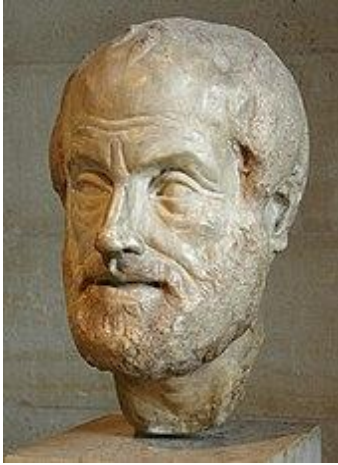


Aristotle's The Poetics



Portrait bust of Aristotle; an Imperial Roman (1st or 2nd century AD) copy of a lost bronze sculpture made by Lysippos

All Art is Mimetic

Art is mimetic, that is all arts is an imitation of life, be it sculpting, painting, music, or poetry. Paintings use paint to imitate real life, and sculptures use stone. Poetry is distinguished as the mimetic art that uses language, rhythm, and harmony to imitate real life, language obviously being the most crucial component. Poetry is mimetic in that it creates a representation of objects and events in the world, unlike philosophy, for example, which presents idea. Aristotle defines poetry as the mimetic, or imitative, use of language, rhythm, and harmony, separately or in combination.

In what way poetry imitates, or "mimics," real life?

The events in Oedipus Rex did not actually happen in real life. In fact, it is important that tragedy be fictional and that there be an understanding that the events taking place on stage are not real: no one should call the police when Hamlet kills Polonius. Still, tragedy deals with humans who speak and act in a way that real humans conceivably could have spoken and acted. It is important that there be an understanding that the account is fictional, but it must also be close enough to reality that it is plausible. Aristotle further elaborates on the value of the mimetic arts with his assertion that we are naturally imitative creatures who delight in imitation. Aristotle relates this claim to our ability to learn and reason: we exercise our reason when seeing something as an imitation of something else. It takes a certain level of recognition to see a bunch of men dancing and singing in masks as imitations of characters from ancient myths, to see stylized gestures as imitations of real action, or to see the emotional intensity generated both by actors and audience as an imitation of the emotional intensity that would have been felt if the action on stage were transpiring in real life. Aristotle defines humans as rational animals, suggesting that our rationality is what distinguishes us from other creatures. If the ability to recognize an imitation and understand what it is meant to represent requires reasoning, then we are delighting in that very faculty that makes us human.

The first distinction in all arts is that they all differ in the use of medium for the particular art. Aristotle says that the first kind of distinction in the various art forms is the means they employ. Just as a painter employs paint and a sculptor employs stone, the poet employs language, rhythm, and harmony, either singly or in combinations. For instance, flute-playing and lyre-playing employ rhythm and harmony, while dance employs only rhythm. He also addresses the question of non-poetic language, arguing that poetry is essentially mimetic, whether it is in verse or in prose. Thus, Homer is a poet, while Empedocles, a philosopher who wrote in verse, is not. While Empedocles

writes in verse, his writing is not mimetic, and so it is not poetry. In tragedy, comedy, and other kinds of poetry, rhythm, language, and harmony are all used. In some cases, as in lyric poetry, all three are used together, while in other cases, as in comedy or tragedy, the different parts come in to play at different times.

The second distinction is the objects that are imitated. All poetry represents actions with agents who are either better than us, worse than us, or quite like us. For instance, tragedy and epic poetry deal with characters who are better than us, while comedy and parody deal with characters who are worse than us. As a medium that arouses pity and fear, tragedy is most effective when events occur unexpectedly and yet in a logical order. The ideal is to have the audience see the final outcome of a tragedy as the necessary consequence of all the action that preceded it, and yet have that outcome be totally unexpected.

The final distinction is with the manner of representation: the poet either speaks directly in narrative or assumes the characters of people in the narrative and speaks through them. For instance, many poets tell straight narratives while Homer alternates between narrative and accounts of speeches given by characters in his narrative. In tragedy and comedy, the poet speaks exclusively through assumed characters. Here Aristotle distinguishes between an epic and a tragedy.

Tragedy and Epic poetry

Tragedy is dramatic poetry and epic, whereas, is a narrative form of poetry.

Tragedy is focussed in action and is of a tangible length whereas an epic is long narration extended over a long period with multiple actions taking place. The plot of an epic poem can be far more expansive because it is not limited by the stage. Epic poetry can jump back and forth between events happening at the same time in different places in a way that would be impossible on stage. These are also two notable dissimilarities between epic poetry and tragedy. The first is the length: an epic poem can reasonably last as long as a whole series of tragedies, provided it can be presented in one hearing and second is the manner.

Also Epic poetry should be narrated in heroic meter, while tragedy is normally spoken in iambic meter.

Aristotle is clearly an admirer of Homer's, as almost all his examples of good epic poetry are drawn from Homer. He praises Homer for reducing his own voice in the narrative and letting the actions and the characters tell the story themselves. He uses Homer to show how epic poetry can recount exaggerated events in a believable manner. A tragedy could never get away with such marvels, since they are less credible when we see them performed. Having said this, he remarks that no plot should ever hinge on improbable events but praises Homer for managing through his art to make this flaw in the *Odyssey* seem insignificant. He also praises Homer as a master of using paralogisms (conclusions resulting from faulty or illogical arguments) to make lies seem believable. Aristotle

cautions against an overenthusiastic use of elaborate diction in tragedy. While it is pleasing when there is no action to recount, and no character or thought to reveal, ornate diction can often obscure these more important elements when they are found together.

Similarities in epic and tragedy are; First, epic poetry must maintain the unity of plot. In this it is allied with tragedy against history. History tells us all that happened during a certain time period or to certain people, and as such it is often somewhat disconnected. Epic poetry should focus on one particular story that remains an organic whole. Homer is an excellent example of such an epic poet, as he tells a particular, connected story in the Iliad rather than trying to narrate everything that happened during the Trojan War.

Second, epic poetry must share many of the elements of tragedy. Like tragedy, it should be either simple or complex, and it should deal primarily either with a character or with suffering. Aside from spectacle and melody, the six parts of tragedy are all present in epic poetry, and epic poetry can also feature *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*.

Tragedy

Aristotle narrows his focus to examine tragedy exclusively. In order to do so, he provides a definition of tragedy that we can break up into seven parts: (1) it involves *mimesis*; (2) it is serious; (3) the action is complete and with magnitude; (4) it is made up of language with the "pleasurable accessories" of rhythm and harmony; (5) these "pleasurable accessories" are not used uniformly throughout, but are introduced in separate parts of the work, so that, for instance, some bits are spoken in verse and other bits are sung; (6) it is performed rather than narrated; and (7) it arouses the emotions of pity and fear and accomplishes a *katharsis* (purification or purgation) of these emotions.

Parts of Tragedy

Next, Aristotle asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six component parts, and that every tragedy is made up of these six parts with nothing else besides. There is (a) the spectacle, which is the overall visual appearance of the stage and the actors. The means of imitation (language, rhythm, and harmony) can be divided into (b) melody, and (c) diction, which has to do with the composition of the verses. The agents of the action can be understood in terms of (d) character and (e) thought. Thought seems to denote the intellectual qualities of an agent while character seems to denote the moral qualities of an agent. Finally, there is (f) the plot, or *mythos*, which is the combination of incidents and actions in the story. Aristotle argues that, among these six, the plot is the most important. The characters serve to advance the action of the story, not vice versa. The ends we pursue in life, our happiness and our misery, all take the form of action. That is, according to Aristotle, happiness consists in a certain kind of activity rather than in a certain quality of character. Diction and thought are also less significant than plot: a series of well-written speeches have nothing like the force of a well-structured tragedy. Further, Aristotle suggests, the most powerful elements in a tragedy, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis*, are elements of the plot. Lastly, Aristotle notes that forming a solid plot is far more difficult than creating good characters or diction.

Having asserted that the plot is the most important of the six parts of tragedy, he ranks the remainder as follows, from most important to least: character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle.

Plot

Plot plays the most significant role in a tragedy. Plot is not the story. It is the arrangement of events in a logical and impressive order so as to build a maximum impact of the story.

Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that the action of a tragedy is complete in itself and with magnitude. For a plot to be a complete whole, it must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is a point that does not necessarily follow from anything else, which naturally has consequences following from it. The end is a point that naturally follows from preceding events but does not have any necessary consequences following it. The middle is a point that is naturally connected both to events before and after it.

The magnitude of a story is important, as it is in any art. Paintings are neither infinitesimally small nor monstrously big because they must be of such a size as to be taken in by the eye. Similarly, a tragedy must be of a moderate length so as to be taken in by the memory. Usually, time limits are set by the audience or other outside factors, but Aristotle suggests that the longer the play the greater the magnitude, provided the poet can hold the tragedy together as one coherent statement. As a general rule of thumb, he suggests the action should be long enough to allow the main character to pass through a number of necessary or probable steps that take him from fortune to misfortune or vice versa.

In insisting upon the unity of plot, Aristotle makes it clear that he does not mean that it is enough to focus the plot on the life of one individual. Our lives consist of all sorts of disconnected episodes, and the story of a man's life would rarely have the completeness necessary for a unified plot. Rather, the poet must select some series of events from a character's life—as Homer does in the *Odyssey*—and craft them into a coherent whole. Any part of a story that could be added or removed without any great effect on the rest of the story is superfluous and takes away from the unity of the piece.

Simple and Complex plots

Aristotle introduces the concepts of *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and *anagnorisis* (discovery or recognition) in his discussion of simple and complex plots. All plots lead from beginning to end in a probable or necessary sequence of events, but a simple plot does so without *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* while a complex plot may have one or both of these elements. The *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* of a complex plot should themselves be necessary or probable consequences of what came before so that they are a part of the plot and not unnecessary add-ons. *Peripeteia* is the reversal from one state of affairs to its opposite. Some element in the plot effects a reversal, so that the hero who thought he was in good shape suddenly finds that all is lost, or vice versa.

Anagnorisis is a change from ignorance to knowledge. This discovery will bring love and happiness to characters who learn of good fortune, and hatred and misery to those who discover unhappy truths. The best kind of *anagnorisis* accompanies *peripeteia*. That is, a reversal of fortune effects a discovery or vice versa. For instance, Oedipus' discovery of who his mother is effects a reversal of fortune from proud king to horrible disgrace. Aristotle suggests that *anagnorisis* is possible by a number of other means as well, but it is most intimately connected to the plot when it accompanies *peripeteia*. The two together will help to arouse pity and fear and will also help to draw the play to its conclusion. In addition to *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, Aristotle defines a third part of the plot—suffering—as actions of destructive or painful nature, such as murders, torture, and woundings. As a medium that arouses pity and fear, tragedy is most effective when events occur unexpectedly and yet in a logical order. The ideal is to have the audience see the final outcome of a tragedy as the necessary consequence of all the action that preceded it, and yet have that outcome be totally unexpected.

Aristotle suggests that the best kinds of plot are complex plots that arouse fear and pity. He thus concludes that three kinds of plot should be avoided. First, we should avoid plots that show a good man going from happiness to misery, since such events seem more odious than fearful or pitiable. Second, we should avoid plots that show a bad man going from misery to happiness, since this arouses neither pity nor fear and appeals to none of our emotions. Third, we should avoid plots that show a bad man going from happiness to misery, since it will also not arouse the feelings of pity or fear. We feel pity for undeserved misfortune (and a bad man deserves his misfortune), and we feel fear if the person we pity is something like ourselves.

Poetry and History

Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history, saying that while history deals with what has been that is history deals with the facts, poetry deals with what might be: it presents the possible as probable or necessary. Poetry is superior to history because history always deals with particular cases while poetry can express universal and general truths. Tragedy gives a feeling of necessity—or at least probability—to the way certain characters behave in certain situations and thus gives us insight into general principles regarding fate, choice, and so on. The worst kind of plot is the episodic plot, where there is no seeming necessity or probability whatsoever between events.

Catharsis

The Greek word *katharsis* was usually used either by doctors to talk about purgation, the flushing of contaminants out of the system, or by priests to talk about religious purification. In either case, it seems to refer to a therapeutic process whereby the body or mind expels contaminants and becomes clean and healthy. Determining exactly what role *katharsis* is meant to play in tragedy is somewhat more difficult.

What exactly *katharsis* is in reference to tragedy. The idea, it seems, is that watching a tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in us and then purges these emotions. But, by virtue of mimesis, we aren't feeling real pity or real fear. I may feel pity for Oedipus when he learns that he has killed his father and married his mother, but this is a different kind of pity than the pity I feel for the homeless or for those living in war zones. I know that Oedipus is not a real person and that no

one is really suffering when I watch Oedipus suffer. As a result, I can empathize with the character of Oedipus without feeling any kind of guilt or obligation to help him out. Watching tragedy has a cathartic effect because I can let go of the emotional tension built up in me as I leave the theater. I am able to experience profound emotion without having its consequences stay with me and harden me to subsequent emotional shocks.

We recall that Aristotle mentions the arousal of pity and fear as the main purpose of tragedy and claims that the tragic poet must aim to arouse such emotions in the audience primarily by means of the plot. In discussing thought, he mentions that agents may arouse emotions in one another by means of language. We find, then, an interesting parallel between the tragic poet and the characters he creates. The plot is an implicit means of arousing emotion employed by the poet, and thought is an explicit means of arousing emotion employed by the agents of the plot.

Pity and fear—which Aristotle calls the "pleasures" of tragedy—are better if they result from the plot itself rather than the spectacle. A story like that of Oedipus should be able to arouse pity and fear even if it is told without any acting at all. The poet who relies on spectacle is relying on outside help, whereas the poet who relies only on his own plot is fully responsible for his creation.

We feel pity most when friends or family harm one another, rather than when unpleasantness takes place between enemies or those who are indifferent to one another. The deed may be done knowingly—as when Medea kills her children—or unknowingly—as when Oedipus kills his father. A third alternative is that one character plans to kill another, but then discovers the family connection between them in time to refrain from the killing.

Thus, the deed can either be done or not done, and it can take place in either ignorance or knowledge. Aristotle suggests that the best kind of plot is of the third alternative, where *anagnorisis* allows a harmful deed to be avoided. The second best case is where the deed is done in ignorance. And the third best is the case where the deed is done with full knowledge. Worst is the case where there is full knowledge throughout, and the premeditated deed is only refrained from at the moment of action. This scenario is not tragic because of the absence of suffering, and it is odious besides. Still, Aristotle acknowledges that it has been used to good effect, as with the case of Haemon and Creon in *Antigone*.

Hamartia

Aristotle concludes that the best kind of plot involves the misfortune of someone who is neither particularly good nor particularly bad and whose downfall does not result from some unpleasantness or vice, but rather from *hamartia*—an error in judgment. A good plot, then, consists of the following four elements: (1) It must focus around one single issue; (2) the hero must go from fortune to misfortune, rather than vice versa; (3) the misfortune must result from *hamartia*; and (4) the hero should be at least of intermediate worth, and if not, he must be better—never worse—than the average person. This explains why tragedies tend to focus around a few families (there are many tragedies about the families of Oedipus and Orestes among others): they must be upstanding

families that suffer great misfortune from an error in judgment rather than a vice. Only second-rate plots that pander too much to public taste focus on a double issue where the good fare well and the bad fare poorly.

Hamartia, then, represents the Greek, and not the Christian, conception of moral failure. Greek heroes are not bad people—Aristotle explicitly states that they cannot be bad people—but are simply good people who fall short in some important respect. Tragedy is less a matter of showing how bad people are punished for their crimes, and is more a matter of showing how ignorance and error can have disastrous effects. The action is tragic precisely because we are all ignorant to some degree, all flawed, and we may all suffer deeply for these errors. This is a cold, hard fact of nature, and not a matter of justice and retribution.

In Chapter 12, Aristotle discusses the quantitative elements of tragedy—the different parts of the performance. These are the Prologue, Episode, Exode, and a choral portion consisting of Parode and Stasimon. In addition, some tragedies have songs from the stage and a *Commos*, a lamentation sung by both actor and chorus. The Parode is the first full statement of the chorus; everything that precedes it is Prologue. The Stasimon is a choral song in a certain meter, while action that takes place between choral songs is Episode. Everything that follows the last choral song is Exode

Tragic Hero

Aristotle's hero must be of **high rank**, relatively virtuous, true to life, and consistent. These requirements depend to some extent on a relatively transparent moral worldview and understanding of psychology. In the modern world where motives are unclear and there are layers of psychology to work through, it might be difficult to determine whether a character is ultimately "good," or what goodness consists of. Further, a character may seem inconsistent, or at least ambiguous, if the agent's motives don't float to the surface by the end of the play. Aristotle does not rule out entirely that a hero could behave inconsistently, but he demands that the play, seen as a whole, should make this inconsistency understandable and believable. Though in one instance the hero may behave one way, and in another behave in a contradictory manner, this contradiction should be made clear by the larger context. Aristotle condemns plays where inconsistent or puzzling behaviour is never clarified.

Aristotle turns his attention toward the character of the tragic hero and lays out four requirements. First, the hero must be good. The character of the hero denotes the hero's moral purpose in the play, and a good character will have a good moral purpose.

Second, the good qualities of the hero must be appropriate to the character. For instance, warlike qualities can be good, but they would be inappropriate in a woman.

Third, the hero must be realistic. In other words, if he is drawn from myth, he should be a reasonable semblance of the character portrayed in myths.

Fourth, the hero must be consistent (by which Aristotle means the hero must be written consistently, not that the hero must behave consistently). He accepts that some characters are inconsistent but that they should be written so as to be consistent in their inconsistency. Like the plot itself, the behavior of the characters should be seen as necessary or probable, in accordance with the internal logic of their personality. Thus, a character may behave inconsistently so long as we can perceive this inconsistency as coming up from a personality that is internally consistent.

From these requirements, Aristotle thinks it clear that the *lusis*, or denouement, should arise out of the plot and not depend upon stage artifice. Both the characters and the plot ought to follow a probable or necessary sequence, so that the *lusis* should be a part of this sequence. Improbable events, or the intervention of the gods, should be reserved for events outside the action of the play or events beyond human knowledge. The actual incidents themselves should not rely on miracles but on probability and necessity.

In order to reconcile the first requirement—that the hero be **good**—with the third requirement—that the hero be realistic—Aristotle recommends that the poet should keep all the distinctive characteristics of the person being portrayed but touch them up a little to make the hero appear better than he is. For instance, in the Iliad, Homer repeatedly describes Achilles' hot temper and yet makes him seem exceedingly good and heroic nonetheless.

The demand that the characters be **consistent** is in many ways parallel to Aristotle's demand for the unity of plot. Every action in the plot should be causally connected to every other action. The tragedy, viewed as a whole, should have the internal consistency of a clock, so that we should see a near inevitability in the way things turned out. Similarly, an agent should behave in such a way that every decision, every action, can be read as a manifestation of a single, unified character. Characters, too, should have the regularity of a clock, so that, when viewed as a whole, there should be a seeming inevitability in every decision the hero makes, based on what we know of the hero's character.

Something about Aristotle

Aristotle popularly known as a Greek philosopher not only studied almost every subject possible at the time, but made significant contributions to most of them. In physical science, Aristotle studied anatomy, astronomy, embryology, geography, geology, meteorology, physics and zoology. In philosophy, he wrote on aesthetics, ethics, government, metaphysics, politics, economics, psychology, rhetoric and theology. He also studied education, foreign customs, literature and poetry. His combined works constitute a virtual encyclopedia of Greek knowledge.

Aristotle, whose name means "the best purpose", was born in 384 BC in Stagira, Chalcidice, about 55 km (34 miles) east of modern-day Thessaloniki. His father Nicomachus was the personal physician to King Amyntas of Macedon. Aristotle was orphaned at a young age. Although there is little information on Aristotle's childhood, he probably spent some time within the Macedonian palace, making his first connections with the Macedonian monarchy.

At the age of seventeen or eighteen, Aristotle moved to Athens to continue his education at Plato's Academy. He remained there for nearly twenty years before leaving Athens in 348/47 BC. The traditional story about his departure records that he was disappointed with the Academy's direction after control passed to Plato's nephew Speusippus, although it is possible that he feared anti-Macedonian sentiments and left before Plato died.

Aristotle then accompanied Xenocrates to the court of his friend Hermias of Atarneus in Asia Minor. There, he traveled with Theophrastus to the island of Lesbos, where together they researched the botany and zoology of the island. Aristotle married Pythias, either Hermias's adoptive daughter or niece. She bore him a daughter, whom they also named Pythias. Soon after Hermias' death, Aristotle was invited by Philip II of Macedon to become the tutor to his son Alexander in 343 BC.

Aristotle was appointed as the head of the royal academy of Macedon. During that time he gave lessons not only to Alexander, but also to two other future kings: Ptolemy and Cassander. Aristotle encouraged Alexander toward eastern conquest and his attitude towards Persia was unabashedly ethnocentric. In one famous example, he counsels Alexander to be "a leader to the Greeks and a despot to the barbarians, to look after the former as after friends and relatives, and to deal with the latter as with beasts or plants".

By 335 BC, Aristotle had returned to Athens, establishing his own school there known as the Lyceum. Aristotle conducted courses at the school for the next twelve years. While in Athens, his wife Pythias died and Aristotle became involved with Herpyllis of Stagira, who bore him a son whom he named after his father, Nicomachus. According to the Suda, he also had an eromenos, Palaephatus of Abydus.

This period in Athens, between 335 and 323 BC, is when Aristotle is believed to have composed many of his works. He wrote many dialogues of which only fragments have survived. Those works that have survived are in treatise form and were not, for the most part, intended for widespread publication; they are generally thought to be lecture aids for his students. His most important treatises include *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, *De Anima* (On the Soul) and *Poetics*.

Near the end of his life, Alexander and Aristotle became estranged over Alexander's relationship with Persia and Persians. A widespread tradition in antiquity suspected Aristotle of playing a role in Alexander's death, but the only evidence of this is an unlikely claim made some six years after the death.

Following Alexander's death, anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens was rekindled. In 322 BC, Demophilus and Eurymedon the Hierophant reportedly denounced Aristotle for impiety, prompting him to flee to his mother's family estate in Chalcis, at which occasion he was said to have stated: "I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy"—a reference to Athens's prior trial and execution of Socrates. He died in Euboea of natural causes later that same year, having named his student Antipater as his chief executor and leaving a will in which he asked to be buried next to his wife.

- Works referred and cited: Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Butcher.
Wikipedia