

Comparative study between othello and o the movie



Literature can be viewed as a manifestation of the context it is composed in, whilst retaining universal elements such as the human experience. Whilst human emotions such as jealousy remain universal despite context, attitudes and values must be continually challenged and questioned in order for society to progress and evolve. This is reflected in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Tim Blake Nelson's 'O' which both share universal elements whilst indicating the progression of society. While retaining Shakespeare's intended reflection on the duality of human nature and the fallibilities one can succumb to when fuelled by darker aspects of one's psyche, for instance, jealousy, Nelson shifts Shakespeare's 16th Century views in order to communicate to a contemporary audience by exploring modern views regarding morality, hierarchy and gender.

During the Elizabethan Era, a non-secular environment fostered a blind trust in its authoritative figures, who were often involved with the church.

Elizabethans valued clarity and believed in binary opposites such as a distinct line between good and evil, while modern day Americans valued truth or more specifically, justice. There was little room for interpretation of criminal actions, and in turn, little interpretation of textual characters, such as Iago who is portrayed as the quintessential Machiavellian villain who is painted as relentless and inherently evil through his dialogue. Iago's schemes are revealed to the audience in the form of soliloquies and asides, where he is often in the shadows or taking part in a clandestine meeting with Roderigo. Iago exclaims " Divinity of hell! When devils will the blackest sins out on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows, as I do now.", accompanying the present religious imagery and proves that he is aware of

his inherent darkness but does not seem to care. Shakespeare fuels the Elizabethans' insular belief by creating overt villains with no motive for cruelty and no desire for redemption.

The explicit line between good and bad that is valued by Elizabethans are blurred in the modern day American context, in which Nelson's antagonist, Hugo provokes sympathy from the audience, in contrast with Shakespeare's purely evil Iago who lacks a plausible motivation for his actions. Nelson allows the audience to empathise with the villain Hugo, when he provides a voice over. Closeups of white pigeons in the opening scene which begins the sustained motif of birds during the film. Hugo confides in the audience, " All my life, I always wanted to fly. I always wanted to live like a hawk. I know you're not supposed to be jealous of anything, but... to take flight, to soar above everything and everyone, now that's living.", expressing his desire to be noticed and understood. Nelson humanises the villain by painting a sad broken image of the typical American teenager, further fuelling the 21st Century's audiences thirst and curiosity about the motivations for crime and truth behind criminal actions. This provides insight to his character and captures the human emotion of jealousy which inevitably draws out savageness in especially the most vulnerable people, sympathised in a world that values rational thought over blind faith.

Shakespeare accommodates his Elizabethan audience's belief in the Great Chain of Being, an archaic concept that promotes white superiority above animals and ethnic minorities, consecutively. Interracial marriage, such as Othello and Desdemona's marriage is met with controversy by the Venetian public, foreshadowing the impending fate of the two characters who <https://assignbuster.com/comparative-study-between-othello-and-o-the-movie/>

disrupted the Great Chain of Being. Their difference in class is illustrated through the recurring black and white imagery, which juxtaposes Othello and Desdemona and furthers the notion that they are binary opposites and do not belong together. Despite the reputable status of the 'noble moor' he has achieved in Venetian society, it was insinuated that his 'blackness' was a sign of inferiority as Othello is considered to be 'far more fair than black'. Othello's supposed racial inferiority is taken advantage of by a spiteful Iago who taints Othello's noble image with racial slurs such as 'thick lips' and animalistic imagery as 'black ram' as an attempt to establish Othello's place at the bottom of the hierarchy. This racial prejudice is mocked in *O*, when Odin and Desi exchange sexual comments, 'you'd let me dress you up and play black buck got loose in the big house.' which offers a cynical view of slavery from decades earlier in America.

Paralleling the Elizabethan Era, the modern American context in which *O* is set, has its own hierarchy and racial prejudices. Odin, Nelson's equivalent of Shakespeare's Othello, is the sole black student in a prestigious academy in South Carolina. Paralleling Othello, Odin is also depicted as a respectable man who holds much power, by being the captain of the basketball team. Although *O* is set in secular society where insular beliefs such as the Great Chain of Being are defunct, there are lingering racial undercurrents in the early 21st Century American society. Odin is represented as different in terms of appearance as well as mentality through the perspective of Hugo, who compares Odin to a lone hawk, whilst comparing the rest of the students to a flock of white pigeons. Bird imagery is sustained through the film with close up shots of the hawk juxtaposing with shots of Odin, attributing their

similarity. Before Odin commits suicide, he makes a speech, similar to Othello's soliloquy, " I ain't no different than none of you all. My mom ain't no crackhead. I wasn't no gang banger.... You tell ' em where I'm from didn't make me do this" to acknowledge his awareness of the negative connotations surrounding black culture and as a final plea to the audience to understand that his inherent savageness was a part of who he was, and is also a part of everyone else and that it was not his culture that caused him to act violent. Both texts, despite being set in differing contexts, address the hierarchy and status within their own settings. Whilst critiquing blind prejudices and judgement of villains and sympathetic heroes, the message remains the same about humanity's capacity to do greatness but to also unleash our intrinsic barbarism when triggered with jealousy, leading to inevitable demise.

In contrast to the Elizabethan woman's expected role of subservient homemaker in a patriarchal society, Shakespeare creates two intellectuals and slightly more outspoken albeit still limited, female characters who do not naïvely follow the men in their lives. Desdemona defies the Elizabethan female archetype by outright denying Othello's accusations, " I never did offend you in my life, never loved Cassio but with such general warranty of heaven as I might love. I never gave him token" but without questioning her husband's masculinity. This is contrasted with the characters of Desi and Emily, who often defy their boyfriends in the name of self-respect or righteousness. " What? If you're asking me if I'm cheating on you, get some balls, and ask! You're the only person I've ever been with and you're the only person I want to be with! And if you want to be with me you never talk to me

like that again, ever!” Desi responds to Odin’s false accusations and delivers a clear message that she is not to be disrespected. A reflection of the American egalitarian society which promotes equal power and rights of women is depicted through the characterisation of Desi and Emily, however, this refreshing independence is proved to be destructive in both Shakespeare’s Othello and Nelson’s O, as their independence and rebellion lead to death. Emily, like Emilia originally compliant to her significant other, retaliates when she discovers that Odin has killed Desi as a result of Hugo’s lies. “ Tell me Odin is lying.” Emily begins to realise that Hugo was responsible. “ Tell me you didn’t say Desi was cheating on him! That’s a lie! Desi and Michael!?! Shut the f**k up Emily”, Emily does not listen to Hugo’s demands and is shot as a result of her rebellion, paralleling Emilia’s manner of death in Othello.

While at their core both Othello and O show the same demise that humanity is susceptible to, the execution varies according to the context. The perspectives regarding the moral grey area of humanity, the social hierarchy and the role of women has been transformed from Elizabethan era Venice to early 21st/late 20th Century America.