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“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”

NAME: Aristotle

OCCUPATION: philosopher

BIRTH DATE: c. 384 BCE

DEATH DATE: c. 322 BCE

EDUCATION: Plato's Academy, Lyceum

PLACE OF BIRTH: Stagira, Chalcidice, Greece

PLACE OF DEATH: Chalcis, Euboea, Greece

A Glimpse to Aristotle's Life

Aristotle (the name means ‘the best purpose’) was a philosopher and polymath from Greece. His father Nicomachus was the personal physician to King Amyntas of Macedon. Aristotle moved to Plato's Academy while he was 18. Aristotle's teacher was Plato, and Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great. Aristotle married Pythias and she bore him a daughter, whom they also named Pythias. 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. 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. His wife Pythias died during this period and Aristotle got involved with Herpyllis of Stagira, who bore him a son whom he named after his father, Nicomachus. Towards the end of Aristotle's life, there was a break between him and Alexander. Following Alexander's death, anti-Macedonian sentiment in

Athens was rekindled. In 322 BC, the political issues made Aristotle flee to his mother's family estate in Chalcis. He died in Euboea of natural causes. He had left a will later that same year, in which he asked to be buried next to his wife.

Aristotle composed most of his works between 335 and 323 BC, while he was in Athens. He had amazing passion for learning and possessed marvelous knowledge on multi discipline. As he learnt, he made significant contributions in the form of treatise to those disciplines. His most important treatises include Physics, Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics, Politics, De Anima (*On the Soul*) and Poetics. He studied anatomy, astronomy, embryology, geography, geology, meteorology, physics and zoology, education, foreign customs, literature and poetry, and in philosophy, he wrote on aesthetics, ethics, government, metaphysics, politics, economics, psychology, rhetoric and theology. It is believed that his works if compiled can be considered as a virtual Encyclopedia of Greek knowledge. Aristotle is considered as the first genuine Scientist.

An Introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics*

What is Poetics? Poetics means the science of poetry. In *Poetics* Aristotle is discussing and analyzing the concepts and art of creating poetry. The exact origins of [Aristotle's Poetics](#) are not known, but researchers believe that it was composed around 330 BCE and was preserved primarily as the notes by Aristotle's students. Despite the objections, praises and controversies, the *Poetics* has been the central document in the study of aesthetics and literature for centuries, especially during the Renaissance; and in today's scholarly circles. One who studies *Poetics* will marvel at the profound insights in the text content that attempts to explain the basic problem of art. Aristotle here defines art and also suggests the criteria for evaluating the quality of the given work of art. Though Aristotle is argumentative in tone in *Poetics* refuting the ideas of his teacher

Plato's theory of art, the tone of the *Poetics* reflects the true spirit of Aristotle's attempts to explain the anatomy of poetry and its value to the human society. With the 'empirical evidence' and concrete argument he dismisses Plato's concept of art, and establishes that the art is useful and good. Hence the *Poetics* is widely acclaimed as one of Aristotle's most demanding but rewarding texts offering profound returns to the diligent reader.

Poetics is the surviving earliest work of Aristotle on his Dramatic Theory and his philosophical perception of the Literary theory. In the 26 chaptered treatise on Poetry, Aristotle dedicates the first three chapters for a scientific analysis of poetry examining the constituent parts of poetry and drawing conclusions from those observations. Next, he remarks that all of these kinds of poetry are mimetic, or imitative, but there are significant differences between them. *Poetics* discusses the different kinds of poetry, the structure of a good poem, and the division of a poem into its component parts. For him Poetry is an act of imitation, but it is different from the mere mimicking of the sound. Poet is a creator, and he creates something new through imitation. The act of imitation becomes successful based on the nature of imitation. The poet may imitate things as they are, as they are guessed to be or as they are ought to be. He defines poetry as a 'medium of imitation' that seeks to represent or duplicate life through character, emotion, or action. Aristotle defines poetry very broadly, including epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and even some kinds of music. According to Aristotle, tragedy came from the efforts of poets to present men as 'nobler,' or 'better' than they are in real life. Comedy, on the other hand, shows a 'lower type' of person, and reveals humans to be worse than they are in average. Epic poetry, on the other hand, imitates 'noble' men like tragedy, but only has one type of meter - unlike tragedy, which can have several - and is narrative in form. The surviving part of *Poetics* includes the discussions on Tragedy & Epic Poetry. Tragedy is the most refined version of poetry

dealing with lofty matters, whereas Comedy is the most refined version of poetry dealing with the base matters. His discussions on Comedy are lost and nothing is available, whereas the discussions on Tragedy constitute the major part of the surviving *Poetics*.

Aristotle's Analysis of Poetry

1.1 What is Poetry?

Aristotle makes a scientific approach to the study of poetry in *Poetics*. Just like the study of any other natural phenomenon, Aristotle observes, analyses with tentative hypothesis, draws conclusions and then gives recommendations on the art of creating poetry. He believes the concept of mimesis as the basics of poetry or art.

He believes that the two reasons for the emergence of poetry are the human instinct to imitate things, and the instinct for rhythm and harmony. With these basic ideas Aristotle defines poetry as a medium of imitation – poetry imitates life through its rhythm, language and harmony; but according to Aristotle, this is not a mere representation of life or a mimicking act. He respects poet as a creator and the poet represents life through his sublime skill of observation. A poet observes life as a first person in a subjective way, or as a third person in an objective way or taking another personality watches the events as an observer. The poetry that emerges can be grouped into any one of the following:- It may be the imitation of noble action or good men in action termed as tragedy / Epic poetry, or it can be the imitation of mean action or low men in action; and it is called satire or comedy. Just like a painter using paint , a sculptor using stone, the poet uses language , rhythm and harmony as separate elements or in combination to create his art form called poetry.

1.2 Poetry as a medium of imitation

Imitation is the innate instinct of every human being. This power of imitation is not only for entertainment but for learning also. A newly born child learns its primary lessons through imitation – imitating its parents or people or animals in the immediate environment. The child imitates the sounds that it hears, and then it starts imitating the actions. As the child grows up it starts imitating various aspects of life around it. Thus imitation becomes the basic instinct of human beings. An artist's primary motivation to represent or capture life in the form of his artistic product is the outcome of the act of imitation. Poetry is an art form, and it is an art of duplicating or representing life. Thus Aristotle defines Poetry as a medium of imitation – imitation of action.

The term 'Action' carries many specifications as Aristotle uses the word. For him the action of men which act as the object of imitation should be chosen one capable of accomplishing some lofty purposes. Action by anybody cannot be selected. The poet should be alert to distinguish and select the noble action, refers only to what is deliberately chosen, and capable of finding completion in the achievement of some purpose. It is the imaginative and creative skills that enable the poet to keep his eye on a lofty action that deserves worthy attention. The chosen action will be different from the stereotypes around us. And then the poet with his creative, imaginative and intellectual mind must refine and reshape them to presentable form in a new attire embellished with the poet's language and imagination. Thus the imitation becomes the reproduction of the existing thing using the poet's art for us to enjoy. This powerful kind of human communication and the product produced through imitation become the representation of human life with all the universal elements. Whatever is reproduced by the poet is first perceived by an imaginative mind. It is this process of perception during imitation that results the so called sublime art form poetry. The perception takes place through all the five senses or through

selective senses. It is the intellect that enables a person to perceive something that others haven't seen in the object of imitation. Intelligence and imagination work together here for the complete reproduction and representation of men in action through imitation. Apart from the common actions, the sublime poets imitate repentance, forgiveness etc. the actions far remote to human eye or ear. It requires the deeper skills and powers of human mind to recognize and appreciate what the poet has presented before us. So the mere phrase *imitation of an action* is packed with meaning, and how the image of such a thing might be perceived.

Aristotle gives an aesthetic meaning to the term 'imitation'. He is very much fascinated by this imitative quality of human nature explores the methods, significance, and consequences of this imitation of life. Aristotle concludes that art's imitative tendencies are expressed in one of three ways: a poet attempts to portray our world as it is, as we think it is, or as it ought to be. Through imitation of life he means a literal copy of this universal. Through imitation poet represents life either through action or character or emotion or through objects. According to Aristotle Poetry includes epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and music (specifically of flute, and lyre). What differentiates these kinds of poetry is the nature of their 'imitation.'

Aristotle defines Poetry, the art of duplicating or representing life as a medium of imitation. Through imitation poet represents life either through action or character or emotion or through objects. Depending on the type of imitation the emerging product can be either an Epic poem or a Satire or music. The artistic product of a poet differs based on the mode, object and medium of Imitation.

Aristotle calls poetry as 'art'. "Art" is the translation of the Greek word *techne* and is closely related to "artifice" and "artificial." So Art for Aristotle is anything that is made by human beings

as opposed to being found in nature. Thus, poetry, painting, and sculpture count as "art," but so do chairs, horseshoes, and sandals. Either one of it if painted, it becomes an imitation, the representation of the real one. Here Aristotle differentiates Poetry and Philosophy. Philosophy is the presentation of ideas whereas poetry is the imitation of real life. While a person watches the imitation of an action on the stage, he is capable of understanding that what he observes or reads are not real but fictional and closer to reality. Thus tragedy deals with humans who will speak and act in the same way how real humans would have spoken and acted in the similar context in real life.

1.2.a. Nature of Imitation

Medium of imitation : - A poet may represent life through rhythm, language or harmony. Music and dance are examples for imitation of life through rhythm and harmony. Dancing imitates character, emotion and action through rhythmical movements; whereas verse poetry is an example for imitation of life through language.

Object of Imitation:- The major object of imitation is men in action. Art imitates life by presenting men as better than they are in life with sublime qualities, or as true to life as they are or as worse than they are with low morals. It is the real skill of the poet to represent men different from what they are, and at the same time to be true to life.

Mode of Imitation:- The mode or nature of imitation depends upon the poet's creativity. A poet can represent life through narration in which he takes another personality and watches the events in life as an observer. In some cases the poet can duplicate life by speaking about it in his own person – as the first person. In another situation a poet can represent life by presenting all its characters as living and moving before us as a third person narrator. When the represented life or

the universal elements created as literal copy gives joy to man since he loves watching the likeness or the better status because he identifies himself with that copy. While watching the representation of men in worse form, the reader or viewer feels happy at the awareness that it is not him.

The poet imitates in action and language; sometimes the poet imitates in a wrong way resulting a factual error. This may be knowingly or accidental. If the error is due to the incorrect imitation by the poet, it affects the essential aspect of the work, and it can damage the whole work. The errors in the peripheral aspects do not affect the work. The various aspect of an artistic work like controversy on the artistic correctness, morally hurtful aspects, irrational and contradictory elements etc. are often questioned by the critics; but Aristotle dismisses all these aspects and highlights that the most important aspect of an art that matters is its goal in imitating reality as it is, as it thought to be or as it ought to be. If an error occurs in this act of imitation, it affects the whole work.

1.3 Types of Poetry

Poetry or art is a product of mimesis. Aristotle defines Poetry as a medium of imitation, and the type of poetry is decided based on the object and nature of imitation. Imitation is of two directions: one is the imitation of men of noble qualities in action and the second one is the imitation of men of lower qualities in action. The first one is named as Epic poetry and the second one is called the Satire. The Epic poetry gives pleasure to the reader as it depicts men as better than they are. Here the reader identifies himself with the character and feels better; where as in Satire, the reader laughs or enjoys the fun at the defects or the ridiculousness of

the character and the reader feels the happiness that it is not he. Hence the satire was also termed as Comedy

Epic Poetry

Epic poetry is the mimesis in verse told in a narrative form. Epic poetry, on the other hand, is a purely narrative medium and as such is limited only by the imagination of the poet and listener. Because we have no help in visualizing events, the epic poet can more easily recount the improbable without disturbing us. Aristotle refers to the episode in the [*Iliad*](#) where Achilles chases Hector three times around the walls of Troy. Homer makes no mention of the rest of the Greek army, which presumably must have been sitting idly by, watching the chase. Such a picture would immediately seem ridiculous if presented on stage, but because Homer can focus exclusively on the characters of Achilles and Hector, we are liable not to notice this absurdity.

The larger-than-life qualities of epic poetry are also brought about by the heroic meter. This contrived and elevated meter further removes the characters in the story from realistic portrayal, their extraordinary speech meshing well with their extraordinary deeds. By contrast, tragedy employs an iambic meter that closely resembles the rhythms of everyday speech.

Epic poetry is also termed as tragedy because of the numerous similarities between epic poetry and tragedy. Epic poem imitates men of noble action as in the case of tragedy. Both Epic poetry and tragedy maintain unity of plot and the object of mimesis is similar subject matter. Both of them can be either simple or complex; and they may deal with a character or with suffering. Like tragedy, epic poetry consists all the six components of tragedy including *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*.

Though the unity of plot is maintained in both, the plot in epic poem can be more explosive since its presentation is not confined to the stage. So it can have more complexity and the events can jump from back and front as it doesn't have the limitations of the stage. Homer is well known for his epic poems and Aristotle has greater appreciation for Homer. Homer's epic poem is the finest example for the study of Aristotle's theories of epic poetry. Homer maintains the unity of plot in *Illiad* which focuses on a particular story or event. It doesn't go to many details or explanations of everything that happened during that social or historical context. In *Illiad* Homer makes the characters and actions tell the story keeping his voice low and highlighting the norms of narration. The unique quality of an epic poem is its ability to present the exaggerated events in a believable manner which is not possible in a tragedy since it becomes less convincing while performed. *Illiad* is a fine example for it. Homer is further admired for his amazing skill for paralogism, that is the ability to make the illogical and faulty arguments believable.

Tragedy and epic poetry are meant to be imitations of great deeds, noble heroes, and tragic suffering, the main difference being that tragedy conveys all this by means of action, while epic poetry does so by means of language alone. Their difference is mainly depending upon the medium of expression. Since Epic poetry uses language for expression, the content can be lengthier, more complex with many fantastic events and different incidents happening simultaneously at different places and also jumping forth and back. Here the reader's imagination is enough for the appreciation. In the case of tragedy, the expression being through action and it has to be performed in front of the people, the poet has to focus on the credibility aspect and the possibility of performance. However, epic poetry can be longer than tragedy, and because it is not performed, it can deal with more fantastic actions with a much wider scope. By contrast, tragedy can be more focused and takes advantage of the devices of music and spectacle.

Epic poetry and tragedy are also written in different meters. Though epic poetry and tragedy have many similarities and a few dissimilarities, Aristotle declares tragedy as the superior art form than epic poetry.

Though the object of imitation is the same in both Epic poetry and the Tragedy, Epic poetry differs from tragedy in the following aspects: it is in verse form, it admits only one form of meter and it is in narrative form. Besides, action in Epic poetry has no time limit whereas tragedy is usually confined to a single day. Rarely it exceeds the time limit. An epic poem does not use song or spectacle to achieve its cathartic effect and epics often cannot be presented at a single sitting, whereas tragedies are usually able to be seen in a single viewing. Finally, the 'heroic measure' of epic poetry is hexameter, where tragedy uses different forms of meter to achieve the rhythms of speech by different characters. Epic poetry should be narrated in heroic meter, while tragedy is normally spoken in iambic meter.

All the elements of epic poem are present in tragedy whereas all the elements of tragedy are not present in Epic poem. Critics considered Epic poetry as the supreme form of art, but for Aristotle tragedy is the supreme form of art because according to him tragedy as well as Epic poetry can entertain the readers in their written form, but the dimension of performing the tragedy on the stage as a drama of spectacle and music is a unique quality of tragedy that enables the viewers to appreciate the whole in one sitting. Contemporary critics considered that tragedy is for the audience of low status whereas epic poetry was for the civilized audience. The inferior audience of the tragedy had only to watch the gestures of the performers whereas the cultivated audience of the epic poetry had to comprehend the narrative form in the epic through their imagination. But Aristotle defending poetry establishes the superiority of tragedy over epic poetry proving that tragedy has everything that an epic poem has; in addition it has the spectacle and music that

make the audience enjoy and appreciate tragedy providing an indulgent pleasure for the audience. Tragedy, then, despite the arguments of other critics, is the higher art for Aristotle.

Comedy / Satire

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.

The successive changes through which Tragedy passed, and the authors of these changes, are well known, whereas Comedy has had no history, because it was not at first treated seriously. It was late before the Archon granted a comic chorus to a poet; the performers were till then voluntary. Comedy had already taken definite shape when comic poets, distinctively so called, are heard of. Who furnished it with masks, or prologues, or increased the number of actors,--these and other similar details remain unknown. As for the plot, it came originally from Sicily; but of Athenian writers Crates was the first who, abandoning the 'iambic' or lampooning form, generalised his themes and plots.

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.

Conclusion

The first chapters of *Poetics* deals with Aristotle's concepts, definitions and views on the art of creating poetry. It is a rich source of valid observations with strong justifications about the creation of successful poetry. There was lot of criticism on Aristotle's definition of the art of poetry as a product of imitation; but for him 'imitation' was not a mere mimicking of life. When he talked about imitation of action, he meant it to be the chosen action which is complete and results in the achievement of a purpose. He has proved the aesthetic meaning of the term 'imitation' and he makes the creation of art closer to life, or rather life itself through the concept of imitation of life with the universal elements. Aristotle even authentically evaluates the success of a literary work. According to him the true success of a literary work is as per its success at imitating the world. If the imitation is carried out with integrity, the work will be acclaimed for its great success despite the other minor drawbacks. Finally Aristotle concludes that a work of art should be judged aesthetically, not scientifically.

Thus in the first three chapters of *Poetics*, Aristotle dissects poetry and examines their constituent parts to draw some general sense of what poetry is and how it works. Through scientific methods and careful observations, he assumes theories to explain his observations. His laws about the working of poetry remain a great source of learning and the *Poetics* seeks to uncover these laws. The *Poetics* is concluded with the answer to two major criticisms against poetry. First question is what makes a 'good' poetry and a 'bad' poetry. Here Aristotle highlights the major purpose of the poet in his imitation of life. If the objective is to imitate life as it is, as people think it is or as it ought to be. Depending on these imitative purposes, the quality of the work can be assessed

with suitable criteria. Aristotle gives the example of a poet who wants to imitate life as it ought to be, and the other one who wants to imitate life as it is. The relaxation measures in representing accuracy in the first case is more whereas the latter case has lot of limitations. So depending on the objective, the evaluation criteria also differ. Similarly the impact of error in imitation also affects the quality taking into consideration that the error must be in the essential objective of the poem, that is the nature of imitation. Casual errors in the peripheral aspects will not affect the essence of the poem. The next question that Aristotle answers is the superiority of tragedy over epic poetry.

Aristotle finishes or concludes the *Poetics* abruptly with the satisfaction of sharing his arguments and observations in an authentic way.

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