

Race in othello research paper samples

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The main characters of Shakespeare's works are usually somewhat tragic in nature – they often end with something bad befalling them because of dramatic irony. With his play Othello, the eponymous figure is a tragic one, in which the fact that he is of a different race leads Iago and others to plot against him and bring about his downfall. Shakespeare's Othello is shown to be a heroic African figure adopted by the Romans, perpetually battling the prejudices of others to get by in his own work and life, just to be taken down by a villainous figure who is afraid of Othello's race and is envious of his accomplishments. By the time the play ends, he turns into the very savage that people assumed he was. Because of this, Shakespeare's Othello shows us how the issues of jealousy and racism can be a vicious circle that turns people into the negative images projected upon them. The primary character of Othello (after which the play is named) is a Venetian general and Moor who has worked his way. In Othello, the Moor, is hated and feared by Roderigo, Iago, and several other Venetian courtiers; at the same time, since he is both married to Desdemona and incredibly skilled at military strategy, he is permitted to live freely in Venice and enjoy every amenity being a general affords him. When Othello is asked to rule the island of Cyprus, Iago seizes this opportunity to enact a plan that will destroy Othello totally, ending with both his death and that of Desdemona's. In Greek tragedy, Hamartia is defined as the fatal mistake that the hero makes that brings him a tragic end; Othello's hamartia is in believing Iago's silver-tongued claim that Desdemona and Cassio are lovers. This tricks Othello into choking Desdemona to death, making him fall into his more savage instincts. Race plays a vital part in Othello's character; to be fair, that is primarily

because of how Iago and others react to his presence. He usually does not notice any prejudice that happens to him because of his race; Act III, scene 3 is the first time he notices, when he attempts to determine why Desdemona would cheat on him: at this point, he says, “ Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have.” (III. iii. 267-269) Othello, in Venice, shows remarkable intelligence and skill, attributes that are much more than Venetians expect of Moors, leading to him fitting in with the Duke and the rest of Venice. Once he gets to Cyprus, though, he starts to fall victim to his own animal instincts and the manipulations of Iago. Iago’s whiteness turns many stereotypes about white and black upside down, according to Hunter: he is “ the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul” (251).

As he is the only character in the play that is not white or Christian, the alien nature of Othello is more evident; he is isolated, scrutinized by white colleagues, and he does not have a good outlet with which to showcase the particular culture of his people. He is able to distinguish himself from the whites he is around and make his own mark, at the same time showing the traits that the racists around him say he has – for example, Othello’s savagery makes him kill Desdemona in revenge. Othello barely recognizes the differences between him and his Venetian colleagues; he just thinks he is one of them. Though many other Venetians do feel uncomfortable about his race, he does not let it get to him. It is just in the end that Iago’s deceit makes him recognize his differences, saying that he is “ one that loved not wisely but too well, / Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme” (V. ii. 341-344).

Othello is defined quite a bit by his relationship to Desdemona, as much as he may hate to admit it. Desdemona's culture and femaleness is vital to controlling Othello's stereotypically savage habits, and right when Iago starts to trick Othello into questioning Desdemona's loyalty, that control goes away. Tilney believes that "a man may show his wife, and his sword to his friend, but not too far to trust them" (280). Iago abuses this moral to inspire doubt about Desdemona in Othello, especially with Cassio. Tinley also says that "It is a hard matter for an honest woman to love a dissolute man, or a wise spouse to accept a foolish mate" (280). This makes being a woman more reasonable and controlled than being a foolish man, which is a source of fear. Because Othello is inspired by Iago to fear Desdemona's control over him, he starts to behave more stereotypically like a savage.

Shakespeare took a great deal of the basis for Othello's character through John Pory's work "History and Description of Africa." This work follows the Moors of Africa, one in particular who masters the wild with an expert wisdom and cunning. Pory is impressed by the lengths to which the Moor he follows has travelled: "I marvel much how ever he should have escaped so many thousands of imminent dangers" (p. 260). Like that Moor, Othello also 'escapes' dangers as a general in the Venetian army - this sort of toughness and skill is transferred to the Othello character as proof of a distinctly Moor-like mastery of survival and war. Pory's work also mentioned the tendency among the Moorish people to be open to change - "The liberality of this people hath at all times been exceeding great" (264). Othello similarly shares this attribute simply by joining the Venetian army and having a wife of another race - though the rest of the Venetians see it as a source of

shame, Othello does not worry about it, at least at first, before Iago manages to turn his love for her around.

Placing this work in a modern context, Othello's issues with race are incredibly important, particularly as he deals with the confluence of race and class. Othello is a member of a marginalized race in Athens, but manages to get by because of privileges he is given due to his military service. To that end, he must deal with the white elite of Athens, proving his mettle as a military strategist to overcome any racial disadvantages he might have. Nonetheless, there are those who still resent him for his accomplishments because of his race; this still happens when minorities achieve great things or break through into mainstream success. On a fundamental level, there are some similarities between Iago and the 'birther' movement that arose after President Barack Obama's presidency, claiming various levels of illegitimacy to Obama's election because of his skin color. These and other expressions of prejudice are the demons that minorities such as Othello have to face on a daily basis.

Othello, as a character, is defined largely by the fact he is of a different race, through both the way he acts and how others treat him; even so, he manages to be unlike most portrayals of black characters during that era. Othello works to succeed and find glory even through his challenges as a general of the Venetian army, but is taken down by the conspiracies around him, which pigeonhole him into the savage they want him to be. Othello's characterization transforms from that of a contradiction from stereotypes into the stereotype himself, as Iago succeeds in "making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face at first excited" (Hunter

248). Othello's struggles help us better understand the nature of race and prejudice, in which people who hate and feel threatened by other races work underhandedly to marginalize them through stereotypes – in the case of Othello, this works, and leads to his downfall.

Works Cited

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