Although there are many possible approaches to writing on *Othello*, one of the most interesting is to examine the role of race. As you read this play, then, be sure to follow carefully the complex meanings and function of race. Do not fall into the trap of seeing this play as simply a black man victimized by the racism of a white society. While it is this to an extent, what the play has to say about Othello's relationship with the white Venetian community, as well as his own sense of racial identity, is far more intricate.

A passage from the play illustrates this point more clearly. The following lines come from an early key moment in act 1, scene 3. Othello is trying to convince the court that he has won the hand of Desdemona honestly, explaining how she came to love him.

```
Her father loved me, oft invited me,  
Still questioned me the story of my life  
From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes  
That I have passed…
Wherein I spoke of most dangerous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field  
Of hair-breadth scapes i'th' imminent deadly breach,  
Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence …
And of the cannibals that each other eat,  
…the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders….  
She [Desdemona] loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
And I loved her that she did pity them.  
This is the only witchcraft I have used. (3.1.127–68)
```

This short passage reveals an enormous amount that could form the foundation for an essay. Notice that the passage begins with a significant clue to Othello's status in white Venice. Brabanzio, Desdemona's father, now outraged by the marriage of Othello to his daughter, was once comfortable inviting Othello to his house. At this point, you might reflect on the degree to which Othello has been accepted by and welcomed into Venice, asking perhaps if that welcome is unconditional.

Othello continues by recounting how he entertained those gathered at Brabanzio's house with stories of his past. The content of these stories opens up one of the most important concepts in the play: the conscious and unconscious ways Othello's actions are determined by his race. Notice the exotic sights and curiosities populating his tale, the fantastic and monstrous symbols of a dark world away from the civilization of Europe. Is Othello merely recollecting things he has seen and done, or is he wittingly using his otherness to appeal to his audience (and, perhaps, Desdemona)?

So far, race seems to be playing a powerful though benign role in Othello's Venetian life. It grants him a difference that he uses to his advantage for public and, as Desdemona comes to "pity" him, private gain. (And do not ignore Othello's use of the word *pity* in describing Desdemona's responses to his tales. Take this as a cue to think carefully—as Othello himself will do to a fatal extent—about the roots of the play's central marriage.) But notice how the final lines of the passage disrupt this complicated but largely benign interpretation of race. Consider the implications of Brabanzio's accusing Othello of employing "witchcraft" to woo Desdemona—he is at a loss for other ways to explain what is to him and his society such an inexplicable decision on his daughter's part. The dark and mystical elements of the story Othello told to his advantage are reflected in the preexisting cultural imagination of white Venice. They are brought to the surface when Othello wants to be more to Venice than a fascinating sideshow, when he wants to become a member of the European community. As you write, focus on other ways in which racially motivated feelings emerge from hidden places in unexpected ways.
As this small cross section of the play’s racial discourse suggests, you should resist the assumption that because Shakespeare’s play is four centuries old it is from a simpler time. The best way to approach the social issues contained in *Othello* is to recognize that while different, the racial relationships in Shakespeare’s lifetime were as fraught and complex as they can be today.

**Topics and Strategies**

Every essay requires a focus; you cannot write about everything in the play at once. The section on how to write an essay shows you a number of ways to turn a focus into a thesis, observations into arguments. However, the starting point is nearly always finding an initial focus and making first observations. What follows is a discussion of *Othello* geared toward helping you make the most of the budding ideas you will have as you read the play. By no means should you feel limited to these topics, however.

**Themes**

While many students will be drawn to the theme of race in *Othello*, many alternative avenues are available. For example, there is in *Othello* a stark and frightening contemplation of the nature of evil, of unlimited hatred. A paper treating gender in the play, focusing perhaps on Desdemona’s restricted control of her fate and person, might not include analysis of race. But as race is a particularly popular choice among student writers working with this play, it is discussed at some length here. Clearly, the key to writing about race in this play is to have a sharp focus on a specific aspect of that theme. You should use a thesis statement to make sure your essay avoids becoming merely a broad discussion of race in the play.

In a close reading of the passage above, the opening and closing lines suggest how Othello is viewed by the white denizens of Venice. This perspective on race in the play might make for a good, sharp essay. What exactly does Othello mean to the state he serves? You should certainly consider the hypocritical opinions expressed by Brabanzio but also the seemingly different point of view held by the duke. Why does the duke defend Othello against Brabanzio’s charges? Look closely, too, at Lodovico’s response in act 4, scene 1 to Othello’s violence. Of course, as in any paper, you must think about what limits to place on your study. For example, should Iago be included in such an essay? What about Desdemona?

Regardless, this essay would clearly have a more or less limited scope. The limit is created when you say, “I will think only about how Othello is viewed by other people and in that way build an understanding of the society in which Othello lives.” You could also achieve a similar effect without placing such rigorous textual limitations on yourself, however. To do so, think about questions offering the chance to discuss race in the play more broadly while still ensuring a tight focus. For example, you ask some variation of the following question: To what extent is this play racist? To write this essay, you would look for evidence of Shakespeare’s sympathies for Othello or, conversely, the playwright’s reliance on and perpetuation of racial stereotyping.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Race:** How central is race to the play’s action? To what extent is the action driven by race?

   Such an essay might begin by identifying explicit statements of racism in the play. Do not simply list them, however. See if you can characterize the patterns and central principles of racial discord as they appear in *Othello*. For example, Brabanzio naturally slips into identifying Othello as a magical, witchlike figure born of some otherworldly place. Look, too, at the opening exchange among Iago, Roderigo, and Brabanzio. Try to spot commonalities of image and metaphor that shape the racist slurs abounding in the first scene. How does society perceive the marriage between Othello and Desdemona? Read for patterns of language and symbolism invoking the unnatural or the bestial.

   Perhaps, however, the most intriguing element of this theme can be found in Othello’s own conflicted sense of racial identity. Try to gain psychological insight into Othello’s perception of himself by locating passages in which he expresses anxieties about his marriage that are anchored in his racial identity. Identify the ways in which Iago brings these deep-seated anxieties to the surface in Othello. Then find evidence of a growing division in Othello’s sense of self. How might Shakespeare be intending his audience to see Othello’s transformation in the second half of the play through a racial lens? Be sure to include a discussion of Othello’s final speech, unraveling the complex layers of racial metaphor and meaning that surround his suicide. The key to such an essay might lie in identifying the nature of Othello’s divided self. How does this split personality stem directly from the racial conditions of the life he tried to lead in Venice and the social anxieties that appear to have weighed heavily on him all along?
2. **Love:** Although we hear much from the Venetians condemning Othello and Desdemona's marriage, how does Shakespeare represent the love between a white woman and a black man?

Again, a good place to begin this essay might be the opening scene, in which Iago's vulgar jibes caricature the physical relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Compare this view from the outside to moments where the lovers characterize their marriage. What is the dynamic of the marriage as the play opens? What kind of husband is Othello? What, for him, appears to be the correct way to love Desdemona? What draws Desdemona to Othello in the first place? As you write, you might then work backward from Othello's final observation that everything has gone wrong because he "loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.353). Was excessive love really the root of Othello's fall? The most important thing might be to recognize that love here does not exist in isolation from the social and psychological ghosts that haunt Othello from the start. Try to identify the various pressures exerted on the love between Desdemona and Othello, perhaps finding scenes that challenge Othello's final, too-neat judgment of what went wrong.

**Character**

A character essay on Othello might obviously draw on many of the same questions and textual moments as an essay on the theme of race. A character study of Iago, moreover, while allowing the student to move away from the theme of race somewhat, presents clear problems of its own. Principally, the main appeal of Iago for many students is precisely what makes him difficult to write about; he is an enigmatic presence about whom there is arguably little concrete to say beyond a few textual clues to his purposes. Certainly none of this means that you should avoid character analysis essays on *Othello*. On the contrary, such an approach opens up different aspects of Othello's character for study or might provide a good way to narrow the focus of an essay on race or some other theme. For example, an essay asking whether Shakespeare's presentation of Othello is sympathetic, given the absolute centrality of race to an understanding of Othello's character, is a very specific reformulation of a thesis seeking to evaluate how Shakespeare handles race. The key to a character essay on this play, then, is recognizing that each character is a product of his or her society, as mired in the same swamp of conventions and prejudices as the next character.

1. **Othello:** How would you explain Othello's transformation from military hero, darling of the Venetian elite, to a murderer who appears to kill his wife over nothing more substantial than a handkerchief?

As discussed above, such an essay will use many of the same concepts and textual moments as an essay on the theme of race. A good structure for this essay might be to start by briefly showing the reader Othello as he is at the beginning and then proceed to a more substantial analysis of the character at the end of the play, focusing on the idea of Othello as a divided, torn man. The remainder of the essay would cover the middle portion of the play, detailing the complex mix of social and psychological elements that lead to his transformation. Do not forget, though, that the seeds of this transformation might not be found in Iago's machinations but in the workings of European society and Othello's attempts to belong within it.

2. **Desdemona:** Is Desdemona merely a passive victim of the tragedy that overcomes her? Or does she help bring disaster on herself, as some critics have suggested, through her desires?

As you read, look for ways in which Desdemona is marginalized. There seem to be similarities between Othello's status as a black man in Venetian society and Desdemona's as a woman: Both are clearly outside the authoritative heart of the community. Pay close attention especially to the early scenes in which she is argued over as if a belonging, an object whose ownership is contested between father and husband. Even more controversially, is Desdemona portrayed as being "punished" for her desires, succumbing to erotic fantasies centered on the other? Look for ways in which she is increasingly associated with images of darkness and evil instead of the language of purity and whiteness that surrounds her at the start. Try to wrestle meaning from the link between Desdemona and the servant Barbary (almost certainly intended to have been black), emphasized by the "Willow" song moments before Othello kills Desdemona. Remember that in Renaissance symbolism, whiteness was understood to represent goodness while blackness was a metaphor for evil. Has Desdemona finally undergone a transformation that mirrors Othello's progression to a divided racial identity?

3. **Iago:** What are Iago's motivations as a villain? Are they substantial enough to give meaning to his character and the actions he takes?

Many students are drawn to this essay, but exercise care; this is a difficult one to write well. The romantic poet and critic Samuel Coleridge complained that Iago's motives were inexplicable and insufficient to make the action of the play believable. Look carefully through the early scenes of the drama, in which Iago offers a number of explanations for what he
is about to do. Do you find these convincing? If not, you should embrace Iago's lack of dimension; think about Iago as a symbolic character, a representation of evil rather than a well-rounded, multidimensional figure. This approach connects him to the medieval stage tradition of the vice, a character who simply represents a negative quality such as greed or lust, for example. If you view Iago as symbolic, what exactly is Shakespeare saying about evil?

You should certainly not hesitate to differ in your essay with this take on Iago if you do not agree; this will take you in a different but no less profitable direction. If you accept Iago's early justifications as substantial enough to propel him forward, you might claim that his jealousy mirrors that of Othello and thus shapes the play into a warning against excessive envy. This approach argues for Iago's complexity and humanness, perhaps the most frightening of all possible interpretations of this character. If Iago is more than a symbol, how might you begin to explain a figure of such unmitigated evil?

History and Context

Much of the intellectual energy surrounding Othello in recent decades has been generated by a school of criticism known as postcolonial studies. Along with several other Shakespeare plays, Othello has received attention from these critics, who hope to obtain a better understanding of Europe's encounter with the ever-growing outside world in the early modern era. From this perspective, Othello becomes a historical document of considerable importance because it takes as its thematic focus precisely this encounter.

This type of approach gives the student an opportunity to write about and participate in the very latest critical trends. As in any historically minded essay, you will need to follow the basic strategy of researching the historical moment and comparing it to the episodes and characters of the play.

Sample Topic

1. The African or Moor in Europe: What was the relationship between Europeans and the Africans, or Moors, existing on or within their borders? In what ways does Shakespeare engage real issues and anxieties of his time in Othello?

There were relatively few people of African origin living in Shakespeare's England. However, their presence was enough of an issue for Elizabeth I to give a proclamation that they should be removed from the land. To the east of Europe, the Turks represented a grave military threat to Christendom. Finally, of course, the empires of Europe in the New World were being built by the muscle of enslaved African labor, whose lives were so cheaply expended to make colossal profit from crops such as sugar in the West Indies. In short, there was a mix of fear and subjection that in many ways is replicated in Othello's story. G. K. Hunter's classic study Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition is a slightly dated but nonetheless good place to begin research in this area. More contemporary but perhaps less accessible is the impressive body of work being written by postcolonial critic Ania Loomba.

As you write this essay, compare the historical record to two components of the play. First, look at what characters say and do throughout the play. You will find many of the same anxieties and prejudices in the words of the characters as you do in the historical record. Then try to view the play as a statement about the European encounter with the African (or Moor) distinct from the sentiments of its characters. Ruth Cowhig argues that in writing Othello, Shakespeare breaks new ground of sympathy and tolerance for a black character. She points out that regardless of Othello's flaws, Shakespeare consciously avoids the otherwise inevitable stereotype of the villainous black man that audiences would have expected. Indeed, Shakespeare seems deliberately to soften his version of Othello compared with the more sinister Othello character found in his source material. Assess Shakespeare's voice against the historical record, the typical sentiments and opinions of his day. Find how he is of his time in this way, as well as other ways in which he is ahead of it.

Philosophy and Ideas

Othello is a play about passions far more than it is a play about ideas; the heart and not the head is Shakespeare's primary setting for this text. Othello's great weakness, as he understands it, is precisely that he does not think enough. (How might this be considered one more of the stereotypical traits of Shakespeare's tragic heroes?) Iago, however, thinks quickly and spontaneously, but it might be difficult to identify any overarching or grand philosophy animating his thoughts. Indeed, many have argued that Iago's significant intelligence is ungoverned by any cohesive intellect. Nonetheless, there is still scope for writing an essay about the
philosophical content of the play. Iago's very rejection of a guiding philosophy creates a philosophical problem for a writer considering the nature of evil in this play. Othello's self-division could also be viewed as a philosophical problem of consciousness that is as much internal as it is social. These essays might encourage you to take on philosophical questions hand-in-hand with an analysis of the play's social conditions. However, Othello also asks philosophical questions that escape social context and approach the universal.

Sample Topic

1. **The relationship between appearances and reality:** What does the play say about the relationship between perceptions and actualities, what we see and feel compared with what actually is? To what degree can the characters of Othello (and, by implication, the rest of us too) trust their senses?

   To write an essay of this kind, you must be willing to look at many different aspects of the play. This philosophical theme manifests itself so frequently and in so many different contexts that you should certainly give it thought. As you read and prepare to write, identify moments where appearance and reality are at odds. Look for ironic details such as the frequent labeling of Iago as "honest" or for moments when speech and language appear to be persuasive and clear but are merely lies. Perhaps more important and more troubling is the way in which Othello's demand for "ocular proof" results in Iago's staging the convincing but utterly false scene of Cassio's "confession." It might be inevitable that we cannot always trust other people when they talk, but what is Shakespeare attempting to say by showing how Othello's most reliable of senses, his sight, is as vulnerable to deception as his ears? Follow closely, too, the passage of the the handkerchief, perhaps the clearest and most famous symbol of how truth is so difficult to find in Othello. Look for and comment on ways in which the meaning of this piece of fabric shifts several times throughout the play. Finally, and perhaps most difficult of all, you might want to consider how this theme is connected to the play's consideration of race. The strongest case for a racially sympathetic Othello might rest in the play's obsession with inaccurate and mistaken perceptions, cautioning against the failure to look beneath the surface and see what truly matters.

Form and Genre

For a very long time Othello was maligned by many critics. They perceived a number of dramatic failures that supposedly compromised the play's success. Questions of Shakespeare's workmanship in Othello have largely been supplanted (or explained) by the kinds of critical interests we have already discussed, but they nonetheless offer good material for students interested in the mechanics of the play. As you write, however, be sure to look for connections between form and content. In other words, are Shakespeare's seeming mistakes really mistakes at all? Do they in fact help illuminate the themes treated in the play?

Sample Topics

1. **The failures of characterization in Othello:** To what extent are Shakespeare's characters in Othello plausible? Are their motives and actions naturalistic or psychologically real enough to be credible?

   An essay of this type might address two of the most common charges against Shakespeare's development of character in Othello: first, that Iago's murderous scheme is not explained or adequately justified by any compensating motive (see the "Character" section on Iago above for suggestions on how to approach this question), and second, that Othello is too gullible to earn the audience's respect, too lightweight compared with Shakespeare's great tragic heroes. Perhaps you agree with one or both of these statements, in which case your essay will be an attempt to support these familiar claims. In the case of Othello, you will focus on what appears to some to be a frustrating lack of healthy suspicion or awareness of those around him. It might be more interesting, however, to challenge one or both of these objections. Again, to take Othello as an example, it might be that his apparently inexplicable naivete is actually nothing less than justifiable self-doubt born from an acute awareness of his vulnerable position in Venetian society.

2. **The quality of Othello's tragedy:** What is the tragic catharsis of Othello? Does its tragic movement compare well to Shakespeare's other great tragedies?

   Tragedies were expected to contain a certain number of characteristics, including a clear cathartic value likened to a purging of fearful emotions. To put this simply, tragedy was expected to be grand, with great men falling against obstacles of universal magnitude. Such an awesome spectacle cleansed the common audience member by instructing him or her at the
expense of the tragic character. In short, the criticism often leveled at *Othello* over the last 400 years has been that it is not serious or grand enough, that Othello, his decisions, and his circumstances are too poorly contrived and explained for the play to function as a tragedy should. Your essay would proceed from this charge, defending it or challenging it as you wish. The latter approach might begin by identifying a substantial cathartic effect at work in the play, showing how *Othello* is more than a mere domestic drama driven by foolish decisions and a lady's handkerchief. Where is the significant dramatic power located in the text? In what way have critics misinterpreted or undervalued the tragic elements of the play? You might develop a number of ideas from this chapter to help you make your case, but also consider the possibility that this tradition of devaluing the play is a product of the same kind of social prejudices visible in the action of the play itself. After all, until as recently as the mid-20th century, a good deal of criticism on this play had a distinctly racist flavor (see, for example, M. R. Ridley's notorious discussion of the play in his introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Othello* in the 1950s).

**Compare and Contrast Essays:**

*Othello* lends itself more easily to certain kinds of compare and contrast essays than others. It may be a little difficult to find elements of character, action, or structure within the play that invite comparison or contrast. Nonetheless, set about looking for pairs in *Othello* and you will find them. For example, you could compare the only two women in the play, Desdemona and Emilia. In this essay, you would want to pay close attention to the conversations they have with each other, especially the remarkable exchange about adultery shortly before their deaths. Shakespeare seems to be presenting two different models of womanhood, but be careful not to jump quickly to judgment against Emilia. After all, her speech might be read as the only moment of female empowerment in the play. Try to characterize the two models of feminine conduct that these women represent, but try to see ways in which Shakespeare might intend them to be complementary as well as oppositional.

Some of the most energetic student essays, however, will look outside the play for reference points. One play that encourages comparison of this kind is *The Tempest*, another of Shakespeare's works dramatizing the encounter between white Europeans and a foreign other. Although the settings may differ, look for ways in which the Europeans' treatment of Ariel, Caliban, and the island itself overlaps with the Venetians' treatment of Othello.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Comparing Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* to Othello:** To what extent do these marginalized figures resemble each other? Does Shakespeare make similar or different points about otherness through these characters?

   An essay such as this might focus on moments in which sympathy is created for each of these outsiders. Look at Shylock's well-known speech in act 3, scene 1, lines 45–61, but also at other moments that bring Shylock and the audience together. These might include Jessica's desertion of Shylock (and her sale of his treasured engagement ring for a monkey), as well as the complex emotional makeup of the trial scene. Both Shylock and Othello eloquently express themselves and articulate their place in society, so look for moments in both plays when this occurs. Are their fates in any way similar, brought about by related social dynamics?

2. **Contrast Shakespeare's *Othello* to Tim Blake Nelson's film adaptation *O* (2001):** What changes occur in the process of updating *Othello* by 400 years?

   Contrasting a Shakespeare play to a film adaptation can make for a good essay, but in this case the possibilities are especially varied because this 2001 film takes more liberties with the text than a traditional adaptation might. Indeed, the film entirely abandons Shakespeare's language in the process of modernizing the story, though it remains thematically true to the spirit of the text. Watch the film closely for shifts, omissions, or additions to the narrative of the play. Consider the way in which race functions differently in the movie. The relationship between Odin (Mekhi Phifer) and Desi (Julia Stiles) is now less outwardly controversial than Othello and Desdemona's, but look for moments when race inevitably influences this modern tragedy. For example, does it still seem that Desi is drawn to Odin at least in part because of his difference? Watch for moments where the lovers discuss race with an openness and candor unavailable on Shakespeare's stage. Think, too, about shifts in the motivations of Hugo (the Iago character in the movie, played by Josh Hartnett) that help make his behavior more comprehensible, in particular, his use of steroids and the addition of a troubled relationship with his father, Duke, who appears to love Odin more than his own son.

**Further Information**


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