



Othello Ethnic and Racial Terms

Many words and phrases in *Othello* describe Othello's status as a Moor. While attitudes about race in Shakespeare's time were not identical to attitudes today, *Othello* does deal with the title character's difference from the Europeans around him. Shakespeare's language helps reveal the prejudices Europeans had toward foreigners.

The "racial" words in *Othello* often have many layers of meaning. There is the literal meaning from Shakespeare's time (which often differs from its current meaning). There is also the more figurative meaning. Use this guide to decide which meanings Shakespeare intended with each use.

Term	Literal Renaissance Meaning	Figurative Meaning
heathen/ pagan	a non-Christian; pagan specifically refers to non-Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam)	sinner, immoral, uncivilized, primitive
black	having any kind of dark complexion, including people of Arab, Persian, Turkish, North African, South Asian, or sub-Saharan African descent	sinful, evil, ill-tempered, angry, rude, from a lower class, unrefined
Barbary/ barbarian	a non-European or non-Christian, specifically from the Mediterranean coast of North Africa (called the "Barbary coast" in Europe)	uncivilized, violent, sinful, enemy
Moor	a Muslim, especially one from Northern Africa; could also refer to other Muslim groups near the Mediterranean	n/a
fair/white	having a pale complexion	innocent, faithful, kind, beautiful
Turk	someone from Anatolia (the peninsula of present-day Turkey) or the surrounding area; the Ottoman Empire ruled the area during Shakespeare's time	bloodthirsty enemy, powerful enemy, heathen, uncivilized
slave	any person sold into slavery, often as a punishment for or payment of a debt; during Shakespeare's time, slavery was not associated with any particular race or ethnic group	a low-status person, a weak person, an uneducated person, a poor person

RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)