



Aristotle's Poetics

MA Semester III / Literary Criticism & Theory I



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Aristotle (384–322 BC)



- ❖ Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher who contributed to the foundation of both symbolic logic and scientific thinking in Western philosophy
- ❖ Born in Stagiris in Macedonia.
- ❖ Son of Nichomachus a court physician to King Amyntas II (Grandfather of Alexander)
- ❖ From the age of 17 for next Twenty Years resident in Athens in Plato's Academy (368-78)
- ❖ He was succeeded as head of the academy following the death of Plato (384–47)
- ❖ In the second phase of his life, he was invited by King Philip as a tutor to Alexander
- ❖ In the later development King Philip was murdered and Alexander became King.



- ❖ After the lapse of 13 years he returned in Athens
- ❖ Alexander already stormed through Asia and became extreme enemy to democracies
- ❖ Many cursed Aristotle
- ❖ Aristotle founded his own academy called Lyceum in the grove of Apollo at Lyceius
- ❖ Research in Politics, history, literature, natural science and biology
- ❖ After the death of Alexander Athens leapt arms against Macedonians, and Aristotle was accused of impiety (for poetry in praise of his dead father in law Hermeis)
- ❖ To keep the Athenian away “from sinning against philosophy”, he shifted to Chalcus in Euboea where he died next year (322 BC)



- ❖ According to Diogenes, Aristotle was a thin man who dressed flashily, wearing a fashionable hairstyle and a number of rings.
- ❖ Aristotle must have possessed significant personal wealth, since it promises a furnished house in Stagira
- ❖ Aristotle fathered a daughter with Pythias and, with Herpyllis, a son, Nicomachus



Unlike Plato, his actual works were never recovered we only have class notes from his students Aristotle is the founder not only of philosophy as a discipline with distinct areas or branches, but, still more generally, of the conception of intellectual inquiry as falling into distinct disciplines.

Aristotle initially claimed that everything was made up of five elements: earth, fire, air, water, and Aether.


Aristotle's idea of "four causes," which explain the nature of change in an object.

1. Its material cause is what it is actually made of.
2. Its formal cause is how that matter is arranged.
3. Its efficient cause is where it came from.
4. Its final cause is its purpose.



- ❖ **Metaphysics:** Aristotle formulates his doctrine of substance, which he explains through the connected contrasts between form and matter, and between potentiality and actuality.
- ❖ **Logic:** A logical argument could have false premises and a true conclusion, but true premises would always lead to a true conclusion.
- ❖ **Ethics:** Aristotle thought that no rules or appeal to consequences could possibly give a person correct guidelines in which to respond to all situations.
- ❖ **Eudemonia:** Aristotle thought that the goal of human beings in their search for happiness was to reach Eudemonia, or a state of flourishing.
- ❖ **Virtues:** Aristotle thought that the way to identify a virtue was that it was a middle ground between two vices in opposite directions.
- ❖ Aristotle's virtues are temperance, justice, fortitude, courage, liberality, magnificence, and magnanimity

* A more common objection that modern philosophers use is that what may be considered a virtue in one society may not be considered a virtue in another



Philosophy of Mind: In Aristotle's view, the soul is the form of a living body. He examines the different aspects of this form in plants, non-rational animals and human beings, by describing nutrition, perception, thought and desire.

What is the soul? : According to Aristotle it is to be the form of the body. More precisely, it is the “first actuality of a natural body that has life potentially”

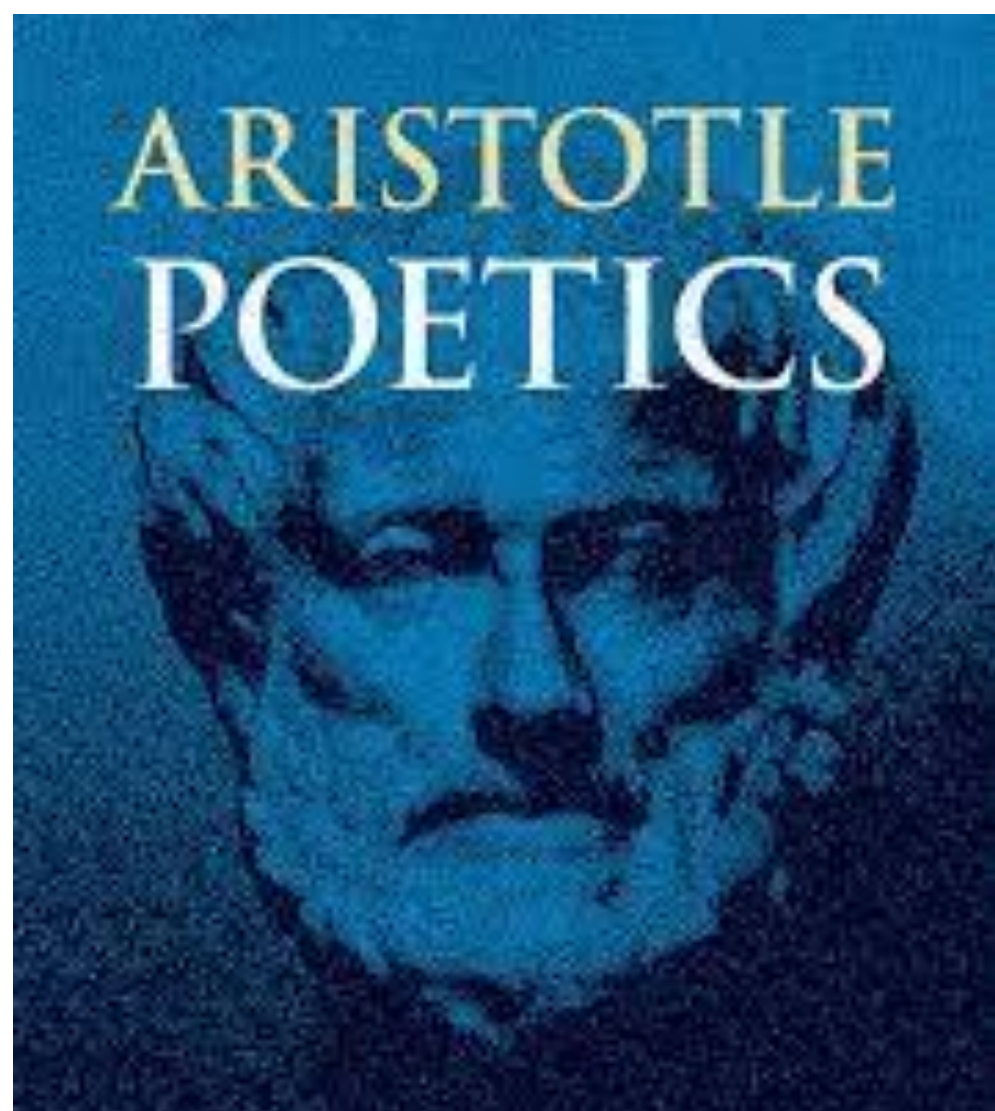
The soul is therefore neither a material part of an animal, nor some immaterial thing capable of existing in separation from the body. For the soul is a set of capacities that a living thing has, and these capacities are incapable of existing on their own - they are the capacities of a living thing.

Politics: Politics is continuous with ethics. For just as it is part of human nature to seek happiness, it is also part of human nature to live in communities. The state is the highest form of community; it is a natural entity, and does not exist merely by convention. Aristotle believes that a state exists for the sake of the good or happy life, so that the best form of government will be one which promotes the well-being of all of its citizens



❖ Plato's and Aristotle's differences occur on the grounds of objectives and Methods

Plato	Aristotle
To re-organise Human Life	To re-organise human Knowledge
Transcendentalist & Artistic temperament	A Scientist and Experimentalist
An Idealist (The ideal world is real, the phenomenal world is but a shadow of this ideal reality i.e. unreal)	Believed in reality of the world of the senses. The world is real and form the basis for scientific study)
Language-Poetic and charming	Dogmatic (rigid) and telegraphic (concise)
Imitation is mimicry	A creative process
Poetry is linked with painting	Poetry is linked with music
Condemned poetry on moral and intellectual grounds	He justifies it and introduces catharsis
Emotions are undesirable so need to be repressed	Need for emotional outlet

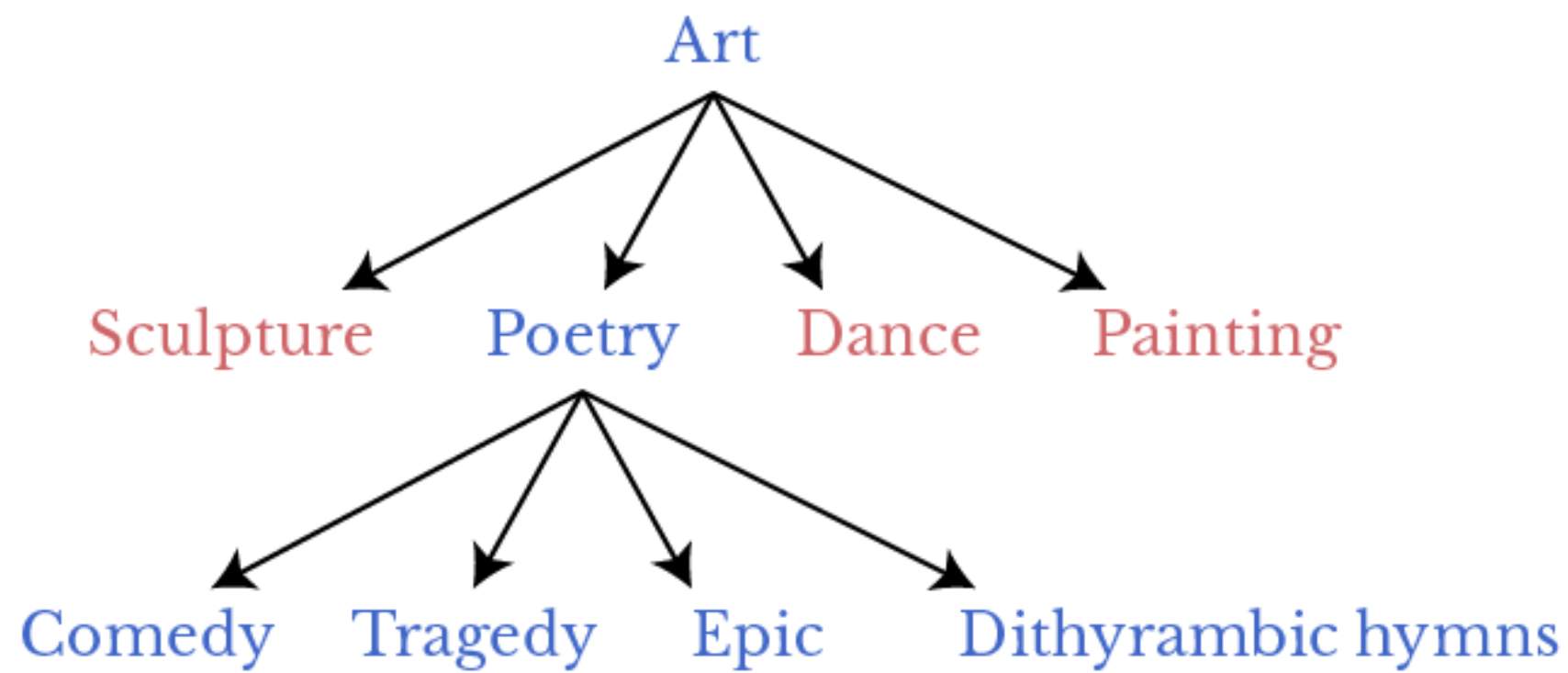




- ❖ Aristotle's *Poetics* (composed in around 330 BC) can be read as a response to Plato's attack on art.
- ❖ The *Poetics* has been a central document in the study of aesthetics and literature for centuries
- ❖ The *Poetics* is Aristotle's attempt to explain the basic problems of art. He both defines art and offers criteria for determining the quality of a given artwork.
- ❖ One contemporary critic argues that Aristotle "reduces drama to its language," and the "language itself to its least poetic element, the story, and then encourages insensitive readers...to subject stories to crudely moralistic readings that reduce tragedies to the childish proportions of Aesop-fables"
- ❖ The main focus of the *Poetics* is on Greek tragedy. Mainly Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.E.), Sophocles (496–405 B.C.E.), and Euripides (485–406 B.C.E.).
- ❖ The *Poetics* also discusses epic poetry, using the example of Homer



- ❖ Aristotle proposes to discuss poetry, which he defines as a means of mimesis, or imitation
- ❖ Aristotle focuses his discussion on tragedy, which uses dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and deals with agents who are better than us ourselves
- ❖ Tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to effect a katharsis (catharsis) of these emotions
- ❖ Six Elements of Tragedy: (1) mythos, or plot, (2) character, (3) thought, (4) diction, (5) melody, and (6) spectacle.





LECTURE II

THE
POETICS OF ARISTOTLE

EDITED

WITH CRITICAL NOTES AND A TRANSLATION

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THIRD EDITION REVISED

London

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED

NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1902

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Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic 2
poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in
most of their forms, are all in their general conception
[modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one 3
another in three respects,—the medium, the objects, the
manner or mode of imitation, being in each case
distinct.

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Medium & Manner of Imitation

Thus in the music of the flute and of the lyre, 'harmony' and rhythm alone are employed; also in other arts, such as that of the shepherd's pipe, which are essentially similar to these. In dancing, rhythm 5

There is another art which imitates by means of 6
language alone, and that either in prose or verse—which
17 b verse, again, may either combine different metres or consist of but one kind—but this has hitherto been without a name. For there is no common term we could apply to 7
the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and the Socratic dialogues on the one hand; and, on the other, to poetic imitations in iambic, elegiac, or any similar metre. People do, indeed, add the word 'maker' or

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Object of Imitation

II
1448 Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus

whether prose or verse unaccompanied by music. Homer, for example, makes men better than they are; Cleophon as they are; Hegemon the Thasian, the inventor of parodies, and Nicochares, the author of the Deiliad, worse than they are. The same thing holds good of Dithyrambs 4

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Cyclopes. The same distinction marks off Tragedy from Comedy; for Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life.

three differences which distinguish artistic imitation,—the medium, the objects, and the manner. So that from one point of view, Sophocles is an imitator of the same kind as Homer—for both imitate higher types of doing. Hence, some say, the name of ‘drama’ is given to such poems, as representing action. For the same reason the Dorians claim the invention both of Tragedy and Comedy. The claim to Comedy is put forward by

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IV Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the ² instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures; and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We ³

learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men ⁵ enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause.

Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature. Next, ⁶ there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, metres being manifestly sections of rhythm. — Poetry, therefore,




Poetry now diverged in two directions, according to 7
the individual character of the writers. The graver
spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of
good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions
of meaner persons, at first composing satires, as
the former did hymns to the gods and the praises of
famous men. A poem of the satirical ~~kind~~ cannot 8
indeed be put down to any author earlier than Homer;
though many such writers probably there were. But

As, in the serious style, Homer is pre-eminent among
poets, for he alone combined dramatic form with
excellence of imitation, so he too first laid down the
main lines of Comedy, by dramatising the ludicrous
instead of writing personal satire. His Margites bears
449 a the same relation to Comedy that the Iliad and Odyssey
do to Tragedy. But when Tragedy and Comedy came 10


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question. Be that as it may, Tragedy—as also Comedy 12
—was at first mere improvisation. The one originated
with the leaders of the Dithyramb, the other with those
of the phallic songs, which are still in use in many of
our cities. Tragedy advanced by slow degrees; each
new element that showed itself was in turn developed.
Having passed through many changes, it found its natural
form, and there it stopped.

Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he dimin- 13
ished the importance of the Chorus, and assigned the
leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number
of actors to three, and added scene-painting. Moreover, 14




V Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type,—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.




Epic poetry agrees with Tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that Epic poetry admits but one kind of metre, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for 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 limits of time. This, then, is a second point of difference; though at first the same freedom was admitted in Tragedy as in Epic poetry.

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Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is, ²
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 ³




Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it necessarily follows, in the first place, that Spectacular equipment will be a part of Tragedy. Next, Song and Diction, for these are the medium of imitation. By 'Diction'

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Again, Tragedy is the imitation of an action ; and an 5
action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess
certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought;
for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves,
and these—thought and character—are the two natural
causes from which actions spring, and on actions again
all success or failure depends. Hence, the Plot is the 6
imitation of the action :—for by plot, I here mean the
arrangement of the incidents. By Character I mean
that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to
the agents. Thought is required wherever a statement
is proved, or, it may be, a general truth enunciated.
Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which 7
parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Character,
Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. Two of the parts con-



incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. The tragedies of most of our modern




The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: Character holds the second place.


• A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful 15 colours, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents, mainly with a view to the action.

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Third in order is Thought,—that is, the faculty of 16
saying what is possible and pertinent in given circum-
stances. In the case of oratory, this is the function of
the political art and of the art of rhetoric: and so indeed
the older poets make their characters speak the language
of civic life; the poets of our time, the language of the
rhetoricians. Character is that which reveals moral 17
purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or
avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this




Fourth among the elements enumerated comes 1
Diction ; by which I mean, as has been already said, the
expression of the meaning in words ; and its essence is
the same both in verse and prose.

Of the remaining elements Song holds the chief place 1
among the embellishments.

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A marble bust of Aristotle, showing his head and shoulders, with curly hair and a beard, set against an orange background.

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.

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LECTURE III

The Structure of the Plot:


Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an ² imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has ³ a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.



Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a picture of a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence an exceedingly small picture cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time.

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long. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and 5 pictures a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view ; so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory. The 6

I Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life, which cannot be reduced to unity ; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. Hence the 2



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As therefore, in the other ~~imitative arts~~, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed.

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The 2




The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history : for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity ; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages.



→ In Comedy this is already apparent: for here 5
the poet first constructs the plot on the lines of prob-
ability, and then inserts characteristic names;—unlike
the lampooners who write about particular individuals.
But tragedians still keep to real names, the reason being 6
that what is possible is credible: what has not happened
we do not at once feel sure to be possible: but what has
happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not
have happened. ←

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✓ But again, Tragedy is an imitation not only of a ¹¹ complete action, but of events terrible and pitiful. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. ←

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Simple and Complex Plot:




An action which is one and 2 continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of Intention and without Recognition.

A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal 3 structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action.




Reversal of Intention is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in the

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of Intention, as in the Oedipus.




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Two parts, then, of the Plot—Reversal of Intention 6 and Recognition—turn upon surprises. A third part is the Tragic Incident. The Tragic Incident is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like.

We now come to the quantitative parts—the separate parts into which Tragedy is divided—namely, Prologue, Episode, Exodos, Choric song; this last being divided into Parodos and Stasimon.



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Quantitative Parts (Explained):

- ❑ The Prologue is the entire part of a tragedy which proceeds the parode of the chorus
- ❑ The episode is entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric song
- ❑ The Exode is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it.
- ❑ Parode is the first undivided utterance of the chorus
- ❑ The Stasimon is a choric ode without anapaests or trochaic tetrameter
- ❑ The Comos is a joint lamentation of chorus and actors

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A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. ←

→ the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it

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A well constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad.

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means ; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place.

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Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention,—except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So

But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another—if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done—these are the situations to be looked for by the poet.



Character (Four Essential Qualities)

1. Character must be good. Any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character. The character will be good if the purpose is good.
2. The Aim at its propriety. There is a valour, but valour in woman or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate.
3. Character must be true to Life.
4. The consistency., for though the subject of the imitation, who suggest the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent.

Again, since Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level, the example of good portrait-painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. So too

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Recognition (Its Kinds)

➤ Some birth marks to distinguish a character:

1. Recognition by signs, like the spear which the earth born race bear, some bodily marks: scars, external tokens as necklace, little arc, etc.
2. The recognition invented at will be poet and on that account writing art. (Orestes in the Iphigenia reveals the fact that he is orestes) (Valmiki of Ramayana)
3. The third kind depends upon memory when the sight of some object awakens a feeling (a hero breaks into tears with a certain scene)
4. The fourth kind is the process of reasoning.

But, of all recognitions, the best is that which arises from the incidents themselves, where the startling discovery is made by natural means. Such is that in the

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Practical tips to the Playwrights:

In constructing the plot and working it out with the proper diction, the poet ~~should~~ place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way, seeing

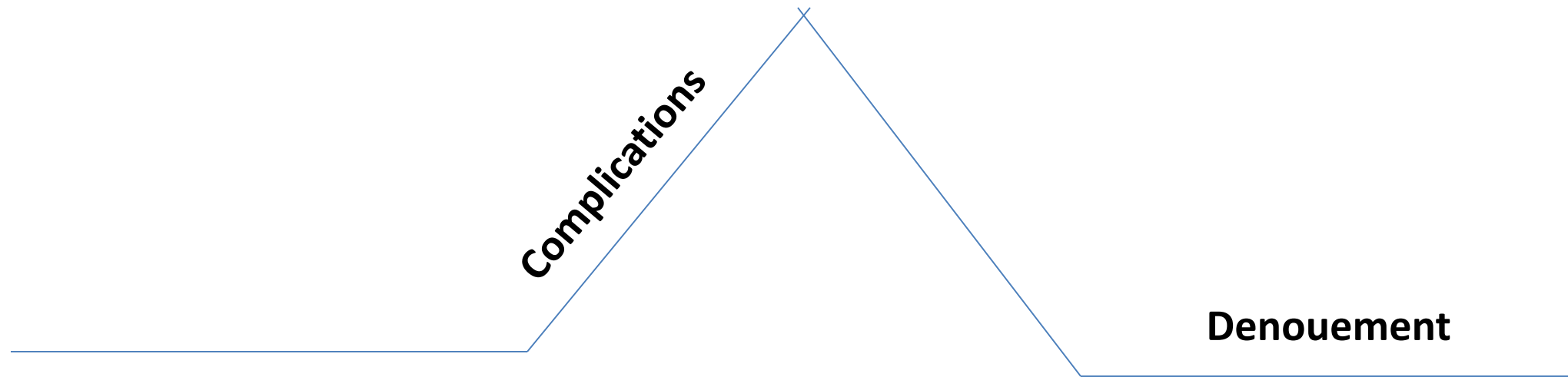
Again, the poet should work out his play, to the best of his power, with appropriate gestures; for those who feel emotion are most convincing through natural sympathy with the characters they represent;

As for the story, whether the poet takes it ready-made or constructs it for himself, he should first sketch its general outline, and then fill in the episodes and amplify in detail.

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Every tragedy falls into two parts,—Complication
and Unravelling or *Dénouement*.




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Four Kinds of Tragedy:


1. The Complex: depending entirely on reversal of the situation and recognition
2. The Pathetic: Where the motive is passion
3. The Ethical: (Where the motives is ethical
4. The Simple:

The poet should endeavour, if possible, to combine all 3 poetic merits; or failing that, the greatest number and those the most important; the more so, in face of the cavilling criticism of the day. 

Again, the poet should remember what has been often said, and not make a Tragedy into an Epic structure.

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The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the 7 actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles.

Under Thought is included every effect which has to be produced by speech, the subdivisions being,—proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings, such as pity, fear, anger, and the like; the suggestion of importance or its opposite. Now, it is evident that the dramatic incidents must be treated from the same points of view as the dramatic speeches, when the object is to evoke the sense of pity, fear, importance, or probability.

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LECTURE IV





Language in General includes following parts:

- Letter
- Syllable
- Connecting words
- Noun
- Verb
- Inflexion or Case
- Sentence or Phrase


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A Letter is an indivisible sound, yet not every such sound, but only one which can form part of a group of sounds. For even brutes utter indivisible sounds, none of which I call a letter. The sound I mean may be either a vowel, a semi-vowel, or a mute. 

A Syllable is a non-significant sound, composed of a mute and a vowel: for GR without A is a syllable, as also with A,—GRA. But the investigation of these differences belongs also to metrical science.




A Connecting word is a non-significant sound, which neither causes nor hinders the union of many sounds into one significant sound; it may be placed at either end or in the middle of a sentence.

A Noun is a composite significant sound, not marking time, of which no part is in itself significant: for in double or compound words we do not employ the separate parts as if each were in itself significant. Thus

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A Verb is a composite significant sound, marking time, in which, as in the noun, no part is in itself significant. For 'man,' or 'white' does not express the idea of 'when'; but 'he walks,' or 'he has walked' does connote time, present or past.

Inflexion belongs both to the noun and verb, and expresses either the relation 'of,' 'to,' or the like; or that of number, whether one or many, as 'man' or 'men'; or the modes or tones in actual delivery, e.g. a question or a command. 'Did he go?' and 'go' are verbal inflexions of this kind.

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A Sentence or Phrase is a composite significant : sound, some at least of whose parts are in themselves significant ; for not every such group of words consists of verbs and nouns—‘ the definition of man,’ for example

Words are of two kinds, simple and double. By simple I mean those composed of non-significant elements, such as γῆ. By double or compound, those composed either of a significant and non-significant element

A word may likewise be triple, quadruple, or multiple in form



Types of Word


- ❑ **Current:** One which is in general use among people
- ❑ **Strange:** One which is in use in another country
- ❑ **Metaphorical:** it is an application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species or from species to genus, or from species to species or by analogy that is, proportion
- ❑ **Newly Coined:** Which has never been even in local use but is adopted by the poet himself
- ❑ **Lengthened:** When its own vowel is exchanged for a longer one, or when a syllable is inserted.
- ❑ **Contracted:** A Word is contracted when some part of it is removed
- ❑ **Altered:** It is one in which part of the ordinary form is left unchanged and part is re-cast



Upon Style:

The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean. The clearest style is that which uses only current or proper words; at the same time it is mean:—witness

That diction, on the other hand, is lofty and raised above the commonplace which employs unusual words. By unusual, I mean strange (or rare) words, metaphorical, lengthened,—anything, in short, that differs from the normal idiom.




A certain infusion, therefore, of these elements is necessary to style ; for the strange (or rare) word, the metaphorical, the ornamental, and the other kinds above mentioned, will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous.

It is a great matter to observe propriety in these several modes of expression—compound words, strange (or rare) words, and so forth. But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another ; it is the mark of genius,

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Of the various kinds of words, the compound are best adapted to dithyrambs, rare words to heroic poetry, metaphors to iambic.

As to that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single metre, the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a single and coherent picture of a living being, and produce the pleasure proper to it.




Epic Poetry:

Again, Epic poetry must have as many kinds as Tragedy: it must be simple, or complex, or 'ethical,' or 'pathetic.' The parts also, with the exception of song and scenery, are the same; for it requires Reversals of Intention, Recognitions, and Tragic Incidents.

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Epic poetry differs from Tragedy in the scale on which it is constructed, and in its metre. As regards scale or length, we have already laid down an adequate limit:—the beginning and the end must be capable of being brought within a single view.

Epic poetry has, however, a great—a special—capacity for enlarging its dimensions, and we can see the reason. In Tragedy we cannot imitate several lines of actions carried on at one and the same time; we must confine ourselves to the action on the stage and the part taken by the players.

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But in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. The Epic has here an advantage, and one that conduces to grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes.

As for the metre, the heroic measure has proved its fitness by the test of experience. If a narrative poem in any other metre or in many metres were now composed, it would be found incongruous.

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Homer, admirable in all respects, has the special merit of being the only poet who rightly appreciates the part he should take himself. The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator.

~~The element of the wonderful is admitted in Tragedy. The irrational, on which the wonderful depends for its chief effects, has wider scope in Epic poetry, because there the person acting is not seen. Thus, the pursuit of Hector would be ludicrous if placed upon the stage—the~~


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Now the wonderful is pleasing: as may be inferred from the fact that, in telling a story, every one adds something startling of his own, knowing that his hearers like it. It is Homer who has chiefly taught other poets the art of telling lies skilfully. The secret of it lies in a fallacy. For,

Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded;





The poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects,—things as they ^{exist} were or are, things as they ^{are also} are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. The vehicle of expression is language,—either current terms or, it may be, rare words or metaphors. There

If a poet has chosen to imitate something, <but has imitated it incorrectly> through want of capacity, the error is inherent in the poetry. 


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First as to matters which concern the poet's own art. If he describes the impossible, he is guilty of an error; but the error may be justified, if the end of the art be thereby attained 

Again, when a word seems to involve some inconsistency of meaning, we should consider how many senses it may bear in the particular passage. For



Things that sound contradictory should be examined :
by the same rules as in dialectical refutation—whether
the same thing is meant, in the same relation, and in the
same sense. We should therefore solve the question by

The element of the irrational, and, similarly, depravity :
of character, are justly censured when there is no inner
necessity for introducing them. Such is the irrational
element in the Aegeus of Euripides, and the badness of
Menelaus in the Orestes.




The question may be raised whether the Epic or Tragic mode of imitation is the higher. If the more refined art is the higher, and the more refined in every case is that which appeals to the better sort of audience, the art which imitates anything and everything is manifestly most unrefined.

Tragic art, then, as a whole, stands to Epic in the same relation as the younger to the elder actors. So we are told that Epic poetry is addressed to a cultivated audience, who do not need gesture; Tragedy, to an inferior public. Being then unrefined, it is evidently the lower of the two.


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Again, Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect even without action; it reveals its power by mere reading. If, then, in all other respects it is superior, this fault, we say, is not inherent in it.

And superior it is, because it has all the epic elements—it may even use the epic metre—with the music and scenic effects as important accessories; and these produce the most vivid of pleasures. Further, it has vividness of impression in reading as well as in representation.



Moreover, the art attains its end within narrower limits; for the concentrated effect is more pleasurable than one which is spread over a long time and so diluted.

If, then, Tragedy is superior to Epic poetry in all these respects, and, moreover, fulfils its specific function better as an art—for each art ought to produce, not any chance pleasure, but the pleasure proper to it, as already stated—it plainly follows that Tragedy is the higher art, as attaining its end more perfectly.



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