*To what extent does race figure into Othello’s tragedy?*

Though race isn’t the explicit or primary factor behind any of the conflicts in *Othello*, it is an underlying cause behind many of the play’s clashes. In particular, Iago’s racist perception of Othello and his subsequent language and treatment of the character propels many of the play’s conflicts, both external and internal.

Iago, *Othello*’s mysteriously motivated Vice character, loathes Othello from the beginning and spends the play plotting and enacting his downfall. “Thou told’st me / thou didst hold (Othello) in thy hate,” Roderigo says to Othello in lines 5-6 of the play’s first scene. “Despise me / if I do not,” Iago responds. While it remains unclear exactly why Iago hates Othello so fervently, his language suggests that this hatred may be at least somewhat racially motivated. Iago frequently associates Othello’s negative characteristics and questionable actions with his race and skin tone. For instance, in disclosing his plots against Othello to the audience via soliloquy, Iago states: “The Moor is of a free and open nature / That think men honest that it seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by th’ nose / As asses are” (1.3, 377-380). Iago refers to Othello as ‘the Moor,’ a racial reference, far more than by his actual name. In this particular quote, Iago associates Othello’s ability to be tricked and misled like an ‘ass’ with his race through the use of the term. Iago’s hatred of Othello could stem from numerous other factors, from jealousy over Othello’s position or appointment of Cassio, to Iago’s belief that Othello has slept with his wife, but his persistent criticisms of Othello alongside racially charged language imply racist undertones in all of his actions. Iago uses Othello’s race as a driving factor in many of his plots throughout the play.

Though many references to Othello and his character are positive towards the play’s opening, the disparaging remarks, particularly Iago’s, correlate with comments on race and skin tone. In Act I, Iago works to ensure Brabantio’s outrage towards the marriage of his daughter and Othello through racially charged language. “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / is tupping your white ewe,” he claims, a clear attempt to incite Brabantio’s anger (1.1, 86-87). Iago equates Othello’s race with animalistic and diminutive qualities – he does this again a few lines later, stating “You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans” (1.1, 108-110). These comments, intended to provoke Brabantio’s outrage, correlate repulsive animalistic copulation with Othello and Desdemona’s interracial relationship – clear attempts to use Othello’s race to disparage him and promote conflict. Brabantio takes the bait, concluding that Othello must have wooed his daughter through witchcraft, as she could not in her right mind have married him. Though a number of differences between Othello and Desdemona, including age and cultural experience, could be the subject of Brabantio’s dismay, Iago’s preceding comments emphasize race as the primary component. The opening clash between Brabantio and Othello demonstrates how Iago uses Othello’s race and ‘otherness’ to denigrate him and cause him strife and woe.

Iago also uses racially charged language to turn Othello against himself and incite his distrust and betrayal of Desdemona. At the play’s start, Othello is self-assured, confidently commanding that Brabantio and his men speak with Othello calmly, rather than drawing weapons. “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black,” the Duke even states of Othello to Brabantio in 1.3 (though this is another instance of Othello’s race invoking negative connotations, as ‘black’ becomes the opposite of fair in both color and in quality). Othello’s reputation and self-worth are dignified, as a military officer, a citizen, and a husband. However, his growing awareness of his skin color through Iago’s conniving correlate with his downslide in self-esteem and security and drive him closer to his betrayal and murder of Desdemona. In his soliloquy contemplating what Iago has ‘revealed’ to him about Desdemona, Othello states: “Haply, for I am black / and have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have… She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loathe her” (3.3, 261-266). This speech is the first time in the play where Othello refers to himself as ‘black’ (in race or demeanor) and also the turn where he begins to distrust Desdemona. It also suggests that Othello may believe that his race, among other differences, is a factor as to why Desdemona betrays him. Later in the same scene, Othello states: “My name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / as mine own face” (3.3, 383-385). Here, Othello correlates Desdemona’s betrayal and the shame it brings upon him with the blackness of his own skin tone. Iago has managed to manipulate Othello not only into believing in Desdemona’s infidelity, but also in Iago’s own racial slander. Just before his own death, Othello describes himself as “a malignant and a turbaned Turk” who “beat a Venetian,” (presumably Desdemona) (5.2, 346-347). This quote, one of Othello’s final moments, demonstrates one final time how Othello’s warped view of his race from the insinuations of Iago become a component in his struggles and his ultimate tragedy.