

Othello's Tragedy: From the Perspective of Damasio's Genomic Unconscious

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Abstract

Othello, as the only typical love tragedy among Shakespeare's four tragedies, has its unique artistic attractiveness. There have been many discussions about Othello's content, meaning, characters, writing techniques and other dimensions, but few have discussed this famous work from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience. Based on Damasio's theory of genomic unconscious, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of the work in combination with the text, and explores the value carried by the tragic hero and the causes of the tragedy from a new angle.

Keywords

Damasio; Genomic unconscious; Othello; Tragedy.

1. Introduction

Art, though higher than life, comes from life. The characters in a play may be entirely fictional, but in a sense they are similar with the characters in the real world, or even the genuine versions of ourselves. However, Gottlieb [5] pointed out sharply that the relationships of characters outlined in early drama are not dynamic interactions between individual personalities, but performances which are good or evil as well as sincere or superficial. And he argued that in the early stages of modern society, to some extent, it is quite normal that individuals are only aware of social responsibility rather than personal experience. These research viewpoints made us see a group of characters completely different from us, when we read the details in Shakespeare's plays. They were not living in the ways of individual performance and self-expression, but the carriers or subversionists of institutional requirements and behavioral norms under the specific social environment at that time. Huimin Cao [7] believed that the cause of Othello's tragedy lies not in their love itself, but in the inner weakness of the characters and the evil of the external environment. The reason why Othello's "jealousy" were explained from the perspective of external environment. However, the defects in protagonist were the source of tragedy [7]. Actually, Many famous theorists deeply feel that it is not easy to understand the moral confusion hidden in the tragic story, and the contradictory explanation of Othello's character is more than any character in the entire works of the writer including Hamlet[8]. Although there have been many discussions about Othello's content, meaning, characters, writing techniques and other dimensions, few have discussed this famous work from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience. The forerunner of this region, Antonio Damasio, clearly explained the genomic unconscious in *Self Comes to the Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. He perfectly described lots of behaviors that seem to be determined by conscious awareness are actually driven by unconscious intention, which gives the author a new clue. Besides, the combination of neuroscience and literature makes literary criticism no longer restricted to one discipline, and give readers a different angle to appreciate literary works, which is the purpose of this paper. Hence, this paper will analyze Othello's tragedy is related to his own genetic unconsciousness on the basis of Damasio's theory of genomic unconscious.

2. Genomic Unconscious

Freud divided people's spiritual consciousness into three levels: conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious. Consciousness is an astonishing capacity, an agent equipped with the mind of its owner and the protagonist of an individual being,, which examine the world within and outside of the self [1]. due to the window of consciousness, people are able to recognize the meaning of mind. The mind is the most natural result of evolution and is largely unconscious, internal and unrevealed [14]. Before consciousness is found, the rules of life were automatic; After consciousness is noticed, the rules of life remain automatic, but it is gradually influenced by self-directed judgment. Hence, conscious processes are based on unconscious processes which are in charge of regulation of human beings. The so-called unconscious refers to those things that do not normally enter the level of consciousness [13]. We are aware that the unconscious does not coincide with the repressed; it is still true that all that is repressed is unconscious, but not all that is unconscious is repressed [13]. Whether they want it or not, the somatosensory cortices keep "inspecting individual's state" continuously, even every moment, whereas the other cortices inspect whatever you tell them to inspect, which depends on your position in space or the position of your head and eyes. So there is an huge gap between the infinite sameness of the input that the somatosensory cortices receive and the diversity of inputs that the cortices can bring from the outer environment. In other words, unconscious refers not to unconscious activities of individual's brain, but to unconscious states of the individual. That is, we can only know the unconscious by making it conscious; And Freud [9] once said: "we can only aware of the unconscious as consciousness after the unconscious has completed the transformation or transition to consciousness."

3. Stages of Emotion Processing

Damasio [2] sharply distinguished between three stages of emotion processing: "a state of emotion, which can be triggered and executed nonconsciously; a state of feeling, which can be represented nonconsciously; and a state of feeling made conscious, i.e., known to the organism having both emotion and feeling". And he further mentioned the meaning of genomic unconscious as follows: the colossal number of instructions that are contained in our genome and that guide the construction of the organism with the distinctive features of our phenotype, in both body proper and brain, and that further assist with the operation of the organism. That is to say they could govern our body [1]. For example, involuntary preferences for food and shelter in the early stage of one's life, are partly unconsciously influenced by genes, although some of these preferences can be adjusted and modified by personal experience as individuals grow up.

4. Genomic Unconscious in Othello

"Othello" is one of the four tragedies of William Shakespeare. It mainly tells that Othello was employed in Venice and made great achievements in the war. Desdemona, daughter of the elder Brabenco, fell in love with Othello deeply because of his brave spirit so that she was willing to elope with him. Iago was a flag officer under Othello, when Othello appointed Cassio as his lieutenant, Iago hated Othello and retaliated against him with all kinds of despicable and brazen means. For example, he made Othello believe that Cassio was having an affair with Desdemona, which made him strangle his own wife. As the truth came out, Othello felt so sorry that he committed suicide and fell beside his wife. With superb artistic skills and strong tragic emotion, Shakespeare made "Othello" a masterpiece [6].

Hugo of France said that Othello is night, and night fetishises day as africans worship white women, and for Othello, Desdemona is his light. Othello was a man with low self-esteem. His

inferiority stemmed from his race, which led to his own doubts and dis-identification of his identity. The sophisticated cognitive processes stimulated by such complex cerebral cortex of primates as memory as well as imagination, which contributes to more enriched and refined feeling states [3]. Although he, Othello looked strong and upright, there was a weakness in his heart, which was also an important reason for the whole tragedy. There is no state of mind and feeling, which at one time appears in consciousness and then disappears from consciousness, ceasing to exist absolutely. Although sometimes people cannot find them in any way, they are still not destroyed and undone, but somehow continue to exist, or, as they say, remain in memory [9]. We cannot directly observe them as they are, but we can safely deduce that the stars below the horizon will continue to exist. This unconsciousness had a huge impact on his actions. He could not change. As Othello [12] once said: "Rude am I in my speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace: for since these arms of mine had seven years' pith, till now some nine moons wasted, they have used their dearest action in the tented field, and little of this great world can I speak, more than pertains to feats of broil and battle, and therefore little shall I grace my cause in speaking for myself." For Damasio, the bodily sources of the self are influenced by interacting with the outer world from the very start. Because the black had been despised by the white for a long time, there was a sense of inferiority in his heart, which was rooted in blood. The deep roots for the self, including the elaborate self which involves identity and personhood, are to be found in the ensemble of brain devices which continuously and non-consciously maintain the body state within the narrow range of physiological equilibrium, which is also the requirement for survival [1]. These devices keep presenting the state of the human body unconsciously from considerably different dimensions. I call the state of activity within the ensemble of such devices the proto-self, the unconscious forerunner for the levels of self which appear in our minds as the conscious protagonists of consciousness [3]. Which is to say, the brain has the connections and interactions with the whole dynamic body all the time, 'taking the photo' of the organs and muscles, so that the whole body provides a dynamic representation within the proto-self. And for Othello, this kind of unchangeable sense of inferiority made him had an instinctive preparedness and fear against the white. In addition, according to Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis [4], The somatic marker does not have to be a fully formed emotion-- something that is completely experienced and perceived. It can be a hidden or emotion-related signal that the individual does not know, and these two conditions are called bias. In this case, Othello trusted a man who looked like a gentleman, and to some extent, his trust in Iago was blind, which is the representation of bias. The cruel discrimination in the real world aggravated his rejection of identity, which directly led to his uncertainty and doubt about love. At the time that Iago made Othello suspect his wife was having an affair with Cassio through using clever pitfalls, the jealousy and fear, which were always suppressed in the bottom of his heart, quickly expanded in an invisible way, and that was why he insisted that his wife was unchastened.

When Othello made this series of decisions within the limited time, he did not consciously process the information he received. Instead, he was dominated by the unconscious emotions which is accumulated from the past. Othello was influenced by emotions that were inspired by the genomic unconscious which eventually led to bitter results. Therefore, genomic unconscious is not the product of thought of Shakespeare as a writer, but one of the basic factors of Shakespeare as a person, which could regulate human life. It is the genomic unconscious that is the basic life-regulating element of human beings, making some human characteristics visible, and providing a bridge for readers to understand the text.

The vast unconscious is always with us, and it plays a great behind-the-scenes role beneath the limited existence of individual's consciousness, such as the intention to trigger drives, motives and emotions, if Othello is as the sample of analysis. An individual in a relationship might become jealous as the person suspects that their significant other might have interest in

someone else. Jealousy causes dissatisfaction in a person upon others' goodness or success in any activity [11]. Therefore, even the vows of his beloved wife, and the exhortations of the others, could not summon back his reason and his trust in Desdemona. Besides, the cognitive unconscious reasoning capacity associated with prior emotional experience has more functional room than its conscious counterpart [1]. And certain choices are unconsciously flagged by a bias which was once linked to previously learned emotion-feeling factors. Thus, it is much easier to understand, under suspicion and jealousy, Othello's confidence and firmness were gone. Such a hero, who was called "there is no other man like him", ended his innocent wife's life because of a lie told by a villain with ulterior motives. A sincere love, which broke through all the resistance of the outside, was destroyed in suspicion and anger. Moral behavior is a set of techniques that require long repetitious practices, and is informed by clear and powerful principles and reasons of consciousness, but which are otherwise the second nature of the cognitive unconscious [7]. As Iago said, "Dangerous thoughts are a kind of poison. Although there is no bitter taste at the beginning, they gradually move into the blood and explode like sulfur." And it seemed natural to hear the gullible Othello saying: "My heart has lost its home, my life has lost its place."

Othello is considered to be one of Shakespeare's "four great tragedies" with multiple themes, which intertwines love and jealousy, loyalties and betrayals, race and colonization. Othello's affection for Desdemona evolved from sincerity at the beginning to crazy jealousy and then to distortion. The transformation of human nature from the peak to the abyss attributed not only to that era, but also to the hidden danger of interracial marriage. Conscious decision begins with reflection, simulation, and testing in the conscious mind; and this process can be completed and rehearsed in the unconscious mind, where the selected action can be taken. However, the conscious and unconscious elements that make up this complex, fragile procedures of decision and execution can be derailed by hobbies and desires [1]. The height of the ideal leads to the abyss of the disillusionment. Othello's pain is so concentrated and intense that he almost went mad in the state of being painful. In order to investigate the relation between the perception of bodily states and feelings through behavioral data, few findings have provided the postulated supports between interoceptive awareness and emotional experiences [10] [15]. Strong psychological hints constantly strengthened the intensity of the stimulus until they finally destroyed Othello's identity constructed through his heroism and legend, which made him deeply sad to feel the color of his skin and the race he belonged to. The protagonist's unconscious inferiority made him believe that it is unnatural for Desdemona to fall in love with him, a Moor, while it is natural and reasonable for her to fall in love with Cassio, because they had the same skin color and race, which eventually caused this love tragedy. The genomic unconscious is partly responsible for marking the similarity of all human behaviors, which could explain the reason why reader's understanding of the story is always regarded as an innate ability. And in combination with Damasio's theory, the reader is able to grasp the the protagonist's characteristics conveyed by the text.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, readers could appreciate Othello from a new point of view -- on the basis of Damasio's theory of genomic unconscious. It is undeniable that Othello's tragedy is a combination of consciousness and unconsciousness. The unconscious process alone cannot complete this work, but the consciousness is always more easily perceived and attached more importance by people, while the contribution of the unconsciousness is weakened. Psychology found that the initial disposition of unconscious in the human brain is largely impacted by genetics, and although many efforts to shape and reshape as conscious individuals have been taken, the range of unconscious is vast and highly pervasive [1]. The unconsciousness seems to

be the vast basement of the mind, which reminds the author and the reader not to confine to the space of individual's reflection. And to a large degree, Othello's decisions are not guided by pure reason, but are largely unconsciously influenced by the powerful prejudice of race.

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