

Peripeteia in othello essay



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The peripeteia in Shakespeare's Othello occurs when the protagonist decides on whom to lay his trust and questions his own previous actions. This happens in Act 3, Scene 3 when Othello tells Iago that he plans to kill his wife, Desdemona, in effect declaring that he has elected to believe him. Like in his other tragedies, Shakespeare crafted the events leading to this integral scene with the mastery that only he could weave. Peripeteia, the concept of reversal of fortune as discussed by Aristotle in the Poetics, is "the shift of the tragic protagonist's fortune from good to bad, which is essential to the plot of a tragedy" (Britannica).

More than any other part of the play, the third scene of Act 3 is vital as it is the point where the villain, Iago, has been aiming to lead Othello to; the same point where the story moves forward and escalates to reach its denouement. This is where Othello, as we know him, an honourable gentleman, unshaken and confident, turns into a complete opposite of himself: inclined to spit out foul language, vulnerable, stonehearted.

He decides to stop loving Desdemona ("All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. 'Tis gone." III, 3, 460-461) and resolves to kill her ("O, blood, blood, blood." III, 3, 467). His decisions and actions from here are one step closer to a tragic ending, intensifying into a crescendo like a drumroll. Othello is Shakespeare's tragic tale of a powerful warrior who falls in love and marries the beautiful daughter of a Venetian senator. Theirs is an unlikely love story during those times, she belonging to an influential society, he being a Moor, reviled for his race.

For Desdemona, however, race is not an issue; she loves him without conditions, a fact that other people of her own color do not understand, most notably the villain Iago, who once pursued her but was rejected. To make matters worse, Iago is passed off by his superior, Othello, for promotion. This is where the play, and the troubles of Othello and his wife, begin. Feeling insulted, Iago plots to destroy Othello, attacking the Moor's most vulnerable part. Knowing how much Othello loves Desdemona, Iago schemes to convince his commander that his wife does not share the same level of devotion.

He weaves a story that the woman has been unfaithful while Othello was away. Othello considers Iago his friend, most trusted and honest. At first, Othello has reservations, but his love has been adulterated with Iago's vivid description of Desdemona's infidelity. Seeking an answer to his doubts, he demands for visual evidence of Iago's accusations. " Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore / Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof" (III, 3, 375-376). In the same scene, he threatens to kill Iago if he fails to produce the proof. " If thou dost slander her and torture me,

Never pray more; abandon all remorse; On horror's head horrors accumulate; Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed; For nothing canst thou to damnation add Greater than that. " (III, 3, 384-389) Othello might as well have asked for his own downfall. In asking for proof, and with a threat at that, he gives Iago the power to further destroy him. Iago knows at this point that he has won as he is already in possession of Desdemona's handkerchief, a gift from Othello. The handkerchief was earlier misplaced by Desdemona and comes accidentally into the hands of Iago.

In the forthcoming scene, when Othello finally sees the proof, that is, the handkerchief placed by Iago in the hands of the object of his jealousy, Othello could only believe Iago's words and carry out his threats. He turns himself into his wife's murderer, first convincing himself that it is the right thing to do, then plotting the best way to do it. According to Aristotle, peripeteia should be an event that occurs contrary to the audience's expectations and that it is therefore surprising, but that nonetheless appears as a necessary outcome of the preceding actions.

Shakespeare concealed, at first, the point where the scene is leading to. The reader/audience is even inclined to believe that Othello will soon wake from his jealous reverie. As the scene progresses, however, when it is revealed that Iago is in possession of a visual proof, it becomes clear that Othello is about to reach his turning point. This shift is clearly a surprise to the reader/audience. But what is more surprising is how Shakespeare managed to turn a seemingly innocent prior scene into a most important one in the turn of events.

This prior scene is where Iago's unsuspecting wife, who happens to be Desdemona's maid, entrusts the girl's handkerchief to him. The surprise comes when Othello asks for a visual proof, then one realizes Iago is already in possession of it. The ensuing scenes build up tension preparing one for a dreadful end. One quality of peripeteia is that it should be able to "bring forth or result in terror" (Rizo 643). From the moment Othello screams, "O, blood, blood, blood!" one can only feel fear, certain that these words have paved the way to his destruction into the tragedy's horrendous ending.