

Marissa Joseph

Dr. Wilson

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Response Paper 2.3:

A Detailed Outline

#BlackGirlMagic: Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* and Social Empowerment Movements

Introduction:

Orientation/Text: Shakespeare's *Othello* disguises itself as a social commentary on the life of an esteemed commander, Othello, a moor in Venetian society, and his contested romance with a young woman named Desdemona in the wake of an impending Turkish invasion. Originally based on a similar story in *Hecatommithi* by Cinthio and Shakespeare sought to redefine Othello's character into a Moor tragic hero, making him into the title character of the rendition (Dobson and Wells). However, *Othello* solely succeeds in telling the story of Iago, a military official underneath Othello who seeks vengeance because he believes Othello to be sleeping with his wife and frequently makes derogatory statements surrounding Othello's ethnic background. While Othello is the title character of Shakespeare's tragedy, the play does leave room or place gravity on his personal narrative but rather emphasizes the narratives of those who commit racially motivated acts against him. In an attempt to express and confront the abandoned narratives and identities within *Othello*, Toni Morrison responded with a play set in its aftermath: *Desdemona*.

Orientation: Shakespeare and Morrison's respective efforts to display an interconnection between personal identity and social conflict manifests in the presence of magic and the supernatural in both *Othello* and *Desdemona*. On one hand, magic and the supernatural can be a basis for oppression and grounds for persecution. The supernatural and magic can be void of normalcy and provoke feelings of discomfort surrounding the unknown or otherness. Shakespeare adopts this frame of magic and the supernatural with respect to Othello and his Moor background through orientalism, exaggerating the differences in Arab culture and practices (Davidson and Wagner-Martin). On the contrary, displays of magic in literature such as magical realism combat these assumptions and establishes supernatural and magical events throughout consistent and reliable realities, creating awe-inspiring and creative fictional experiences (Baldick).

Problem/Method: Magic and the supernatural appear in *Desdemona* and *Othello* in contrasting ways. When examining these two camps of execution, it is necessary to also dissect the social perspectives that also influenced these two authors in their use of magic in order to gain greater perspective on the empowerment of oppressed peoples in literature and the larger world.

Thesis: In Shakespeare's *Othello*, magic is used to characterize and distinguish Othello's otherness, serving a basis for his oppression, whereas, in Morrison's *Desdemona*, magical realism is evoked as a liberating force for formerly marginalized characters. Their contrasting use of magic is reflective of Morrison's proximity to *Desdemona*'s oppressed peoples as a black woman in the 21st century and Shakespeare's remoteness from *Othello*'s oppressed peoples as an Englishman during the Elizabethan era.

Stakes/Implications: Othello and Desdemona's characters draw their inability or ability to self-liberate from the experiences and social contexts of Shakespeare and Morrison. Morrison's empowerment of her characters through magic displays the ideological phenomena behind social empowerment movements of Morrison time and the present.

Body:

Assert for Paragraph 1.1: Othello's association with magic is used to discredit him and repress his social mobility

- Text Ev: Barbantio's disapproval and magical characterization
- Hist. Ev.: Heresy- rise in anxiety about deviation from the norm of Christianity, stereotypes exude elements project as threatening the social order
- Text Ev: Mythologized narrative of his adventures- "fantastical lies"

Assert for Paragraph 1.2: The supernatural ties between Othello and his culture serve as a means for his destruction.

- Text Ev: Handkerchief from his mother
- Hist. Ev: Orientalism- representing Arabs as superstitious and backward
- Text: Ev: Mother is this mystical being

Synthesis:

- Hist. Ev: White supremacy is the reigning ideology within the Elizabethan era, no non-violent movements for ethnic or national pride, took form only in conquering and warfare- as displayed by the backdrop of war in most of Shakespeare's plays

Hist. Context: Magical Realism and Post-Modernism

- Morrison and the exploration of cultural identity - envision new worlds for formerly oppressed blacks and women - begins in the 20th century
- Themes of freedom and self-possession heightened by the use of magical realism
- Complex style of writing (flexible time and fantastical events) used to convey complex identities

Assert for Paragraph 2.1: The supernatural in Morrison's *Desdemona* provides a space for liberation and exploration.

- Text Ev.: Exist between dead and undead
- Text Ev.: Timeless place for wisdom

Assert for Paragraph 2.2: Iago and other characters are not allowed to exist within the scope of Desdemona and Morrison replaces the previously deemed "normal" as outsiders.

- Hist. Ev: Usually does not include white characters in her stories - provides a space for full expression without suppression

- Text Ev: Envisioned without Iago
- Text Ev: They laughed at my deformity - magical ties are seen as a deformity to hold back and suppress whereas in this new space he can just be without judgment

Assert for Paragraph 2.3: Othello's supernatural cultural ties serve as a source of strength, rather than as a barrier to his success.

- Text Ev: Soun and Madam B
- Soun is a real person

Synthesis: Reclamation of magic - turns it into a source and space for empowerment

Conclusion

Argument: The appearance of magic and the supernatural in Shakespeare and Morrison's texts serves to answer the question: where do self-expression and social mobility stem from- acceptance from the oppressor or acceptance of the self? The representation of magic within *Othello* as a symbol of the unpalatability of marginalized cultures to oppressors is intentional and it manifests in *Othello*'s overall structure. Othello's culture and personal experiences as a marginalized Moor in Venetian society are too far from the scope of Shakespeare's perspective. Rather than focusing on the personal narrative and identity of his title character, Shakespeare's focal point falls with a character with discriminatory and repressive cultural and behavioral patterns he can more closely relate to: Iago. Citing his "otherness," Shakespeare restricts Othello's social mobility and expression, illustrating the assumption that oppressed people's need to be given their freedom and liberation through the approval of their oppressors. Perhaps due to her resistive spirit, crucial to persisting as a black woman within a larger racist and sexist society, Morrison provides a much less pessimistic resolution for oppressed peoples in relation to their station in society. Morrison applies the supernatural as a framework for unchecked expression in *Desdemona* and allows her characters to harness their magic as a source of empowerment. *Desdemona* emblemizes that self-expression and social mobility can be achieved through self-reclamation of "otherness."

Implications: Morrison's sentiments are echoed throughout social movements across the country: most specifically #BlackGirlMagic. #BlackGirlMagic calls for young black women to embrace the "magical" parts of themselves, including those that might be unaligned with the status quo. Morrison and #BlackGirlMagic envision spaces for black women to uplift their voices because their specific narratives have traditionally been left out of the fight for black liberation or in the celebration of black achievement. Morrison was among the first 20th century feminist writers to deviate from the standard feminine perspective in literature and prioritize the stories of African-American women. (Parini and Leininger) #BlackGirlMagic traces its roots and foundation to Morrison's use of writing styles such as magical realism to reflect the complexity and illustriousness of the black feminine experience and reflects a similar model of empowerment. Hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic are not a call of black cultural superiority; however, both Morrison and this social movement recognize a need for the expression of black greatness and achievement.

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Max Garrity-Janger
Dr. Wilson
Expos 20
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Response Paper 2.3:
A Detailed Outline

Racism in *Othello*:
An Opportunity to Combat Implicit Bias Today

Introduction

Orientation/Text:

Shakespeare's *Othello* is famous for its discussion and depiction of race and racism in the 17th century. As Shakespeare's only play with a black protagonist, the question of race's role in the play is inevitably inherent to our reading and interpretation of its meaning and significance. The play doesn't take long to dive into the racial tensions of the time, with the story opening as Iago and Roderigo plot and carry out a plan which attempts to turn Brabantio against Othello by reporting "sir, you're robbed. For shame... an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe" (Shakespeare 1.1.94-98). The play opens on a scene driven by racial bias, as Iago likens an interracial relationship to a graphic and offensive description of animal sex. It therefore takes very little analysis to conclude that calling Othello a "black ram" is horribly offensive. Iago is unquestionably racist, but Shakespeare clearly depicts him as the conniving antagonist of the play, revealing a conscious effort to condemn this racism. However, Shakespeare's use of words like "robbed" to describe a common racist archetype, Othello's stereotypical corruption of a white woman which ultimately ends in her murder, reveals a possible unconscious bias in Shakespeare himself.

Problem:

Thus arises a deeper question: is racism in the play an acknowledgement and condemnation by Shakespeare of the racism of his time or simply an inadvertent reflection of his own racial views? More broadly, is Shakespeare racist in his writing of *Othello*?

Theoretical Citation:

Banaji and Greenwald explore this concept of unconscious bias in their 2013 book, *Blind Spot*. Banaji and Greenwald compare our unconscious biases to physical blind spots such as that "of the retinal scotoma in each of our eyes". Thus they argue that just as all humans have physical limitations to our awareness we also possess limitations in our ability to manage implicit, unconscious biases which are shaped by "our cultural environments" and experiences and undoubtedly influence our behavior (Banaji and Greenwald 7). They then go on to lay out a certain method they devised, the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which reveals unconscious biases we possess by comparing the amount of time it takes the subject to match individuals of a certain group to symbols which represent certain traits such as good, bad, American, or foreign (Banaji and Greenwald 39). If we use Banaji and Greenwald's theory of implicit bias in *Blindspot* to interpret the significance of racism in the play, it becomes possible to not only

differentiate between intent but also delve into the possible unconscious forces which drove Shakespeare's writing of the play. Banaji and Greenwald define implicit bias as "hidden biases (implicit race attitudes or stereotypes)" which are independent of conscious intent or ideals (Banaji and Greenwald 200). They further define a stereotype as an association or "mental habit that is difficult to override" even if it "clashes with [one's] personal views" (Banaji and Greenwald 71), revealing the unconscious nature of stereotypes and thus implicit bias. Ultimately, the consequence of this application is that while Shakespeare may have consciously and outwardly presented an ideal of equality and a distaste for bias, he nevertheless inevitably harbored implicit associations, stereotypes, and biases which governed his unconscious thoughts and thus writing of *Othello*.

Criteria (Differentiating between characters and Shakespeare):

This contrast between Shakespeare's egalitarian intentions and deeper unconscious biases can be seen throughout the play. Iago's role as the play's antagonist and Othello's as its tragic hero clearly shows an attempt on Shakespeare's part to equate racism with evil. However, while Shakespeare superficially condemns the racism of Iago, he reflects these same biases in both Othello's character and the structure of the play. While Iago's blatant bias is not a product of Shakespeare's own racism, the presence of racial stereotypes in Othello's character and structural biases against him are attributable to Shakespeare himself and indicative of his own implicit bias.

Thesis:

Thus I will illustrate that while Shakespeare attempts to condemn racism, his writing of *Othello* reflects an implicit, structural bias, which reveals the dangers of speaking for others.

Stakes/Implications:

With this implicit bias and racism in mind, we must reconsider how and whether Shakespeare's plays should be read today. More frankly, does implicit bias in Shakespeare's plays make them dangerous or inappropriate to read, especially as an integral piece of our educational curricula, for it undoubtedly necessitates a reevaluation of their meaning and functionality today.

Body

I. Historical Context

I. Origin of the play reveals influence of racial culture on Shakespeare's writing of the play

A. Adapted from a play about the stereotypes associated with people of color

II. Analysis of Moor

A. Provide quotations where Moor isn't used in a purposefully derogatory context (just used to refer to Othello instead of name)

B. Yet Moor carries no informational only derogatory meaning

III. Staging of play (all white cast)

A. All white cast visually depicts contrast between superficial and deeper views on bias

II. Implicit Bias in Shakespeare

- I. Shakespeare attempts to condemn racism
 - A. Iago calls himself a monster, etc.
 - B. Iago is antagonist, black Othello is protagonist
- II. Response to last paragraph
 - A. Use criteria, presence of stereotype, despite Iago's evil and racist character what he says actually describes Othello within the context of the play, while Shakespeare condemns Iago for expressing racist stereotypes about Othello, he does little to change these stereotypes in his narrative
 - B. Connection to Blindspot, conflict between conscious and unconscious factors
- III. Othello representative of stereotypes, indicative of implicit bias of Shakespeare
 - A. Power derived from violence, prowess in war
 - B. Propensity for violence, ultimately kills Desdemona

Conclusion

Argument:

Shakespeare's implicit bias manifests as a deeper structural bias against Othello. Despite being the protagonist and tragic hero of the play, Othello has only 3 soliloquies and is almost never seen alone, preventing the audience from understanding his inner thoughts or relating to his perspective. In contrast, Iago, who has seven soliloquies, drives the narrative of the play, and thus becomes the most relatable character to the audience, despite his racism. Iago has over one thousand lines while Othello has two hundred and seventy four, a striking contrast which is clearly indicative of Shakespeare's implicit bias and counterproductive to his egalitarian intentions. Similarly, while Iago is the first character the audience meets in the beginning of the play, Othello is not mentioned by name for the entire first scene of the play, instead simply being referred to as the Moor (Shakespeare 1.1) Even in the performance of the play, Othello's narrative was recreated by a solely white cast, furthering the audience's stereotypical associations with race. Despite being the tragic protagonist, Othello does not take a central role in the depiction or action of the play. Thus Shakespeare uses stereotyping to allow the audience to "achieve the desirable effect of allowing us to rapidly perceive total strangers as distinctive individuals" (Banaji and Greenwald 90). Rather than allowing Othello to tell his story, Shakespeare uses stereotypes and implicit assumptions to enable the audience to build a quick relationship with Othello's character based off racial biases. This tactic strengthens the audience's own racial biases by allowing them to engage with a narrative that lends visual and audible evidence to their unconsciously held associations. Thus Shakespeare's play would appear to not only be riddled with implicit biases but also strengthen the biases of those who see it.

Implications:

Therefore, as a testament to implicit bias, it seems *Othello* and all other Shakespearian works should be excluded from our academic and social doctrine. However, isn't it true that if one thing can be taken away from the biases of Shakespeare it is that even in our attempts to espouse equality we will always be plagued by implicit bias. So then how can this inherent presence of

implicit biases be combatted and how and to what extent can Shakespeare be involved in this process? Banaji and Greenwald comment that the best method to avoid bias is to simply eliminate it from a situation, using blind musical auditions as one such example (Banaji and Greenwald 147). However, the most common and harmful biases that exist today can often be much too complex for such a binary, simple solution. For example, while most people may hold egalitarian ideals and thus not show drastic bias towards individuals, the effects of their bias can manifest in the form of group favoritism, the concept that an individual may in general give preference to a certain group such as being more likely to offer help or confer opportunities (Banaji and Greenwald 158). In this case, simply blinding individuals to bias would mean avoiding virtually all social interaction and is thus not a valid solution. However, Banaji and Greenwald comment that success in counteracting implicit bias has been shown through the use of counter stereotypes and “alternative mental exercises” (Banaji and Greenwald 150), showing the most inelastic success when individuals are exposed to sustained environments which present people and ideas which conflict with their biases (Banaji and Greenwald 152). In essence, the results of these studies show that while bias can’t be eradicated, it can be continuously combatted. Although exact approaches may vary, the prevailing method is to acknowledge bias and engage in thinking which counteracts unconscious stereotypes.

Additional Implications:

So, in an effort to return to the question of Shakespeare, why not then see *Othello* and all Shakespearian works as an opportunity to accept the presence of implicit biases and engage in thinking which counteracts these acknowledged biases. For example, reading *Othello* in conjunction with *Blindspot* triggers the dialogue about race and bias which this essay attempts to address. However, it may not be a single answer that is most important, but rather the act of engaging in this thought which is most conducive to combating implicit bias. At the end of the play, Othello urges Lodivico to “these unlucky deeds relate”, saying “speak of me as I am.” (Shakespeare 5.2.401-402). We must all take these words to heart, telling Othello’s story not as Shakespeare would have it but in its true nature, as an opportunity to acknowledge, discuss, and thus improve upon our own implicit biases.

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