



The concept of Tragedy and Epic Poetry in Aristotle's – Poetics

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ABSTRACT: Aristotle's Poetics is the earliest surviving book of Literary Theory. It is a landmark in the realm of literary criticism. He was one of the earliest critics to discuss the principles of tragedy. This article shows an overview of Aristotle's concept of Tragedy and Epic poetry. The main emphasis falls on plot, characterization, structure, and an integral part of Tragedy. In poetics, Aristotle answers the questions raised by critics regarding the creation and nature of a work of art

Key Words: - Aristotle, Plot, Characterization, Epic poetry, Spectacle

INTRODUCTION: Aristotle was born in 384 BC at a place called Stagirus in Macedonia. He was a member of Plato's Academy and trained himself there. After the death of Plato, Aristotle was nominated by King Philip as a tutor to Alexander the Great. Aristotle taught political science and literature to Alexander. In 338 BC Aristotle found his own school called Lyceum and he trained his disciples there. He made a study of politics, literature, history, natural science, and biology. Aristotle married Pythias and his married life was not a smooth going one because he had a mistress called Herpyllis. He held strong views on God, government, education, democracy, religion Etc. Some of his views are highly controversial. For eg -He considered that God is indifferent to the sufferings of man, hence he had dissatisfaction with him. Dialogues, On Monarchy, Rhetoric and Metaphysics are some of his popular works that have disappeared with the passing of time, and they are not retrieved till today. Aristotle died in 322B.C. Poetics is a literary treaty that has got 26 chapters and Alexander discusses in this the art of writing poetry which includes drama also.

According to Aristotle, Imitation is the basic virtue of all fine arts. It is called Mimesis. Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy, Dance, Music, Painting, Sculpture, etc., are the Branches of fine arts.

Imitation is not nearly mimicry or copying of nature indeed it is a real creative Endeavour. Music is also an imitation but it has its own originality. The musician imitates the emotions and passion of the human soul. The concept of imitation differs from one branch of fine arts to the other. It differs in terms of medium or objects or manner. Medium is the mode or material through which an artist imitates. The medium of the painter is color, and the medium of the poet is language and rhythm. Poetry and prose are the branches of literature but the term literature was unknown in Alexander's time. Therefore, he called it An Art without a name. Aristotle says that Poetry can write without meter and prose can be poetic at times.

The object of Imitation: The object of Imitation in fine arts is men and their actions. Whether good or bad. A poet may imitate men and present them doing as good or he may portray their weakness and follies to mock them. This is the difference between tragedy and comedy. Tragedy idealizes man and Comedy exposes that men are worse than what they really are.

Manner of Imitation:

Based on their Manner Of imitation, fine arts differ from one another. Manner of Imitation may be classified into 3 modes

- 1] Narrative modes: Poet narrates all incidents and events.
- 2] Mode of Dramatic Presentation: Characters are shown in action.
- 3] The Combination of the first and second modes: It will lead to the Climax of the story. The manner of imitation determines the nature of poetry.

Genesis of Poetry

Poetry takes its origin from four factors

1. Men desire to imitate things in life. Even as the child imitates the Parents
2. Imitation gives pleasure to a man.
3. From imitation men learns and learning gives them pleasure.
4. Men derive pleasure from harmony and rhythm and poetry includes both.

In the process of its development poetry broke up into 2 kinds.

1) The first dealt with the noble actions of noble personage. Hymns to Gods were written. This way, it leads to the birth of epic poetry. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey are the best examples of epic poetry. The development of epic poetry caused the birth of tragedy

2) The Second kind of poetry deals with the actions of trivial people and this led to the birth of comedy. Homer excelled in both tragedy and comedy. His Iliad and Odyssey are epic tragedies and The Margites is a comic work.

Comedy, Epic Poetry, and Tragedy

Comedy presents characters that are worse than the average. Comic characters are lower type. Tragedy presents the serious character in a grand kind of verse. The characters are better than average. In comedy, the characters are below average and in tragedy, it is above average

Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy

The tragedy was developed in the Greek language even before Aristotle. The Greek concept of the tragedy was different from the concept of the tragedy of modern times. The term tragedy originally means a goat's song. In Greece, in those days Contestants of dramas were held and, on such occasions, the Writers of the best dramas were awarded goats. Hence tragedy is called a goat's song, but in modern times tragedy is a story with a sad ending.

Definition of Tragedy

The tragedy is an imitation of action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishment through action and not narration and through scenes of pity and fear bringing about the Catharsis of those emotions.

The definition identifies three factors.

- 1) Tragedy is an imitation of serious action and therefore it can't be a Story with a happy ending.
- 2) It is different from epic poetry because imitation of human life is Made through action and not narration.

3) It must evoke pity and fear in the audience and bring about the Catharsis

Catharsis

It is a purgation of feelings. Purification of feelings gives artistic pleasure to the audience. As a result, they will have relief, for they understand that suffering is universal and common to all.

A tragedy has got six integral components

1. Plot.
2. Characters.
3. Thoughts.
4. Diction.
5. Melody.
6. Spectacle.

1. Plot:

It is the most important factor in a tragedy. In a tragic plot, action should always be complete and whole. The plot should have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning should be convincing to the readers and there can be no doubts in him as to why and how action comments in tragedy. The middle is consequent upon the beginning. It leads the action logically to the end. This is what Aristotle calls “a whole” in a tragic plot. A tragic story should have enough length to accommodate all the incidents. The incidents must be arranged in a proper sequence. At the same time plot can't be too long to make the reader the beginning before the climax reached.

Nature of the Plot

- 1) Simple Plot - In a complete plot the action progresses consistently and uniformly to the end. There is no sudden or unexpected change in the middle

2) Complex Plot -In a complex plot unexpected occurrence of events takesplace and there will be a sudden change in the direction of progress of activitieswhich changes the whole story.

Absolute Unity

The unity of the plot in the tragedy can't be achieved just by having one man alone as its subject. In the life of a hero, there will be many incidents and the dramatist will have to choose only the important one. So that a tragedy can have, the element of absolute unity. No event, no incident can be removed from a tragedy without affecting the wholeness of the drama. This is called Absolute unity.

Three parts of the plot

1) **Peripety** - it is a sudden change and reversal of things in a drama.

Ex-The progress of a hero towards the achievement of his goals may suddenly be arrested and he may suffer a setback.

2) **Anagnorisis** - it is either discovery or recognition of some fact in a drama that will hasten the action.

Ex- In the drama Oedipus, Oedipus discovers his parentage towards a close (end) of the drama and this discovery quickens the action.

3) **Suffering**- It is a suffering of a Protagonist. Suffering is a result of a Protagonist's deeds or the ways of nature.

Ex- Murders, Tortures, Wounds, and these all things lead to suffering.

The Three Rules for the Construction of Plots.

1) He should visualize the actual scenes of the drama; he should see every scene in his imagination. This will help him in removing the unwanted, impossible, and improbable elements from the plot of the drama.

2) A poet should even act his story with the very gesture of the characters. This will enable him to use the right kind of language appropriate to the situation.

3) A poet should simplify and reduce the story of his drama to a universal form. He should think about the core of the nuclear of the story and subsequently, it should be expanded into episodes. While expanding the episodes a poet should maintain consistency in linking every segment of the drama. There should be a beginning, middle, and end in a drama.

Three types of plots should be avoided.

1. A good man should not be shown to fall from happiness to misery.
2. A bad man should not be shown rising from misery to happiness.
3. An extremely bad man must not be seen falling from happiness to misery such a story may arouse human feelings in us that it will not create pity and fear.

The Perfect Plot.

According to Aristotle, a perfect plot must have a single issue, not a double issue. It should concentrate on the misfortune of the hero. It cannot focus on dual issues of joy for the good people and suffering for the bad people. A dual issue plot cannot create a pleasure appropriate to tragedy.

Three Unities

For the success of tragedy, the drama will have to follow the three Unities

- (a) Unity of Time.
- (b) Unity of Place.
- (c) Unity of Action.

The Unity of action is the most important one, according to Aristotle. Unity of time implies that the action in a tragedy should take place in one day and that is usually from sunrise to sunset.

The concept of the unity of place signifies that action in a tragedy should take place in one location only and can't be shifted to another place. Unity of action, a tragedy may have any number of incidents, but they must be tightly linked with each other. They should develop the action to the resolution or denouncement at the end. The plot of a tragedy should have a beginning, middle, and end.

2. Characterization

In a tragedy next to the plot, characterization is the most important element responsible for its success. According to Aristotle, a character should be good, and he should have a motive in life. In the development of tragedy, there cannot be any inconsistency. That is, suddenly, a character cannot be made great nor can be degraded. A poet will have to keep in mind these aspects while creating his characters.

Four factors of characterization

- 1) First and foremost that a character must be good. A character through words and deeds should prove that he/she has a good purpose in life. When he/she speaks his/her speech should reveal an amoral purpose.
- 2) The second point is that characters should be made appropriate in a tragedy. A character is appropriate when he/she conducts himself suitably to his/her nature.
- 3) Characters should be true to life. They have all the traits of human characters which a man has/had in real life, virtues, joys, sorrow, etc.
- 4) The fourth point is that a Tragedy-writer should make the character consistent throughout. There should not be any change in their nature and behavior. An inconsistent character should be consistent in his inconsistency.

Hamartia: A tragic hero who belongs to a noble family or aristocratic family, because of his small mistakes or misfortune he is suffering in the end. This is called Hamartia.

3) Thoughts in a tragedy

In a drama, a character presents their thoughts through verbal expression and interaction. Thought is expressed to prove something, to convey feelings or emotions like pity, fear, anger, etc. A thought is verbally expressed. It is also used to maximize things. Thought and action always vibrate with each other. Thought appears in the form of speeches and speeches should be appropriate both to the characters and situation in drama. It is the speech that makes characters respond to each other and this promotes action. The thought and speeches of characters in a drama determine the artistic impact on the audience.

4. Diction

Diction is the choice of words used either in speech or writing. Diction includes the alphabet, the syllable, the conjunction, the articles, the noun, the verb, the case, and the speech.

There are two kinds of words

1) Simple words

2) Double or compound words.

Diction may be divided into 6 categories.

1) Words used in ordinary speech.

2) Foreign words borrowed from another language.

3) Metaphorical words like the “Bloody Sun”, “Copper sky” etc.

4) Ornamental expressions like “Decked in Gold”

5) Newly words added new coinages

6) Words not new but slightly modified. Ex- spake for spoke

5) Chorus / Melody

Chorus is a major component of a tragedy. Chorus is a group of actors who sing songs to explain or give opinions on the action of drama.

The following are the sequential parts and components of drama

- 1) **Prologue:** It is the first segment of the drama.
- 2) **Parole:** This is the entrance song of the chorus. The chorus enters and sings, songs commenting on the characters and the events
- 3) **Episode:** It consists of incidents presented between two choric songs. The episode is like a pack of incidents that takes place in every act of modern drama.
- 4) **The Stasimon:** is a choric song presented in the middle of a tragedy.
- 5) **The Commos:** is a lamentation song sung by the chorus and actors together.
- 6) **Exode:** is all that follows after the last choral song. It is the climax of the drama.

6) Spectacle and Tragic Emotions.

A spectacle in a drama means a tragic event being shown. It is always disastrous and will arouse pity and fear in the auditors. Oedipus's eyes are torn out and this creates no doubt, pity, and fear. However, this kind of spectacle will not create real tragic pleasure, in the audience. The audience can derive tragic pleasure even without a spectacle. Mere reading of a drama itself will create tragic pleasure. The right arrangements of incidents and the structure of the plot will arouse pity and fear in the audience

Complication

Before the opening scene of the drama many incidents would have taken place in the life of the protagonist they are presented through a portrait or flashback. The action commences only in the middle of the life of the protagonist such incidents which have supposed to have taken place before the opening scene is called complications.

Denouement

The denouement is again an incident in the drama that is presented successively from the beginning until the catastrophe or the resolution of the end. In Aristotle's sense, denouement has a duality of meaning. It is a series of incidents in a drama; also, it is an end of story when everything comes out right. The dramatist should select the right denouement in a drama.

Epic Poetry and Tragedy

According to Aristotle there is difference between Epic poetry and tragedy. An epic poem narrates a story in versified language but tragedy narrates story through the dialogue. Epic poem does not imitate human action, like tragedy but tragedy imitates the human action. In epic poetry the poet should maintain the unity of the story; it should be based on single action. Epic poem deals with events belonging to several periods. It deals with lives of many persons and the career of one person will not be enough for its story and action.

Tragedy depends on spectacle, but epic poem is not so. Chorus is indispensable in tragedy, but in epic poem Chorus is absent. Epic poem is longer than a tragedy. Incidents and events may be presented in epic poetry but this is not possible in tragedy. An Epic Poetry can introduce miracle, marvelous and wonders but the same cannot be shown on the stage. In tragedy we cannot see meter but in epic poetry we can see metre. According to Aristotle tragedy is superior to epic poetry because in tragedy we can see music, chorus but in the case of epic Poetry it is not possible. According to Aristotle tragedy is the most famous presentation in a literature.

A tragedy in every sense is superior to an epic poem. It has had all the elements one could find in an epic poem. Besides, there is music; also, there is a spectacle. In terms of length a tragedy is shorter than an epic poem. And therefore, there is a better scope for concentration on every artistic aspect. The emotional and artistic effects, a tragedy makes on the audience are always strong. Since a tragedy is shorter in length, it has greater unity. Pity and fear can best be aroused in human persons only by tragedy. Therefore a tragedy is always superior to an epic poem.

In the past epic poetry was written for a recital on important social and religious occasions, and a tragedy was enacted on the stage for entertainment. Since a tragic play is action-oriented, in the bygone days, it gained more popularity than the epic. The length of a tragedy (it is shorter than an epic), its music, meter, treatment of a single emotion, and the emotional impact it makes on the audience are the elements that make it (a tragedy) more appealing to a man than an epic poem.

Conclusion

Aristotle's concept of tragedy is something unique, and infact, his contribution to literary criticism, especially to criticism of drama, is unprecedented. In the days of Aristotle, poetry and drama were not delinked as in the modern time, and therefore, while pursuing Poetics readers may develop a sort of ambiguity, unable to see a difference between what Aristotle says about tragedy and what he says about poetry. There is not much of a difference between the two. In a tragedy, plot and character are the most important element, and in addition to them, catharsis and the three unities are the two major factors contributing to the success of tragedy.

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