed from him  
As gifts to Desdemona.*

*It must not be.”*

Besides, Iago didn't believe anyone. He suspected his wife Emilia of having an affair with others many times, and repeatedly instilled in Othello the idea that every woman in the world is dishonorable.

*“Think every bearded fellow that's but yoked  
May draw with you. There's millions now alive  
That nightly lie in those unproper beds  
Which they dare swear peculiar.”*

Suspicion of human nature is the clue that runs through Iago's life, which is also the fundamental motivation that leads him to make all kinds of vicious actions. Out of doubt about human nature, the protection of himself has become the only anchor in the whole world. He carefully designed a plot to play everyone between his hands but was defeated by fate's tricky arrangement at last. His plot was finally exposed, and Iago was punished accordingly.

In addition, the words spoken by Iago in his lines are often contradictory. According to Descartes, he also doubts his own physical and mental activities. Taking the theme of honor as an example, Iago once said that reputation was a boring and deceiving thing, and the person who got it may not have any merit, and the person who lost it may not have any fault. However, when Othello asked Iago for his opinions, he pretended to be reserved and said that who stole his money bag, but stole some waste, but who stole his reputation, then although the thief was not rich, himself became destitute because of losing it. His forewords often conflict with each other, indicating that Iago's inner attitude towards the established views is constantly overturned, reexamined and doubted. He not only doubted everyone including himself, but also doubted the previous old ideas and statements, and never regarded anything as eternal, correct and static. At the same time, Iago's behavior is far more fragmented than that of ordinary people. What the world knows about him is not the real him. He kept emphasizing his loyalty to Othello, but his heinous deeds were far more shameful than those of the Turkish fleet,

*“...Others there are  
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,  
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,  
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
Do well thrive by them; and when they have lined their costs,  
Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,  
And such a one do I profess myself.”*

### 3.2 Racial and Gender Discrimination

As mentioned above, “I think therefore I am” is the foundation of Descartes’ philosophy. Those views are not generalized although they are extended from the deny of objective reality, even denying their own views. Descartes’ attitude towards thinking is a negative affirmation, which cannot be judged by subjective thinking or arbitrariness. From the perspective of rationality, the core of Descartes’ epistemology is that a clear understanding that comes from rationality is true [4]. Since childhood, we have received all kinds of ideas imperceptibly, some of which may not be derived from rational thinking and outdated, but because such impressions are too deep-rooted, we don’t have any thoughts and doubts about them. We get the impressions and concepts of everything in the world from endless life experiences, but most of them just stay on the surface. We tend to accept those conclusions that seem to be taken for granted and conform to common sense and conventions, rarely stopping to examine those old ideas. Such ideas obtained by irrational thinking are manifested in Iago as well, which is racial discrimination and gender discrimination.

*“And I, <God> bless the mark, his Moorship’s ancient.”*

*Aigu’s loyalty to Othello from the beginning was hypocritical. No matter how talented he was, his excellence could not collapse the wall of discrimination forged by skin color differences in people’s hearts.*

*“I know our country disposition well.*

*In Venice they do let <God> see the pranks*

*They dare not show their husbands. Their best conscience*

*Is not to leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown.”*

Why does these discrimination come from? Levi Straw once stated in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, “the transition from natural state to civilized state is determined by the ability of human beings to conceive biological relations in a series of opposite forms: the dualism, mutual alternation, opposition and symmetry of these relations in a certain or fuzzy form constitute not so much a phenomenon that needs to be explained as a basic and direct material that constitutes social reality [6].“ Without the “other”, that is, the object, there will be no subject. Reflected in *Othello*, that is in the confirmation with the noble status of white male nobles such as Iago. The subject and object are not simply binary opposites; the former must be established through opposition to the latter, whereas the “other” cannot be completely separated from the subject. However, with the development of productive forces and the needs of social improvement, more and more “objects” play an increasingly important role in society, just like *Othello* in this play. Although being a Moor, he is appreciated because of his excellent military talent. It is precise because *Othello*’s social status was above Iago’s that the differences between the two became subtle, blurring the distinctive characteristics between the subject and the object. Therefore, the subjective status established by Iago in his heart was in jeopardy. Because when the distinctive characteristics almost no longer exist, the object can be transformed into the subject at any time.

Iago subconsciously resisted this change, refusing to think about the necessity of this change. Descartes’ idea requires that we should never slow down the pace of thinking and

doubt, and get our own judgment through rational thinking, so as to get rid of the shackles of old ideas. On the contrary, as a vested interest in the society at that time, Iago chose to obediently accept the social tradition's discriminatory impression of disadvantaged groups and ignore the rights of minority groups as a matter of course. As Beauvoir stated in her book *The Second Sex*, we refuse to explain women with "eternal women", and we also refuse to explain human beings with "eternal human". The unfinished subject is not a static way of existence, but a dynamic process of continuous construction. The essence of racial discrimination and gender discrimination is the way of ideological imprisonment used by the dominant groups in the society to protect their dominant position, attempting to reject the dynamic development of the subject in cognition and place the social structure under a static state, which is a selfish, one-sided and backward traditional thought. At the stage of social development, Iago did not dig deeply into the source of traditional dross concepts, but simply accepted them and allowed his discriminatory thoughts against ethnic minorities and women to become the booster of his evil plan, which eventually led to this tragedy.

#### **4 Discussion**

Although the social background and Othello's personality characteristics at that time are the factors that contributed to this tragedy, Iago's motivation and the behavior driven by his motivation are undoubtedly the catalyst and fuse of this tragedy. Through the analysis of Iago's role behavior, we can also learn a lot of enlightenment that can be applied to contemporary life. The first is the rejection of excessive individualism. Looking at today's society, the COVID-19 has not subsided, the outbreak of local wars, the rise of trade protectionism and other factors are undoubtedly a shock to traditional social values, and people's virtue behavior is also being increasingly tempted and challenged. Neither humanism in the Renaissance nor Descartes' emphasis on the personal initiative can be an excuse to indulge one's own behavior and pursue personal interests without limitation. On the contrary, we need to face classical philosophy with a moderate and sublating attitude and avoid excessive interpretation, so as to restrict our behavior with a higher moral outlook, and find a balance between giving full play to our subjective initiative and following social public order and good customs, so as to maximize personal and social welfare by actively undertaking personal obligations.

Secondly, we need to look at problems from the perspective of development and strive to get rid of the shackles of old ideas. Essence and dross coexist in traditional thoughts, and some backward ideas should not become the basis for contemporary people to behave. The construction of the subject is a process of continuous development. If you blindly indulge in the past and your blocked vision, you will not only lose the grasp of your own existence, but also stagnate the process of history. Thoughts guide actions. Countless tragedies are caused by narrow thoughts. Getting rid of the shackles of backward ideas and stereotypes plays an important role in the development of globalization, cultural exchange and dissemination, social progress and innovation, and even the smallest aspect of the pursuit of personal happiness.

## 5 Conclusion

This article attempts to combine some of Descartes' philosophical theories with the role behavior of Iago in Othello, finding reasonable explanations for his various behaviors by analyzing the limitations of his behavior motivation and ideas through skepticism and epistemology, and drawing lessons from them that can be applied to modern society. In the future study of Shakespeare, it is undoubtedly a great weapon to use some philosophical thoughts to excavate the ideological activities of characters. Finding a balance between personal and social interests, stereotypes and the current era's background, is an unavoidable problem for any member of society pursuing happiness. How to correctly understand classical philosophy and restrict their own behavior with higher moral standards is an urgent proposition to be solved today when traditional ideas are repeatedly shaken.

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