

Othello: A Tragedy

Othello is one of the most revered and performed Shakespeare's Tragedies. It is an overwhelming statement of passionate love which wrecks off under its own pressure. The protagonist Othello is an epic warrior of classic grandeur, a man of strange experiences, foreign parts and distinct vocal timbre.

As it happens in a tragedy, the hero must struggle against overwhelming fate and his defeat/downfall must be noble so that he wins the moral victory over the forces that destroy him. The Greek philosopher Aristotle also underlines the importance of 'catharsis' in the audience after witnessing the spectacle of the downfall of its hero. The catharsis should happen by invoking the twin emotions of pity and fear in the audience. As per the structure, Aristotle emphasizes the Unity of action as an important aspect for a tragedy or any drama for that matter. Later, scholars have deduced Unity of Time and Unity of Place also as important for the structural congruity of the drama.

Going by this yardstick, Shakespeare's tragedies are more flexible in nature. As logic would explain, Unity of Time and Place are very difficult to observe and are not in keeping with the general congeniality of a drama so to speak. Strict adherence to them may result in rigidity and artificiality in the structure resulting in hindrances in the narrative flow.

Othello, the Moor of Venice is mainly set in two locations- Venice at the outset and Cyprus as the play proceeds along. The play covers an unspecified lapse of time with plot getting unfolded from Othello marrying Desdemona to the evil scheming of Iago to the final act of Othello committing suicide in repentance upon realizing the gravity of his crime. For a complex plot like this to unfold, the time of one day or 24 hours in adherence to Unity of Time is, by no means, sufficient. The plot is fairly unified focusing on Othello and his fate and dealing with other people and events only in so far as they are relevant to their focus.

Besides, Othello quite fits the billing for the tragic hero as defined by Aristotle. A tragic hero must be noble in nature and of high rank, must suffer the reversal of fortune from good to bad owing to his tragic flaw or error of judgement and meets his downfall (death) in the end so as to evoke the twin emotion of pity and fear in the audience. As we see, Othello is a military commander in the Venetian army and his nobility of nature is evident in his blind trust in his ensign Iago and his treatment of him as his friend.

His tragic flaw is jealousy of the kind passionate lovers experience in the course of their romance. Coupled with the gullibility of his nature effectively brings about his eventual downfall (of murdering his wife and killing himself in the end). His gullibility prevents him from seeing through the façade which the cunning Iago maintains throughout. Othello does not realize until the end that he has been manipulated by Iago. Nevertheless, Iago's plan to humiliate Othello is ultimately and ironically hijacked by the immensity of the tragedy of the play which takes on a momentum of its own. Iago's wife Emilia's unravelling of her husband's cruel manipulations serves as the poetic justice for the story. Othello is overcome with guilt and repentance when he finally realizes that Desdemona was chaste and he had wrongly killed his wife. His deep penitence culminating in his suicide elevates him to the status of a true tragic hero.

The death of Brabantio's runaway daughter Desdemona and the noble black soldier Othello create no cosmic ripples. The humdrum of the outside world goes on quite as usual. This, far from diminishing, only intensifies the tragedy of two innocents in an unsympathetic deceptive world.