

Peripeteia

Peripeteia is a reversal of circumstances, or turning point. The term is primarily used with reference to works of literature. Peripeteia is a sudden change in a story which results in a negative reversal of circumstances. It is also known as the turning point of ,the place in which the tragic protagonist's fortune changes from good to bad. This literary device is meant to surprise the audience, but is also meant to follow as a result of a character's previous actions or mistakes.

In other words, Peripeteia is the turning point in a drama after which the plot moves steadily to its denouement. It is discussed by Aristotle in the poetics as the shift of the tragic protagonist's fortune from good to bad which is essential to the plot of a tragedy.

[Aristotle](#), in his [Poetics](#), defines peripeteia as "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity." According to [Aristotle](#), peripeteia, along with discovery, is the most effective when it comes to [drama](#), particularly in a [tragedy](#). He wrote that "The finest form of Discovery is one attended by Peripeteia, like that which goes with the Discovery in [Oedipus...](#)".^[1]

Aristotle says that peripeteia is the most powerful part of a plot in a tragedy along with discovery. A peripety is the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events. There is often no element like Peripeteia; it can bring forth or result in terror, mercy, or in comedies it can bring a smile or it can bring forth tears (Rizo).

This is the best way to spark and maintain attention throughout the various form and genres of drama "Tragedy imitates good actions and, thereby, measures and depicts the well-being of its protagonist. But in his formal definition, as well as throughout the Poetics, Aristotle emphasizes that" ... Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of events inspiring fear or pity" (1452a 1); in fact, at one point [Aristotle](#) isolates the imitation of "actions that excite pity and fear" as "the distinctive mark of tragic imitation" (1452b 30).

Pity and fear are effected through reversal and recognition; and these "most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy-Peripeteia or Reversal of the Situation, and recognition scenes-are parts of the plot (1450a 32). has the shift of the tragic protagonist's fortune from good to bad, which is essential to the plot of a tragedy. It is often an ironic twist. Good uses of Peripeteia are those that especially are parts of a complex plot, so that they are defined by their changes of fortune being accompanied by reversal, recognition, or both" (Smithson).

Peripeteia includes [changes of character](#), but also more external changes. A character who becomes rich and famous from poverty and obscurity has undergone peripeteia, even if his character remains the same.

When a character learns something he had been previously ignorant of, this is normally distinguished from peripeteia as [anagnorisis](#) or discovery, a distinction derived from Aristotle's work.

Aristotle considered anagnorisis, leading to peripeteia, the mark of a superior tragedy. Two such plays are [Oedipus Rex](#), where the oracle's information that Oedipus had killed [his father](#) and married [his mother](#) brought about his mother's death and his own blindness and exile, and [Iphigenia in Tauris](#), where Iphigenia realizes that the strangers she is to sacrifice are her brother and his friend, resulting in all three of them escaping Tauris. These plots he considered complex and superior to simple plots without anagnorisis or peripeteia, such as when Medea resolves to kill her children, knowing they are her children, and does so. Aristotle identified [Oedipus Rex](#) as the principal work demonstrating peripety. (See Aristotle's [Poetics](#).)

The importance of using Peripeteia

According to Aristotle, peripeteia is the single most important and powerful element of [plot](#) in a tragedy. Peripeteia is meant to cause fear and pity in the audience upon witnessing the tragic twist of fate which abruptly ruins the life of the protagonist. Peripeteia provides plays, poems, novels, movies, and television shows with a dark moment when the [plot twists](#) and the protagonist's life changes forever. Whether the change is from wealth to poverty, safety to danger, or good to evil, peripeteia leaves the audience feeling dismayed, sad, and shocked. As such, peripeteia is the most necessary and striking element of the tragic plot.

Examples of Peripeteia in Literature

Peripeteia provides literature with a shocking and abrupt point in the plot which changes the entire course of the story.

Oedipus was raised by different parents, for his parents feared the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. As an adult, Oedipus is told by an oracle that the plague on his people will end when the murderer of Laius is caught and exiled. Oedipus visits a prophet Tiresias who tells him he is the murderer. Believing he is innocent, Oedipus is angered. His wife, trying to calm him down, tells him of Laius's murder. Oedipus, upon hearing the story, suspects he may have been the murderer. A messenger arrives to tell Oedipus his father Polybus has died. Oedipus rejoices that he has not murdered his father, but still fears he may marry his mother. The messenger, hoping to ease his fears, tells him Polybus and his wife were not his real parents. Rather than easing his fears, the messenger reveals the dark truth to Oedipus: he has fulfilled the prophecy.