

## PERIPETEIA IN NARRATIVE THEORY FROM ARISTOTLE TO COGNITIVE NARRATOLOGY

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### Abstract

Peripeteia, conventionally defined as a sudden reversal within narrative action, has occupied a central position in literary theory since its formulation in classical poetics. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the concept is primarily associated with plot structure and the causal logic of tragic action. Subsequent developments in narrative theory, however, have gradually expanded the scope of peripeteia beyond formal reversals of fortune to include shifts in cognition, emotion, and interpretation. Against this background, the present article traces the theoretical trajectory of peripeteia from Aristotelian poetics to contemporary cognitive narratology. It argues that, within cognitive approaches to narrative, peripeteia may be more productively understood as a moment of cognitive and emotional reorganization, affecting both character consciousness and reader interpretation. By bringing classical narrative theory into dialogue with cognitive models of narrative comprehension, the article proposes a reconceptualization of peripeteia as a key mechanism of narrative meaning-making and reader engagement.

**Keywords:** Peripeteia, narrative theory, Aristotle, cognitive narratology, mental models, emotional processing.

### Introduction

Narrative theory has long been concerned with moments of disruption, reversal, and transformation that reorient the course of a story and reshape its meaning. One of the earliest and most influential concepts developed to account for such moments is peripeteia, first systematically articulated by Aristotle in *Poetics*. Aristotle defines peripeteia as a reversal in the action whereby events turn into their opposite, emphasizing that such reversals should arise from the internal



logic of the plot rather than from chance (Aristotle, trans. 1996). In tragic drama, peripeteia frequently coincides with recognition (*anagnorisis*), producing a powerful emotional and ethical impact.

For much of its theoretical history, peripeteia has been treated primarily as a structural feature of plot organization. Classical and neoclassical approaches, as well as later formalist traditions, tended to focus on its function within the causal sequence of events. Yet such accounts only partially explain the enduring significance of peripeteia in narrative experience. Readers do not merely register reversals as formal turning points; rather, they experience them as moments that demand reinterpretation, emotional adjustment, and renewed understanding of characters and situations.

This observation has become particularly salient with the emergence of cognitive narratology, which shifts analytical attention from narrative structures alone to the mental processes involved in narrative comprehension. From this perspective, peripeteia may be seen not simply as a change in external circumstances but as a cognitively salient event that disrupts readers' mental models and prompts their reconfiguration. The present article builds on this insight by tracing the evolution of peripeteia from its Aristotelian origins to its reinterpretation within cognitive narratology. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that peripeteia remains a theoretically productive concept when understood as a mechanism that integrates narrative structure with cognitive and emotional processing.

**Peripeteia in Aristotelian poetics.** In *Poetics*, Aristotle situates peripeteia among the defining elements of complex plot (*mythos*), alongside recognition and scenes of suffering. He characterizes peripeteia as a change in the course of action that leads to its opposite outcome, stressing that such reversals must be motivated by necessity or probability rather than coincidence (Aristotle, trans. 1996). This insistence on causal coherence reflects Aristotle's broader view of tragedy as an imitation of purposeful human action.

Importantly, peripeteia is not treated as an isolated narrative device. It is closely bound to character and ethical judgment, revealing the consequences of human error (*hamartia*) and the limits of human knowledge. As Halliwell (1986) observes, Aristotelian peripeteia functions within a moral framework in which reversal brings latent truths to light, often through the painful recognition of responsibility.

Although Aristotle's analysis is grounded in tragic drama, his formulation of peripeteia has exerted a lasting influence on subsequent narrative theory. Even when applied to non-dramatic genres, the concept continues to denote moments of decisive transformation that alter the trajectory and meaning of the narrative as a whole (Golden, 1992).

**Peripeteia in classical and early modern narrative thought.** In post-Aristotelian literary criticism, peripeteia remained a largely implicit category, absorbed into broader discussions of plot unity and dramatic effectiveness. Renaissance and neoclassical theorists, drawing heavily on Aristotelian authority, emphasized coherence, causality, and moral clarity, with reversals serving as indicators of successful composition rather than as objects of independent theoretical inquiry (Scaliger, 1561/1994).

As narrative forms diversified, particularly with the rise of the novel, the nature of reversal began to change. In prose fiction, peripeteia often manifested less as a sudden external shift in fortune and more as an internal transformation involving perception, belief, or self-awareness. Watt (1957) notes that the novel's emphasis on individual consciousness encouraged new forms of narrative turning points, centered on psychological rather than purely structural change.

These developments prepared the ground for later theoretical approaches in which peripeteia would be reinterpreted not only as an event within the story but as a transformation in narrative understanding.

**Structuralist narratology and the marginalization of peripeteia.** Twentieth-century structuralist narratology marked a decisive shift away from classical plot categories toward systematic models of narrative organization. In the work of Gérard Genette, attention focused on narrative order, duration, frequency, and focalization, providing powerful tools for analyzing narrative discourse (Genette, 1980). Within this framework, peripeteia was not eliminated but subsumed under broader structural descriptions of narrative progression.

Similarly, Propp's (1968) morphology of the folktale reduced narrative change to a sequence of recurrent functions, emphasizing regularity and predictability rather than singular moments of reversal. While such approaches significantly advanced the formal analysis of narrative, they tended to downplay the experiential impact of turning points on readers.

As Ryan (1991) observes, structuralist narratology often describes what happens in narratives without fully accounting for how these events are cognitively and



emotionally processed. This limitation would later motivate the emergence of cognitively oriented approaches to narrative theory.

**The cognitive turn in narrative theory.** Cognitive narratology emerged in response to the perceived gap between formal narrative description and reader experience. Drawing on cognitive psychology and linguistics, this approach conceptualizes narratives as prompts for mental simulation rather than as self-contained textual structures. David Herman argues that readers construct dynamic mental models of story worlds, continuously updating them as the narrative unfolds (Herman, 2002).

Within this framework, narrative comprehension is understood as an active, inferential process. Readers generate expectations, evaluate new information, and revise their interpretations in light of narrative developments. Events that disrupt these expectations—such as peripeteia—therefore play a central role in sustaining cognitive engagement and interpretive effort.

**Peripeteia as cognitive reconfiguration.** From a cognitive perspective, peripeteia can be understood as a moment of mental model disruption. Situation model theory suggests that readers track multiple dimensions of narrative information, including characters, goals, temporal relations, and causality (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). A peripeteia challenges one or more of these dimensions, prompting a rapid reassessment of previously constructed representations.

Such cognitive reconfiguration aligns closely with Aristotle's emphasis on recognition, albeit reframed in psychological rather than ethical terms. What changes is not merely the direction of the plot but the reader's understanding of narrative meaning. In this sense, peripeteia functions as a catalyst for reinterpretation, reinforcing its significance beyond formal plot mechanics.

**Emotional processing and narrative reversal.** Cognitive narratology also foregrounds the emotional consequences of narrative events. Research in affective psychology demonstrates that emotions arise from appraisal processes that evaluate events in relation to expectations and goals (Scherer, 2005). Because peripeteia overturns expectations, it often produces heightened emotional responses such as surprise, empathy, or moral reassessment.

Monika Fludernik (1996) emphasizes experientiality as a defining feature of narrative, arguing that readers engage with stories through embodied and affective understanding. From this perspective, peripeteia represents a peak of experiential intensity, integrating cognitive disruption with emotional resonance.

**Toward an integrated model of peripeteia.** When viewed through both classical and cognitive lenses, peripeteia emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon. Structurally, it marks a decisive turning point in narrative progression; cognitively, it disrupts and reorganizes mental models; emotionally, it intensifies reader engagement and ethical reflection.

This integrated perspective supports recent calls for interdisciplinary narrative theory that bridges textual analysis and cognitive science (Herman, 2013). Revisiting Aristotelian concepts in light of contemporary cognitive research allows narrative theory to retain its historical depth while addressing the complexities of reader experience.

## Conclusion

The concept of peripeteia has undergone significant transformation since its articulation in Aristotle's *Poetics*. While originally conceived as a plot-based reversal within tragic drama, it has gradually evolved into a broader narrative phenomenon encompassing cognitive and emotional change. Cognitive narratology provides a productive framework for understanding this evolution, highlighting how peripeteia functions as a trigger for mental model revision and emotional appraisal. By tracing peripeteia's trajectory from classical poetics to cognitive narrative theory, this article demonstrates both the durability and adaptability of the concept. Peripeteia remains central to narrative meaning-making precisely because it operates at the intersection of structure, cognition, and emotion, shaping how stories are understood and experienced.

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