

**III B.A ENG. LIT**  
**An Introduction to English Criticism – Sub. Code: BEN 53**

ARISTOTLE [B.C. 384–322]

**Introduction**

Aristotle was the most distinguished disciple of Plato. He is believed to have written nearly half a dozen critical treatises, of which only two survive—Poetics and Rhetoric. Poetics deal with the art of poetry and Rhetoric deals with the art of speaking.

**The Plan of Poetics**

Poetics is not a mere enunciation of the principles of the poetic art. Its conclusions are firmly rooted in Greek Literature.

Poetics is a treatise of about fifty pages containing twenty six small chapters. It gives the impression of being a summary of his lectures to his pupils, written either by them or by himself. It is believed to have a second part, which is lost. For it is incomplete and omits some of the important questions he himself raises which were reserved for a fuller treatment in the second part.

The first four chapters and the twenty-fifth are devoted to poetry, the fifth in a general way to comedy, epic, and tragedy, the following fourteen exclusively to tragedy, the next three to poetic diction, the next two to epic poetry, and last to a comparison of epic poetry and tragedy. Aristotle's main concern appears to be tragedy, which in his day, was considered to be the most developed form of poetry.

**ARISTOTLE'S OBSERVATIONS ON POETRY**

**1. Its Nature**

Following Plato, Aristotle calls the poet an imitator. The poet imitates one of three objects—‘things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be’. Like Plato, he believes that there is a natural pleasure in imitation, which is inborn in man, constituting the one difference between him and the lower animals. It is the pleasure of imitation that enables the child to learn his earliest lessons in speech and conduct from those around him. A poet or artist is a grown up child indulging in imitation for the pleasure it affords.

There is another natural instinct, helping to make him a poet—instinct for harmony and rhythm, manifesting itself in metrical composition. It is no less pleasing than the first.

The poet’s imitations are not unreal—‘twice removed from reality’—as Plato said. Aristotle believed that they reveal truths of a permanent or universal kind. Comparing poetry and history, Aristotle says that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened but what may happen.

- ◆ The poet is different from the historian, not because he writes in verse and the latter in prose.
- ◆ The historian relates what has happened, the poet relates what may happen
- ◆ Poetry is more philosophical than history because it expresses higher things.
- ◆ Poetry expresses the universal, history the particular.

## 2. Its Function

Aristotle sees pleasure as the end of poetry. He never says that the function of poetry is to teach. Teaching is not ruled out if it is incidental to the pleasure it gives. Such pleasure can be regarded as superior because it serves a dual purpose—that of itself and of civic morality.

## 3. Its Emotional Appeal

Aristotle like Plato believes that poetry makes an immediate appeal to the emotions. Taking tragedy as the highest form of poetry, he says that it arouses the emotions of pity and fear-pity at the undeserved sufferings of the hero and fear of the worst that may befall him. Plato considered them as harmful to the growth of the mind. 'If we let our own sense of pity grow strong by feeding upon the grief of others, it is not easy to restrain it in the case of our own sufferings'. Aristotle has no such fear. These emotions of pity and fear are aroused with a view to their purgation or catharsis.

◆ Everybody has occasions of fear and pity in life. If they go on accumulating, they become an alien matter in the soul.

◆ In tragedy where the emotions are not our own these emotions find a full and free outlet, relieving the soul of the excess.

◆ By showering them on other persons, we emerge nobler than before.

◆ It is this that pleases in a tragic tale, which normally will be painful.

◆ Viewed in this light, tragedy is an art that transmutes the disturbing emotions into what Milton calls 'calm of mind all passion spent'.

◆ Thus the emotional appeal of poetry is not harmful but health-giving and artistically satisfying.

### ARISTOTLE'S OBSERVATIONS ON TRAGEDY

#### 1. Its Origin

Poetry can imitate two kinds of actions—the noble actions of good men or the mean actions of bad men.

From the former was born the epic and from the latter the satire. From these in turn arose tragedy and comedy. Tragedy bears the same relation to the epic as comedy to the satire. It follows therefore that the epic and tragedy are superior to the satire and comedy, which is related to the actions of low men.

Between them, tragedy, according to Aristotle is superior to the epic, having all the elements of the epic in a shorter compass, with moreover music and spectacular effects which the epic does not have, and being more compact in design.

## 2. Its Characteristics

'Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions'.

★ By serious action Aristotle means a tale of suffering exciting pity and fear. Action comprises all human activities, including deeds, thoughts, and feelings. It should be complete or self-contained, with a beginning, a middle and an end

★ A beginning is that before which the audience does not need to be told anything to understand the story. If something more is required the beginning is unsatisfactory.

★ From the beginning follow the events that constitute the middle.

★ In their turn they lead to those other events that cannot but issue from them and that lead to none other after them. They form the end.

★ Completeness implies organic unity or a natural sequence of event that cannot be disturbed.

The plot should have a certain magnitude or a reasonable length, such as the mind may comprehend fully in one view or with the required time. A reasonable length or size is an essential condition of beauty. Plot should be of the right proportion in itself and in all its parts. If it is too short, the mind will miss many things in it to comprehend it fully and if it is too long the mind cannot take in all the events within the time required by the story.

Artistic ornament—'rhythm, harmony and song'. These are designed to enrich the language of the play to make it as effective in its purpose as possible.

The form of action—in the tragedy the tale is told with the help of living and moving characters. The speeches and action make the tale. Tragedy is meant to be acted as well as read, whereas the epic is intended to be read only.

### 3. Its Constituent Parts

Aristotle finds 6 constituent parts in tragedy—  
Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song & Spectacle  
Plot is the arrangement of the incidents. It is the chief part of the tragedy. To the question whether plot makes a tragedy or character, Aristotle replies that 'without action there cannot be a tragedy, there may be without character.

Character determines men's qualities. It is by their action that they are happy or otherwise. Tragedy is written to imitate men in action. It is by their deeds, performed before our very eyes, that we know them rather than by what the poet, as the epic, tells of them. Character is next only in importance to plot.

Thought is what the character thinks or feels during his career in the play. It reveals itself in speech.

Diction is used to accomplish plot, character and thought.

Song is used as embellishment.

Spectacle is the least important part of the tragedy. It is the work of the stage mechanic.

### 4. The Structure of the Plot

The plot is the soul of tragedy. Hence the artistic arrangements of its incidents is of prime importance

It should have 'unity of action'. The events comprising the plot will concern only one man and not more. If they concern more than one man, there will be no necessary connection between them, as the actions of one man cannot be put down to another.

◆ The episodic plots—those in which the episodes or events follow one another in mere chronological order— are the worst.

Only once Aristotle mentions what is came to be known as ‘the unity of time’:- ‘Tragedy endeavours as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit’ whereas the epic action has no limitations of time’.

From this statement, critics were led to believe that for a good tragic plot it was necessary to select an event or events that happened within twenty four hours or so in life, so that when represented on the stage in about one-fourth of that time on the stage they may not appear unnatural, as they would if the plot-time were longer. But Aristotle nowhere insists on this as a condition. He merely states the existing practices. He is also aware of the fact that in this particular matter, ‘at first the same freedom was admitted in tragedy as in epic poetry’.

The unity of place is not mentioned at all.

So much confusion was created on the issue of unities that it has to be mentioned that Aristotle never considered them as among the essentials of a good plot.

◆ However, it is necessary that a good tragic plot must arouse the emotions of pity and fear in the spectator.

◆ The change of fortune of the hero should be from good to bad and not otherwise. The unhappy ending is the only right ending, for it is the most tragic in its effect.

The plot is divisible into two parts—complication and its denouement. The former ties every incident into complicated knot. The latter unties it. The first is generally called rising action and the second is called falling action.

## 5. Simple and Complex plot

The plot may be simple or complex. In a simple plot there are no puzzling situations. In a complex plot there will be ‘peripeteia’ and ‘anagnorisis’

★ ‘Peripeteia’ is a reversal of the situation, a deed done in blindness defeating its own purpose,



a move to kill an enemy recoiling on one's own head, the effort to save turning into just its opposite, killing an enemy and discovering him to be a kinsman.

★ 'Anagnosis' is a change from ignorance to knowledge.

★ Both 'Peripeteia' and 'Anagnosis' please because there is the element of surprise in them. A plot that makes use of them is complex and a perfect tragedy should be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan'.

## 6. Tragic Hero

The aim of tragedy is to evoke pity and fear. Hence the actions of the hero must create these feelings in the minds of the spectators.

★ So the tragic hero cannot be an eminently good man, hurled from prosperity into adversity, because this totally undeserved suffering will arouse not pity and fear but shock or revolt that such a thing should happen.

★ The tragic hero should not be a bad man because by his very badness he can neither create pity nor fear.

★ Again the tragic hero cannot be a villainous character because his fall will create only gratification rather than pity and fear.

★ Thus the tragic hero is a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. The literary term for this is 'hamartia' [fatal flaw]

★ His misfortune excites pity because it is out of all proportion to his error of judgement, and his overall goodness excites fear for his doom.

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