
Othello: Whether He Is A Tragic Hero

Is Othello a Tragic Hero ?

Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher distinguished a tragic hero as a protagonist with valiant stature but ultimately who faces his downfall due to a tragic flaw in character or error in judgement. According to Aristotle's definition, Othello can be perceived as a tragic hero. Othello has three traits that satisfies this distinction. Firstly, Othello was a valiant hero who was appointed general in the Venetian Army. Secondly, even though he is a well-respected and important person he experiences a lack of self-respect because of his moor background. Lastly, Othello saw his own downfall when he allowed himself to be manipulated by trusting Iago who used Othello's lack of self-respect and confidence to his advantage. Therefore, in this paper I will use different instances from the play to support the three traits I have listed above to bolster the statement that Othello indeed is a tragic hero.

Othello is a well distinguished military soldier. His experience and gallantry is called upon when the Duke discovers the imminent threat from the Ottoman fleet. The Duke says, "Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you, Against the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.48-49). Even Iago who hated Othello because he passed him over for lieutenant admits that Othello is one of Venice's most exceptional soldiers and that they wouldn't be able to do without him.

"Cannot with safety cast him; for he's embarked

With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars,

Which even now stands in act, that, for their soul,

Another of his fathom they have none

To lead their business..." (1.1.146-150).

Othello when accused by Brabantio of stealing and manipulating his daughter unperturbed answers,

"Her father loved me, oft invited me,

Still questioned me the story of my life,

From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes

That I have past" (1.3.128-131).

From the lines above, we can understand that Othello has experienced many battles and victories and that Brabantio willingly invited him to hear his war stories and military adventure despite his moor status. Therefore, we can establish that Othello was an honorable man of high stature in the society and has the first trait that is required of a tragic hero.

Othello's diffidence regarding his skin color and moor heritage are his fatal flaw. At first, it seemed like Othello's remarks were coming from a place of modesty, but as the play progresses and Iago manipulates Othello, his insecurities about his skin color and heritage are exposed. Iago easily targets Othello's insecurities about being a racial and cultural foreigner. Despite being a general, he is often disrespected when he is referred to as the "Moor" during multiple instances in the play. Although this wasn't clear to us in the beginning, Othello's insecurities broke out from beneath the surface when Iago made Othello jealous by manipulating him into thinking that Desdemona was cheating on him with Cassio.

"My name, that was fresh

As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black

As mine own face" (3.3.387-389).

In these lines, it is important to notice that Othello compares his good name to that of Goddess Diane indirectly referencing his reputation to that of a white face. But now, because of his wife's alleged unfaithfulness he claims his reputation is as black as his face. From these words, he is claiming that by being black he is dirty and filthy. His internalized feelings about the color of his skin and insecurities are very evident here. Therefore, we can establish that Othello although a very brave and honorable general lacked self-respect thus exposing his tragic flaw and is a second trait required of a tragic hero.