

# Race and color prejudice in othello literature review

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The primary characters of Shakespeare's plays typically have an element of tragedy to them: some unfortunate outcome for them that occurs either despite their circumstances or because of them. In the case of *Othello*, the titular character is a tragic figure whose race leads many, including Iago, to scheme against him and lead to his downfall. In this essay, the character of Othello will be examined in terms of his race and behavior, through the lens of G. K. Hunter's "Othello and Color Prejudice." Here, Othello is presented as a black man who is a heroic figure, constantly fighting against the perceptions of others to succeed in his own field and life, only to be undone by a villain who is jealous of his accomplishments and fearful of his race. In the end, he becomes that very savage stereotype that he fought so hard to shake off.

The main character of *Othello* is the Venetian general Othello, who is a Moor. In *Othello*, the Moor, is distrusted by Roderigo, Iago, and many others in the Venetian court; however, due to his marriage to Desdemona, as well as his military prowess, he is allowed to roam freely around Venice and take part in all the comforts of generalhood. When Othello is tasked to govern the island of Cyprus, Iago takes this chance to set in motion a chain of events that will undo Othello completely, leading to his death and Desdemona's alike.

Hamartia is the fatal flaw that the hero makes that leads to his downfall; Othello makes this mistake in believing Iago's suspicions that Desdemona has cheated on him with Cassio, leading Othello to strangle Desdemona to death and give in to his more primal instincts.

Race plays an important part in Othello's character; however, that is mostly due to the reactions of outside forces (Iago et al.) to his presence. He himself very rarely notices or feels persecuted because of his race; it is not until Act III, scene 3, when he tries to figure out why Desdemona would be unfaithful to him, that he acknowledges any sort of negative connotation to being black - Here he says " Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have." (III. iii. 267-269) Othello himself, while in Venice, exerts confidence and eloquence, traits that are far more sophisticated than those expected of Moors by the rest of Venice, contributing to his acceptance by the majority of the people, including the Duke. By the time he reaches Cyprus, however, he begins to succumb to his own animal nature and the machinations of Iago. Iago being the white villain turns many stereotypical associations between white and black on their head, according to Hunter: he is " the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul" (251).

Being the only non-white or non-Christian character in this play, the outsider nature of Othello is emphasized; he is all by himself, being judged by white neighbors, and he has no real outlet with which to express the unique attitudes of his people. He is able to set himself apart from his white brethren and strike out on his own, falling victim to the same traits that those who discriminate against him attribute to him - Othello's barbarism makes him take his revenge against Desdemona. Othello is barely cognizant of the differences between him and his Venetian brothers; he merely interacts as though he is one of them. While there are most certainly those

who are opposed to him because of his race, it does not affect him. It is only in the end that Iago's trickery forces him to accept his differences, speaking of himself as "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 somewhat defined by his relationship to Desdemona, much to his chagrin. Desdemona's culture and femininity is crucial to taming Othello's wilder, Moorish tendencies, and as soon as Iago begins to manipulate Othello into doubting Desdemona's fidelity, that control vanishes. In Edmund Tilney's "The Flower of Friendship," it is stated that "a man may show his wife, and his sword to his friend, but not too far to trust them" (280). Iago uses this very principle to sow distrust of Desdemona within Othello, particularly around Cassio. Tilney also states 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). In this quote, femininity is described as more sane, more in control than 'foolish' masculinity, making men fear it. The fear of femininity examined in Tilney's text starts to turn Othello against Desdemona, claiming that she will start to exert control over him.

Shakespeare took much of his inspiration for how to characterize the Moor Othello through Leo Africanus' translator John Pory's "History and Description of Africa." In it, he follows the aforementioned Moor, who navigates the wilderness with a mighty intelligence and wisdom. He has traveled through many desolate mountains and deserts, which impresses Pory. "I marvel much how ever he should have escaped so many thousands of imminent dangers" (p. 260). Othello also escapes so many imminent

dangers in his history as a Venetian general - this type of resilience and bravery is brought over to the Othello character as evidence of a wildness and rawness within him that is characteristic of Moors. Pory is also in awe of the diversity and willingness of the Moorish people to try new things - "The liberality of this people hath at all times been exceeding great" (264).

Othello also shares this trait by the mere virtue of joining the Venetian army and taking a white wife - while the rest of the Venetian court balks at it, Othello seems unfazed, at least in the beginning, before the words and manipulation of Iago turn him against her.

In conclusion, Othello as a character is defined greatly by his race, in both the other characters' interactions with him and his own behavior in the play; despite this, he is most definitely not stereotypical of portrayals of black characters at the time. Othello manages to find success despite his race as a general of the Venetian army, but is undone by the prejudicial forces against him (as well as his own savage nature). These character's downfalls are derived from their own weaknesses - Othello is the tragic victim of a spiteful lieutenant who tricks him into believing that his wife has been unfaithful. In the end, Hunter argues that 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).

## **Works Cited**

Hunter, G. K. "Othello and Colour Prejudice" pp. 248-62.

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