Othello: A Tragic Story Of Love And Hate, Life And Death

Othello, one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, is a tragic story of love and hate, life and death. Just like the rest of Shakespeare's masterful works, Othello has also failed to dodge the scathing limelight of critical interpretations. Besides the strictly critical ones, even more interpretations have arisen around pretty much every spectrum of the play's plot. One topic which has never ceased to receive attention is the question of what is truly the devil in Othello. What really drove Othello to the egregious acts which he commits at the end of the play? The first question to be asked is, "Is he voluntarily acting upon a sinful nature or has he been driven there by an independent slavemaster?" Given Othello's good character which is praised by even his demeanors at the beginning of the play, it is widely accepted and undisputed that Othello was driven to his final actions. So, what or who could have possibly made him doubt the faithfulness of his wife and ultimately murder her and commit suicide?

Many if not most believe that Iago is the villain of the play. Marvin Rosenberg, Professor of Dramatic Art and Emeritus Professor at Berkeley, observes that the most common opinion views Iago as "a creature of subhuman evil, malignant without any motivation, an embodiment of Satan himself" (1). One modern critic named Tamsin Shaw, Associate Professor of European and Mediterranean Studies and Philosophy at NYU, obviously shares this view when she states that Iago is possibly Shakespeare's greatest villain and is "certainly the most inscrutable in his motivations." However, some would disagree with this claim including the likes of Kiernan Ryan, Professor Emeritus of English Literature at the University of London. As we can tell by the very heading of Dr. Ryan's article titled "Racism, misogyny and 'motiveless malignity' in Othello," he begs to argue that "the causes of the tragedy of Othello are more complex and disturbing than they might at first appear" (Ryan). He argues that Iago is merely the logical conclusion to the cultural prejudices which are held by the whole of the Shakespearean Venice which is represented in Othello. So, what are we to view as the "devil," for lack of a better term, in the play: Iago or racism? Is Iago truly the filthy swine that most view him to be, or is he simply the outworking of Venetian culture? In this paper, I will be arguing that rather than Iago, the racism which is rampant in Shakespeare's representation of Venice is the true devil of the play.

As I stated previously, the commonly held view is that Iago is an evil demon whose unjustifiable actions drive Othello to his final sins. People who hold this view argue that Iago participates in motiveless hate for Othello which provides no justification for his misleading and tempting of Othello. They do this by making the argument that Venice was not racist at nature, thus saying that Iago was an evil outlier. A perfect example of this can be found in the article titled "Critical Approaches to Othello" by Virginia Vaughan, Research Professor and Professor Emerita of English at Clark University, where she explores a new historicist interpretation of the play. This interpretation argues that "Although Othello's racial identity is clearly a factor in Shakespeare's text, when the play was first performed the audience would not have seen it as squarely focussed on race as we do." As Vaughan goes on to explain, although terms are used in reference to Othello that we would consider to "exude" racism today, modern cultural norms with which we make these claims were merely "incipient" in the day of Shakespeare. She concludes summarizing this interpretation by saying: "… the Duke's pronouncement that Othello is 'far more fair than black' and Montano's claim that 'the man commands / Like a full soldier' (2.1.36–37) indicate the high esteem others [actually] have for him." However, not only would

they argue that Othello's treatment was not racist in its historical context, they would even argue that his treatment was not racist by today's standards if examined closer. Robert Evans, Professor of English and Philosophy at Auburn University, holds this view. Evans argues this view extremely persuasively and even affirms the existence of minor amounts of racism, but still make similar conclusions, saying: "Race is indeed an issue in the play, but it is not the only or even the dominant issue, and it is mainly an issue in the mind of Iago." The likes of Evans, come to this conclusion through close analyzation of the character dynamic in the play; however, I still do not believe this analysis is an accurate one. In order to demonstrate this, I will explore a few examples of how Evans defends the treatments of Othello.

Throughout his article, Evans discusses the moments in which he believes racism could be potentially found. He cites examples from the lips of Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, the Duke, and even Desdemona. For example, Evans talks about the use of the term "the Moor" by pretty much anyone and everyone in the play. Evans finally dismisses this as being racist by arguing that it is mostly used by Iago (whom he affirms to be racist) and only some by others. Besides, he argues, even if we grant that "the Moor" is a racist term, it is only used when referring to Othello when he is not present. When he is present they refer to him as "my lord." It is not hard to see that this argument quickly crumbles. If the argument you are attempting to refute is that Venetian society is built off racial undertones, then the fact that the characters only refer to him in a racist way behind his back, in fact, bolsters the opposition. Another point he raises is even Othello's beloved wife Desdemona used the term "the Moor," in his presence no less. Because of this, Evans remarks that it can be implied that "the Moor" is "simply how Othello is commonly referred to." It is easy to see the moral downfall of this argument. Just because Othello is commonly referred to as "the Moor," that does not make it right in any way whatsoever. Other than one singular additional instance in the play, no one is referred to by their race in the way that Othello is, and it is obvious that one Venetian would never call another "the Venetian." In this way, it is made clear that Venetians viewed his identity as his race rather than his humanity.

A final argument that Evans makes consistently throughout his essay is the fact that Shakespeare could have easily made Venetian racism more evident if he wanted it to be the main issue of the play; however, the very essence of Evans' essay seems to negate this fact. Because the play is so saturated with examples of racism, Evans must spend his entire essay defending remarks which can be or are considered racist. Besides, this argument could truly be used in any situation. If Shakespeare truly wanted to make Iago the explicit devil of the play, he would have had him kill Othello personally, or even worse kill everyone. As you can see, this argument can quickly be reduced to nonsense. On top of this, there are many examples other than these which Evans does condemn yet seems to overlook, whereas he seems to deem the "spotless" Duke as Venice's saving grace. However, it once again appears to me that since Evans must spend his entire essay defending questionable treatments of Othello, even if we grant that the Duke is not racist, he still seems to be the outlier in Venetian culture.

On the other hand, others would beg to differ. People like Patrick Hogan argue that the Venice which Shakespeare depicts in Othello was in fact extremely racist. They do this by analyzing the very same examples as those Evans' does, yet affirms them as racist indeed. Hogan, Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, argues that the world of Othello was built off ubiquitous undertones of racism. He says that "in almost every way, the attitude towards Othello in the play is racist, even when it is not derogatory," because, in fact, that is not assumed in the category of "racism."

To begin, Hogan observes that the term “the Moor” is used twice as much (proportionally) as the actual name Othello is in the play. The very fact that “the Moor” is used before and more frequently in the play than his actual name was used, demonstrates the inhumane treatment of Othello which is rampantly present throughout the play. For the majority of the time, the other characters in the play do not refer to Othello as an individual, but rather they refer to him as a “foreign” or “black” individual. His identity is not affirmed in his humanity, but rather in his race. However, not all of the speech is merely racist in essence. A lot of it is explicitly derogatory. This can be seen over and over by the way the other characters refer to and talk about Othello. For example, Roderigo refers to Othello as “the thick-lips” and Iago characterizes him as an animal, calling him “an old black ram.” If Othello was white, would Roderigo and Iago have said “the normal lips” or “the white sheep” (to use the kindest of terms)? Would they even refer to each other in such a way? I think not. This rhetoric may seem silly or erring on ridiculous; however, I would argue that it is the absolute truth. The racism does not stop there as Iago continues to prod Brabantio, the father of Desdemona saying: “Your daughter is covered with a Barbary horse, hence you will have nephews neigh to you.” You may be thinking at this point, “You have proved Iago certainly hates Othello because of his race; however, you have not shown any evidence of this world view from anyone else in the play.”

This is where I would turn the discussion to a certain portion of the play, namely the scene that takes place in the court of the Duke. Brabantio is thoroughly convinced that his daughter could never love something like Othello and must have been deceived into doing so. Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, who has not been “steadily deceived” by ongoing subliminal messages from Iago. Brabantio is shown in the play to virtually immediately hold the same contempt for Othello as Iago, assuming that Othello must have used some type of witchcraft to win over his daughter. Because of this, Desdemona is summoned before the court to defend her love for Othello. The character of Othello can be easily dismissed given the fact that everyone truly found Othello as a morally upstanding man. This only leaves his race as the reason for why Brabantio believes Othello must have somehow “coerced” his daughter into loving and marrying him, which is bolstered by the statements of Brabantio in the court. Hogan finally concludes that Shakespeare masterfully uses the play to condemn such treatment of people according to their race by “mak[ing] painfully clear the quiet, persuasive cruelty of racism, and its terrible human consequences.” I could not think of a better conclusion for this argument. Shakespeare clearly makes the racism in the play intentionally obvious and explicit in order to condemn it by the tragic ending of the play.

Personally, I would firmly adhere to this latter interpretation as truly accurate. In fact, I would go even farther by applying this to the “Iago problem.” I would use this view to hammer home the fact once and for all that racism is the true devil of the play rather than Iago. One scholar whom I vehemently agree with is Kiernan Ryan, whom I cited earlier. He makes an extremely similar argument to say that racism can be found everywhere throughout the play. Ryan start this with an analysis of Othello and Desdemona’s forbidden relationship. The uproar which caused in reaction to their elopement and marriage exemplifies the derogatory treatment of Othello throughout the entire play. As I stated previously, Othello was indeed a highly respected soldier and a great man of character, so this reaction can only be traced back to Venice’s racial prejudice against him. Thus, Othello and Desdemona find themselves at odds with society. They are now facing the “venomous rage of a society whose foundations are rocked by the mere fact of their marriage.” After this, Ryan continues to explore other flaws in Venetian society, as well to examine other derogatory references to Othello by the likes of not only Iago but Roderigo and Brabantio as well.

So, how does this relate to Iago, and how does it let him “off the hook?” I would actually not be so bold as to argue that the racism of Venetian culture lets him “off the hook,” because there is still no excuse for his or anyone else’s treatment of Othello; however, I do believe that Iago unfairly becomes the sole scapegoat for the tragic results of the play nine times out of ten. Simply imagine, “If Othello was white, would the play still come to its same tragic outcome?” I think not. If it were not for the commonly held grounds of racism which we have previously explored, neither Iago nor anyone else would have viewed Othello in a bad light. The outcome of the play is inextricably linked to Othello’s race. As I have stated multiple times, Othello was a good man and a good soldier. No one had any valid reason to dislike him. The only justification they had to hold prejudices against him was his race, and this reason was not valid or moral in any way whatsoever. It has also been made clear that Iago was not the only one who held these racist views, but so did the likes of Roderigo, Brabantio, and the rest of society -- barring possibly the Duke. As Ryan says: “Iago differs from his fellow Venetians only in the ferocity with which he espouses their values and the deadly extremes to which he resorts to vindicate them.” Yes, Iago acted off the same voluntary sinful nature that all men share, yet if it were not for the racism of Venetian culture in general, Iago would not have held these views either, and would not have deceived Othello as he did. Ryan concludes: “To grasp that fact [that the tragedy could have come to fruition without Iago’s interference at all] is to pluck out the heart of Iago’s mystery, which is dispelled by the realization that his malignity is not a monstrous deviation from the Venetian norm but its mirror image. The patriarchal, racist universe of Othello confronts in ‘damned Iago’, the ‘inhuman dog’ (5.1.62), not its demonic antithesis but its grotesque epitome.” As Ryan finally concludes, Iago is the horrible conclusion to the racist syllogism of Venetian society. Does this Iago guiltless? Of course not! However, neither are any of the other proponents of racism in the play.

In conclusion, I have explored the question of what was truly the enemy in the play: Iago or Venetian racism? To answer this question, I analyzed whether Venetian society was truly racist. After exploring both sides of the argument, I came to the conclusion that the racism which runs deep in the roots of Venice as represented by Shakespeare in Othello is the true devil, not Iago. However, how does this matter to us? That is to say, why should we care that racism is the devil and not Iago. Well, this fact can actually have a large impact on our lives which the likes of the new historicist will miss out on. Those who argue that Iago is the devil of the play tend to remove racism as an issue, or at least one of great gravity. So, when you argue that Iago is simply an evil psychopath that represents the devil, you can easily dismiss his actions as the machinations of a sick mind, and similarly overlooks the moral of the play. Shakespeare is imploring us to reflect on not only ourselves but our culture as well. He wants us to realize the gravity of racism and understand its poisonous consequences in culture through the final tragedies of the play. Especially when we read this play as Christians, we should feel convicted to heed his warning and engage in wholesome reflection, lest we become blinded by society’s evil prejudices as Iago was. We must analyze our relationships with others and the impact we have on culture especially in our given social circles as we err from Venice’s mistakes, and heed Christ’s call in Mark 12 to love our neighbor as ourselves.