

**Prompt: What role does whiteness play in Othello? How are characters' actions and beliefs shaped not only by Othello's presence as a black man in a predominantly white society, but also by their own beliefs about the significance of whiteness and having white skin?**

Readers of *Othello* by William Shakespeare might easily disagree on the role whiteness plays in the play. At some moments, ideals of whiteness seem to be used as leverage points for racism in a predominantly white society. At other moments, however, it acts as a way to point out positive traits and contrast insecurities characters regardless of their race. While Othello appears to act cold and barbaric towards the end of his life, his actions, those of others around him, and the tragedy that befalls him, are a result of his presence of blackness in a predominantly white society.

The influence of whiteness can be seen as early as Othello's character is introduced. It is apparent that Venetian society is controlled almost entirely by white people, as seen when it is announced that Othello and Desdemona will be getting married. Iago exploits social whiteness, specifically targeting both Brabantio and Roderigo's racism to incite rage and cause unnecessary chaos. Interracial marriages were frowned upon at this time, and Iago's skillful manipulation of this fact sets the stage perfectly for tragedy to strike, planting seeds in Othello and others' minds. Iago sends Brabantio into a racist rampage by comparing Othello to a horse, saying his "daughter [will be] covered with a Barbary horse", that his nephews will "neigh to [him]", his cousins will be "coursers", and close relatives will be taken as "jennets" (1.1.110-112). He then goes on to report to Brabantio that "...your daughter the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.114). Iago's twisting of words excellently evokes feelings of rage in Desdemona's father, as he has been so conditioned to expect his daughter to marry a white man. It is clear that Iago's referral to Othello as an animal are made to dehumanize him and ostracize him for his blackness. If his aim was simply to inform, he would have used far less crude language, and wouldn't have referred to copulation as "making a beast with two backs." His abuse of Brabantio's preconceived societal view on whiteness, in this case marriage, shows how Othello's blackness impacts characters in the story apart from direct interactions.

*This Paragraph will discuss the effect whiteness had on Othello specifically. It will examine internalized racism and the effect it had on the tragedy.*

Some readers may argue that Othello fell into Iago's trap because of his foolishness and patriarchal views. While a case can be made for toxic masculinity and failure to look past his emotions, his final actions all stem from the larger problem that is whiteness. It can be reasonably argued that Othello ignored all logic and reasoning when it came to Desdemona as he dismissed all of Desdemona's pleas as soon as they were brought up, not even sparing her a moment to pray. Some readers may take this a step further and state that Othello killed Desdemona because of the patriarchal view of women cheating on their husbands. This is entirely false, however, as adultery has never been an excuse for murder in the past. Also, the fact that Othello was unable to look through the veil that were his emotions further dismisses the patriarchy as the cause for Desdemona's death. A common patriarchal view is that men are

almost god-like creatures that are in check and should make all decisions, while women are subordinate creatures whose emotions cloud rational decision making. Othello and Desdemona's final interaction completely rejects the idea, with Desdemona providing reasonable counterclaims to Othello's accusations. When accused of having an affair with Cassio she says, "...I never did / Offend you in my life, never loved Cassio / But with such general warranty of heaven" (5.2.58-61). When confronted about Cassio having the handkerchief, she asks to "Send for him hither" to have him prove his innocence (5.2.68-69). Her immediate refutations of Othello's claims show her standing up for herself and going against the typical role of women in a patriarchy. This clearly refutes the idea that Othello was driven by twisted notions of the patriarchy, as the final interaction between Othello and Desdemona completely goes against typical patriarchal beliefs.