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The Effect of Whiteness on the Mind

Readers of *Othello* by William Shakespeare might easily disagree on the exact 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 more as a physical characteristic, consequently highlighting characters' insecurities. While Othello appears to act cold and barbarous towards the end of his life, his actions, those of others around him, and the tragedy that befalls him are a result of the presence of his blackness in a predominantly white society.

The influence of whiteness becomes evident as soon as Othello's character is introduced. It is apparent that Venetian society is predominantly white when Othello and Desdemona's marriage is announced. Iago exploits this fact, specifically targeting 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 distaste sets the stage perfectly for tragedy to strike, planting seeds in Othello and others' minds. Iago sends Brabantio on a racist rampage by comparing Othello to an animal, saying his "daughter [will be] covered with a Barbary horse", that his nephews will "neigh to [him]", that his cousins will be "coursers", and that close relatives will be taken as "jennets" (1.1.110-112). He then goes on to report to Brabantio that "...[his] daughter and 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 was under the

impression that he had raised Desdemona to seek only white men. It is clear that Iago's references to Othello as an animal are made to dehumanize and ostracize him for his blackness. If his aim was simply to inform, he would have used far less crude language and would not have referred to copulation in the way that he did. His abuse of Barbantio's preconceived societal view on whiteness, in this case marriage, shows how, even indirectly, Othello's blackness plays a large role in the decision-making of others.

Along with the beliefs about interracial marriage, whiteness clearly impacts the beliefs characters have about having white skin too. This impact can specifically be seen through Othello, as he serves as the only set of black eyes in a predominantly white society. Othello is made to think that blackness is a fundamentally negative trait and that he can never be truly loved or appreciated because of others' whiteness. His views on the significance of whiteness come to fruition when he is plotting to kill Desdemona as a result of Iago's manipulation. Iago claims that Desdemona truly wants to be with someone "Of her own clime, complexion and degree" (3.3.234). He justifies his lies with racism, coming back to the idea that someone as fair and white as Desdemona would never want to marry a black man such as Othello. It is clear Othello is struck by Iago's suggestion when he tries to justify the unfaithfulness of Desdemona, saying, "Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have, or for I am declined" (3.3.267-269). He views his blackness as something that makes him socially and intellectually less than the white people around him, believing himself to be less likable and unfit for love. Having white skin is clearly represented as a positive trait for one to have, making them more attractive and socially able than those with black skin.

The belief that whiteness makes someone more favorable naturally expands into the thought that blackness is a dirty and evil trait for one to possess. The play's association with

blackness and filth is displayed through Othello himself in his final logical interactions with Iago. Trying to hold on to his last positive beliefs about Desdemona, Othello says, “I’ll have some proof. Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (3.3.389-391). Othello clearly wants to believe Desdemona is loyal to him, but it is obvious that internalized racism has run its course and fully infected his mind. Dian, being the Roman goddess of the moon, is a white and admirable aspect of the night sky. Keeping this in mind and knowing how severely adultery was frowned upon in Othello’s society, it is easy to draw the connection between purity and skin color. A woman’s name would become tainted if she was found to be sleeping with other men, but Othello takes this a step further, comparing this taintedness to his blackness. This comparison implies that whiteness is a desirable feature, as it was desirable for a woman to be ‘pure’ and enter a marriage as a virgin. He views his own skin color as dirty, demonstrating how white skin was so highly sought after, even by non-whites.

Othello and Emelia’s interaction following Desdemona’s death also pushes the narrative of whiteness, relating to morality in this case. Desdemona attempts to clear Othello’s name in her dying words, but Othello quickly admits to the crime when confronted by Emelia. His quick admission of murder implies that he believes himself to be impure and that it is in his nature to be violent. Given that he has the most violent military position and that he commits the first act of violence to this degree in the play, it is clear that the play supports the notion that black people are more violent as a result of their blackness. Emelia contributes to the racism in this scene by saying that Othello has become the “blacker devil” (5.2.129). It would be appropriate to call a murderer the devil, but Emelia’s use of the word “blacker” suggests that she already believes the devil to be black. This further ties having a black skin color to impurity, as the devil is objectively viewed as evil and immoral. Furthermore, Desdemona is referred to as an angel when

trying to hide Othello's sin, further contrasting the ideas of good versus evil and linking blackness to the latter (5.2.128). Believing Desdemona's dying actions make her appear angelic and that murder has made Othello 'blacker' illustrates how their society's conceptions of whiteness extend beyond basic interactions, influencing notions of purity and morality.

Whiteness' impact is observed to stretch beyond characters' views of skin color, but it also influences Othello's beliefs about his own abilities to love as well. Othello is introduced as a proud black man at the beginning of the play, as reflected by his reaction to being accused of witchcraft. He is confident in his relationship with Desdemona, refuting Brabantio's accusation by reciting his positive traits and saying the only witchcraft used was his life story and ability to love (1.3.170). Othello easily denounces his involvement in witchcraft publicly, but further investigation reveals that this accusation continued to linger in his mind throughout the play. With the help of Iago's manipulation, Othello's handkerchief falls out of Desdemona's possession, influencing Othello to share a story about how the handkerchief is a symbol of love and has the power to subdue a lover and magically make the wielder amiable (3.4.61-69). Over the course of the play, Othello went from someone who was confident in his ability to love a woman like Desdemona to someone who believes the loss of a supposed magical handkerchief has made his lover unfaithful. There is a clear connection between the interaction between Desdemona and Othello here and the one with Brabantio and Othello. Othello was slowly made to believe that a black man like himself is incapable of adequately loving a white woman, giving in to Brabantio's racist antics from Act One. Being the only black character in the play, it was easy for Iago to make Othello feel incapable of reciprocating Desdemona's love, as he already feels ostracized in his society.

Given that the handkerchief was said to have magical powers associated with it that have ties to old African culture, it is logical that this would be on Othello's mind when Desdemona's unfaithfulness comes into question.

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 patriarchy and toxic masculinity, his final actions truly stem from the larger problem of whiteness. It can be reasonably argued that Othello ignored all logic and reasoning when it came to Desdemona, immediately dismissing all of Desdemona's pleas and 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 of his emotions further dismisses the patriarchy as the cause of Desdemona's death. This is defended by the common patriarchal view that men are almost god-like creatures. It is thought that men are emotionally in check and should make all decisions, while women are subordinate 'creatures' whose emotions cloud rational decision-making. Othello and Desdemona's final interaction further rejects this 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 demonstrate her independence, going against the typical role of women in a patriarchal society. This clearly refutes the idea that Othello and the tragedy serve as a commentary on twisted patriarchal notions. Iago's manipulation of Othello throughout the play serves as the true

destructive force, using race, as opposed to gender, to convince Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful .

Othello excellently tackles the idea of being black in a predominantly white society, illustrating how significant differences in someone allow doubt to creep into their mind. Iago was able to take advantage of this feeling in Othello, playing him like a fiddle throughout the play. The tragedy of Othello is a result of his blackness and how he is viewed by the characters around him, with both him and others slowly believing more and more that blackness is a negative trait in and of itself. Whiteness, throughout the play, is clearly denoted as a pure and just character trait that is typically associated with being both morally and socially correct.