

## **Application and Deviation of Aristotelean Principles in the Tragic Play *Othello* by William Shakespeare.**

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### **Abstract:**

*Aristotle's most acclaimed and valued work in the field of literary criticism Poetics can be read as a response to Plato's attack on art. None of the works of Aristotle, that is available in recent times has been published by him and there is a high probability that most of them are lost and the Poetics in its true form is much likely to be longer than what is accessible currently. Aristotle's main focus in Poetics is on Greek tragedy and he divides it into six parts in descending ranks, namely 1) Plot or mythos 2) Character 3) Thought 4) Diction 5) Melody and 6) Spectacle. Poetics exercised a considerable influence on subsequent literary theory, especially the Renaissance. This paper aims to study the application of Aristotelean principles as well as deviations in the play Othello, written by William Shakespeare, an eminent playwright during the Renaissance period.*

### **Introduction:**

Born in 384 BCE, Aristotle is one of the greatest ancient Greek philosophers and his works have shaped centuries of philosophy and literature. A researcher and writer Aristotle left behind a glorious body of work, numbering to two-hundred treatises, out of which near around thirty-one survive. Aristotle's one of the most notable works is *Poetics*, a scientific study of writing and poetry where he observes, analyzes, and defines epic poetry and tragedy. Exploring the foundations of story-making and character development, *Poetics*, his most acclaimed work is of great value to the field of literature and literary theory and criticism. Extensively discussing poetry and tragedy, Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity

and fear effecting the proper purgation- catharsis of these and similar emotions.” (*The Poetics Of Aristotle*, Ch.6, P.8)

Having discussed the definition of Tragedy, the six consecutive parts of Tragedy are presented in their descending rank of importance and the significance of each is discussed. The six components are Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song, and spectacle. *Poetics* exercised a substantial influence on subsequent literary theory, especially the Renaissance.

*Othello*, a renaissance play, published in 1622 is a five-act tragedy that revolves around the tragic protagonist Othello, a heroic black general in the Venetian army. Iago, the villain, jealous of Othello’s success and Cassio’s promotion as chief lieutenant plots revenge and Othello’s downfall by falsely accusing Desdemona, Othello’s wife, of committing adultery with Cassio leading to a tragic end based on manipulation, lies and misunderstandings. This paper aims to study and explore the application and deviation of Aristotelean principles in the play Othello by its playwright, William Shakespeare.

### **Application and Deviation of Aristotle’s principles in Othello:**

To understand the intricacies and to identify the Aristotelean principles in the play in study it is important to understand the six elements in depth along with relating them to the events and characteristics of the play. According to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy “Catharsis” is an important element of a tragic play and as the play moves along the events should build feelings of pity and fear. Catharsis is a realisation of the tragic hero that his ‘damnation’ was brought in due to his actions and the catharsis of the hero is in turn translated onto the audience who feel the same emotions, and a good playwright successfully makes his character relatable to the audience or the readers. (Kanoria)

Othello, as a tragic play fits into Aristotle’s definition of tragedy since it tells a story of a noble and principled hero who leads himself to a devastating end due to an error in judgement but Shakespeare also takes the liberty to add his own rules. The play in question is dramatized and deals with a serious issue and consists of a plot of great magnitude since it allows a change from

happiness to misery, here it being Othello marrying the love of his life and then killing her due to his tragic flaw which leads the audience to feel emotions of pity and fear as the plot progresses thereby justifying the definition of tragedy.

Shakespeare's Othello is probably considered as the best example of catharsis. Othello on learning the truth at the end of the play delivers a monologue right before taking his life. Othello's monologue and suicide are cathartic to the audience due to several reasons, firstly it was the main protagonist, who was honest and of noble strata leading the readers and audience to naturally identify with him and this identification made it more painful for the audience to accept his death, but this also serves as a relief for the audience that Othello would be then free from the pain and he realised his mistake. Othello's mistake of trusting his friend blindly and his betrayal was also felt by the audience as the Elizabethan audience could connect to it since in this era wars and betrayals were common. It is Othello's monologue and suicide where the audience can allow their feelings to explode. The storm scene in Act 1 also serves as a feeling of fear for the audience and then relief is felt by the audience with the announcement of the arrival of Desdemona and then finally Othello thus forming Catharsis.

Getting back to the formative parts of tragedy, Aristotle emphasises the plot to be the most important of all the elements. According to the Greek philosopher, the plot is the soul of the tragedy and its unity is of utmost importance. Aristotle says that "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not allow itself follow anything by casual necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conforms to these principles." (*The Poetics Of Aristotle*, Ch.7, P.10)

According to Aristotle's idea, a plot should constitute a beginning, middle and end; Aristotle implies that the beginning should not necessarily follow any earlier events, but as far as Othello is

concerned Shakespeare takes the liberty to bend the rules since the play starts in the middle of a conversation which brings out a certain action already having taken place, that, is Othello's promotion and him choosing Cassio as his new lieutenant. The event of Othello and Desdemona's marriage was also taken place before the start of the play and all of it defies the rule of a beginning not following any earlier events. Apart from flouting the rules of beginning the play without a preceding action, the middle and end do hold up the Aristotelian principles with the jealousy of Iago being highlighted at the first leading to the succeeding actions in the play, that manipulation of Othello by Iago, and then a tragic end and nothing to follow after, that Othello, Desdemona, Emilia and Rodrigo dying and Iago being arrested.

Aristotle in *Poetics* also implies that a plot may be simple or complex, in a simple plot the changes in the protagonists' fortunes happen without the elements of 'peripeteia' or 'anagnorisis' while a complex plot involves either one or both of the above-stated terms. Shakespeare has applied the principles of a complex plot by using 'peripeteia', that is when the fortunes of the hero are reversed, in Othello's case this takes place in Act 3, scene 3 when Othello trusts Iago on Desdemona having an affair and consumed with jealousy chooses to trust him and starts his way towards downfall, that is killing Desdemona and a tragic end. The Moor's anagnorisis occurs in Act 5, Scene 2:

"Are there no stones in heaven

But what serve for the thunder?—Precious villain!" (*The tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice, Act 5, Scene 2, p.255*)

Othello having known how he let himself get manipulated by the Villain discovers his ignorance and recognises the true nature of his situation is best exemplified through the following dialogue:

"Behold, I have a weapon.

A better never did itself sustain

Upon a soldier's thigh. I have seen the day

That with this little arm and this good sword

I have made my way through more impediments

Than twenty times your stop. But—O vain boast!—  
Who can control his fate? 'Tis not so now.  
Be not afraid, though you do see me weaponed.  
Here is my journey's end, here is my butt  
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.  
Do you go back dismayed? 'Tis a lost fear.  
Man but a rush against Othello's breast  
And he retires. Where should Othello go?  
Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starred wench,  
Pale as thy smock, when we shall meet at compt,  
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,  
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl?  
Even like thy chastity.—O cursèd, cursèd slave!—  
Whip me, you devils,  
From the possession of this heavenly sight!  
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulfur,  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!  
O, Desdemona! Dead, Desdemona! Dead! O, O!"

*(The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice, Act 5 Scene 2, p.259)*

Shakespeare through his tragedy and using the techniques of 'peripeteia' and 'anagnorisis' has enhanced the intelligence of the plot as Aristotle believed it to do thus making it a perfect tragedy.

The tragic plot must also involve a tragic deed and the same has been portrayed in the play where the Tragic deed carried on by Othello is having confidence in Iago and then murdering his wife. However, this deed can be approached with full knowledge or in ignorance and in the play, Othello approaches it in complete ignorance and gets a realisation after the irreversible deed was finished.

Aristotle's dramatic theory also talks about three unities which are "The unity of action", "Unity of time", and "Unity of place", and is an essential requisite to have a perfect plot. According to the

unity of actions, a play should consist of a single plot that could sustain the interest of the readers and then lead to catharsis. The unity of time holds that a play should not take place over more than twenty-four hours and the unity of place meant representation of no more than one place. Othello as a play violates all three unities since Shakespeare uses a sub-plot in his play, which is Rodregio's desperate attempt to win Desdemona's love and doing everything in his capacity to win her love. The sub-plot also supports the main plot, but this results in defying the concept of the unity of action of focussing on one single action. The unity of time is violated since the time frame is unclear and the events cover an unspecified time lapse. The play opens on the night of Othello's marriage but in Act 3, Scene 3 Othello orders Iago to kill Cassio within 3 days. We also see Bianca, Cassio's mistress complaining that Cassio has kept away from her for a week which hints that the party has been there for that duration of time and the events have taken place during the same time. This unclear time frame makes it unsuitable to fit into the idea of the unity of time as exemplified by Aristotle. The first scene opens in Venice and then the events are then shifted to Cyprus thus Shakespeare ends up defying the rules of unity of place as well.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle is of the view that the character is the second most important element in a tragedy and suggests that the tragic hero must evoke feelings of pity and fear. According to Aristotle, the ideal protagonist is the one who belongs to a position of rank, is prosperous and virtuous but has misfortune befalling upon him due to a tragic flaw or *hamartia*. The tragic hero should also be consistently portrayed as one of moral character and in good light and most importantly it should support the plot. Shakespeare has strictly adhered to the principles Aristotle laid down for a tragic hero. Othello belongs to a noble rank and has the qualities of a perfect hero, that is a general in the Venetian army and is courageous, valiant, intelligent and has a good command over the troop. His noble rank and representation of a perfect man allow the audience to feel pity when he is led to his downfall due to his fatal flaw, which is jealousy and insecurity. It is also interesting to note that Shakespeare has given a genetic as well as a racial disadvantage to his character, that he is black which serves to be one of the primary reasons for his insecurities. The difference in ethnicity between him and his wife all more make him vulnerable to Iago's plan making it easier for him to manipulate Othello, this also serves as a way for creating feelings of pity and fear in the minds of the audience. Othello's character as a tragic hero and his error in

judgement also serves to advance the actions in the plot and thus it does not overshadow the plot as Aristotle had warned of, it is Othello's actions of jealousy and misplaced trust that leads to the tragic end. Shakespeare has also shown consistency in his hero concerning his love for Desdemona. Othello wants Desdemona to get justice by killing her before she ends up "betraying" another man. His love is evident in the lines just before he carries out the terrible deed:

"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.  
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
Put out the light, and then put out the light."

*(The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice, Act 5. Scene 2. p.235)*

Through the above lines, Shakespeare has shown the moral uniformity in Othello's character since he considers sacrificing Desdemona would retain the morality and integrity of relationships, and it also serves as a medium for the audience to feel pity and fear before he commits the act due to his fatal flaw. The other characters apart from the tragic hero are also true to their characters, Iago as a villain is morally bad and manipulative constantly and even the women characters are true to their type, they are shy and do not have warrior-like qualities. Though one can say Emilia to be an exception since she did raise her voice towards the end of the play and helped expose Iago.

The last four elements of a tragedy; thought, diction, melody and spectacle are considered of least importance by Aristotle, yet help in making a successful tragedy. Thought in a play deals with what is said, it is a way of saying what is appropriate for a given situation and there should be a connection between the situation and thought, that a grave situation would require grave thoughts. On the other hand, Diction or the stylistic features is the composition of lines or the dialogues that are recited. When speaking of diction Aristotle is particularly interested in the use of metaphors and dramatic irony. Shakespeare has used thought and Diction in various ways to bring in certain

themes and emotions in the play that improvises the tragic play. In Act 1 Scene 2 Brabantio's speech:

“O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?  
Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,  
So opposite to marriage that she shunned  
The wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation,  
Would ever have, t' incur a general mock,  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight.  
Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense  
That thou hast practiced on her with foul charms,  
Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals  
That weakens motion. I'll have 't disputed on.  
'Tis probable and palpable to thinking.”

*(The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice. Act 1.scene 2.p.25)*

The above speech brings out the prejudices Brabantio has towards Othello. That he does not have problems maintaining military relationships with him but he cannot accept the fact that Othello, being black could marry his daughter. This very thing brings in the theme of racial prejudice in the play and also hints at Othello always being the other, the same grounds of insecurity that Iago exploited.

Shakespeare has used imageries and metaphors in the play to hint at various qualities and tragic features. In Act 1, scene 1 Iago uses animal imagery, i.e, he calls Othello “ Barbary horse” to anger Brabantio and this sets in the stereotype of blacks being lustful creatures and an outsider in the Venetian society. Emilia telling Othello “You are the blacker evil” gives the audience and readers the idea of Othello's clouded judgement and he ended up conducting the tragic deed.

The senator and Duke both address Othello as the “brave moor” or “brave Othello”, this creates the larger than life characteristic of Othello and hold up to his identification as a tragic hero.

In Act 1, Scene 3, Othello uses embellished language and speaks highly of Desdemona and has her fall in love with him. This reflects Othello’s love for Desdemona but is also ironic because in the later scenes he would be using language filled with imagery and insult to attack and humiliate Desdemona he claimed to love. Brabantio through his speeches also successfully sends across his hatred for Othello and so does Iago by using various imageries in his dialogues.

In Act 1, Scene 3, Brabantio defeated asks Othello to keep an eye on Desdemona since she lied to her father she may lie to Othello as well. Through this Shakespeare brings in thoughts of betrayal and the seeds of doubts are first sown in Othello’s mind. Another interesting technique used is Dramatic irony. Most of the dramatic ironies come through the dialogues of Iago, especially in Act 1, scene 3 where he almost lays down his complete plan, and the audience knows Iago to be the villain since the beginning of the play but the characters of the play are unknown to it till tragedy strikes them. The use of dramatic irony also helps in stirring anxiety and fear in the minds of the audience. The audience is aware of the events before they happen, which with all the characteristics of tragedy being portrayed accurately helps thought and diction dominate the events in the plot.

Songs in a tragedy are usually referred to as the ones sung by the chorus in a play, Shakespeare does away with the chorus and instead uses a clown to fill in the gap. The clown apart from bringing in comic relief, as it did after Cassio and Roderigo’s fight, also foreshadows certain events in Shakespearean plays. When Desdemona uses the word ‘lies’ to ask for Othello, the clowns play with the word to mean falsehood or deception and sexual intercourse. The clown says:

“He’s a soldier, and for one to say a soldier lies, ‘tis stabbing.”

*(The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice, Act 3. Scene 4. p.151)*

This line means that accusing a soldier of lying is equal to getting stabbed in retaliation, and critics say the clown acts as a messenger to hint at Iago stabbing Emilia on being accused of manipulating Othello. It also serves as a pun on soldiers having sex, which hints at the lie of Cassio and Desdemona being in a relationship that Iago fed to mislead Othello, but Desdemona was unaware

of the meaning behind those words. The clown here acts as a messenger of hidden meanings to the audience just like a chorus. The play has songs that are sung by the characters instead of the traditional chorus, out of which Desdemona's willow song is the most popular. The Willow Song is a mournful ballad wherein a lady laments the loss of her lover. Though Desdemona doesn't complete the whole song, it is assumed that the Shakespearian audience would have been aware of the song and would have also known of it as a hint towards tragedy. This song gives the message of two innocent women being wronged by their husbands. Desdemona sings while preparing for bed thinks Othello would come to the chamber to reconcile, but the song serves as a mirror to the situation that she has lost her lover. The song is left incomplete with a knock on the door which could be an indication of her near the end. The willow song also acts as a realisation to the audience that probably Desdemona has a premonition about her doom, hence this song allows an interpretation of the past, that Othello being misguided and not trusting her as well as the present, of him hating her, and the future which means she would eventually die. This song acts as an allusion to her fate and thereby intensifies the dramatic effect.

The last element that Aristotle talks about is the Spectacle. The spectacle is least connected to literature and are those scenes that are used for the sake of the emotional attraction of the audience. Shakespeare hardly relies on spectacle in his play, though the spectacle of race is one of the main visual elements in the play, that Othello as a black hero and being emphasised as the other made him marketable to the Elizabethan crowd since such important roles were rare to be enacted by coloured people. The handkerchief was another important prop and an essential one that paved way for the tragedy. The prop that looked harmless instead became a deadly weapon that murdered relationships as well as the main characters. The story behind the handkerchief also allows emotional appeal to the audience. The spectacle of Othello smothering Desdemona and the setting is also important since it reflects her innocence and also serves as a cathartic to the audience by the use of dramatic irony, i.e., the audience is aware of Desdemona's innocence but her husband is not.

### **Conclusion:**

Othello, Shakespeare's most notable work is an exemplary example of an Aristotelean tragedy. Though Shakespeare has adhered to the elements laid down by Aristotle there are certain places where Shakespeare as a playwright has taken the liberty to mould those rules and fit his own. With all the characteristics of tragedy being portrayed accurately, Shakespeare has deviated from the principles in a few places. The principles of unity being violated and the presence of a preceding action being one of the deviations. As a tragic hero, Othello satisfies all the demands required for the protagonist of a tragedy and the drama also conveys a lesson to the audience. A major deflection came in the element of the song where Shakespeare replaced the chorus with a comic relief often represented by a clown or a fool. This illustration of the Aristotelean principles as well as Shakespearean elements of tragedy in the play makes it an interesting and intelligent piece to read. The application, as well as the deviation of Aristotelean principles, also show how the Renaissance was a revival of the classical yet the scope and subject were changed to focus on the man himself.

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