

# [Othello – explore the relevance of rank and race in shakespeare’s representation ...](https://assignbuster.com/othello-explore-the-relevance-of-rank-and-race-in-shakespeares-representation-of-a-tragic-hero-assignment/)

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OTHELLO. Explore the relevance of rank and race in Shakespeare’s representation of a tragic hero. The fall of Othello is caused by many collective contributing factors; the most important, I believe, being rank and race and how the other characters in the play, such as Iago, can exploit these factors to influence Othello’s downfall. I do not believe rank and race are valid themes of the play, yet the true themes of jealousy and love cannot be reasonably interpreted without considering the presentation of race and rank.

The play seems to be based around the Aristotelian classical model of tragedy, and Shakespeare incorporates the hubris and harmartia in the character of Othello to further enhance the effect of Iago’s attempts to ruin him. Othello is a worthy figure of a tragic protagonist. The attributes he possesses suggest that we should view him as a hero, as he is descendant of a line of royalty and is an impressive military superior in the Venetian army. This role was very important in the Elizabethan times, Venice was a powerful, respected place and as this government was threatened by the Turks, Othello was seen as worthy enough to protect that.

Othello is proud of his status, and his reputation is a crucial aspect of the hero’s perception of himself. As an Aristotelian tragic hero, Othello requires a hubris, a flaw in his personality. It is generally agreed that Othello’s hubris is his arrogance and self confidence, as this suggests that he believes that bad things will not happen to him, which is apparent in these lines; ‘ My parts, my title, and my perfect soul Shall manifest me rightly. ‘ (A1, S2, L31). My services which I have done the signiory Shall out-tongue his complaints’ (A1, S2, L18). According to the Aristotelian model of tragedy, this pride would lead to an error of judgment or mistake, the harmartia. His confidence may invoke the idea that his right hand man, Iago, would be consistently loyal to him; therefore his mistake would be trusting Iago’s lies. However, Othello’s self-assuredness could be a positive quality, a representation of his instinctive authority and level-headedness that provokes jealousy in Iago.

Othello’s hubris could instead be gullibility or susceptibleness, or, what I believe to be most accurate, his own jealous tendencies, as this is what ultimately causes the error of judgement. The role of rank and race in this play appear to be assisting factors for what I believe to be the main theme of the play, jealousy. Both of these factors play a very important role in the destruction of Othello’s life and sense of judgement. I believe that Iago’s main motivation is jealousy.

Some may argue that Iago has none, that he is just evil and that our attention should be focused on the development of Othello’s character, but there are too many suggestions that give reason to Iago’s actions. His hatred may have started with his jealousy of Othello’s rank, the fact that Othello promoted Cassio over him and also the rumour that Othello slept with Iago’s wife, Emilia. ‘ For I do suspect the lusty Moor Hath leaped into my seat … … and nothing can or shall content my soul Till I am evened with him, wife for wife’

This reference to ‘ the lusty moor’ could be Iago’s racism which causes him to suspect Othello, or it could be his suspicions that cause him to be racist, but nevertheless, to a certain extent due to Othello’s heritage, Iago’s hatred of him quickly falls to racism. It is stressed from the beginning that Iago is a traitorous man during Iago’s monologue in the opening scene; ‘ I follow him to serve my turn upon him’ (A1, S1, L42) ‘ I am not what I am’ (A1, S1, L66) Iago has made his intentions clear from the very beginning, which leads the audience to believe that he has a plan to destroy Othello’s life, which is elevant to the fall of a tragic hero, as the destruction is apparently inevitable. Rank is relevant to the representation of a tragic hero, because according to Aristotle, the tragic hero is usually from a noble or royal family and has a high status in society. Rank is also relevant because the whole concept of rank and worthiness sparks jealousy in Iago, he is jealous of Cassio’s promotion and also Othello’s general status. Iago’s jealousy of Cassio is apparent in the first scene; ‘…mere prattle without practice is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had the election,

And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof…’ (A1, S1, L26) He evaluates Cassio’s status in the army to be less impressive and less qualified than him, yet Cassio still got the promotion and he was left as ‘ the Moorship’s ancient’ (A1, S1, L33). This jealousy of Cassio’s rank causes Iago to plan revenge on Othello and also Cassio by causing him to get into a drunken fight, which results in him being dismissed from his job. Iago uses Othello’s new dislike for Cassio to create a rumour that Desdemona is cheating on Othello with him. This eventually causes Othello to kill Desdemona and himself.

Iago’s only tool is to use the weaknesses of others to manipulate them, as he manipulates Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, by using racism. I do not believe it is important that Iago is racist or not. The important thing is that Iago knows that Brabantio is racist, and uses this as a way to turn him against Othello. ‘ Zounds, sir, you’re robbed; for shame, put on your gown; Your heart is burst; you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe’ (A1, S1, L109) The use of the word black is both literal and metaphorical. In Elizabethan imes, words such as black or darkness related to a portrayal of the devil or evil, and because we are constantly reminded throughout the play that the black man is in fact the true hero, ‘ he is far more fair than black’ (A1, S3, L291), it further enforces the idea that the only reason Othello could be disliked is through racism. This suggests that the only tool Iago has to turn other characters against him is pairing racism with other negative things such as robbery and false accusations. The use of the term ‘ old black ram’ holds man negative connotations for Brabantio.

It compares Othello to an animal and suggests that he is forcibly having his way with Desdemona, who is suggested to be Brabantio’s property and half of his own soul, meaning that not only is Othello represented as an animal, but also a thief. To me, this racist representation is relevant to the representation of a tragic hero because Othello is supposed to be seen as the hero. The audience sees him as a good and noble character, yet we can see the unnecessary hatred represented through racism in other characters, therefore we see that because of this, something bad will happen to a good character.

The racism of the other characters is also relevant because it acts as a manipulative tool that Iago can use against them to turn them against Othello and convince them to hate him. Until Iago ‘ blackened’ Desdemona’s appeal, Othello was proud of his heritage and felt secure with Desdemona. He believed that she thought his colour was irrelevant; ‘ she had eyes, and chose me’ (A3, S3, L192) But after Iago convinced Othello that Desdemona is cheating on him, he feels that his honour is vulnerable and compares it to his own ‘ blackness’ in a negative way.

He now feels that he is not worth Desdemona’s love because of his race. A change is represented in the character of Othello, and we can now see that he is acting like what he is accused of being. Othello’s hubris with regard to his career contrasts greatly with his sense of inferiority as a Black man in a racist society. It is this sense of low self worth which makes him especially vulnerable to Iago’s manipulation. When his suspicion of Desdemona affects his status as a respected soldier, he, like Cassio, feels that he has lost everything when his reputation is compromised.

He seems to link himself to hell and evil when asking for assistance in his revenge; ‘ Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell’ (A3, S3, L450), although he believes that he is serving heaven by offering a sacrifice of the pure Desdemona. Othello’s reputation as a soldier was important to him because he feels that his race makes him unworthy of Desdemona’s love, and I believe that by ‘ putting out the light’ of Desdemona means that Othello has fulfilled his tragic destiny by succumbing to his own personal racism.