
The Effects Of Racism In Shakespeare's Play Othello

Racism and prejudice, two of the most devastating elements that is engraved into every society and civilization since the beginning of history are a topic of debate and discussion. Racism, a word that looks quite simple on paper, but holds so much more meaning when looking at the whole picture. Racism is something that appears in many shapes and forms directed at those of deemed inferior to those of the opposite race. Although the world's society has progressed in the last couple of decades, racism still continues to exist as it has in the past. Most literature is inspired by the overall theme of being human and being able to make mistakes but, this does not exclude the theme of racism. The Elizabethan Era was the most obvious time period where the discrimination of race was very evident. The famous Shakespearean play, Othello, is an example of literature that displays the effects of racism. Therefore, Othello is a tragedy that deals with racial conflict rather than other works that deal with the feeling of jealousy that comes from being the opposite race, or the feeling of being outcasted due to being the minority. The play shows racism that places a restraint on love, and also destroys the happiness that one feels when faced with prejudice from fellow peers.

In Othello, the protagonist is a successful, brave soldier from Africa who is also given the title of supreme commander of the Venetian army. Although he is only a Moor, Othello is dedicated to serving his society. When it comes to serving his country, Othello can be seen as a significant and physically powerful figure respected by those around him. However, his deep rooted insecurity of his race makes it difficult to enjoy the sacrament of holy matrimony. Othello is surrounded by the countrymen who do not wish to see the interracial couple that is Othello and Desdemona.

The duration of the play consists of verbalized racism represented by the words 'Moor' and 'Black', these names are not associated with anyone other than Othello creating this divide and feeling of being an outsider. In the beginning of the play, Othello's own name is not used when he is introduced, in fact he is instead called 'thick-lips' and 'an old black man'. As the play develops the audience can see Iago's growing hatred towards Othello's race. In Iago's mind a black soldier cannot be as successful as a white soldier, a black man is not worthy or deserving of marrying a white woman. When Iago hears the news of Othello and Desdemona's marriage he becomes enraged, spitting out racist language in response. In the Elizabethan Era, marrying behind a father's back was unacceptable, however when it is revealed that Desdemona married a black man, this aggravates the situation further. As Othello 'steals' Brabantio's daughter from him he furiously says to Roderigo, 'O, that you had had her!'. Brabantio would have been more pleased with a marriage to a man he did not approve of compared to a marriage to a black man.

Due to all of the damage that Othello caused, his reputation of being a good soldier is destroyed. Othello's fellow soldiers were able to see past his race in some aspects due to the respect of his kills, however when the truth of the secret marriage is revealed the respect Othello had once had is gone. Othello is angered by the idea of being judged merely by the color of his skin.

It remains clear that Brabantio will never accept the marriage between Desdemona and Othello. In Brabantio's eyes nothing good can come from the Moor. Othello's good soldier illusion is

shattered due to him being another race. To him, if Othello is black then Desdemona and his love cannot be real and thus is questioned. Brabantio is so blinded by Othello's skin color that he believes the only way that Desdemona could be in love with Othello is if she is bewitched. From this idea Brabantio proclaims:

O thou thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter? Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her; For I'll refer me to all things of sense,

If she in chains of magic were not bound, Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy, So opposite to marriage she be shunned.

When Desdemona is given the chance to respond the audience is keyed in on how she truly feels about her husband's race. Desdemona admits that she is not necessarily impressed by Othello's appearance but instead is with him more for his mind replying 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind'.

When reviewing the play, it is easy to see the root of the conflict was due to the matrimony of Desdemona and Othello. Othello's greatest fault is marrying the white Desdemona. The fault between the two is not the love and affection that they share, but the fault was not taking the impact of his race into consideration. It is evident from the beginning of the play that Othello is outcasted, however the marriage sparks the flame of racism. Once the marriage is revealed this fuels Iago's hate fire even more. When the position of lieutenant goes to Othello rather than him he becomes infuriated. This rank shift is the what Iago bases his revenge on. He cannot stand the idea of having someone he sees lesser than him being in charge. This sparks jealousy in Iago's heart and from then on his sole mission is to destroy Othello. At this point, the thing that pushed Iago into setting his plan into motion was Othello's blackness and now deemed devil image. From these ideals, Iago believes that Othello and Desdemona's relationship will end quickly, mainly from his doing.

This feeling of jealousy ties in with the film 'O', a Shakespeare adaptation filmed by Tim Blake Nelson. In Nelson's adaptation the character of Iago is portrayed by the character Hugo. Hugo is the son of the basketball coach and during the course of the film the audience can see that his father prefers Odin over his own son. This favoritism influences Hugo to always seeking for attention and approval from his father and peers. Odin is the 'token' black boy of school and ultimately is the star of the basketball team. Hugo's true jealousy begins when Odin overlooks him for a position he believes he deserves. Instead, Odin bestows MVP to an underclassman, Michael. Just like Iago in the play Othello, Hugo burns with jealousy and anger to such a high degree that he is willing to do anything to knock Odin off his throne and become 'king' of the court. Just as in the play, Hugo uses manipulation to betray anyone who stands in his way of revenge.

The first step in Iago's revenge plan is to team up with Roderigo, who is undoubtedly in love with Desdemona. In his speech to Roderigo, Iago comes to the conclusion that Roderigo's feelings for Desdemona will fade and that she too will eventually get fed up with her betrothed. He supports this theory by saying Desdemona will get bored of the Moor's stories and intelligence and that she will settle for his looks, seeing as she did not marry him for his looks in the first place. As mentioned previously, Iago's plans are purely motivated by his deep set prejudice towards Othello. Iago believes he will achieve his goal of ruining Othello, if he can make Othello suspicious of his own wife. Iago only feels that he can be successful due to his

vigorous feeling of inferiority over Othello. In doing, Othello is cast-off and Iago is able to turn everyone against the Moor. Once Othello is alienated he comes to the conclusion that Desdemona is cheating on him, just as Iago wanted. Othello may lack the confidence of his marriage due to his own ethnicity and culture. Othello knows that the color of his skin does not match the 'pure' white color of his white Venetian companions, thus creating a distrust in his relationship because he feels as though he is not good enough for her.

Earlier in the play, Othello's reputation was upstanding, Othello was a honorable and trustworthy demeanor, in other words he was viewed as good by everyone around him, despite being Black. Once Othello kills Desdemona his reputation is ruined and his race is put on display. Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's servant, never brings up the subject of Othello's race yet, once Desdemona is murdered at his hands Emilia cannot help but spit hatred at him: 'O, the more angel she, And you the blacker devil!'. Othello's blackness, his marriage to Desdemona, a white woman, and his killing of his wife all coincide creating the perfect formula for a Shakespearean tragedy. Othello's killing of his wife relates to their marriage and their marriage relates to his being black, this all comes full circle.

Racism in the play consequently ruined the marriage of the two lovers. If a society has any form of hatred, especially racism, it can affect the lives of people, including their love and it ultimately allows people to ruin the happiness of others.