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Criticizing the Flaw in the Social Class System

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In Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, both blatant and subtle class distinctions are evident throughout the story, highlighting the importance of class in the characters' lives. The play explores the themes of jealousy, love, and betrayal, but also reflects the social hierarchy of the time. Each character's status and social class play a significant role in how they interact with one another and this is evident in the power dynamics within the play. Shakespeare explores the themes of jealousy, the outsider, and love in *Othello* to criticize the inequity in the social system at the time.

Iago's relationship with Othello mainly reflects the theme of jealousy due to his social status. In Act 1 Scene 1, Iago does not have good intentions toward Othello; he is upset that Othello chooses Cassio over him to be the lieutenant of the Venetian army. He is also a racist character who believes that Othello should not be in his position due to his race. Iago at the start mentions how he does not like Othello because he did not get a promotion, which he explains to Roderigo in the opening scene. However, in his explanation to Roderigo, Iago's complaint highlights the deeper reason for his anger. He feels that Othello should have selected him to be lieutenant because he was next in line and had put in the hard work. However, Othello chose to promote a man who already had social standing and had never once stood on the battlefield. Shakespeare uses the theme of jealousy through Iago to emphasize the flaw in the social class system at this time:

*we cannot all be masters, nor all masters
cannot be truly followed
...Others there are
who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
and, throwing but shows of service on their lords...
Were I the Moor I would not be Iago." (Shakespeare I.I. 50-65)*

Iago's jealousy towards Othello ends up leading to him ruining Othello's life and his own life due to a rumor. He blatantly admits that he is not a loyal follower and that he is only following Othello for his purpose. The themes of jealousy and discrimination are portrayed through the words Iago uses to describe Othello, such as "Moor" and "black ram." Shakespeare uses Iago's jealousy and discrimination in words to tell a message to the audience of the flawed social system.

In Shakespeare's play *Othello*, the theme of the outsider is portrayed through the experiences of Othello. As a black man in a predominantly white society, Othello is constantly reminded of his outsider status. He puts up with racist comments and insults, and his marriage to Desdemona is disapproved of by both her father and other characters in the play. In the article, "The Improvisation of Power," Greenblatt mentions how "the blackness—the sign of all that the society finds frightening and dangerous—is the indelible witness to Othello's permanent status as an outsider, no matter how highly the state may value his services or how sincerely he has embraced its values" (Greenblatt 45). Due to his race, he is always

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considered an outsider, which ends up impacting how his ability as a general is viewed. Without being aware, Othello talks about his unfair experience with the whole situation. Though he is a general, his self-esteem starts to go down after having to encounter all these problems:

*Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—.* (Shakespeare III.III.305-7)

This quote highlights not only Othello's sense of isolation but also the flawed social system in which he exists. He doubts his ability to have conversations with people due to his race and, in turn, starts doubting his abilities. He claims that the only reason why he is not better at this is because "I am black." The fact that he is judged solely on his race reflects the prejudices and inequalities that existed during Shakespeare's time.

Shakespeare uses the universal disapproval of Othello's marriage to Desdemona to critique the flaw of the social hierarchy using the theme of love. When Brabantio finds out about the marriage between the two, he is very unhappy about it. He even says to one of his Kinsmen that Othello has either possessed Desdemona or he has stolen her. He also tells Othello, "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (Shakespeare I.III.331). To Brabantio, Desdemona's decision to marry a man out of their social hierarchy is the same as a betrayal to him. He is in shock that she would marry a person who is not only not in her social class but so far removed from it. For all of Othello's rank and status, he is still a black man. He will never truly belong no matter how high his social rank becomes. In the article "The Improvisation of Power," Greenblatt claims that "her marriage choice is, for Brabantio, an act of astonishing disobedience, explicable only as the somnambulistic behavior of one bewitched or drugged" (Greenblatt 45). Brabantio refuses to believe that their marriage is true solely due to Othello's race. Shakespeare includes the theme of forbidden love in Othello to emphasize how flawed the social hierarchy system was at his time.

Shakespeare criticizes the social class system by using the themes of jealousy, the outsider, and forbidden love. Through Iago's relationship with Othello, Othello's experience with being a general, and the disapproval of Othello's marriage to Desdemona sends a message to the audience of how the social class system is not just. Not only did the flaw in the social class system exist during Shakespeare's time, but it is also still a problem in the current day.