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Principal Investigator & Affiliation: Prof. Tutun Mukherjee, University of Hyderabad

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Paper Coordinator & Affiliation: Dr. Anita Bhela, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce,
University of Delhi

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Content Writer's Name & Affiliation: Dr. Omana Antony, K. R. Mangalam University

Name & Affiliation of Content Reviewer: Ms. Sandesha Rayapa-Garbiyal, Assistant Professor,
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Name & Affiliation of Content Editor: Dr. Anita Bhela, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce,
University of Delhi

A Gateway

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”

NAME : Aristotle

OCCUPATION : philosopher

BIRTH DATE : 384 BCE

DEATH DATE : 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 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, he 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 five 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 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 Tragedy

Aristotle considers tragedy as the most refined version of poetry that deals with the imitation of lofty matters. It is believed to have its origin from the dithyrambic hymns sung by a large choir praising the god Dionysus. Aeschylus, an ancient Greek tragedian introduced a second actor along with the narrator in dialogue. He also diminished the role of the choir and included more dialogue than music. Aristotle had only one concern about Aeschylus as he didn't develop a distinct poetic language for tragedy. Sophocles, another ancient Greek tragedian is considered by Aristotle as the master of Tragic play. He depicted men as they ought to be, and hence he could create a higher view on humanity. He is compared to Homer in his approach to humanity. Sophocles modified the existing form of tragedy by introducing a third actor and slowly tragedy took the contemporary dramatic form with many actors into dialogues.

According to Aristotle Tragedy is an act of imitation; and he defines Tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language;... in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions." (1449b Arist. Poet) Thus according to Aristotle there are seven characteristic features for a tragedy as follow:- 1) it is mimetic, 2) it is serious, 3) it tells a full story of an appropriate length, 4) it contains rhythm and harmony, 5) rhythm and harmony occur in different combinations in different parts of the tragedy, 6) it is performed rather than narrated, and 7) it arouses feelings of pity and fear and then purges these feelings through catharsis.

Aristotle believes Tragedy as the ultimate form of our innate delight in imitation. It is in dramatic form or its medium is drama, and hence tragedy is not to tell but to show or perform. This dramatization aspect of tragedy makes it more philosophical than History. In History we are told what has happened whereas in tragedy the action or incidents are performed or shown with all the probability or possibility laws. The incidents that have happened and related in history may be related to a particular situation and doesn't have

any cause-and-effect relation. The actions that are imitated in the tragedy are performed with the cause-and-effect relation showing what would have happen. Tragedy dramatizes what may happen whereas history is all about what has happened. So tragedy is much closer to life and more appealing to the humanity than history. History has little relevance to others but tragedy is rooted in the fundamentals of how the human life works. It shows how an action may change or get transformed as per the possible situations at any time or place as it happens in the normal way in the world. This explanation also proves that tragedy deals with the universal while history deals with the specific. Since tragedy is closer to life or the imitation of life itself, it arouses not only pity but also fear. This is the unique feature of tragedy because the noble action imitated and the great people imitated in tragedy have cause-and-effect chain.

Aristotle makes a scientific analysis of tragedy to establish its greatness over the other art forms. He has great admiration to Sophocles and his tragic play *Oedipus the King*. Aristotle assesses this play as the perfect tragedy and takes many examples from this play to prove his views and arguments on Tragedy. Aristotle observes six components that constitute a successful tragedy and they are: plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle. The success of a tragic play depends upon the perfect mixing up of these six components. Plot is 'the soul' of tragedy, because action is paramount to the significance of a drama, and a tragedy is the imitation of action of noble men. The rest of the elements of a tragedy can be considered subsidiary. Aristotle gives a detailed description of each element of a tragedy with their significant role.

Plot: Plot is the soul of a tragedy. It is the first principle and the most important feature of a tragedy because action is the most significant aspect of a tragedy. There can be tragedy without character or music or dance; but there cannot be a tragedy without action. Plot is the arrangement of incidents. Story gets its impact or power only when the incidents are arranged in the correct sequence with effective link. It must have a universal significance, definite structure, unity of theme and purpose. Following are the specifications of a successful plot of a tragedy:-completeness, magnitude, unity, determinate structure and universality.

1. Completeness of the plot means the plot must be “a whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning or the **incentive moment**, must instill the cause-and-effect chain based on something which is within the play. The middle, or **climax**, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself causes the incidents that follow it. The end, or **resolution**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play. The end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment. The cause-and-effect chain of actions ‘tying up’ from the incentive to the Climax as *desis* or Complication; and the cause-and –effect chain of actions ‘unravelling’ from the *desis* to the resolution are called *lusisi* or denouement. There should be appropriate sequencing of incidents resulting the feel of completeness.
2. Magnitude of the plot refers to the length. Usually the length of the play should be what the viewers can wind up in their memory. At the same time the lengthy plot with many incidents make it a complex one. Aristotle recommends complexity of the plot by the inclusion of as many incidents revolving around one theme. The more the number of incidents included in the plot, that make the play richer and improves its artistic value. A brief plot will reduce the scope for artistic value. At the same time too many incidents without any coherence or sequence will indeed mar the quality of tragedy. Hence the magnitude of the play is very important. It should be complex, compact and comprehensive.
3. Unity in the plot refers to the unity of action. Whatever the number of incidents or situations discussed in the plot must have an organic unity. The whole action and incidents must be revolving around the central action. .The plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (*catastrophe*). Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” (*peripeteia*) and “recognition” (*anagnorisis*) connected with the catastrophe. Both

peripeteia and *anagnorisis* turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a *peripeteia* occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended to produce, while an *anagnorisis* “is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.” He argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the *peripeteia* leads directly to the *anagnorisis*); this in turn creates the *catastrophe*, leading to the final “scene of suffering”.

4. Well determinate structure of the plot means the effective linking of the various events and incidents in the plot with a remarkable coherence. It is the expertise of the poet to prune or avoid all the irrational and irrelevant details from the plot. Action is the paramount of a tragedy; so the action should be shown as a complex one, and this complexity increases the artistic value of the play. There should be a perfect sequencing of the events or incidents happening in the play. Whatever the turmoil, the link with which the actions are held together should not be affected. The whole body of the play must be able to stand as a unit.
5. Universality of the plot refers to the fact that whatever that is imitated or shown in the tragedy should be closer to the real life. The way the action is shown in the play should remind us that anywhere in the real life a human being will be acting in the same way how the hero has acted.. Inclusion of theme and the associated actions of universal nature will give more significant value to the play enabling the dramatist catch the attention of more number of people.

A simple plot fails to create artistic value whereas a complex plot is rich with incidents linking to the major action or theme of the play. These incidents are in definite sequence leading to the cathartic effect of tragedy. A complex plot has the following elements: reversal, recognition, and catharsis. The hero of the play reaches to the peak of his glory or status and then surprising all, his fortune is

reversed due to an error in judgment. He falls from a happy state to a state of misery. Since the hero of a tragedy is a person of noble status, this sudden reversal in his status makes an ironic twist. As the play progresses, there is a recognition of the true identities or a shift from ignorance to knowledge making people aware of the hidden truth or true identities. This reversal and recognition result in sufferings by arousing the feelings of pity and fear in the audience. Pity on the sad plight of the tragic hero and fear at the anxiety of the thought whether that fate of the tragic hero would befall on us. According to Aristotle this sufferings undergone by the audience while watching a tragic play is the greatest merit of a good tragedy and it decides the true value of the play.

Character: Character comes of second importance next to plot in a tragedy. Tragedy is the imitation of action or thought or emotions, and these aspects belong to the man who is the object of imitation. Aristotle explains four qualities for the character of the tragic hero whose actions are imitated to bring about reversal, recognition and catharsis – the elements that constitute the success of a tragic play. The tragic hero should be good, renowned and prosperous; he should be courageous and dear to everyone, he should be true to life that any one of the audience should be able to identify himself or herself with the feelings or emotions undergone by the hero because whatever is depicted in the play about the hero must make the viewers feel that they are closer to life or real life situations itself; and then the hero should be a consistent person in the sense whatever qualities or weakness assigned to him should be consistently there with him throughout. The adversities that happen to him shouldn't be an artificially created one as a miracle. All the adversities that he is facing or experiencing due to a reversal of his fortune must be due to some weakness or flaw in his character. The hero is neither an ideal nor a virtuous man, but he is a good man and any one of the viewers can easily identify the hero with any other man among them, that is he must be so much closer to life. His fall doesn't happen all on a sudden as a shock but it is due to a flaw or frailty in his character which makes

the hero more credible in his sufferings. The consistency in the character makes the people identify with the hero in a more convincing manner because any other person in such a situation would do the same as what the tragic hero has done. It is the reversal of the character from his prosperous position to a pitiful status due to an error in judgement resulted from a flaw or weakness in his character that arouses the feeling of pity in the play. The tragic flaw in the character is known as *hamartia*. The intensity of the tragedy increases as the character causes some destructions or damages to his kith or kin due to his ignorance of truth, and finally by the pitiful condition of the hero when the truth is informed to him.

Thought: The third important component of a tragic play is thought. Thought is important because actions spring out from thoughts. A tragedy is the imitation of action or imitation of men in action. Everything that are supposed to be brought out through the effect of speech or action are included under thought. The verbal and the nonverbal impact of a tragic drama may be assigned to its action or speech; but both these action and speech are the co-existing components of thought. The cathartic effect of the tragic play by arousing the feelings of pity and fear is ultimately the product of thought. In the case of action, no verbal explanation is needed for the intended effect because the action itself is independent to achieve the aim; whereas in the case of speech, the aimed effect has to be achieved by the speech itself which is ultimately depending upon how the character delivers that speech. Dramatic incidents and dramatic speech should be analysed with the same perception since both aim at the same objective.

Diction: Diction takes the 4th place in the sequence of the importance of the components that constitute a tragedy. Diction is in fact the metrical arrangement of words in the play. It includes the verbal expression of the content or the subject matter of the tragic play. The nature, type, quality and aptness of vocabulary used in a tragedy should be proper and appropriate to the character, plot and objective of the tragedy. Embellishments are welcome in the language used, and the use of appropriate metaphors is considered to be an intellectual approach to diction. Whether the diction is rich, intellectual or decorative, the objective is

achieved through the manner that text or script is delivered by the character. In this situation, the character must have a deep awareness about the tone of the content. The character must be able to discriminate between a command, request, advice, threat, query and a prayer. When the poet writes a script in which the character is intended to command the Goddess, and the character delivers the script as a prayer, the whole intended purpose of the situation is damaged.

Song: Aristotle calls the musical elements of the chorus as song or melody. Song is a splendid aspect of tragic play because it makes sense to everybody and the viewer appreciates the artistic form with sheer pleasure. Chorus creates and keeps the melody of the play and Aristotle strongly insists that chorus should be an integral part of the play as an actor or action is to a play. Song that is incorporated to the play should be taking a serious role in contributing to the unity of the plot.

Spectacle: Spectacle is the last component of a tragic play. It is of lowest importance because it has very little to do with literature. The poet who creates an artistic work gives primary attention to the inner structure of the work. All his effort will be to give life to the work and to achieve the artistic value. Usually no creator does the creation thinking about the spectacle. The spectacular beauty arises when the play is brought out with the artistic value. So it is an automatic byproduct of a good play. The poet who focus on the spectacle fails to achieve the artistic beauty of the play.

Four unique components of Tragedy

There four specific components in addition to the above mentioned ones that make tragedy a unique work of art. They are *anagnorisis*, *hamartia*, *peripeteia* & *catharsis*.

The Greek word ***anagnorisis*** means ‘recognition’. Aristotle describes it as an essential component of tragic plot that results the striking recognition resulted due to the change in the status from ignorance to

knowledge, resulting the revelation of the hidden truth. **Hamartia** is described by Aristotle as the 'error in judgment'. The tragic hero is a man of noble status; still he faces misfortune not because of his villainy but due to an error in judgment. His sufferings are due to a moral flaw which makes the impact of sufferings all the more intense. **Catharsis** is a medical term that means 'purgation'. Aristotle uses this term in tragedy for describing the real aesthetic pleasure of tragedy resulted by catharsis, the purgation of the feelings of pity and fear. **Peripeteia** is an ironic twist in a tragedy that projects the fall of the hero from a higher status to the meanest level and into the intense sufferings. Peripeteia is resulted due to hamartia. These four components are essential for a tragedy to fulfill its objectives.

Aristotle concludes his discourse on Tragedy by discussing the aesthetic pleasure of tragedy. As pointed out earlier, a complex plot leads to a reversal, recognition and catharsis. Reversal is the sudden change in the status or position of the tragic hero from a better or high status to a lower status due to an error in his judgment caused by a flaw or weakness in his character. Since the tragic hero is a good and courageous person loved by all faces a fall due to his own folly, and is subjected to lot of sufferings. Then he realizes his folly or the truth hidden from him. This particular situation arouses the feelings of pity and fear in the viewers. Catharsis is a medical metaphor used by Aristotle with the meaning 'purging'. The viewers who watch the fall of the tragic hero due to his own error or flaw in character, and the realization of the truth and the sufferings undergone by the hero, identify themselves with the tragic hero. This empathizing gesture makes the viewers give an outlet to their suppressed emotions like fear, anger, hatred etc. and feel relieved mentally by the purgation effect. This is the cathartic effect of the play which enables the viewers to get purged and experience a unique pleasure of light heartedness. This is the biggest objective and the true artistic pleasure of a tragedy.

A well-formed plot must have a beginning, which is not a necessary consequence of any previous action; a middle, which follows logically from the beginning; and an end, which follows logically from the middle and from which no further action necessarily follows. The plot should be unified, meaning that every element of the plot should tie in to the rest of the plot, leaving no loose ends. This kind of unity allows tragedy to express universal themes powerfully, which makes it superior to history, which can only talk about particular events. Episodic plots are bad because there is no necessity to the sequence of events. The best kind of plot contains surprises, but surprises that, in retrospect, fit logically into the sequence of events. The best kinds of surprises are brought about by *peripeteia*, or reversal of fortune, and *anagnorisis*, or discovery. A good plot progresses like a knot that is tied up with increasingly greater complexity until the moment of *peripeteia*, at which point the knot is gradually untied until it reaches a completely unknotted conclusion.

Thus Aristotle concludes his discourse on tragedy by establishing it as the most refined form of poetry with qualities superior to that of epic poetry. He also convincingly proves the artistic value of tragedy through its aesthetic pleasure enjoyed by the viewers or readers as they visualize the dramatic form. Aristotle highlights the basic instinct of human beings to imitate, and thus develops his theory of poetry as an act of imitation of action. He emphasizes on the imitation of actions true to life. This real representation of life with its universal elements makes tragedy the most appealing art form. It is this realistic aspect of the action imitated and the character make the people accept the hero one among them and identify his feelings and emotions resulting catharsis – the aesthetic pleasure. Our pity and fear is aroused most when it is family members who harm one another rather than enemies or strangers. In the best kind of plot, one character narrowly avoids killing a family member because *anagnorisis* reveals the family connection. The hero must have good qualities appropriate to his or her station and should be portrayed realistically and consistently. Since both the character of the hero and the plot must have logical consistency, Aristotle concludes that the untying of

the plot must follow as a necessary consequence of the plot. Aristotle presents a scientific analysis of the various components of a tragedy establishing its superiority over other art forms.

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