

Racism in william shakespeare's othello

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Othello is one of Shakespeare's most popular tragedies. It is mainly about how some people can be deceiving that they are able to convince us that they are our friends even if they are really our enemies. But deception is often overseen by people because of the way the main character of Othello was created - he is of a dark complexion. And even if the actual race of Othello has not been determined, it is obvious that it greatly affects how the play unfolds.

His not being European caused people to interact with him differently, making them either fear him or reluctant to give him their full respect. His race also made him easily believe rumors about his wife. Lastly, Othello's race can be pointed as the reason for the violent characteristics Shakespeare gave him. But even if the way Shakespeare created Othello's character can be accused of being racist, one can still argue to the contrary because of the other positive traits bestowed on the protagonist - such as his being poetic and strong ally.

The play Othello was written in 1604 during William Shakespeare's great tragic period. It is said to be based on Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinzio's *Gli Hecatommithi* but the unique elements that Shakespeare threw into the story made it one of the - if not the - most emotionally laden and well-loved tragedies of the English playwright (SparkNotes LLC). Indeed, this story of a love ruined by the lies a highly-manipulative character has crept into hearts of millions that it inspired the creation of 12 movie adaptations, including a modern take with an American high school serving as the background ("Othello").

Different from Shakespeare's other tragedies in that it revolves around a domestic tragedy (vs. a national one as in the stories of Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear), Othello paints the story of the Venetian Moor who enters the play with everything he could ever wish for: the respect and admiration of the people who surround him, trust of the highly-influential Duke of Venice, and the love of Desdemona whom he just married. But he is about to lose everything because of Iago, who seemed determined to destroy him. At the start of the play, Iago says his hatred of Othello stems from the main character's preference for Cassio as lieutenant:

.... I know my price, I am worth no worse a place. / But he, as lowering his own
pride and purposes, / Evades them with a bombast circumstance, / Horribly
stuffed with epithets of war, / And in conclusion, / Nonsuits my mediators.
For " Certes," says he, / " I have already chose my officer." / And what was
he? / Forsooth, a great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio, a Florentine...
(Shakespeare, 8-9)

But he later says that he suspects Othello of having an affair with his wife Emilia...

.... I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that ' twixt my sheets / ' Has
done my office. I know not if ' t be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that
kind, / Will do as if for surety. (Shakespeare, 55)

Iago's reasons keep on changing from time to time and, more often than not, have no solid evidence. But he seems well-loved and Othello trusts him. Maximizing on this trust, Iago sets about destroying Othello's life. He does

this by feeding the hero of this play with lies of Desdemona's infidelity. Once presented with 'evidence' carefully weaved together by Iago himself, Othello is blinded with rage and kills his wife by smothering her. When the truth is revealed, it was, alas, too late – Desdemona was already dead and Othello's reputation has been tarnished. At this, the protagonist commits suicide.

As Laurie Rozakis pointed out, Othello's primary theme is that of appearance versus reality (215). Yet glaring references to the main character's race often mislead readers and viewers into thinking that it is the central plot of the story. Although this is not the case, Rozakis does admit that it is an issue of importance (215).

Even up to now, 401 years since Othello was first performed in the court of King James I, Othello's race is still debatable (SparkNotes LLC). Nobody has yet presented exact proof that Othello is indeed really a Negro – which leads some to assume that he is simply of a race that has dark (and not necessarily black) skin.

“What a full fortune does the thick lips owe / If he can carry 't thus!”
(Shakespeare, 11) This, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes, is perhaps the “only seeming justification” of Othello being black. But since it was delivered by Roderigo, who has reasons to hate Othello because he himself is in love with Desdemona, one can conclude that the statement was made to derogate an enemy. Even the continuous reference to Othello as “Moor” cannot really be taken as to mean that he is of the North African descent. Although “Moor” nowadays refers to North Africa's Islamic Arabic inhabitants, the term meant

different things during Shakespeare's days. " Moor" back then was loosely used and associated with Africans from different regions. Also, even the allusion to Othello's blackness can merely mean he was darker than the average European (SparkNote LLC).

Yet whether or not Othello was a Negro, it is undeniable that his appearance sets him apart from those around him; hence, making us think that he is really of a different race. The protagonist himself admits to his ' uniqueness' in the following lines: " Haply, for I am black..." (Shakespeare, 135) and " Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (Shakespeare, 145). And Othello's coming from a different race does play a role into how other characters treat him and into his reactions in the events that unfolded in the play.

As A. C. Bradley pointed out in his famous book *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Othello's race made him ignorant of European women, their thoughts and morality. This ignorance of European women (or more specifically Venetian women) made Othello easy prey to Iago's lies, even if Desdemona never actually presented him with cause to doubt her fidelity. His race also made him vulnerable to insecurities about his wife wanting another man - this vulnerability made him easy to conclude that Desdemona only married him because of her " strange, and naturally temporary, preference for a black man" (Bradley).

Even though Othello has gained the admiration (and perhaps fear) of his subordinates and earned the trust of the Venetian Duke, he never really had the full respect that was due a man of his position. Othello may have been

addressed as 'master' when being talked to, but he was often referenced as "the Moor" and never by his name when people are talking behind his back. In fact, Othello only got to be called by his name in Act 1, Scene 3 and only by the Duke, who not only has high-regard for Othello but also has a favor to ask of him.

There may be times when the word "Moor" is connected to the positive adjective 'valiant' but the deliberate way by which other characters avoided saying his name can be directly connected with one of the concepts of racism. If we go into one of the most controversial issues of racism, one will find out that the "N-word" stemmed from the white people's intentional mispronouncing of the word Negro. As University of California's sociolinguistics professor Robin Lackoff explains, this is intended to convey the power of one person to not care about the other person – it is a 'I don't even care what your name is, you have so little power you matter to me so little'-attitude (Williams).

Blacks are also often stereotyped as angry, physically strong, animalistic, and prone to shameless violence. They are also portrayed as obsessively self-indulgent, without regard for rules and authorities (David and Middleton). This may explain why Shakespeare let Othello give in to his violent passions and kill the wife he loved so much.

The flaws of Othello can easily be attributed to human flaws; but the fact that he was made to be a man of color makes the critics read into his character as if it was made with a malicious intent. The genius that he is, Shakespeare must have predicted this reading of his Othello, leading him to

give the hero characteristics that balances what may well be seen as negative stereotypes associated with being black. Othello is by far the most eloquent of Shakespeare's heroes that it led Bradley to call him "the most romantic" of all the characters Shakespeare has created. And despite this gift of words, Othello is humble, insisting that he is rude of speech (Shakespeare, 35). Othello was also made to show a man whose trust is absolute, of which "hesitation is almost impossible" (Bradley).

While critics are to be applauded for going out of their boxes to provide both learners and lovers of Shakespeare's works different interpretations of the playwright's words, one cannot take these translations for the absolute truth. Because as good as we are in reading between the lines, only Shakespeare himself can explain with certainty what message he wanted to convey in his tragedy Othello.