

# The theme of racism in william shakespeares othello



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The theme of racism is strongly depicted in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. It depicts the attitude of European society towards those that were different in colour, race and language. In Europe, people of white complexion were the majority and all other races were considered to be less important and inferior.

There are several characters in this play that portray this mentality. These characters include Brabantio, Roderigo and Emilia. But by far, the face of racism in this play is that of Iago, who makes his intentions crystal clear in his soliloquy where he states 'I hate the Moor', (I, iii, 379). Throughout the play, Iago lays forward a number of reasons for his hatred, which leads to the ruin of most of the characters.

It is most likely that the main reason behind Iago's hatred of Othello is the colour of his skin. Similar to many other people of his time, Iago would have had little or no racial tolerance for others, and thereby saw Othello as an outcast that had risen to success which is a factor contributing to another of his reasons for hatred jealousy. From the very first act of this play, and indeed the very first scene, Iago hurls racial insults at Othello, an example of which is '...very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe' (I, i, 89-90) - A statement that has both racist and vulgar connotations, as well as referring to Othello as a Barbary horse (I, i, 112) - Which is degrading him to the level of a filthy animal.

As was mentioned before, jealousy is also one of the reasons behind Iago's hatred. His behaviour and speech indicates clearly that he is jealous of success (Othello becoming a general, Cassio becoming his second-in-

command) as well as the happiness of Othello and Desdemona. An example of this is crying out to Brabantio that ...your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs - (I, i, 118) Which has strong, vulgar imagery. He is able to manipulate the entire course of the play through deceit and treachery.

Cassio was chosen to be Othello's first lieutenant in favour of Iago, and this angered him deeply. He hates Othello for overlooking him, but he also hates Cassio for being chosen ahead of him to the spot that he wanted. Iago is successful in ruining Cassio and causing him to lose his reputation and thereby Othello's respect. Eventually, despite the success of his endeavours, he still attempts to have Cassio killed by successfully convincing Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair by saying that Cassio is jealous of him: O, beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on" (III. iii. 169-70). Iago's ultimate objectives are made clear. He wants Cassio and Othello to die, and being the ruthless villain he is, he will stop at nothing to fulfil his desires.

There is also the indication that Iago suspects that Othello may have been involved with his wife: And it is thought that twixt my sheets, He's done my office. (I, iii, 380-81), although this is likely to be a rationalisation for his barbarous acts. Emilia and Othello are never portrayed in that way, even when alone, and it is unlikely that Iago is driven by a need for revenge.

Iago is able to influence the way every character in the play thinks. He is repeatedly referred to as honest Iago. I believe that the other characters in the play are overly idealistic, and are comparable to Brutus from Julius

Caesar. They place too much trust in honest Iago and eventually pay the price. The majority of the characters are not realistic, especially Cassio, who is unable to realise Iago's purpose while allowing himself to be led along like a sheep. The inability of most of these characters to understand Iago's true motives results in the culmination of the play in a bloodbath, and even when they do realise what is going on, it is simply too late.

It is evident from examining these reasons that the driving force behind Iago's hatred is his racism as well as his burning jealousy. His behaviour can be described as being sociopathic in modern terms. Following his appointment as first lieutenant after the incident involving Cassio, it is unclear what he stood to gain when he attempted to kill both Othello and Cassio, other than cause people suffering and satisfy his perverted personal desires. He stands alongside Mark Antony and Shylock as one of the most devious characters ever created by William Shakespeare.