

# Changing perspectives on othello

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Depending on cultural differences and upbringing a text will have different impacts on the audience. Like any great piece of literature, William Shakespearean plays deal with timeless concerns that have the ability to be adapted and presented to remain relevant for modern audiences.

Shakespearean Othello is a Jacobean play written in a time of racist attitudes towards foreigners and sexist attitudes to women. This revenge tragedy follows the protagonist Othello, a black army general who is manipulated by his ensign Iago.

For me the way that race and color is presented is entrant to the stereotypical portrayal highlights the prejudice apparent in not only the Jacobean society but our own as well. This is portrayed through Iago's racist depiction of Othello and the opposing imagery of black and white. The play can also be viewed as having a strong feminist theme. The two heroines are portrayed as capable and steadfast individuals. Both women are the only characters that remain justified throughout in their loyalty to their husbands.

My interest in Othello is drawn to the way that race and color is presented.

Shakespeare was revolutionary in his casting of a black man to be the tragic hero and white man to be the villain. In Jacobean society and even in many societies today, the audience would be expected to see a black man as the felon. The setting in Cyprus is dramatically significant as it is isolated in the wild frontiers of war. Away from the structured society of Venice social norms and hierarchy are not relevant allowing Shakespeare to place a Moor in a position of authority. This daring theme of a black man in power has remained controversial ever since and it wasn't until 1833 that a black man actually played the part.

The issue of mixed race relationships was specially an issue in segregated America up until the twentieth century with Othello being played with blackface till 1940. The unnatural war setting also enables Iago's passion to be unmasked, unregulated by the usual constraints of society. In the exposition our first Impression of this revolutionary character is from Iago when he disrespectfully describes Othello as "the devil", Glenn the Impression of a beastly, barbaric man. This is quickly contradicted when the audience is presented with the confident and calm Othello who is clearly respected by his peers and is able to speak with grace.

Othello is seen as "far more fair than black", challenging the prejudice of the audience by demonstrating the opposite to what they expect. On the other hand Iago is a "hellish villain" portraying the stereotypical qualities that a Jacobean audience would expect from a black man. Shakespeare creates dramatic effect and reinforces the audience's perceptions of evil being dark through the opposing imagery of black versus white. Iago's evil work is performed in the duologue's with Othello, which always occur at night. It is in this darkness that Othello's jealousy is stirred and he is taken away from the pure and white Desdemona.

Iago is using Desdemona's goodness, which is portrayed as light, to be the evil and darkness that destroys them all. Unmasking himself in a soliloquy "I turn her virtue into pitch, That shall enmesh them all". This reinforces the continuing theme of light opposing dark. Iago's inherent racism takes its toll on Othello and gradually he acts according to this stereotype. As the play reaches the catastrophe the noble language of Othello reverts to that of the

swearing Ago. Othello becomes like his enemy, a destructive avenger. Evil has won but has triumphed as Othello finally recognizes Iago's black heart, "I... Emend that deem- devil why he has thus ensnared my soul". The struggle between light and dark, despite the tragic catastrophe, resolves and light prevails. A common feminist valuation of the play focuses on how the play portrays the strength of women. In the dominant patriarchy of Jacobean culture women were not free to make their own decisions. Desdemona is portrayed as a strong heroine with an uncommon verbal dexterity, not normally portrayed in Jacobean plays. She asserts her independence and challenges the patriarchy by scandalously eloping with

Othello. Her father Brabantio is quick to pass judgment and disown his daughter as "dead?" "Ay to me!" even before he has even seen her. A Jacobean audience would have understood the father's treatment of his daughter whereas viewers today would see this as an inherently sexist act. Ago presents the misogynistic view that a Jacobean audience would relate to, believing that a woman is only meant to enhance a man's image and bring children into the world. "she that was ever fair, and never proud Had tongue at will, and yet never loud... Though Iago's beliefs are extreme they represent society's expectation of the role of women in contrast to the actions of the strong women in the play. The strength of these women can be seen through the solidity of both wives' loyalty to their husbands. In the two women's dialogue they talk of adultery "I would not do such a thing... But for the whole world". The only reason that they would sleep with another man would be if they were given the world so that their husbands could rule it. Adhesion's strength also amplified by the way that the play is structured.

Her purity and character is Juxtaposed against how easily Othello fell under Iago's malignant manipulation. She remains faithful to Othello till her last breath, not blaming her husband for her murder but " I myself". Even though Desdemona holds a very cynical view of how men portray her, most likely from her experience with Iago, " they are all but stomachs; and we all but food". She also remains loyal to her husband stealing the handkerchief " but to please his fantasy". Although both women are murdered and the masculine power is restored the misogynistic men do not triumph. It is only the women who remain Justified.

In conclusion there are as many views of Othello as there are responders. For me the play highlights the way that a black man is portrayed in society throughout the ages. I see this through setting, dramatic structure and the opposing imagery of light verses dark. Another common interpretation of the play is the way that the play presents women. Shakespeare creates strong, individual women who are loyal and stable throughout. Their strength is emphasized through Juxtaposition and metaphor. Like would have been revolutionary for a Jacobean audience but sadly they are still relevant today in a world still fighting for social Justice.