

Aristotle's Hamartia In Othello

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Aristotle's Concept of Hamartia and Tragic Character

Othello's fall and tragedy. Hamartia, the "mistake in judgment" or "unwitting error" of the protagonist, has often been incorrectly interpreted as the "tragic flaw." According to the *Poetics*, the protagonist's destructive act or mistake, hamartia, is the most important factor in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Although it is accompanied by a moral defect, it has a conflicting nature and a particular association with other features in the structure, such as recognition and reversal (Hyde, 2).

Aristotle, the protégé of Plato, was born in 384 BCE in Stagira, a town in Chalkidiki. The Renaissance was greatly influenced by his work on medicine, philosophy, ethics, and political theory. After entering Plato's Academy at seventeen, he remained associated with it until Plato's death. He was then called to Macedonia as the tutor of King Philip II's son, who later became Alexander the Great. He returned to Athens in 335 BCE and founded the Lyceum, a competing educational institution to the Academy. Aristotle's writings deeply influenced Western and Islamic thought. In his *Poetics*, he analyzed tragedy and explained that tragic action should be based on probability and necessity. The tragic protagonist should not be completely good or completely evil but should experience a reversal of fortune because of hamartia.

Hamartia is therefore not simply a permanent personality weakness. It can be an error caused by limited knowledge, a mistaken interpretation, or a decision made under pressure. The audience recognizes that the protagonist has some responsibility for the outcome while also understanding that the mistake is human and not entirely malicious. This mixture of responsibility and vulnerability creates pity and fear. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the protagonist's jealousy is often called his tragic flaw, but a more complete Aristotelian analysis shows that his hamartia includes errors of trust, judgment, and interpretation.

Othello as an Aristotelian Tragic Protagonist

Othello possesses many qualities associated with the tragic protagonist. He is a respected military commander whose service is valued by the Venetian state. He has achieved authority despite being an outsider in Venetian society. His marriage to Desdemona demonstrates personal courage, and his early speeches show dignity and confidence. When Brabantio accuses him of using magic, Othello responds through a composed account of how Desdemona came to love him.

His elevated position is necessary to the tragedy because his fall affects both his private life and the political order. He moves from honour, marriage, and command to jealousy, murder, and self-destruction. The contrast between his initial status and his final condition produces the reversal expected in tragedy.

Othello is not presented as naturally cruel. He initially loves Desdemona and trusts the people around him. His tragedy arises partly from admirable qualities that are misdirected. His decisiveness is valuable in war but dangerous when applied to uncertain domestic evidence. His trust enables military cooperation but makes him vulnerable to Iago. His concern for honour supports his public role but becomes destructive when he believes his marriage has humiliated him.

Misplaced Trust and the Error of Judgment

Othello's central error is his decision to trust Iago's interpretation more than Desdemona's character and testimony. Iago repeatedly presents himself as reluctant to accuse anyone. This performance makes his lies appear responsible and honest. Othello already considers him "honest Iago," and this reputation prevents him from examining the motives behind the accusations.

The mistake is not merely that Othello trusts another person. Social and military life require trust. His hamartia lies in the way he gives Iago's insinuations more authority than direct evidence. Iago rarely makes a complete accusation at first. Instead, he raises questions, pauses, and encourages Othello to construct the worst possible explanation himself. Othello becomes an active participant in the deception because he interprets uncertainty as proof.

He also fails to communicate openly with Desdemona. Rather than explaining the accusation and allowing a meaningful response, he questions her indirectly about the handkerchief. This method turns an ordinary misunderstanding into apparent confirmation. Desdemona does not know the symbolic importance Othello has attached to the object at that moment, and her attempt to redirect the conversation toward Cassio appears suspicious to him.

The Handkerchief as False Evidence

The handkerchief becomes the material centre of Othello's error. It was his first gift to Desdemona and carries emotional and family significance. When Iago obtains it through Emilia and places it in Cassio's room, the object seems to connect Desdemona and Cassio. However, Othello never establishes how Cassio received it.

Othello's demand for "ocular proof" initially appears rational. He does not want to act on rumour alone. The problem is that he accepts evidence that has been staged and interprets it without investigation. Cassio's possession of the handkerchief does not prove an affair, and Othello does not confront him directly about its origin. The object becomes convincing because jealousy has already

shaped the interpretation.

The handkerchief also reveals the difference between evidence and meaning. Objects do not explain themselves. Their significance depends on context, testimony, and interpretation. Iago controls the context, while Othello supplies the most destructive meaning. His hamartia therefore involves an epistemological error: he believes he knows more than the evidence actually supports.

Jealousy, Honour, and Emotional Manipulation

Jealousy is undoubtedly central to Othello's tragedy. However, it does not operate as an isolated flaw that automatically causes murder. Iago carefully produces and intensifies it. He understands Othello's fears about age, race, social belonging, and Desdemona's choice. He suggests that Venetian women are deceptive and reminds Othello that Desdemona concealed their relationship from her father.

Othello's concept of honour makes jealousy especially dangerous. He interprets possible infidelity not only as private loss but as public humiliation. His identity depends heavily on military competence and social respect. The belief that others may know of his disgrace creates urgency and anger.

His emotional state gradually changes his language and behaviour. The controlled commander becomes fragmented, violent, and physically overwhelmed. Iago's success demonstrates that the tragedy is not simply the result of Othello's personality. It develops through the interaction between personal insecurity and deliberate manipulation.

Recognition, Reversal, and Catastrophic Action

Aristotle connects hamartia with reversal and recognition. Othello experiences a complete reversal from respected commander and husband to murderer. The recognition occurs after Emilia exposes Iago's deception and explains how the handkerchief was obtained.

This recognition is devastating because it arrives after Desdemona's death. Othello finally understands that the evidence was false, that Desdemona was faithful, and that he trusted the wrong person. The truth does not restore the earlier situation. Recognition instead reveals the full meaning of his actions.

Othello's final suicide is both punishment and an attempt to recover control over his identity. In his last speech, he asks to be remembered accurately, not as someone who "loved wisely" but as one who "loved too well" and was "perplexed in the extreme." This self-description contains insight but also limits. He recognizes his error and the extremity of his jealousy, yet he continues to shape the story of himself as a tragic public figure.

Iago, Moral Evil, and the Limits of the Tragic Flaw

A focus only on Othello's tragic flaw can obscure Iago's responsibility. Iago plans the deception, exploits relationships, manipulates evidence, and anticipates the reactions of others. Othello makes fatal choices, but those choices occur within an environment deliberately constructed to produce error.

Iago also uses broader social prejudices. He draws on racist assumptions, sexual suspicion, and anxieties about women's independence. These ideas already exist in Venetian society and make his lies more believable. Othello's vulnerability is therefore both personal and social.

Aristotelian analysis should not reduce the tragedy to a simple moral lesson that jealousy is bad. The play explores how knowledge is formed, how trust can be exploited, and how social insecurity can affect judgment. Hamartia provides a more useful concept than tragic flaw because it includes action, circumstance, and incomplete understanding.

Pity, Fear, and Tragic Responsibility

The audience feels pity because Othello is deceived and because the destruction includes innocent characters such as Desdemona and Emilia. It feels fear because the error develops through ordinary human capacities: trust, love, insecurity, and the need to interpret uncertain information. The tragedy suggests that intelligence and status do not make a person immune to manipulation.

At the same time, pity does not remove responsibility. Othello chooses violence, refuses adequate investigation, strikes Desdemona, and ultimately kills her. His suffering cannot excuse these actions. Tragedy allows the audience to understand the causes without declaring the protagonist innocent.

This balance is central to Aristotle's theory. A completely innocent victim would produce shock but not the same form of tragic recognition. A completely evil protagonist would not generate sufficient pity. Othello remains tragic because he is neither. His virtues, vulnerabilities, errors, and crimes are interconnected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Othello's hamartia is more complex than a single flaw of jealousy. It consists of mistaken trust in Iago, insecure interpretations of honour, acceptance of inadequate evidence, and failure to communicate with Desdemona. Jealousy intensifies these errors but does not fully explain them.

The play follows important elements of Aristotelian tragedy through Othello's elevated position, reversal of fortune, recognition, and catastrophic suffering. His final knowledge comes too late to

prevent the consequences of his actions. Understanding hamartia as an error of judgment rather than a fixed defect reveals the depth of the tragedy and preserves the tension between manipulation and personal responsibility.

References

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