

Essay #2: Argument/Counter-argument Essay on *Othello*

Name: Trevor Swan

Final Comment:

Trevor,

Your essay, I think, suffers from two – related – things, and this holds back a paper with quite a lot of potential. You can see both of them in the introduction, but they also end up affecting the rest of the essay as well. In the introduction, you put forward two *broad* possible interpretations of whiteness in the play – one related to physical characteristics, the other related to whiteness as a “leverage point,” (something which I don’t really understand) – and don’t really explain either of these views. As a result, you *state* that there’s an ambiguity surrounding whiteness, but don’t really *show* it to the reader. Without an understanding of what the multiple interpretations of what it means to be white might be, the essay has trouble articulating its argument clearly, and conceiving of how something else might be true. This can be seen most clearly in your counterargument, which drops whiteness in favor of a different topic, and in doing so effectively changes your question. It can also be seen in your *thesis*, though, which posits broadly that whiteness causes stress for Othello – the only black man in the play – and causes the tragedy. Again, this is kind of really broad.

The rest of the paper ends up working to make your argument more specific. In the first body paragraph, you suggest (but do not explicitly state) that whiteness gets defined as “human,” in comparison to a black “non-human/animal.” In the second body paragraph, whiteness proves “good/superior,” where blackness proves “bad/inferior.” In the third body paragraph – and then for much of the rest of the essay – whiteness becomes “purity.” These are all slightly different answers, and your essay would be strongest, I think, if you focused on *one* of these as the answer, “What is whiteness in the play?” Purity seems like the strongest candidate for a couple of reasons. First, it’s more precise than the other two answers. Second, you could easily make the case that Iago and Brabantio’s discussion about miscegenation is really about Desdemona being made “impure,” as a result of her marrying (and having children with) a black man. Similarly, the focus on “impurity,” might help you to explain why Othello feels the need to strangle Desdemona; her alleged adultery makes her dirty and impure, but Othello wants to keep her white skin untouched and pure. This argument strikes me as most broadly applicable to the evidence you’ve already shown.

If you revise, then, I’d encourage a new, more focused thesis statement, and also a new counterargument. The logical counterargument would be “whiteness as superior and blackness as inferior,” and you could use an “Okay, but...” rebuttal in which you concede that, in part this is true, but that it’s also vague. Othello is not seen as inferior in *all* ways – he’s a respected general and thought of as logical and in control of his emotions by society. There is a sense that he’s “dirty,” and unworthy of Desdemona that pervades the play, though. I’ll leave you to work out the details of this on your own; the main point is that the counterargument should focus on whiteness too, given how you introduce the paper.

All of this criticism might suggest that I think that the paper was poor, but I don't think that this is the case at all. It feels very *drafty* – since you still seem to be figuring out an argument as you write – but there are lots of interesting observations and some clear, complex thinking here. You are thinking deeply about the play; the trick to revision is to pick out the best of the ideas that you came up with in the first draft, and refocus the entire essay to center around this idea.

Green highlights went well

Yellow highlights need improvement

Introduction & Title												
Criteria	15 14 13			12 11 10			9 7 5 0					
Has an evocative title	Meets all criteria at high level; clear & readable			Meets some criteria; uneven; less clear			Meets few criteria; unclear					
Presents and develops intellectual problem described in the prompt												
Points to ambiguous evidence capable of supporting more than one reading												
Ends with clear, focused, arguable thesis												
Overall Quality of Ideas, Argument, Effective Evidence												
Criteria	30 29 28 27				26 25 24			23 21 19 15				
Adopts clear, consistent definitions for key argumentative terms – gender, class, whiteness, racism, etc.	Meets all criteria at high level; clear & readable				Meets some criteria; uneven; less clear			Meets few criteria; unclear				
Has well-supported argument that anticipates reader's objections												
Uses concrete, textual evidence from the play to support claims (references to specifics, including brief quotations, summaries of scenes, etc.)												
Thoroughly explains significance of textual evidence												
Has strong insights; shows clear wrestling with complexity & ambiguity												
Avoids over-reliance on obvious evidence and ideas												
Avoids plot-summary												
Counter-argument												
Criteria	10 9		8 7		6 5 0							

<p>Introduces a reasonable counter-argument to essay's thesis statement</p> <p>Points to evidence that might be used to support this argument</p> <p>Rebuts this argument with evidence</p> <p>Counter-argument logically transitions into the essay; not arbitrarily placed</p> <p>Does not engage a "straw-man" argument</p>	Meets all criteria at high level; clear & readable	Meets some criteria; uneven; less clear	Meets few criteria; unclear
Organization & Argument			
Criteria	20 19 18	17 16 15	14 13 10 5
<p>Thesis statement clear, focused & contestable</p> <p>All parts of argument are developed thoroughly and logically; no inconsistencies or deviations from thesis</p> <p>Paragraphs support unified claim, stated in topic sentence</p> <p>Claims of paragraphs logically support thesis statement, smoothly transition from previous paragraph</p> <p>Concluding sentences logically and effectively point reader back to thesis statement</p> <p>Effective concluding paragraph, considers larger significance of essay's thesis statement</p>	Meets all criteria at high level; clear & readable	Meets some criteria; uneven; less clear	Meets few criteria; unclear
Style			
Criteria	15 14 13	12 11 10	9 7 5 0
<p>Uses sophisticated transitions to guide reader from one paragraph to another</p> <p>Sentences effectively guide reader from old to new information</p> <p>Sentences contain clear actors as subjects and concrete actions as verbs</p> <p>Has clear, graceful, grammatically correct sentences</p>	Meets all criteria at high level; clear & readable	Meets some criteria; uneven; less clear	Meets few criteria; unclear
Formatting, Length, Citation			

Criteria	10 9	8 7 6	5 4 3 2 0
Paper uses appropriate font size, margins, etc. Paper meets length requirements (5 pages, 1500 words) Paper includes appropriate heading Follows MLA Conventions for in-text citation & documentation	Meets all criteria at high level; clear & readable	Meets some criteria; uneven; less clear	Meets few criteria; unclear
Penalty for Editing Errors			
0	-1 -2	-4 -6 -10	
Flawless paper or occasional but minor errors Strong professional ethos	Some distracting noise via spelling, punctuation, or apostrophe errors or occasional grammar mistakes (subject-verb agreement; fragments; run-ons, etc.). Writer seems careless, but understanding rarely impeded	Paper seriously marred by editing errors or grammatical mistakes; paper seems unprofessional; comprehension significantly impeded	