

Is Iago an Atheistic Existentialist?

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Abstract

Iago is one of the most controversial characters in Shakespeare. Critics have disagreed about his motives. This paper reviews the critics' opinions about him and argues that Iago's character, actions, and motives can be studied in the light of the philosophy of "Atheistic Existentialism" as found in Sartre's essay entitled "Existentialism". Although Shakespeare wrote Othello at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the modern reader with an average knowledge of Existentialism can interpret Iago as an "Atheistic Existentialist" since he advocates rejection of God and all moral values.

This paper also shows that Iago is the product of his age and society. The Renaissance was greatly influenced by Machiavelli's writings, the new scientific spirit and the rise of individualism, which led to a pervasive materialistic view of life.

Next to Hamlet, Iago is perhaps the most controversial of Shakespeare's characters. Critics have taken diverse views of his character and suggested different reasons for his actions. Coleridge advanced his famous dictum that Iago was prompted by the "motive - hunting of a motiveless malignity."¹ Hazlitt thought he was an "amateur of tragedy in real life" who "instead of employing his invention on imaginary characters... casts the principal characters among nearest friends and connections."²

Iago has also been found to be sadistic, proud and arrogant, jealous (of Othello and Cassio), Machiavellian (in his love for power), nihilistic, cynical, egotistical, Mephistophelian, envious (of the human race), manipulative and incapable of disinterestedness, suspicious, and revengeful.³ He has been viewed as an intellectual sensualist, a vicious slanderer, an absolute rationalist, (embodying the mystery of the evil will), a consummate dissembler and hypocrite (who destroys people's sense of reality), a practical joker, a sardonic intriguer (and survivor from the Vice Tradition of the Morality Plays), a confirmed racist, a clever improviser, a piece of machinery, a catalyst, a neurotic (whose motivating force is his need for vindictive triumph), a homosexual (representing the spirit of denial to the divine principle), a mixture of the demi-devil and the psychopath, a Devil - Archetype, a militarist (who finds his military way of life threatened by the love of Othello for Desdemona), a practical materialist, a rival for the possession of Desdemona's love, and a scapegoat whose role is cathartic.⁴ Furthermore, some critics have regarded Iago as impelled by a need to denigrate and destroy all that is true, good, and beautiful; motivated by unsatisfied ambition; actuated by extreme self-love and egoism; and controlled by an irrational mind which is lucid and cunning on the surface, but demented underneath.⁵ The list, thus, may go on interminably.

Othello's richness of texture and the ambiguity surrounding Iago's motivation accommodate this diversity of interpretation. A new approach to Iago's character, which I propose in this paper, views him as an atheistic existentialist. My interpretation will answer such questions as: Can we interpret Iago's character and motivation in the light of the main tenets of the philosophy of atheistic existentialism? Does he exemplify some of the main principles of this philosophy? Would a reader who has an average knowledge of this philosophy understand and construe Iago's actions and motives as being the result of an attitude of life which is similar to atheistic existentialism?

If we approach Iago in the light of the philosophy of atheistic existentialism, we will find that his character, actions and motives are the result and expression

of a particular attitude to life which is very close to atheistic existentialism. A careful examination of Iago's words and actions will show a striking similarity between them and Sartre's existential philosophy. Although Shakespeare wrote Othello in 1604, i.e., more than three hundred and fifty years before Sartre worked out his philosophy and communicated its principles to the world, in his conception of Iago, he was able not only to prefigure Sartre's philosophy of atheistic existentialism, but also to anticipate its results when embraced by an individual. By looking around him and noticing the changes that were occurring in his society, Shakespeare understood the threat posed to his established way of life and inherited values by the New Man. He, therefore, created both Iago and Edmund as types of the new unscrupulous atheistic existentialists who were emerging in his time.

In **Othello** Iago chooses to align himself with the Powers of Darkness. He rejects the ways of God and all moral values.

*If sanctimony, and a frail vow, betwixt an
erring barbarian, and a super-subtle Venetian, be
not too hard for my wits, and all the tribe of hell,
thou shalt enjoy her.*

(I. iii. 355-9; italics mine)

*I ha't. It is engender'd! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.*

(I. iii. 401-2; italics mine)

Divinity of hell!

*When devils will their blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now.*

(II. iii. 341-4)⁶

Towards the end of Sartre's play *The Flies* (1942), Orestes rejects Zeus and, preferring a life of loneliness, suffering and guilt, he proudly goes out, followed by the Furies:

Zeus: ... Remember, Orestes, you once were of
my flock, you fed in my pastures amongst
my sheep. Your vaunted freedom isolates
you from the fold; it means exile.

Orestes: Yes, exile.

Zeus: But the disease can't be deeply rooted yet;
it began only yesterday. Come back to the
fold. Think of your loneliness. ...

Orestes: *But I shall not return under your law; I am doomed to have no other law but mine. Nor shall I come back to Nature, the nature you found good, in it are a thousand beaten paths all leading up to you — but I must blaze my own trail. For I, Zeus, am a man, and every man must find out his own way.*⁷

(Italics mine)

Both Iago and Orestes reject God and embark on a life of existentialist freedom and egotism.

Iago himself is also the product of his age and society. Although the Renaissance boasted many thinkers and writers who defended tradition, orthodox religion and adherence to the hierarchical order of society, it was a period that favored individualism, encouraged the quest for power and glory, and fostered egotism, materialism and even atheism. The influence of Machiavelli and the New Science were widening the “gap between the real and the Ideal”, and, consequently, the “oppositions between action and contemplation, nature and art, the court and the country, the claims of birth and the claims of ‘merit’ were not simply topics for academic or courtly debate.”⁸

It is the purpose of this paper to show that Iago advocates an attitude to life which is very close to Sartre’s atheistic existentialism as outlined in his essay entitled “Existentialism”. By comparing Iago’s words and actions to the tenets contained in Sartre’s essay, I will demonstrate that if an individual rejects God and refuses to acknowledge the validity of moral values - just as Orestes did in *The Flies* - he may easily turn into such a villain as Iago. This paper will also argue that if society leans towards and is propitious to the pursuit of existential individualism, self-seeking materialism, and ruthless opportunism, it will inevitably produce monsters like Iago.

In his essay entitled “Existentialism”, Sartre writes:

If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after his thrust towards existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. ... Man is at the start a plan which is

*aware of itself... there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be.*⁹

In **Othello** Iago tells Roderigo:

Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus: Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners, so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop, and weed up thyme; supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many; either to have it sterile with idleness, or manur'd with industry, why, the power, and corrigible authority of this, lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason, to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect, or scion.

(I. iii. 319-33)

J.V. Cunningham considers this speech "a notorious commonplace of the Christian tradition, as well as of the Aristotelian," that it is "plain and hoary orthodoxy" and that "there is no perversion in it."¹⁰ However, Iago's flouting of virtue at the very beginning of the speech urges us to be careful in interpreting his words. A close analysis of the speech will reveal that, in spite of what Cunningham believes, the speech does constitute a serious perversion of orthodox religion, a perversion which is analogous to Sartre's claim that "there is no God" or that "there is nothing in heaven."

Following his contemptuous reference to virtue, Iago makes an emphatic statement asseverating man's exclusive reliance on himself and implying a deliberate rejection of God's grace, guidance, and help: "Tis in ourselves, that we are thus." The next statement makes this clear. The will, or gardener, has exclusive and arbitrary authority over our inclinations and appetites. The will is completely free to choose evil and idleness: "plant nettles... to have it sterile with idleness": or to choose goodness and hard work, "set hyssop ... or manur'd with industry." The wayward and arbitrary freedom of our wills is thus unreclaimed and unguided by any reference to a higher authority outside man himself, and unenlightened by any moral teachings of the post-lapsarian era. Reason functions only as a controller: "If the balance of our lives had not one

scale of reason to poise another of sensuality..." Thus, while acknowledging man's sensuality, bestiality, and baseness, reason does nothing to help man rise to a higher spiritual level, a level which would put him above the animals and closer to the angels.

According to Iago, man is only body and appetites and is subject to his own will. Reason merely balances his appetites but is unconcerned with any reality outside itself. It neither acknowledges moral values nor holds itself accountable to a higher authority. "Existential" Iago thus betrays two of the worst sins for which man can be externally damned: egotism and pride. As Irving Ribner has aptly remarked:

The supreme egotism of Iago is a manifestation of the code of 'reason' by which he lives. True human reason in terms of Renaissance Christian humanism was a reflection of the supreme wisdom of God, and it consisted of attuning one's own will to the purposes of God, a recognition that human events are reflections of divine purpose. Iago's 'reason' is the sin of pride, for it denies the supremacy of God and sees man as the sole author of his destiny, able to control himself and others by the power of his mind.¹¹

Commenting on Sartre's attitude to God, Philip Thody has written: "But once God disappears, there ceases in Sartre's view to be any reason for anything, especially the rules separating right from wrong, to exist at all."¹² Likewise, Iago's speech which begins with "Virtue? a fig!" is a manifesto of his existentialist creed which will translate into all kinds of inhuman and treacherous acts.

In his aforementioned essay, Sartre writes:

Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within nor without does he find anything to cling to.¹³

In *Othello*, Iago is the arch-liar and dissimulator who lies to Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, Montano, Roderigo, and Lodovico. His actions, moreover, are a deliberate travesty of all that the word "honesty" stands for. He

views honesty as an abstraction which has no essence, a mere sound, as devoid of meaning as the words "virtue" and "blessedness". Honesty is a word to be manipulated for his own purposes.¹⁴

In spite of his jocularly and sense of humor, Iago is not a very happy man. Sartre's words, quoted above, apply to him exactly: "forlorn, because neither within nor without does he find anything to cling to." Iago is essentially a parasite. He himself has no essence, as he tells Roderigo: "I am not what I am" (I. i. 65).¹⁵ Thus he adapts his personality and words according to the occasion and the person he is talking to. His constant elusiveness is indicative of his hollowness.

In his essay, Sartre writes:

*The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse.*¹⁶

In **Othello** Iago scoffs at Roderigo's passion for Desdemona: "Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon". (I. iii. 310-12)

In spite of his prurience, Iago is incapable of strong passion, as Granville Barker has remarked:

*He is a passionless creature ... But Shakespeare admits neither love nor lust into Iago's composition, nothing so human; shows him to us, on the contrary, frigidly speculating upon the use such indulgence might do to him, and so frigidly declining: none. Even his hate is cold, and will be the more tenacious for that, its strength not being spent in emotional ebb and flow.*¹⁷

Thus Iago cannot understand the nature of the love between Othello and Desdemona; to him it is mere lust. His "reason" tells him that once satiated with each other's body, they will drift apart: she to other lovers and he to different interests. It is inconceivable that a woman so young, so beautiful, and so highly-born, should continue to be attracted to a man who is not only her elder but, which is much worse, a black foreigner. Iago's "reason" cannot conceive, in the words of Winifred Nowotny, "the truism that love, any love, is a miracle."¹⁸ Love is beyond reason and cannot be subjected to its limited and limiting constructions. The sight of the perfect harmony between Othello and Desdemona jars on him:

O, you are well tun'd now,
But I'll set down the pegs that make this music, as
honest as I am.

(II.i.199-201)

In his essay, Sartre writes:

*But given that man is free and that there is no human nature for me to depend on, I cannot count on men who I do not know by relying on human goodness or man's concern for the good of society.*¹⁹

Therefore, society, according to Sartre, will be made up of individuals who cannot trust one another. Hence the element of solidarity which is so important for the survival and development of society will be absent.

In **Othello**, Iago does not trust anybody. He suspects both Othello and Cassio to have slept with his wife. He also suspects Othello's motives for giving the lieutenancy to Cassio (I.i.7-37). He does not trust even his own wife, and when she steals and gives him Desdemona's handkerchief, which he was very eager to have, he does not bother to confide in her but dismisses her quite brusquely (III. iii. 304-18: 320-5).

Satre writes again saying:

*The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of quietism, since it declares "There is no reality except in action." Moreover, it goes further, since it adds, "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life."*²⁰

According to his philosophy, man's life becomes significant, not by virtue of his good deeds, but by being quantitatively measured and found impressive. Therefore, man's primary concern should be to seek to obtain as much pleasure, have as many adventures or new experiences, and fulfil as much of his ambition as possible. He can achieve this by any means at his disposal, regardless of moral or religious restraints, since this philosophy does not recognize any.

In **Othello**, Iago declares his admiration for those Machiavellian opportunists who - and he is proud to consider himself one of them:

*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 coats
Do themselves homage.*

(I.i. 51-4)

Such a philosophy with its obvious resemblance to Sartre's, has very serious consequences for both society and for Iago himself. It precludes the

establishment of sound, honest, and lasting social relationships which are necessary for the thriving of both society and individuals. As Mera J Flamenhaft has written, "Iago's extreme self-love, or egoism, precludes not only a sincere relationship with other individuals but also with the community as a whole."²¹

Iago like Sartre, subscribes to the postulate that there is "no reality except in action," for he himself is a man of action who finds fulfilment only as he moves from one victim to another: from Roderigo to Cassio to Othello and Desdemona. He reveals his contempt for his first victim, Roderigo, whom he has been exploiting and manipulating for his various selfish ends: "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:/ For I my own gain'd knowledge should profane,/ If I would time expend with such a snipe,/ But for my sport and profit" (I. iii. 381-4). He tells Roderigo: "If thou canst cuckold him [Othello], thou doest thyself a pleasure, and me a sport" (I. iii. 368-9). In his soliloquy, following Roderigo's exit, he says: "To get his place [Cassio's lieutenantcy], and to plume up my will, / In double knavery"²² (I. iii. 391-2). He does not show any compunctions, visitings of nature at having involved the innocent and virtuous Desdemona in his demonic plot, but rejoices in his ability to ensnare ladies like her: "work on,/ My medicine, work:/thus credulous fools are caught,/ And many worthy and chaste dames, even thus/All guiltless, meet reproach" (IV i. 44-7).

Iago's "sport" and pluming up his will show that to him getting the lieutenantcy is not his ultimate goal. He enjoys playing God to his victims. He likes to have them in his power like puppets on a string and the greater their torment and humiliation the higher his exaltation and the deeper his sense of triumph.

Sartre writes:

*In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself. This being so, in discovering my inner being, I discover the other person at the same time, like a freedom placed in front of me which thinks and wills only for or against me. Hence let us at once announce the discovery of a world which we shall call inter-subjectivity; this is the world in which man decides what he is and what others are.*²³

Such a doctrine would eventually foster egotism, for, according to its tenets, I should be concerned with others only in so far as they are important to me. Others do not have their own separate objective entity. Moreover, such

"inter-subjectivity" can lead to nothing but chaos and a return to the law of the jungle. If each individual interprets and decides what the world and what other people should be, then we will have an infinite number of subjective interpretations and decisions. What gives coherence to the world and definiteness to man as a recognizable and identifiable discrete being is a common belief in a reality outside man, i.e. God, and in a common body of ethical guides or rules. In the absence of God and such moral values and beliefs to give purpose, direction and meaning to his life, man faces a great void, as William V Spanos has written:

*Stripped of the ethical guides deduced from theological or rational systems, the individual is left naked and alone to face in fear and trembling the great void and, to adapt King Lear's words, to decide whether to make something out of nothing.*²⁴

Iago chooses "the Divinity of Hell", for in a purely subjective world such as the existentialist believes in, there is no guarantee that a man will make a moral choice, or choose the way of God. Iago, moreover, instead of "making something out of nothing," makes "nothing out of something," In other words, he manages to destroy what is most valuable, noble, and meaningful in his world.

In his essay, Sartre writes:

*Given that men are free and that tomorrow they will freely decide what man will be, I cannot be sure that after my death, fellow fighters will carry on my work to bring it to its maximum perfection.*²⁵

(Italics mine)

Such a freedom as Sartre refers to is, however desirable, meaningless unless it is enlightened by and directed towards an ideal outside itself; otherwise, this freedom will be abused or misused just as Iago did his in manipulating and exploiting others. Moreover, as is obvious from the passage quoted above, the subjective interpretation of freedom - when each individual interprets his freedom the way he chooses - leads, in the long run, to distrust and suspicion: "I cannot be sure that, after my death, fellow-fighters will carry on my work".

As is already argued, Iago does not trust anybody and his distrust prompts him to move against others before they move against him, or to take revenge on them if he suspects they have already done so. Thus he thinks Othello and Cassio have both had an affair with his wife and he has to take his revenge on them (I. iii. 385-88; II. ii. 302). He is also afraid that the Moor may confront

Cassio, and Roderigo may expose him to Desdemona. Therefore, it becomes imperative that both Cassio and Roderigo should die. (V.i. 11-22)

It is significant that the word "free" occurs fourteen times in the play (I. ii. 25-8; I. ii. 98-8; II.iii. 260-65; I.iii.297-98; II.iii. 310-13; II.iii. 327-8; III.i.739; III.iii.187-89; III.iii. 203-4; III.iii. 257-59; III.iii. 346; III.iv. 125-26) and the word "freely" occurs four times (II. iii. 59; II.iii. 320; III.i. 56; V.ii. 54). Although these two words cover a wide range of meanings in the play: unrestrained, willing, generous, innocent, and completely, all these meanings also suggest an absence of some sort. They suggest absence of ties, restraints, and objections; absence of second-thought or personal considerations; absence of selfishness; absence of guilt; and absence of compulsion. In the quasi-claustrophobic atmosphere of the play we are reminded that there can be a way of life that is free of selfishness, hypocrisy, envy and jealousy; and that there can exist people who are different from Iago, people who value virtue, honesty and friendship.

It is apt, therefore, that when Iago's villainy has finally been exposed, he is called a "slave", i.e., a man who, because of his wickedness and treacherousness, does not deserve to be a free man or a free citizen:

Montano: *I'll after that same villain, for 'tis a damned slave.*

(V.ii. 243-4)

Lodovico: *O thou Othello, that was once so good,
Fall'n in the practice of a damned slave,
What should be said to thee?*

(Ibid., 292-94)

Lodovico: *For this slave, if there be any cunning
cruelty,
That can torment him much...*

(Ibid., 333-35)

Finally, in his essay, Sartre writes:

You have got to take things as they are. Moreover, to say that we invent values means nothing else but this: life has no meaning a priori. Before we come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning that you choose. In that way, you see, there is a possibility of creating a human community.²⁶

Since Sartre, as we have seen (reference 13), does not recognize the existence of moral values, the meaning that Modern Man may choose to give to

life can be a subjective one, based on self-interest and self-love. There is no guarantee that he will choose virtue, decency, or justice as his norms. Moreover, faced with a multitude of choices in a world that is becoming more and more complicated, competitive, and frustrating, and human needs more varied and complex, Modern Man, no matter how well-disposed he may be, can get confused without moral guidance.

We have already seen what kind of choice Iago made. He deliberately spurned honesty: "Whip me such honest knaves:" (I.i.48), rejected the possible existence of virtue and blessedness, and subjected every consideration to his own "peculiar end" (I.i.60).

Sartre has given Modern Man the freedom of creating "a human community", but he has taken away from him moral values, trust in others, and belief in God. He has, in other words, deprived him of the means by which he can create a viable and lasting "human community". "Existential" Iago, who does not acknowledge moral values, destroys every possibility for the continuation or even existence of such a community. It becomes clear that, through his choices and actions, "existential" Iago can exist only amidst a heterogeneous group of individuals who have made their choices and live in their own world undisturbed by and unconcerned about the desires, aspirations, or interests of the rest of the community, each exploring and experimenting to see how much can get out of the world and out of others. "Existential" Iago's experimental view of the world "is ultimately predatory, driving toward possession and mastery and control."²⁷

The Renaissance witnessed many changes in the individual's attitude towards God, religion, tradition, and human relationships. These changes brought about an attitude and a way of life akin to modern atheistic existentialism. Iago was the product of this society. Such a society was a rich soil for the growth of his egotism, individualism and atheism.

The Renaissance was, therefore, a paradoxical period, a period of intellectual upheavals and turmoil. This turmoil was the result of the gradual disappearance of the old feudal society and the moral values that accompanied it and the emergence of new interests such as money-making and the pursuit of power. As Mark Rose has written:

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were a time of transition and contradiction, a period in which fundamentally incompatible social forms and structures of thought sat uneasily side by side ... Particularly apparent were the tensions between the traditional feudal values of honor, loyalty, and

service, and the less absolute imperatives of the marketplace.²⁸

A major influence on the Renaissance was Machiavelli's **The Prince**. Machiavelli advocated hypocrisy, cunning and dissimulation as the best means for obtaining one's ends in life. To him all men are either deceivers or deceived:

And he who knows best how to use the fox has come to a better end. But it is necessary to know how to disguise this nature well and to be a great hypocrite and a liar: and men are so simpleminded and so controlled by their present necessities that one who deceives will always find another who will allow him to be deceived.²⁹

Machiavelli not only felt contempt for the stupidity and gullibility of mankind, as the passage quoted above demonstrates, but he also thought that men were evil and if left to their own devices would choose selfishness and self-interest as their way of life. The result would inevitably be confusion and chaos:

As is demonstrated by all those who discuss civic life, ... it is necessary for anyone who organizes a republic and institutes laws to take for granted that all men are evil and that they will always express the wickedness of their spirit wherever they have the opportunity. ... Men never do good except out of necessity; but when they have the freedom to choose and can do as they please, everything immediately becomes confused and disorderly.³⁰

Another major influence on Renaissance society was the progress of science and the scientific spirit. The new achievements in science were manifest in medicine, navigation, land-surveying, mining, engineering and in many other fields. The new scientific spirit was best expressed in the writings of Francis Bacon such as **The Advancement of Learning** (1605) and **Novum Organum** (1620) in which he attacked the various "idols", or weaknesses, which hamper the progress of the mind. Bacon supported the inductive method which is based on empirical observation, verification and experimentation. Bacon's empiricism is inimical to metaphysics and favors practicality, opportunism and materialism, as Douglas Bush has remarked:

Bacon repudiates the study of first causes and applies himself to the study of things. To material progress he sacrifices that scale of divine and humane values which the best minds of antiquity,

*the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had striven to
make prevail.*³¹

Thus the new science and the new scientific spirit encouraged scepticism, materialism and self-seeking practicality.

Iago's materialism and extreme practicality can be seen in his attitude to love. Desdemona, for example, is viewed by him not as a human being, but as a possession. He is concerned only with her pecuniary potential. He tells Cassio that Othello, by marrying her, has married a big fortune: "Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carack/ if it prove lawful prize, he's made for ever" (I.ii. 49-50). Iago's approach to his victims is also experimental. He tries to discover how far he can go with them and what are the possibilities he can avail himself of for deceiving them and getting them to fall into his snares. This is very obvious in the temptation scenes with Othello:

Iago: *Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,
Know of your love?*

Othello: *He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?*

Iago: *But for a satisfaction of my thought -
No further harm.*

Othello: *Why of thy thought, Iago?*

Iago: *I did not think he had been acquainted with her.*

Othello: *Oh, yes, and went between us very oft.*

Iago: *Indeed?*

Othello: *Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou
ought in that?*

Is he not honest?

Iago: *Honest, my lord?*

Othello: *Honest? Ay, honest.*

Iago: *My lord, for aught I know.*

Othello: *What dost thou think?*

Iago: *Think, my lord?*

Othello: *By heaven, thou echoest me,
As if there were some monster in thy thought*

Too hideous to be shown.

(III.iii. 94-108)

Iago is a master of dissimulation and hypocrisy, which he uses in his quest for personal aggrandizement and revenge. From the very beginning of the play

he declares: "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 sleeves,/ For doves to peck at: I am not what I am" (I.i. 61-65); "I must show out a flag, and sign of love,/ Which is indeed but sign" (I.i. 56-57); [the Moor] "thinks men honest that but seems to be so" (I.iii.398); "Knavery's plain face is never seen, till us'd" (II.i.307); "When devils will their blackest sins put on,/They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,/ As I do now" (II.iii. 342-44).

Iago practices what he preaches. He gulls Roderigo while pretending to be his friend. He maligns Cassio to Montano (II.iii. 114-21); Cassio to Othello; Desdemona to Othello; and Othello to Lodovico (IV. I. 266-76). While injecting his venom, he protests his sincerity, honesty and concern for the party he is maligning. Finally, he manages to ruin Cassio, Othello, Desdemona and Roderigo.

The spreading of Machiavellian ideas, materialism, and the scientific spirit led to the rise of individualism in Renaissance society. As a result, many individuals turned their backs on the values of loyalty and service. Iago's attitude to service is very significant and typical of many Renaissance people who used service to achieve personal profit. Edmund Spenser, for example, while working for Lord Grey in Ireland and supporting the ruthlessly repressive policy of the British in that country availed himself of the situation and helped himself to a substantial piece of land.³² Iago's self-seeking philosophy which he proudly proclaims to the fool Roderigo is not much different from Spenser's attitude and actions in Ireland:

You shall mark

*Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave,
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time much like his master's ass,
For nought but provender, and when he's old
cashier'd,
Whip me such honest knaves: others there are,
Who, trimm'd 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'em and when they have lin'd their
coats,
Do themselves homage, those fellows have some
soul,
And such a one do I profess myself.*

(I.i. 44-45)

Such a self-seeking attitude to service had already been deprecated by Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (1599) where Orlando, unlike Iago, praises the disinterestedness of the older generations exemplified in Adam, his servant, as compared with the opportunism and selfishness of the new generations:

*O good old man, how well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world,
When service sweat for duty, not for meed!
Thou art not for the fashion of these times,
Where none will sweat but for promotion;
And having that, do choke their service up
Even with the having.*

(II.iii.56-62)³³

Sincere, disinterested and freely-given service was very important to maintain the traditional hierarchical order or society. Individualism and self-service amount to a repudiation of such an order and can lead to its collapse. The collapse, violation, or disturbance of this order can result in dire consequences to the commonwealth and to the individuals themselves, as S.L. Bethell has written:

*It seems to follow that Shakespeare thought of the
"new man" with his contempt for traditional morality
and religion, as a disintegrating force seeking to
break down the social order that is a part of cosmic
order - as, in fact, an instrument (no doubt
unconscious) of the Devil in his constant effort to
reduce cosmos to chaos.³⁴*

Just as Renaissance society produced people like Iago, who, in his extreme ambitiousness and dedication to self-love, is hostile to and contemptuous of whatever is not practical and self-seeking, the Modern Age, in the light of the philosophy of atheistic existentialism, can also produce men like him. Sartre's declarations: "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself;" "Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after his thrust toward existence"; and "I cannot count on men who I do not know by relying on human goodness or man's concern for the good of society", like Iago's philosophy of life, can generate nothing but ugliness and misery.

In conclusion, Iago exemplifies the main tenets of atheistic existentialism. There is no doubt that he is not only the product of his materialistic society, but

he can also be approached in the light of Sartre's philosophy. His real motives for doing what he did make him an "Atheistic existentialist" for if an individual repudiates all moral values and aligns himself with the "Divinity of Hell", there is no sin he will not be capable of committing in order to realize his ambition, satisfy his revenge, appease his envy, or humiliate his superiors in position or in virtue. Accordingly, Iago would have to face his own moral ugliness, spiritual emptiness, or the state of Nonbeing of the "Existentialists" who have rejected God. Every act of villainy Iago commits and every successful attempt at humiliating a person morally superior to him are for him an act of ontic self-affirmation.

NOTES

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, **Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets** (Florida: New World Books, 1972), p. 388.
2. William Hazlitt, **Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection, 1623-1840** (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 286. Following Hazlitt, Granville-Barker wrote that Iago has the "intuition of the artist in leading strings." See **Prefaces to Shakespeare. Vol 2** (London: B.T. Batsford, 1961), p. 104. Sigurd Burckhardt, showing the influence of both Hazlitt and Granville-Barker, decided that Iago was a "sort of built-in-playwright, who, presented with a donnee ... sets about shaping a play from it" Burckhardt, **Shakespearean Meanings** (Princeton: University Press, 1969), p. 273.
3. See respectively, Leslie Y Rabkin and Jeffrey Brown, "Some Monster in His Thought: Sadism and Tragedy in Othello," **Literature and Psychology**, 23 (1973), 59-61; Larry S Champion, **Shakespeare's Tragic Perspectives** (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976), p. 138; A.C. Bradley, **Shakespearean Tragedy** (London: The Macmillan Press, 1904; rpt. 1979), p. 187; S.L. Bethell, "Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in Othello," **Shakespeare Survey** 5 (1952), p. 75; Virgil K Whitaker, **Shakespeare's Use of Learning** (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1969), p. 281; Julia Willis Abernethy, "Honest Iago," **Sewanee Review** 30 (1922), 342; Bethell, p. 75; Madeleine Doran, "Good Name in Othello," **Studies in English Literature**, 7 (1967), 200-201; D.R. Godfrey, "Shakespeare and the Green-Eyed Monster," **Neophilologus**, 156 (1972), 215-16; Nicholas Grene, **Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination** (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional, 1992), pp. 105-106; Ruth M Levitsky, "Prudence Versus Wisdom in Othello," **Dalhousie Review**, 54 (1974), 284; Irving Ribner, **Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy** (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 94; J.K. Walton, "Strength's Abundance: A View of Othello," **Review of English Studies**, Vol. 11, No. 41 (1960), p. 10; M.R. Ridley (ed.) **Othello** (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. lxi-lxii; Laurence Lerner, "The Machiavel and the Moor," **Essays in Criticism**, Vol. 9, No 4 (October 1959), pp. 343-47; Bernard McElroy, **Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies** (Princeton: University Press, 1973), p. 102; Bethell, p. 96; G. Wilson Knight, "The Othello Music," in **The Wheel of Fire** (London: Methuen, 1930; rpt. 1977), pp. 112-114; McElroy, p. 102; G.M. Matthews, "Othello and the Dignity of Man," **Shakespeare in a Changing World**, (ed.) Arnold Kettle (London: Laurence & Wishart, 1971), p. 134; Peter Mercer, "Othello and the Form of Heroic Tragedy," **Critical Quarterly**, Vol. 11 (Sept. 1969), pp. 54-55; Derek Traversi, **An Approach to Shakespeare** (London: Hollis & Carger, 1969), p. 107; McElroy, p. 109; Bradley, p. 179; Ribner, p. 97; Lerner, p. 341; Knight, p. 114; Robert B Heilman, **Magic in the Web** (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1977), p. 38; Helen Gardner, "The Noble Moor," **Othello: A Casebook**, ed. John Wain (London: The Macmillan Press, 1971), p. 156; Levitsky, p. 284; Walton, p. 10.

4. See, respectively, William Robertson Turbull, **Othello: A Critical Study** (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood, 1973), p. 270; Doran, p. 200; Marvin Rosenberg, "In Defense of Iago," **Shakespeare Quarterly**, Vol. 6 (Spring 1955), pp. 153-56; Bradley, p. 186; Daniel Stempel, "The Silence of Iago," **PMLA**, 84(1969), p. 252; Karina Williamson, "Honest and False in Othello", **Studia Neophilologica**, V. 35 (1963), p. 216; W.H. Auden, "The Joker in the Pack," **Othello: A Casebook**, ed. John Wain, p. 205; Bernard Spivack, **Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil** (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 56-57; Matthews, pp. 130-31; Stephen Greenblatt, **Renaissance Self-Fashioning** (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 233-36; F.R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero," **The Common Pursuit**, Penguin edition (Middlesex, England: Pelican Books, 1962), p. 154; Sanford E Marowitz, "Othello Unmasked: A Black Man's Conscience and a White Man's Fool," **Southern Review**, 6(1973), p. 118; Godfrey, p. 216; Norman Holland, **Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare** (New York: Octagon Books, 1976), pp. 249-50; Arthur L. Little, "An essence that's not seen": The Primal Scene of Racism in Othello," **Shakespeare Quarterly**, Vol. 44 No. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 317-19; Knight, p. 114; Grene, p. 123; Maud Bodkin, **Archetypal Patterns in Poetry** (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 211-18; John Fraser, "Othello and Honour," **Critical Review**, Vol. 8(1955), pp. 62-3; Bethell, p. 69; Kenneth Burke, **A Grammar of Motive** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 414; and Kenneth Burke, "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," **Hudson Review**, 4: 2(1951), 166.
5. G.R. Hibbard, "Othello and the Pattern of Shakespearian Tragedy" **Shakespeare Studies**, 21 (1968), 44; Champion, p. 448; Mera J Flaumenhaft, "Begetting and Belonging in Shakespeare's Othello," **Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy**, 4:3 (Spring 1975), 199; and Matthews, p. 134.
6. All citations of **Othello** are to the Arden edition, ed. M.R. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1969).
7. Jean Paul Sartre, **The Flies**, trs. Stuart Gilbert, in **Altona, Men Without Shadows, The Flies**, Penguin Plays (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 307-11.
8. **Introduction to Sixteenth-Century English Poetry and Prose**, eds. Paul Delany, Jeffrey Ford and Robert W Hanning (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), pp. 4-5.
9. Jean Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947). Reprinted in William V Spanos, ed. **Casebook on Existentialism 2** (New York: Thomas Y Crowell Company, 1976), p. 390. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.
10. J.V. Cunningham, **Woe or Wonder** (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1964; rpt. 1969), p. 23.
11. Ribner, p. 97. See also Whitaker, pp. 281-2.
12. Philip Thody, **Jean Paul Sartre** (London: Macmillan Education, 1992), p. 15.
13. "Existentialism," p. 393.
14. In her essay "'Honest' and 'False' in Othello" Karina Williamson expresses a similar idea: "For the tragic paradox of Othello is that he, who stakes everything on honesty - Desdemona's, Iago's, his own, lacks the faculty for distinguishing between honest and false, the semblance and the reality," (p. 211).
15. Iago's words are a parody of God's words to Moses: "I am what I am," (**Exodus** iii. 14.) Shakespeare, however, subjects Iago to his own parody. God is what He is, i.e., cannot be apprehended through any theory, formula or conceptualization because He is too vast and infinitely transcends man's limited mind. Iago, on the other hand, is elusive because - as Sartre said about the Existentialists ("Existentialism," p. 390) - he has no nature to be apprehended.
16. "Existentialism", p. 393.
17. Granville-Barker, **Prefaces to Shakespeare**, Vol. 2, pp. 108-9.

18. Winifred M.T. Nowotny, "Justice and Love in Othello," **University of Toronto Quarterly**, 21 (1951-52), 335.
19. "Existentialism", p. 396.
20. "Existentialism", p. 397
21. Mera J. Flaumenhaft, "Begetting and Belonging in Shakespeare's Othello," op. cit., p. 199.
22. The Arden edition has: "To get this place, and to make up my will,/ A double knavery." I prefer, however, the version followed by many other editions, and have therefore used it in this context. All other quotations are from the Arden edition.
23. "Existentialism", p. 400.
24. William V Spanos, "Abraham, Sisyphus, and the Furies," in **Casebook on Existentialism 2**, op. cit., p. 6.
25. "Existentialism", p. 397.
26. "Existentialism", p. 405.
27. Nathan A Scott, (Jr.), "The Literary Imagination in a Time of Death," in **Casebook on Existentialism**, p. 238.
28. Mark Rose, "Othello's Occupation: Shakespeare and the Romance of Chivalry," in **Othello: Modern Critical Interpretations**, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 68.
29. Nicholai Machiavelli, "The Prince", in **The Portable Machiavelli**, trans & eds Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: The Viking Penguin, 1979), p. 134.
30. **The Prince**, pp. 181-2.
31. Douglas Bush, **The Renaissance and English Humanism** (Toronto: University Press, 1968), p. 93.
32. See Stephen Greenblatt, **Renaissance Self-Fashioning**, op. cit., pp. 185-86.
33. **The Riverside Shakespeare**, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).
34. S.L. Bethell, "Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in Othello," op. cit., p. 71.

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