

AQA English Literature A-level

Othello Themes: Race

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Race

The persistent problem of racism today allows readers to access the play's use of **racial language**. The systematic oppression of **ethnic minorities**, and the resulting **discrimination** and **prejudice**, have prevailed throughout history and are depicted in this play. Othello is often referred to as a '**Moor**', which could mean an African, a Muslim, or a South Asian Indian. These definitions mean that Othello's **identity is ambiguous**, and he does not fully fit into **Venetian society** due to his **racial difference**.

Race, Sexuality and Marriage

Many critics have seen **race** as central to *Othello*. However, it is questionable how important it is in relation to **Othello and Desdemona's love**. This is because the **colour difference** between them is not very important to them, but is seen and used as a **source of strength**. Desdemona has great trust in Othello and his character, even saying that he is unable to feel jealousy. This choice to overlook race is an **admirable characteristic** that Desdemona displays. Especially because women had little say in who they were going to marry: she **disobeys** her father and the society that fostered her to believe that **racial difference** was bad. You could go one step further and argue that Othello's blackness and **allure of his skin** colour is what attracted Desdemona to him; his tales of **exotic adventures** allow her to escape into his fantasy world in which she can get lost in and escape the pressures of **societal expectations**.

Critics such as **Fenella Salgado** argue, however, that '**Othello's colour is dramatically important as a symbol of his own uniqueness and the uniqueness of Desdemona's choice, but it is only when Othello begins to think of himself as a typical black man ... that the seeds of tragedy are sown**' (*Critical Studies: Othello, 1989*). This suggests that while Othello's colour was of little importance in his marriage to Desdemona, he falls victim to the **stereotypes** that he avoided by being **trapped** by Iago. As a result, he publicly **humiliates** her by hitting her in public as well as in private, and by doubting her love for him. Regardless of the conventions that their love challenges, at the end Othello **succumbs to the toxicity of male honour**.

The theme of **race** is also used in order to suggest **sexual deviance**. The play uses **discriminatory descriptions** regarding Othello's race in order to reinforce **cultural ideas** of black Africans being excessively **sexual**. **Elizabethan prejudice** towards black African residents in England and the growing European participation in the **slave trade** is reflected in various, sinister comments towards Othello. For example, '**An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe**' (Act I Scene I) suggests that **racially charged language** is used to portray Othello's **sexual relationship** with Desdemona as **unnatural**, establishing a **binary** between **black / white** from the start.

This is supported by a record of performances of *Othello* (1604) at a **Hallowmas** (known as All Saints Day) festival in church. The play was considered appropriate because the festival was used to see how **faithful** lovers would be, reflected in the play in a **tragic manner**. Furthermore, the festival placed importance on saints and other **martyrs** who were very **righteous and virtuous**. Due to the play's central themes of **religion, fidelity, and sin**,



Othello was a great example of those tropes. For example, the idea of being **blessed** or pure is represented by Desdemona, while Othello's actions can be seen as an **aggressive manifestation of righteousness**. This is further emphasised due to Desdemona's **white skin and dress**, suggesting her **innocence** to the audience who know she has been faithful to Othello throughout the play. Her unjust death begins Othello's spiritual journey, as his **misjudgement** and **perverted sense of righteousness** need to be punished by a **divine power** enacted by the law.

Similarly, race is used to condemn Othello and Desdemona's marriage by associating **blackness with evil**. This also reflects **Elizabethan stereotypes** which perpetuated the view that Africans were only fit to be slaves and were **manifestations of the devil**. Iago claims that **'the devil will make a grandsire of you' (Act I Scene I)** to Brabantio, **weaponizing** the idea of **evil** within Othello to manipulate Desdemona's father against him. To further emphasise this, he warns that **'you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse' (Act I Scene I)**. This is an **animalistic description** of Othello, creating an **imagery** of him as **non-human** and depicting the mixing of races as an **obscene interspecies relationship**.

A05 - A Post-Colonial Perspective

Post-colonialism is the period after Western colonies were freed through decolonisation movements, involving the revision and reclaiming of lost history, language and traditions. Post-colonial writing observes this **legacy of colonialism**, particularly considering problems of race. Othello is an **outsider** because of his race and is subject to discriminatory remarks. **Ania Loomba** claims that the conflict in the play is **"between the racism of a white patriarchy and the threat posed to it by both a black man and a white woman"** (*Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*), meaning that institutions that are controlled and policed by a white culture amplify his outsider status. He faces two, interlinked problems; he is a black man married to a white woman in an inherently **racist and sexist** society.

Can you identify the consequences of trying to fit into the ideal, dominant man and operate around his outsider status? How is his identity affected by this split?

Race and Nobility

Although the language deployed by Iago and other characters is **racially insensitive**, it is continuously highlighted that Venice needs the Moor because they want him to help Venice repel the Turkish navy that invaded Cyprus. The issue of race is **temporarily subdued** due to **practical and military necessity**. The portrayal of Othello as a **hero** within the play reflects the **ethnic diversity** of Venice at the time in which the interchange between Europe, Asia and Africa became common. Although there was a lot of anti-blackness in England, many African Moors achieved the **highest ranks** in society e.g. intellectuals, nobility, musicians etc. Moors were also **royals**, such as **Alessandro de Medici** who ruled Florence; he was the child of the powerful Lorenzo de Medici and an unknown African woman. He was also called **'il moro' (The Moor)** during his reign from 1530 to 1537.



Such figures are important when considering Shakespeare's **subverted portrayal** of the black Moor in the play. His **outsider status** is always countered by the emphasis on his **nobility and status** as a military leader. For example, the Duke gives a **backhanded compliment** to Brabantio about Othello, stating that his **'son-in-law is far more fair than black'** (**Act I Scene III**). This suggests that Othello's character, which is seen as **honest, loyal, and trustworthy**, is valued within the Venetian court. This is important to remember as the play progresses because these are the **characteristics** that Iago **exploits** to make him adhere to the **racially stereotypical mannerisms**.

Another reason why he is valued is because of the **religious beliefs** during the Elizabethan era. The Senate accepts that Othello and Desdemona's marriage reflects **Christian concepts** of **universalism** and the positive perception of **interracial love**. Furthermore, it can be assumed that Othello converted to **Christianity**, as this is the only way to gain respect from those around him and fit into the society that wants to marginalise him. For example, he states that he was **'taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery'** (**Act I Scene III**) and was then able to get **'redemption'** (**Act I Scene III**). This suggests that he found **deliverance from sin** through the **atonement of Christ**. His religious history therefore suggests that he may have been Muslim before, making his fight against the Ottoman Turks significant - by helping Venice, he **denies his original roots** to become a part of a privileged, white society.

The New World: Race and Religion

Trading, exploration, and exoticism informed **The New World**, which was the name given by Europeans to the Western hemisphere, especially the Americas. During the **age of discovery**, Englishmen went out to sea to discover new countries, create **new economic relations** and prove the existence of the **savage**. The 'savage', for the British, was regarded as anything that did not fit their sense of normal. This included **native Americans or indigenous people**, who were seen as **uncivilised sub-humans** – particularly for their skin tone and preoccupation with **'magic'** e.g. **'If she in chains of magic were not bound'** (**Act I Scene II**). Such stereotypes can also be seen when Brabantio and Iago assume that Desdemona was **bewitched** by Othello, as opposed to her having fallen in love with him. Such **racial slurs** parallel those that were prevalent when the play was written and performed, as the **slave trade** was seen as a major, **profitable market**. This was first developed by **John Hawkins** in 1562, who saw **African slaves** as a **commodity** to be sold to the Spanish New World colonies. This created a huge market in which African men and women were taken from their homes to be sold to slavery in England – this placed them at the bottom of the **social hierarchy**, because they were seen as objects.

As this was the **backdrop** for Shakespeare's writings, placing an innocent white woman in an **equal relationship** with a black man would have been shocking. However, **Psychoanalysts** suggest the idea of **forbidden pleasure** – this is when the individual secretly enjoys something that is normally not **socially acceptable**. This means that breaking the law, for example, may bring individuals a sense of **gratification** that they do not want to publicly announce in fear of being **marginalised**. This notion can be applied to **Elizabethan audiences**, whose obsession with **sensationalism** suggests a deep rooted desire to see taboos enacted on stage, as they were **unrealistic and fantasy-like** for the



audiences. When something is sensational, it means that it **over-dramatizes** certain aspects or characters in order to make the piece of work more **scandalous**. Othello's character, who is black in appearance but retains the spirit of a white man fits into this **thirst for sensationalism**. This is achieved by Shakespeare because he **subverts** the way the audience is forced to feel towards the play and who they feel **sympathetic** towards. Iago, who is a **white European** male, is depicted as a hate filled villain, which the audience cannot side with but inextricably become **complicit** with him because only the audience is aware of his sinister side. Retrospectively, this can be seen as **social commentary** as the **duplicity and psychological violence** imposed by Iago mirrors that of **British colonists** who tried to **civilise** Africans through **religion** and teaching them the **English language**. For example, Othello's Christian conversion is one of the main reasons he was accepted within Venetian society, as this was seen to be the source of **purity and goodness**.

This is especially reflected in the **writing and texts during** the Elizabethan era. For most citizens in England, the idea of a totally **different racial being existing was totally absurd**. They had to come to terms with the fact that there were other, stranger cultures that practised things that were outside of their everyday realm. In particular, stories from **voyagers** (which Shakespeare also took inspiration from, specifically for *The Tempest*) were often used as reference to identify Africans. One of the most popular publications was **Mandeville's Travels**, which vividly described the African continent and its inhabitants – repeatedly noting that the colour of their skin was black. As a result, associations **with 'exotic' subjects were automatically black**. For example, Othello's race is mentioned before any of his **virtues**. The audience gets a bad impression of him, seeing him as someone to be weary of because of the way Iago presents him at the start. However, it is only through the **intervention of higher authorities** that Othello's honourable status is restored.

Similarly, British colonisation focused on the **dissemination of their own culture** and language. This is a form of **Eurocentric superiority**, which can be observed excessively in Iago. Europeans wanted to teach the **'uncivilised' people** of the New World the correct language and culture. Such tendencies could be observed in other literary work at the time, such as **Samuel Daniel's 1599 poem** in which he says:

**'The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores
This gaine or our best glorie shal be sent
T'inrich unknowing Nations with our stores?
What worlds in th'yet unformed Occident
May come refin'd wiht th'accents that are ours?'**

Daniel **romanticises** the English language as being a saviour for the **barbaric cultures**. Such sentiments are also echoed in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where Caliban represents the uncultivated people who needed **salvation**. This **rhetoric** of salvation is prevalent within Othello and Desdemona's relationship, as he believes that he is **redeeming** her by killing her when in reality he is committing a **mortal sin** himself. This suggests that, although Shakespeare subverted the roles to make the Moor **noble and respectful**, he re-establishes **the normal social order** to please his Elizabethan audience. Nevertheless, the death of Othello does not carry any **racial undertones**. This means that, in the perspective of a



contemporary reader, Shakespeare uses racial stereotypes in order to remove the significance of them and shock the audience by sympathising with the Moor solely for the fact that he was duped by Iago. Therefore, the idea of race linked to **cultural and linguistic superiority** is reflected in Othello, who despite adhering to those standards set by his society, is destroyed by a **colonial manipulator**.

A05 – Blackness as monstrous

In **Karen Newman's** text *Femininity and the Monstrous in 'Othello'* (1987), she suggests that Renaissance culture inherently **demonises racial** and sexual difference as **monstrous**. In particular, she notes that the **white male characters** (specifically Iago) feel threatened by the **'power and potency of a different monstrous sexuality'**, symbolised by Othello. This is because Othello, married to a white woman, would be able to use his power to diminish his **partner's whiteness**. As a result of such fears against black men, along with **prejudiced ideas** against **inter-racial marriages**, Othello's character would be considered as **naturally monstrous**.

Do you think that the idea of race presented in the play is quite progressive compared for its time?

Inevitability of Race

The word 'Moor' had little significance in Elizabethan England, as the **Oxford English Dictionary** defined it as **infidel, non-Christian, barbarian**. This sums up Elizabethan attitudes towards blackness as still being negative, regardless of someone's background.

Othello begins to behave in a stereotypical manner when instigated by Iago, who brings out a **lustful, murderous side** in him. This is particularly evident when Iago claims: **'[Othello] is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest but seem to be so / And will as tenderly be led by th' nose / As asses are'** (Act I Scene III). This shows how Iago perceives Othello as **naive and gullible**, paralleling the **superiority** that **Europeans** felt over the **'uncivilised' Africans**. It is important that Iago continuously invokes and provokes Othello's **inner insecurity** about his own **blackness**, as this exploitation leads to the ultimate **destruction of his marriage and his religious identity**.

Questions to consider

- To what extent can you trace colonial undertones within contemporary literary pieces?
- How does staging, body language and gestures affect the way the audience sees the character? Consider the interpretation of Othello's gradual descent into violence and how it is depicted through his body language/ words.

The concept of **the Other** is significant and relevant when looking at Othello's outsider status. The idea of the 'Other' is suggested by **Friedrich Hegel**, who argues that everyone has their own **separate consciousness**. This means that the way we decide right from wrong, good from evil comes from our own **sense of morality** and understanding of the world. However, Hegel notes that there is a **dichotomy or binary** that emerges due to the



hierarchical nature of society. This means that certain differences such as class or race are amplified by the creation of categories that define **identities**. In particular, he argues that the **slave / master dichotomy** is present in relationships where there is a **power difference**. He suggests that the **consciousness of the slave** is dependent on the **master**, relying on him to teach him the right ways; this can be observed by the **colonial ideas** of civilising 'savages' in the New World.

However just as the slave is dependent on the master for their consciousness, the master is dependent on the slave to **reaffirm their own power**. This means that the master needs the slave to have **authority**. As a result, consciousness and power relationships can be seen to **utilise difference** to serve mostly the master. In *Othello*, the **slave / master dichotomy** manifests itself within **Iago and Othello's relationship**. While Othello is unaware, Iago secretly lures him into this deceptive relationship whilst acting his advisor. Even though on the surface it seems like Othello has greater authority, Iago's ability to use **language to manipulate** him suggests that he has more power over him. This establishes and confirms this dichotomy, as Othello is subjected to the 'master' who is Iago. Consequently, this also echoes **historical relationships** where African slaves had to obey their masters constantly, reflecting in the play in a more **subtle** way.

At the end of the play, for instance, he evokes a fight '**in Aleppo**' (**Act 5, Scene 2**) between a '**malignant and turbaned Turk**' (**Act 5, Scene 2**) and a Venetian. In making his position **unclear** (whether he is the Venetian or the Turk), Othello **re-affirms his outsider status** and **religious ambiguity**. He uses imagery such as Aleppo, which was one of the most important cities in the Ottoman empire, suggesting that his final, broken state is like **reverting** to be who he was before becoming a Christian. Furthermore, by killing himself while describing how he kills the Turk, Othello presents himself to be a **threat to Venice**. In this final moment of **revelation**, he accepts the fact that he will remain an **outsider** regardless of his successes, leading to his **suicide** for the sake of the safety of the state. This can be seen as an act of **martyrdom**.

Performances of *Othello*

As race is a major factor in the play, it is important to consider who **can and should play the main role**. Historically, black actors as well as women were not allowed to perform on stage; **social conventions** at the time made it illegal for those groups to act in theatre. The role of Othello would have been played by a **white man**, while Desdemona would have been played by a **young boy**. This is significant because it brings in questions about what productions are **inappropriate** now that were appropriate before. Let's have a look at some past and **contemporary productions**.

One of the first performances of *Othello* took place on **1st November 1604** in the **Banqueting House at Whitehall**, which is the palace of **James I**. Similarly, it was staged throughout the years of its publication at the **Globe** and within the **Blackfriars** theatre, suggesting its **popularity**. Stage effects would have been achieved manually, as well as **casting practices** being completely different. The main characters were played by white males – records show that **Richard Burbage** was the most likely the first actor to play Othello. It can be assumed that they probably used certain products **to darken their skin**,



which would be frowned upon now. Nevertheless, these plays carried on until theatre plays were banned during the English Civil War in 1642.

Over the years, directors have changed and **re-interpreted** the **racial aspects** of *Othello*. For example, in the **2009 production of *Othello* in the Berlin Deutsche Theatre**, the protagonist was played by **Susanne Wolff** who is a **white woman**. By casting a white woman as Othello, the director usurps boundaries of both **race and gender**, as they position her to be the love interest of Desdemona. This production further played with this **unstable** aspect through their dress up; Wolff was put into **odd costumes** throughout the play, wearing black trousers and a white shirt which is a more modern outlook on their usually traditional outfits. However, at the height of the play where Othello thinks Desdemona committed adultery, she wore a **gorilla suit** in order to symbolise Othello's rage and animalistic tendencies. The choice to visually represent Othello's feelings is quite fascinating, as it suggests the **flexibility** with which directors conduct the play. On the other hand, some audience members might find this inappropriate. Nevertheless, it is a very **different and unique concept** which presents Othello in a different light played by an actress.

- How do you feel about directors manipulating Othello's character like this?
- What are the criteria for casting Othello?
- How does race and gender affect this?

Another contemporary example which plays with the conventional **representations of race** is **Iqbal Khan's production at RSC Theatre in 2015**. This is because he casted a black actor (Lucian Msamati) as Iago. This is interesting because it undermines the **colonial readings** of Iago as a **white European** man trying to destroy Othello. On the other hand, the play becomes more **sinister**, as Iago's jealous motives can be highlighted even more due to his **equal blackness**. However, at the same time, the audience is forced to look past the race of Iago in the play because of his **racist dialogue** against Othello. As a result, Khan creates an **uncomfortable atmosphere** for the audience who are forced to both pay attention to the **racial slurs** while also questioning the actor who speaks them out.

Directors and producers play with race and ethnicity a lot. In particular, the 2018 Globe production of *Othello* featured an array of people – from **African actors to Indian or white actors**. This shows the **progress** influenced by social changes in society, where the cast in theatres reflects the **real diversity** today. Furthermore, the role of Othello is interpreted differently, but most popular productions usually include black actors playing the lead role. Whether this role should be restricted to black people or not is for you to decide – would it be reductive to only reserve the role for black actors?



A05 – Race

‘When the black actor plays Othello, his most conspicuous performance centres on his ability to play Shakespeare; when the white actor plays Othello, he most conspicuously performs blackness.’ (Arthur Little, [Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape and Sacrifice](#))

The 1965 staging of *Othello* by the National Theatre Company starring Laurence Olivier as Othello can be seen as problematic. This is because Olivier is a white male, having performed blackface by deliberately darkening his complexion and adopting an ‘exotic’ accent to sell his role better. As suggested by Arthur Little, white actors have to inherently perform blackness i.e. stereotypical (and racist) traits associated with black people. Although the role of Othello is not confined to black people only, Little emphasises that it should be based on their ability to perform Shakespeare without having to darken their skin. *Do you think white actors should be able to play the role of Othello?*

Race today

The **racial stereotypes** enacted by Shakespeare in *Othello* can be seen as a historical product of its time. The views shared by Elizabethans can **retrospectively** now be seen as insensitive and prejudiced, condemning those that were different to them. Although Shakespeare’s evocation of Othello is partly positive, he still adheres to the **standard perceptions of Moors** at the time. The re-establishment of this **racial hierarchy** suggests that the rigid frameworks set upon **inter-racial marriages** were going to be difficult to over-turn. While there has been more progress towards representing **inter-racial marriages** in the media, some cultures still repress this in the name of honour and tradition.

The concept of **race and the injustice** that accompany black people is a generational and cultural issue. Some cultures retain racist attitudes against black people, perpetuating **stereotypes** that are damaging. Since Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a lot of progress has been made in regards to **racial injustice**. The **slave trade** that informed the stereotypical views of



Othello, Colorado Shakespeare Festival, 2015.
Image source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/HchT5PneZ92SetBs8>

black people at the time diminished the **cultural identity and history** of a lot of the slaves. This meant that their whole identity was **re-shaped by European ideas**. Othello, for example, embodies this as he struggles with the **ambiguity of his own identity**. At the end, it is unclear whether he still fits into the **Christian identity** that he claimed for himself, or whether his murder returned him to his former Muslim self. It is clear, however, that he still **condemns** the ‘Turk’ side of him as devilish.



Such **ambiguities** are summed up by **Homi Bhabha**, who argues for the existence of **cultural hybridity** as a result of past colonial struggles. He calls this cultural **ambivalence**, wherein the identity of the coloniser is reflected in the colonised subject. For example, the slave **master's European culture** is adapted by the colonised Other, who repeats these actions despite those cultural practices going against their own **sense of self**. This acceptance of the coloniser's identity leads to a split in the **colonised subject's identity**. They know that they have their own identity, but are **coerced** to follow through with the practices of the coloniser. As a result, an **ambivalent space** opens up that places the colonised Other in-between the master and their own cultural heritage. This ambivalence can be observed today, as many ethnic minorities experience a split in their own identity. For example, **immigrant children** brought up in the UK have to constantly battle between their heritages and assimilate into a new culture.

Similarly, black activist movements ranging from **Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter** have been vocal about the **discrimination** faced by the black members of society. In 2020, the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of police caused **outrage** and **widespread protests** all over the world. The problem of police violence persists today, as well as the prevalence of **micro-aggressions**. These are actions which have **racist undertones** but are not overtly discriminatory. Such micro-aggressions usually happen in offices, for example, when colleagues from different ethnicities are made to feel like outsiders through derogatory phrases or behaviour.

Overall, the theme of race in *Othello* still echoes in today's world, suggesting the continuing need for change in social perceptions of different cultures and ethnicities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berenson, F. (1982). *Hegel on Others and the Self* from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4619540>

Little, A. (2002). *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial RE-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* from <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=666>

Loomba, A. (1992). *Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Newman, K. (2009). *Essaying Shakespeare*. London: University of Minnesota Press.

Othello in *The Norton Shakespeare*. (2016). ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, Suzanne Gossett, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Gordon McMullan. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Salgado, F. (1989). *Critical Studies: Othello*. London: Penguin Books.

