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Writing Samples

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Defining Iago: Racial Motives & Personal Shortcomings

Racial tensions have played serious roles in history as cultures have clashed with each other. Of course, this has also translated into literature and other works carrying the same overtones. Specifically, the issue of color has been significant as it defined the roles of blacks and whites across diverse contexts. But this was not a general rule as some blacks gained positions of power even when competing against traditional white male Protestants. Given the racial tensions involved in such situations of blacks in power, generalized characteristics about blacks and whites become much clearer as we assess behavioral traits that surpass skin color and cultural values. In William Shakespeare's classic play *Othello, The Moor of Venice*, strong racial overtones and character depictions are evident as well. In analyzing the role of Iago, Othello's ensign and villain of the play, it is vital to carefully consider the complex interplay of race and personal characteristics as the drama unfolds. In holding any dispositions of blacks having an "innate darkness" and whites being the epitome of justness and virtue back, the characters truly expose themselves within the context of both racial and personal tensions. As Iago's manufacturing of racial tension is uncovered, the reader must critically look to personal character traits in determining whether Iago would have been successful in carrying out a similar plan within a different skin color.

The plot summary of *Othello* focuses on the devious and revengeful tactics of Iago as he tries to assert his own punishment for a variety of reasons. Othello himself is depicted as an

upstanding Moor general who commands the respect and leadership of his soldiers. His wife is but a mere concubine who relentlessly loves her husband, despite his irrational behavior. As the events unfold in the play, the action is focused on the manipulation by Iago of other characters. It is important to reconcile that Iago has a reputation of honesty and credibility among the people he interacts with. For example, when Othello was leaving to go to the war, his conversation with the Duke reflected a high level of respect for him: “a man he is of honesty and trust. To his conveyance I assign my wife...” (Shakespeare, 18). Trusting another man with your wife was considered a serious indication of respect and honor within the historical context. Consequently, Othello displayed an intimate level of personal trust and affection for Iago. In placing so much trust in him, the stage was set for him to show his true colors as everything unfolded.

Surely, one of the first indications of Iago’s true nature comes in the form a racist attitude toward the black Moor. From the very beginning and throughout the play, he constantly hides his true attitudes while being modest and hateful when in the presence of others. For example, when convincing the rejected suitor of Desdemona to pursue her in spite of Othello, Iago uses sharp and hateful language in the process: “Even now, very now, an old black ram is tugging your white ewe” (Shakespeare, 4). Clearly, the characterization is that Othello is being compared to an animal who is not worthy of having a white woman as his wife. While one might argue that this statement was used solely for the purpose of angering Roderigo and further instigating him, the play offers more evidence that contributes to these racial tensions. Moreover, the reference to Othello being a primitive or sub-human being is evident when he calls him a “barbary horse” (Shakespeare, 5). Again, this personification offers testament to the notion that Iago had a racial motivation for disliking the Moor. Even his own wife Emilia spurred out racial slurs referencing

Othello to the devil. Ultimately, there was a clear indication that Iago was not happy with the Moor's position as a leader and the fact that he was forced to respect someone with a skin color that he despised.

These racial tensions could easily be attributed to the reason that Iago was so vengeful of Othello. They are depicted as being a leading theme in the play shared by almost everyone. However, there is not sufficient evidence that Iago's vision of race was equally shared. For example, in meeting with Desdemona's father to ruin Othello's marriage, "Iago legitimize[d] and intensifie[d] Brabantio's racism through his initial sexualization and racializing invocation of Othello" (Adelman, 126). That is, the racial tensions in the play were manufactured by Iago and not necessarily native to everyone. The same was true of how he manipulated Roderigo to hate Othello and pursue Desdemona. Even in his conversations with Cassio, Iago insisted on forging Othello "into a black monster, invading the citadel of whiteness" (Adelman, 130). These types of characterizations originated from Iago and only gave the perception of a shared racist view because he simultaneously fused emotionally charged topics such as a daughter or lost love into it. The visible layer of the other characters' hatred towards Othello was only masked by their own internal motivations for hating him that were unrelated to race. That being said, evidence such as the conversation with the Duke epitomizes just the opposite view of the black Moor: "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (Shakespeare, 18). As this Duke was one character who was not fully manipulated by Iago, he did not share such a negative view of blacks. Consequently, the role of personal characteristic traits must be further explored.

The fact that Iago's character identity was based on servitude throughout the play gives credibility to the notion that his hostility would have persisted if racial tensions were not there.

As Cassio was elected to be the Lieutenant above rank of Iago, the spite shined much more clearly. In justifying why he should have been chosen, Iago argued vehemently, albeit in fair grounds. Indeed, his experience on the battlefield reflected his qualifications: “And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds Christian and heathen, must be belee'd and calm'd By debator and creditor” (Shakespeare, 2). However, to be a leader, there was more to leadership than performing on the battlefield. Being able to deal with men and act without hubris was essential. Iago's behavior throughout the whole play gives evidence that he was not able to maintain emotional stability against the odds of life. Thus, his self-proclaimed inferiority shined from the first scene when he lamented that “I am not what I am” (Shakespeare, 3). He clearly felt as though he was not being recognized as the leader, soldier and person that he thought he was. This was the reason that there were so many abrasive conversations with other characters; Iago was venting his own inferior position and self-concept in front of people that he perceived to have dominance over.

As Iago's core personal traits reflect an angry, inferior and bitter human being, the evidence now points to a different root cause of his behavior, personal shortcomings; consequently, this suggests that race should be mitigated as a strong influence in how the characters are judged in various scenarios. Iago's inferiority in the play was thoroughly sufficient reason for him to lash out. Even his own wife lived a life of servitude to someone else, just like him. Consequently, whether Iago himself was black, white or yellow, his personal identity would have prompted him to behave in a similar way and carry out his hatred towards others that have things he does not. Such erratic and spiteful behavior would not have won the confidence or trust of anyone because of his true nature. Since he was a clever deceiver of others, he could have

used vice as a means of winning trust, but his core being would not have been different if his skin color was. For example, Iago's constant characterizations of feeling empty and worthless in contrast to Othello support this notion. As Janet Adelman remarked regarding Iago's personal weakness, "Othello's fullness and solidity are the object of Iago's envy [and] can be gauged by the extent to which he works to replicate his own self-division in Othello" (Adelman, 132). As a result, personal shortcomings were the main focal point of the dishonesty and race was used as an outlet because it was a feasible and easily used scapegoating tactic. This de-emphasis of race supports the assertion that Iago would have been able to perform any of his same treachery, even if it meant wearing a different skin tone. However, his personal characteristics would have doomed him because these were the self-destructive devices that would inevitably lead him to his downfall. Race was merely a disguise that was used to cover the fact that personal emotions are harder to confront.

The issue of race seems to be the main emphasis of the play. However, because Iago manufactured the racial tension because of personal shortcomings, it is reasonable to assert that Iago as a black man would still be able to carry out the same devious task. His only downfall would be his personal character, which is much more telling of the root cause of his hatred. Indeed, Iago's racial comments to others were a scapegoat to delve into their own personal and emotional problems. Othello's noble character was the real reason that Iago held such a strong jealousy. Moreover, he would have surely carried out his diabolical plan even if he were black because the racial aspect was not a shared phenomenon by all of the characters. Therefore, his spiteful behavior would have been free to trick and deceive the Venetians and earn their respect

with one major exception: his personal struggles regarding his own inferiority would have come to fruition and inevitably doomed his plans.

Works Cited

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