

Othello as tragic hero essay sample

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In what ways does Shakespeare present Othello as a typical tragic hero?

Professedly, Shakespeare appears to present Othello as tragic hero, exposing his tragic flaw, which consequently leads to his downfall, through his use of language, structure and form. It could be argued ‘ Othello’ appears to conform to Aristotle’s principles of tragedy, of the noble protagonist who undergoes peripetia and endures suffering, resulting in his ultimate downfall due to hamartia, which he eventually realises, providing catharsis for the audience. However, upon further study, such devices may be interpreted to provide a different perception of the protagonist, as more of an atypical victim, exposed to the harsh reality of the society he longs to fit into, rather than an typical hero.

Shakespeare uses a highly concentrated and distinctive structure in ‘ Othello’, dividing it into five scenes, in addition to keeping the three unities, another aspect of Aristotle’s theory. There are no subplots, the majority of the action occurs in Cyprus, and time on stage is fairly close to “ real” time. Such a structure allows the audience to develop a more personal understanding of events, as they are in closer proximity to the action, and are not distracted by subplots. Not only does this heighten the ominous mood of the tragic events that are to come, it makes the prospect of Othello’s downfall increasingly terrifying.

Immediately, Shakespeare presents Othello as an outsider in the play, referring to him as the “ moor”. In Venetian society, such a term referred to second rate citizens of Muslim descent, and Iago’s use of the word suggests he feels that Othello is not worthy of being called his own name. The

audience begin to develop a dislike for him, particularly when Iago awakes Brabantio to tell him how “ an old black ram is tupping [his] white ewe”. He continues explaining to him how the “ Barbary horse” has married his daughter. Such extensive use of animal imagery, and the stark contrast between black and white, not only in racial terms but in terms of good and evil, emphasise the bitterness and tension Shakespeare is attempting to create between Iago and Othello, and also highlights many of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audiences’ racist attitudes. Shakespeare often wrote for the royal court where such poignant reflections of the society they lived in were likely to make lasting impressions on them.

However, as the play progresses, Othello is in fact revealed as a noble and valiant character, who is valued by many, who is satisfied with his life, exclaiming: “ I cannot speak of this content”. Even when confronted by Brabantio, he appears to be level headed saying, “ Let him do his spite: my services which I have done the signory shall out-tongue his complaints”, showing he is controlled and confident. Whilst continually being damned by Brabantio as having “ enchanted her”, he remains composed and polite, addressing the senate as “ very noble and approved good masters”.

Shakespeare also presents Othello as an honest character, as he openly admits “ it is most true; true that I have married her”. He neither yells nor screams, but explains in a manner that captivates the audience, and draws them to listen, through his use of eloquent verse. Nevertheless, it could be argued that these speeches made by Othello, although beautifully crafted and entrancing, seem to have an air of arrogance to them, and his “ unvarnished tale”, comes across as well rehearsed.

He feels he should “promulgate” his achievements as a general and believes strongly that his “parts.. titles...and.. perfect soul, should manifest [him] rightly”. In the eyes of the Duke, that is just what they do, making him believe Othello is “far more fair than black”. Leavis agrees with this stance, claiming Othello is “overly aware of his nobility”; also he suggests that Othello’s speech in which he explains that, but for the love of Desdemona, he would never give up the freedom to roam “for the sea’s worth”, is “overblown”, “egotistic” and “self dramatising”. Although there is a great deal of truth in this, it is important to note that, as someone who has always been considered an outsider and as a relatively new arrival to Venetian society, he may just feel obliged to constantly prove his worth to those around, maybe to the expense of the love he shares with Desdemona.

As the play goes on, the manipulation from Iago begins to corrupt Othello’s mind, taking advantage of his once “free and open nature”, as he implies Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, and due to his hubris he is blind to it. His hamartia is arguably that he is too trusting, as he believes what “honest Iago” is telling him. The audience watch as he is taken advantage of by the fake and malicious acts of Iago, and Shakespeare’s use of dramatic irony aids the audience to empathise with the protagonist, and share a frustration at the tragedy of the unfairness of the situation. A. C Bradley believes it is this trust that brings about his downfall, in a nature that in reality is “virtually flawless”. While it appears that Othello is trusting Iago, this trust is not something instilled in him automatically, but rather something that develops not because of Othello’s supposed trusting nature, but from the “ocular proof” provided through Iago’s heavy staging of events. Although

Othello is warned to “beware the green eyes monster”, the jealousy within him does take on quite a monstrous nature, growing inside him and becoming increasingly destructive and intense.

The once controlled and well levelled Othello appears to be disappearing to be replaced by an erratic man. The once fluent verse that won over so many people, including Desdemona, is replaced with prose, similar to that of the villainous Iago. Shakespeare presents this through heavy use of fragmented speech and repetition: “Lie with her? Lie on her...Handkerchief-confessions-handkerchief!”. Not only does this highlight Othello’s maddening state, it also demonstrates his insecurity and disbelief as he is constantly questioning himself, losing control. He makes brash decisions and crude outbursts of how he will “tear [Desdemona] apart” and “chop her into messes”. In doing this Shakespeare is enabled to present Othello as returning to his basic, animalistic sinful state, losing stature and composure and drawing closer to his ultimate decline, but an alternative view would be to see Othello’s insecurity as his downfall. Perhaps this so called “trust” he has placed in Iago is not because he is the “faultless hero” described by Bradley, but rather someone whose trust is neither “strong” nor “absolute”, as Leavis claims.

Maybe it is just a ploy to keep the reputation he has spent his entire life building intact. This suggests that, rather than a hero, he is in fact a selfish character motivated by power and a need for acceptance rather than love. In Act 3, he speaks of being “haply black”, and his insecurities are revealed as he believes he is inarticulate, barbaric and lacking “those soft parts of

conversation...that clamberers have". Instead of his trusting nature and jealousy being his *harmatia*, something Desdemona believes the "sun where he was born drew such humours from him", it is this inbred insecurity that has now been unveiled through Iago, that is the primary cause of his downfall – not his heroic good nature.

When reality does finally hit, some would say he appears to be truly repentant for his actions, speaking of punishments ("Roast me in sulphur"), leading critics such as Bradley to suggest catharsis is reached and "Othello's anger has passed, and sorrow has taken its place". Yet, this is debatable, as this sorrow may have been mistaken for a sudden sense of despair and realisation that all is lost. Leavis argues he is in fact "preoccupied with his own emotions rather than the loss of Desdemona". Othello's final speech regresses back into his self-flattering eloquent verse, as he feels the need to remind the "state [of] some service", and instead of acknowledging the tragedy of his treacherous actions, he dismisses himself as an "honourable murderer". Here it seems Shakespeare is subtly presenting Othello as narcissistic and heartless, beneath his heroic facade. Amidst this questionably conceited final speech, his insecurities seem to reappear as he refers to himself as a "circumcised dog", suggesting he is more distraught that this is how he would be remembered rather than a worthy general.

Ostensibly, Shakespeare appears to present Othello as a tragic hero as he fulfils many of the universal concepts of tragedy. However, he is actually a victim, not only to the manipulation of Iago, but to his own insecurities. His life appears to revolve around his passion with Venetian society, rather than

Desdemona, and as a consequence, he is turned into the jealous, shallow and obsessed man at the end of the play. Although tragic, Othello is far from heroic.

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