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Literary Criticism

Definition:

Etymologically the word criticism is derived from Greek word meaning ‘Judgment’. It is an exercise in judgment. Literary criticism is the exercise of judgment on works of literature.

To examine the merits and demerits and finally to evaluate the artistic worth, is the function of criticism. Thus, literary criticism is the study, discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of literature.

Literary criticism is the evaluation of literary works. This includes its classification by genre, structure, and judgment of value (Beckson & Ganz).

Literary criticism asks what literature is, what it does, and what it is worth. (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Literary criticism helps readers like you and me interpret the literature we read. Each literary theory provides us with a different way of looking at a given literary work, which can ultimately reveal important aspects about it.

But what are these important facts?

Literary criticism helps us to understand what is important about a literary text.

For example:

- Its structure
- Its context: social, economic, historical
- How the text manipulates the reader
So in short, literary criticism helps us to understand the relationship between authors, readers, and literary texts.

The act of literary criticism ultimately enhances the enjoyment of our reading of the literary work. Figure 1 below illustrates this relationship.

**Literary work:**

The *work itself* is placed in the center because all approaches must deal, to some extent or another, with the text itself. Hence:

- Different approaches or lenses help us to discover rich and deeper meaning.
- Each lens has its strengths and weaknesses
- Each lens is valuable
- Try to become a pluralist rather than an inflexible supporter of one.

Criticism is the exercise of judgment in the area of art and literature. It is the overall term for studies concerned with defining, analysing, and evaluating works of literature.

It refers to description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary works. Literary criticism deals with different dimensions of literature.

According to Griffith, prior to the 20th century, the investigation of the nature and value of literature had had a long and distinguished history, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and continuing into modern times with such figures as Sir Philip Sidney, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold.

But their investigations focused primarily on evaluation, not interpretation. They explored what literature is and praised or condemned works that failed to meet whichever standards they deemed essential. In *The Republic*, to cite one extreme example, Plato condemned all literature because it stirs up the passions—lust, desire, pain, anger—rather than nurtures the intellect.

**The principles of criticism:**

We now consider what standard of judgment should a critic follow and what qualification and instruments/equipment should s/he possess.

**Every literary work has three elements:**

- Matter
- Manner
- Capacity to please (aesthetic pleasure).
Earlier, critics devised rules by which technical excellence – plot construction, diction, style, meter and language – of literary work. These rules have always changed with time. Essential quality of literature is not how rigidly such rules are followed but appeal to the imagination.

Human nature and subsequently principles of literature are held universal and permanent. We observe three such principles:

The first principle of criticism is the pursuit of truth, as poetic truth is the truth of ideas, and experiences of a work of art.

The truth of literature is different from the truth of science. Poetic truth is the ideas, and experiences of a work of art.

The second principle is concerned with symmetry (construction) – which implies the right selection and arrangement of material.

This principle implies right selection and arrangement of material. The writer should select certain aspects of reality and not all reality and then his material should be so arranged as to throw the selected aspects of reality into sharp relief. Aristotle stressed on this.

In his view it is essential for that artistic beauty on which the imaginative appeal of literature depends.

The critic must examine if the various parts of the composition are originally related to each other or not, whether they are proportionate to each other and to the composition as whole or not.

The test of the symmetry is indirectly a means by which the presence of the dominant artistic quality can be discovered and measured.

The final principle is that of idealization –which implies the aesthetic (beauty) consciousness of the reader.

The selection made for artistic treatment should be so made that unpleasant aspect to aesthetic consciousness of reader is kept away or minimized by virtue of which a work of art gives pleasure.

**Functions of Literary Criticism:**

The function of literary criticism is to examine the merits and demerits or defects of a work of art and finally to evaluate its worth. The chief function of criticism is to enlighten and stimulate.
The true critic is the one who is equipped for his/her task by a sound knowledge of his subject. The true critic can discover the qualities of power, beauty and depth of significance.

Another important factor to note is that the view of criticism is directly related to the critic’s own intellectual philosophy or outlook of life.

It is determined by the likes, dislikes, and prejudices of the critic himself/herself and this is equally shaped by the socio-political sensibilities of the critic’s environment. As such, critical theories are shaped by the spirit of the age.

**Literary criticism vs Literary theory**

Even though modern literary theorizing and criticism emerged during the 19th century, both attained greater heights in the 20th century. In fact, the 20th century could be appropriately termed the age of criticism.

The richness and the complexity of literary theory can be seen in the many critical movements that sprang up and in the enthusiasm with which many critics practised the art. The impact of the new psychologies was deeply felt in criticism.

In the preface to *A History of Literary Criticism*, A. N. Jeffares gives no room for any doubt about the kinship of literature, literary criticism and literary theories. He says:

The study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote. What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background, etc?

The argument of Jeffares is that for literature to be on course, it becomes expedient that a structure is put in place to reveal its meaning beyond the literal level. Broadly, texts of literature would possess two levels of meaning - the literal and the super-literal.

The super-literal meaning of texts of literature is the ideological implication of the same, which criticism attempts to resolve. The task of resolving the crisis engendered in literary texts is possible through the formulation of some principles, parameters and paradigms which are technically termed theories.

Theories are meant to interpret and evaluate works of literature with the mind of revealing the in-depth implications of such works.
Thus, literary theory and criticism is an unavoidable part of studying literature. Literary theory and criticism aim to explain, entertain, stimulate and challenge the student of literature.

Literary theory and criticism make literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways. Some of the ways include:

Literary theory and criticism help us to achieve a better understanding of literature. A better understanding of the world in which we live, automatically, comes along when we study literature, and the study of critical theory makes that enterprise even more productive.

Literary theory and criticism can, not only show us our world and ourselves through new and valuable lenses, but also strengthen our ability to think logically, creatively, and with a good deal of insight in analyzing works of literature.

A theory as a body of rules or principles used to appraise works of literature. Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read literary texts.

All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. You cannot say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to "decide" to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading.

As you read the different texts in your literature courses, you will realise that to study literary theory is to seek to understand exactly how readers (critics) interpret (criticize) texts, especially literary ones.

Most scholars today would agree that there is no single meaning waiting to be simply found in any text. It is our role as readers to produce meaning.

In other words, it is a function of the different interpretative strategies which we as readers apply to a text.

Thus, a cardinal rule of modern literary criticism could be summed up as follows: the ‘answers’ you get from a text depend entirely upon the kind of ‘questions’ you put to it.

Strictly speaking, when we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism, but when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are applying literary theory.
In other words, **literary criticism is the application of critical theory to a literary text**, whether or not a given critic is aware of the theoretical assumptions informing his or her interpretation.

In fact, the widespread recognition that literary criticism cannot be separated from the theoretical assumptions on which it is based is one reason why the word *criticism* is often used as if it includes the word *theory*.

**The qualities (characteristics) of a critic:**

It is also important for you to know the qualities of a critic, namely:

- He/she must be someone of rare sensibility – have a rare and unique sense of judgment.
- He must be someone widely read.
- He must have proper training and technical skill in different branches of literature.
- He must rise above all prejudices, personal, religious, national, political or literary so as to be objective.
- He must have imaginative sympathy – be sensitive and humane.
- He must possess a sound knowledge of human psychology and human nature.
- He must have knowledge in all branches of literature.
- The critic must get at the mind of the author.
- The critic must have a philosophical mind.
- Must be of varied experience – thoroughly acquainted with the great authors in several languages.

**THE CLASSICAL AGE: PLATO and ARISTOTLE:**

**Introduction**

“All that is literature seeks to communicate power, all that is not literature seeks to communicate knowledge” says Thomas De Quincy. We shall study the literature of power and its evaluation. Literature of power is also referred as creative writing while evaluation of creative writing is referred as criticism.

The term classicism designates an attitude to literature that is guided by admiration of the qualities of formal balance, proportion, and decorum and restrained attributed to the major works of ancient Greek and Roman literature.
A classic is a work of the highest class. The term is applied to the writings of major Greek and Roman authors from Homer to Juvenal, which were regarded as the unsurpassed models of excellence.

Plato and Aristotle are our classical thinkers and they lived in the 3-4th century BC. Plato, the great disciple of Socrates, was the first critic who examined poetry as a part of his moral philosophy.

Plato was basically a moral philosopher and not a literary critic. Plato’s critical observations on poetry lie scattered in *The Ion, The Symposium, The Republic and The Laws*.

**Plato:**

Plato was a great moral philosopher and his primary concentration was to induce moral values in the society and to seek the ultimate Truth. So when he examines poetry his tool is rather moral and not aesthetic.

He confused aesthetics with morality and ultimately concluded poetry as immoral and imitative in nature. Most of Plato’s philosophy is expounded in dialogue form, using a dialectical (to converse) method of pursuing truth by a systematic questioning of received ideas and opinions.

The early dialogues are devoted (35 and 13 letters) to exploring and defining concepts such as virtue, temperance, courage, piety, and justice. The major dialogues of Plato’s middle period – *Gorgias, Apology, Phaedo, Symposium, Republic* – move into the realms of epistemology (theory of knowledge), metaphysics, political theory, and art.

The familiar world of objects which surrounds us, and which we perceive through our senses, as not independent or real but as dependent upon another world, the realm of pure **Forms** or ideas, which can be known only by reason and not by our bodily sense-perceptions.

Plato says that the qualities of any object in the physical world are derived from the ideal **Forms**.

**For example,** an object in the physical world is beautiful because it partakes of the ideal **Form** of Beauty which exists in the higher realm. And so with Tallness, Equality, or Goodness, which Plato sees as the highest of the Forms.
The connection between the two realms can best be illustrated using examples from geometry: any triangle or square that we construct using physical instruments is bound to be imperfect.

At most it can merely approximate the ideal triangle which is perfect and which is perceived not by the senses but by reason: the ideal triangle is not a physical object but a concept, an idea, a Form.

According to Plato, because the world of Forms is changeless and eternal, it constitutes reality.

It is the world of essences, unity, and universality. Contrary, the physical world is characterized by perpetual change and decay, mere existence (as opposed to essence), multiplicity, and particularity.

A central function of the theory of Forms is that it unifies groups of objects or concepts in the world by treating them as belonging to a class, by referring them back to a common essence, and thereby making sense of our innumerably diverse experiences.

The great philosophers of the period discussed a great variety of matters including the value of literature of society and its nature and functions. The fourth century B.C. was an age of critical enquiry and analysis.

Plato was not a professed critic of literature and there is no single work that contains his critical observations. His ideas are expressed in several books, chief among them being the “Dialogues” and the “Republic.” In these books, Plato gave initial formulation to the most fundamental questions:

- How can we define goodness and virtue?
- How do we arrive at truth and knowledge?
- What is the connection between soul and body?
- What is the ideal political state?
- Of what use are literature and the arts?
- What is the nature of language?

Plato’s answers to these questions are still disputed; yet the questions themselves have endured.

**Poetry in Plato’s Republic:**

Plato’s theory of poetry in the *Republic* is mainly concerned defining justice and the ideal nature of a political state.
Plato views poetry as a powerful force in molding public opinion, and sees it as a danger to his ideal city, ordered as this is in a strict hierarchy whereby the guardians (philosophers) and their helpers (soldiers) comprise an elect minority which rules over a large majority of farmers, craftsmen, and “money-makers”. The program of education that he lays out for the rulers or guardians of the city consists of gymnastics and music.

According to Plato, it is music which primarily defines the function of guardianship. Hence, he condemns poetry on the grounds of:

- the falsity of its claims and representations regarding both gods and men;
- its corruptive effect on character; and
- its “disorderly” complexity and encouragement of individualism in the sphere of sensibility and feeling.

In other words, it encourages variety and multiplicity, valuing the particular for its own sake, thereby distracting from contemplation of the universal.

In projecting this model onto the state as a whole, Plato aligns the mass of people with the unruly “multitude” of desires in the soul, and the guardians considered collectively with the “unity” of reason.

The individuality of the guardians is to be all but erased, not merely through ideological conditioning but through their compulsory existence as a community: they are to possess no private property or wealth; they must live together, nourished on a simple diet, and receiving a stipend from the other citizens.

Collectively, then, the guardians’ function in the city is a projection of the unifying function of reason in the individual soul.

**Plato’s Objection to Poetry**

As a moralist, Plato disapproves of poetry because it is immoral. A poem for Plato is a collection of copies of the ideas or forms. His opinion has been outlined in his dialogues and in his dialogues and in The Republic.

According to Plato, poetry tends to arouse emotions. So, the poet is not fit to be a good citizen. The moralistic approach believes that literature is morally good or has a capacity to influence people so as to make them morally better.
Plato thought that bad and evil influences of literature should be kept from the young generation during their formative years.

Plato defends philosophy. His purpose is to demonstrate the practical superiority of philosophy over poetry. As a philosopher he disapproves of poem because it is based in falsehood.

He is of the view that philosophy is better than poetry because a philosopher deals with idea / truth, whereas a poet deals with what appears to him / illusion.

He believed that truth of philosophy was more important than the pleasure of poetry. He argued that most of it should be banned from the ideal society that he described in the Republic. Thus, Plato attacks poetry and drama on moral grounds. He says:

- Poetry is not conducive to social morality
- A poet “tells lies about gods” and gods and great heroes who are descended from the gods are represented as corrupt, dishonest, and subject to all faults and vices of common humanity. Works of poets like Homer must not be prescribed for school study.
- Drama is even more harmful because dramatists and poets appeal to the baser instincts of men, their love of the sensational and the melodramatic.

We note that Plato condemns poetry on intellectual, emotional and moral grounds, and demonstrate its usefulness, and its corrupting influences. He condemns the poets because “they feed and water the passions instead of drying them.”

As such, he condemns poetry on three grounds.

- Poetic inspiration
- The emotional appeal of poetry
- Its non-moral character.
1. Poetic inspiration:

The poet writes not because he has thought long over but because he is inspired. It is a spontaneous overflow or a sudden outpouring of the soul. No one can rely on such sudden pourings.

It might have certain profound truth, but it should be suspected to the test of reason. Then only it will be acceptable. Otherwise they are not safe guides.

So they can’t be substitutes to philosophy which is guided by the cool deliberation or reasoning. Poetry, on the other hand, is created by the impulse of moment. So it cannot make a better citizen or a Nation.

2. The Emotional Appeal of Poetry:

Poetry appeals to the emotions and not to the reason. Its pictures of life are therefore misleading.

Poetry is the product of inspiration. Hence it cannot be safe guide as reason.

Plato illustrates this with reference to the tragic poetry. In tragedy, there is much weeping and wailing. This moves the heart of the spectators. It is harmful in its effect.

If we let our own pity grow on watching the grief of others, it will not be easy to restrain it in the case of our own sufferings. Poetry feeds the passions and let them rule us.

3. Its non-moral character:

Poetry lacks concern with morality. It treats both virtue and vice alike. Virtue often comes to grief in literature. Many evil characters are happy and many virtuous men are seen unhappy.

It is seen that wickedness is profitable and that honest dealing is harmful to one’s self. Their portraits of Gods and Heroes are also objectionable.
anger, grief and so on. Such literature corrupted both the citizen and the state.

In addition, in ‘The Republic,’ Plato objected to poetry on three grounds. Let’s proceed to examine his objections.

What were his Objections?

Plato objected to poetry on three grounds, namely, Education, Philosophical and moral view point.

1. Plato’s objection to Poetry from the point of view of Education:


   Homer’s epics were part of studies. Heroes of epics were not examples of sound or ideal morality.

   They were lusty, cunning, and cruel – war mongers. Even Gods were no better.

b. Plato writes: “if we mean our future guardians to regard the habit of quarrelling among themselves as of all things the basest, no word should be said to them of the wars in the heaven, or of the plots and fighting of the gods against one another, for they are not true.

   If they would only believe as we would tell them that quarrelling is unholy, and that never up to this time has there been any quarrelling between citizens…… these tales (of epics) must not be admitted into our State, whether they are supposed to have allegorical meaning or not.”

   c. Thus he objected on the ground that poetry does not cultivate good habits among children.

2. Objection from Philosophical point of view:

   In ‘The Republic’: Poetry does not lead to, but drives us away from the realisation of the ultimate reality – the Truth.
Philosophy is better than poetry because Philosophy deals with idea and poetry is twice removed from original idea.

Plato says: “The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearance only …. The imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring.

3. Objection from the Moral point of view:

- In the same book in ‘The Republic’: Soul of man has higher principles of reason (which is the essence of its being) as well as lower constituted of baser impulses and emotions.
- Whatever encourages and strengthens the rational principle is good, and emotional is bad.
- Poetry waters and nourishes the baser impulses of men - emotional, sentimental and sorrowful. Plato says: “Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily limited. And therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered state, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason … Poetry feeds and waters the passion instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.”

Why He Objected to Poetry?

These are Plato’s principal charges on poetry and objection to it. Before we pass on any judgement, we should not forget to keep in view the time in which he lived. During his time:

- There was political instability
Education was in sorry state. Homer was part of studies – and Homer’s epics were misrepresented and misinterpreted.

Women were regarded inferior human beings – slavery was wide spread.

Best time of Greek literature was over – corruption and degeneration in literature.

Confusion prevailed in all sphere of life – intellect, moral, political and education. Thus, in Plato’s time the poets’ added fuel to the fire. He looked at poets as breeders of falsehood and poetry as mother of lies.

And so the chief reasons for his objection to poetry were:

- it is not ethical because it promotes undesirable passions,
- it is not philosophical because it does not provide true knowledge, and
- it is not pragmatic because it is inferior to the practical arts and therefore has no educational value. These were the reasons for Plato’s objections to poetry.

The Value of Plato’s Criticism:

Plato is a discerning critic in both poetry and drama. In his attack on poetry, he exhibits a thorough insight into their nature, function and method.

He insists on truth as the test of poetry. He says that poetry is twice removed from reality.

He disapproves of the non-moral character of poetry. He makes a distinction between the function of poetry and that of philosophy. He also derides the emotional appeal of poetry.

He makes valuable observations on the source of comic and tragic pleasure. He was also, perhaps, the first to see that all art is imitation of mimesis.

He divides poetry into the dithyrambic or the purely lyrical, the purely mimetic or imitative such as drama and the mixed kind such as the epic.

He makes valuable observation on style of good speech and writing.
Plato’s Observations on Style.

Plato lays down a few principles of good speech. They apply equally to good writing. The first essential of a speech is a thorough knowledge of the subject matter.

The speaker should also know the art of speaking. The presentation must have an organic unity.

i.e. it must have a beginning, middle and an end. The speaker must also have a thorough knowledge of human psychology. These principles are equally true in the case of written word.

Plato’s Comments on Drama

Plato’s observation on poetry is equally applicable to drama. But he says a few more things about drama in particular. These are:

1. Its appeal to the Baser Instincts

Drama is meant to be staged. Its success depends upon a heterogeneous multitude. In order to please them all, the dramatist often introduces what they like.

This is likely to lead to the arousal of baser instincts. It may affect morality. Hence such plays should be banished.

2. Effects of Impersonation

By constantly impersonating evil characters, the actors imbibe vices. This is harmful to their natural self. Acting, says Plato is not a healthy exercise.

It represses individuality and leads to the weakness of character; However, Plato admits that if the actors impersonate virtuous characters, the same qualities are stimulated in them by the force of habit.

These tragedies that represent the best and the noble are to be encouraged.

3. Tragic and Comic pleasure

Plato tries to answer what constitutes tragic pleasure. But his explanation is not scientific. He says that human nature is a mixture of all sorts of feelings such as anger envy, fear, grief etc.; these feelings are painful by themselves.

But they afford pleasure when indulged in excess. It pleases a man to be angry or to go on weeping; otherwise he would not do so.
In comedy, the pleasure takes the form of laughter when we see a coward behaving like a brave man, a fool as a wise man, a cheat as an honest person and so on.

The source of laughter is the incongruity between what he is and what he pretends to be. Such a pleasure is malicious as it arises from the weakness of a fellow man.

We derive pleasure from such a man only if we love him. If he were one whom we hate, he fails to arouse any laughter but contempt. Plato says, “no character is comic unless he is lovable”.

**Plato’s theory of Mimesis**

In his theory of mimesis, Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. He believed that ‘idea’ is ultimate reality. Art imitates idea and so it is imitation of reality.

He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair. The idea of ‘chair’ first came in the mind of carpenter. He gave physical shape to his idea and created a chair.

The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, the painter’s chair is twice removed from reality. Hence, he believed that art is twice removed from reality.

He gives first importance to philosophy as philosophy deals with idea, whereas poetry deals with illusion – things which are twice removed from reality. So too Plato, philosophy is better than poetry.

This view of mimesis is pretty deflationary, for it implies that mimetic art--drama, fiction, and representational painting-- does not itself have an important role to play in increasing our understanding of human beings and the human world.

We note that Plato’s view of art is closely related to his theory of ideas. Ideas, he says are the ultimate reality and things are conceived as ideas before they take practical shape as things.

This implication would not be rejected by every lover--or indeed every creator--of imaginative literature.

Ironically it was Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, who was the first theorist to defend literature and poetry in his writing Poetics against Plato’s objection and his theory of mimesis.
The Classical Age as exemplified by ARISTOTLE

1. Introduction

Aristotle is the second figure you need to talk about when you discuss the classical age of literary criticism. He is one of the greatest ancients we discuss in this course and he is very important as his views are the ones carried over and modified by John Dryden – hence the reason why we say that John Dryden is a neo-classic.

Aristotle is also a Greek philosopher like Plato. Aristotle lived from 384 B.C. to 322 B.C. He was a student of Plato, a Greek philosopher and critic. Among his critical treatise, only two are extant–‘Poetics’ and ‘Rhetoric’, the former deals with the art of poetry and the latter with the art of speaking.

His famous work is The Poetics is Aristotle’s great work on the principles of drama. He believed that the major function of art is to provide satisfaction, for happiness is the aim of life. He argued that tragedy stimulates the emotions of pity and fear. The Poetics contains twenty six small chapters.

The first four chapters and the twenty-fifth are devoted to poetry; the fifth in general way to comedy, epic, and tragedy; the following fourteen exclusively to tragedy; the next three to poetic diction; the next to epic poetry; and the last to a comparison of epic poetry and tragedy.

Aristotle’s main concern thus appears to be tragedy, which was considered the most developed form of poetry in his day. Poetry, comedy, and epic come in for consideration because a discussion of tragedy would be incomplete without some reference to its parent and sister forms.

In The poetics, he outlined tragedy, catharsis, the tragic hero and the three Unities: these are important unities which you must always remember and explain as well as compare with what Dryden as a neo-classical critic says. These three unities are the unity of TIME, PLACE and ACTION.
He spoke at length about poetic drama and especially applied his principles to the drama of Oedipus the King by Sophocles.

He refers to this play to illustrate his critical terms – plot, character, thought, language, spectacle, catharsis, tragic hero, the three unities, and hamartia.

According to Plato and Aristotle, the tragic hero has to be noble and from a high class like Oedipus.

Since Aristotle was Plato’s student, let’s start by examining his response to Plato’s objection to poetry.

Aristotle's Reply to Plato's Objection

Aristotle replied to the charges made by his Guru Plato against poetry in particular and art in general. He replied to them one by one in his defence of poetry.

Plato says that art being the imitation of the actual is removed from the Truth. It only gives the likeness of a thing in concrete, and the likeness is always less than real.

But Plato fails to explain that art also gives something more which is absent in the actual. The artist does not simply reflect the real in the manner of a mirror. Art cannot be slavish imitation of reality.

Literature is not the exact reproduction of life in all its totality. It is the representation of selected events and characters necessary in a coherent action for the realization of the artist’s purpose.

He even exalts, idealises and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. These elements, present in art, are absent in the raw and rough real.

While a poet creates something less than reality he at the same times creates something more as well. He puts an idea of the reality which he perceives in an object.

This ‘more’, this intuition and perception, is the aim of the artist. Artistic creation cannot be fairly criticized on the ground that it is not the creation in concrete terms of things and beings. Thus considered, it does not take us away from the Truth but leads us to the essential reality of life.
Plato again says that art is bad because it does not inspire virtue, does not teach morality. But is teaching the function of art? Is it the aim of the artist?

The function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express emotions and represent life. It should never be confused with the function of ethics which is simply to teach morality.

If an artist succeeds in pleasing us in the aesthetic sense, he is a good artist. If he fails in doing so, he is a bad artist. There is no other criterion to judge his worth. R.A.Scott-James observes:

“Morality teaches. Art does not attempt to teach. It merely asserts it is thus or thus that life is perceived to be. That is my bit of reality, says the artist. Take it or leave it – draw any lessons you like from it – that is my account of things as they are – if it has any value to you as evidence of teaching, use it, but that is not my business: I have given you my rendering, my account, my vision, my dream, my illusion – call it what you will. If there is any lesson in it, it is yours to draw, not mine to preach.”

Similarly, Plato’s charges on needless lamentations and ecstasies at the imaginary events of sorrow and happiness encourage the weaker part of the soul and numb the faculty of reason.

These charges are defended by Aristotle in his Theory of Catharsis. David Daiches summarizes Aristotle’s views in reply to Plato’s charges in brief: “Tragedy (Art) gives new knowledge, yields aesthetic satisfaction and produces a better state of mind.”

Plato judges poetry now from the educational standpoint, now from the philosophical one and then from the ethical one.

But he does not care to consider it from its own unique standpoint. He does not define its aims. He forgets that everything should be judged in terms of its own aims and objectives, its own criteria of merit and demerit.

We cannot fairly maintain that music is bad because it does not paint, or that painting is bad because it does not sing. Similarly, we cannot say that poetry is bad because it does not teach philosophy or ethics.

If poetry, philosophy and ethics had identical function, how could they be different subjects? To denounce poetry because it is not philosophy or ideal is clearly absurd.
Aristotle's Objection to the Theory of Mimesis

Aristotle agrees with Plato in calling the poet an imitator and creative art, imitation. He imitates one of the three objects – things as they were/are, things as they are said/thought to be or things as they ought to be.

In other words, he imitates what is past or present, what is commonly believed and what is ideal.

Aristotle believes that there is natural pleasure in imitation which is an in-born instinct in men. It is this pleasure in imitation that enables the child to learn his earliest lessons in speech and conduct from those around him, because there is a pleasure in doing so.

In a grown-up child – a poet, there is another instinct, helping him to make him a poet – the instinct for harmony and rhythm.

He does not agree with his teacher in – ‘poet’s imitation is twice removed from reality and hence unreal/illusion of truth’, to prove his point he compares poetry with history.

The poet and the historian differ not by their medium, but the true difference is that the historian relates ‘what has happened’, the poet, ‘what may/ought to have happened’ - the ideal.

Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical, and a higher thing than history because history expresses the particular while poetry tends to express the universal. Therefore, the picture of poetry pleases all and at all times.

Aristotle does not agree with Plato in the function of poetry making people weaker and emotional/too sentimental. For him, catharsis is ennobling and it humbles a human being.

So far as the moral nature of poetry is concerned, Aristotle believes that the end of poetry is to please; however, teaching may be the by-product of it. Such pleasing is superior to the other pleasures because it teaches civic morality. So all good literature gives pleasure, which is not divorced from moral lessons.

Aristotle’s Concept of Tragedy

According to Aristotle metre/verse alone is not the distinguishing feature of poetry or imaginative literature in general. Even scientific and medical treatises may be written in verses.
Verse will not make them poetry. Then the question is, if metre/verse
does not distinguish poetry from other forms of art, how can we classify the form of
poetry along with other forms of art?

Aristotle classifies various forms of art with the help of object,
medium and manner of their imitation of life. Let’s look at these
classifications.

**Object:**

Which object of life is imitated determines the form of literature. If the
Life of great people is imitative it will make that work a Tragedy and if the life of
mean people is imitated it will make the work a Comedy.

David Daiches writes explaining the classification of poetry which is imitative:

―We can classify poetry according to the kinds of people it represents –
they are either better than they are in real life, or worse, or the same. One could
present characters, that is, on the grand or heroic scale; or could treat ironically or
humorously the petty follies of men, or one could aim at naturalism presenting men
neither heightened nor trivialized … Tragedy deals with men on a heroic scale, men
better than they are in everyday life whereas comedy deals with the more trivial
aspects of human nature, with characters ‘worse’ than they are in real life.‖

**Medium:**

What sort of medium is used to imitate life again determines the forms
of different arts. The painter uses the colours, and a musician will use the sound, but
a poet uses the words to represent the life.

When words are used, how they are used and in what manner or metre
they are used further classifies a piece of literature in different categories as a tragedy
or a comedy or an epic.

The types of literature, says Aristotle, can be distinguished according
to the medium of representation as well as the manner of representation in a
particular medium.

The difference of medium between a poet and a painter is clear; one
uses words with their denotative, connotative, rhythmic and musical aspects; the
other uses forms and colours. Likewise, the tragedy writer may make use of one kind
of metre, and the comedy writer of another.

**Manner:**

In what manner the imitation of life is presented distinguishes the one
form of literature from another. How is the serious aspect of life imitated?
For example, dramas are always presented in action while epics are always in narration. In this way the kinds of literature can be distinguished and determined according to the techniques they employ. David Daiches says:

“The poet can tell a story in narrative form and partly through the speeches of the characters (as Homer does), or it can all be done in third-person narrative, or the story can be presented dramatically, with no use of third person narrative at all.”

**Aristotle’s Definition of Tragedy**

Another very important contribution of Aristotle to literary criticism is his definition of tragedy and his definition is critical.

For Aristotle; “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions” (Poetics, p. 10).

You have to always remember this definition and when we move on to John Dryden you must then compare and contrast their views.

**Aristotle’s Explanation of the Definition**

The first part of this definition distinguishes tragedy from comedy; the second one; from the lyric; the second and third distinguish it from the epic; the last one describes its effect.

The definition may be analysed in another way. The first part describes the subject matter of tragedy, that is, an action that is serious, long enough and complete.

The first part distinguishes it from comedy whose subject matter is not of such serious significance. The second and third part refers to its means, that is, acting, not narration. The second part distinguishes it from the lyric.

This and the next distinguish it from the epic which employs a single meter and is narrative in form.

The fourth part mentions the end, i.e. arousing pity and fear and their catharsis. Thus, it mentions the feelings that a work should arouse if it should be considered a tragedy. The last line of the definition — ‘through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these and similar emotions’
Substantiates the theory of Catharsis. His theory of Catharsis consists in the purgation or purification of the excessive emotions of pity and fear. Witnessing the tragedy and suffering of the protagonist on the stage, such emotions and feelings of the audience is purged.

The purgation of such emotions and feelings make them relieved and they emerge better human beings than they were. Thus, Aristotle’s theory of Catharsis has moral and ennobling function.

Aristotle’s Observation On Tragedy

Its origin

Poetry can imitate two kinds of actions — the nobler actions of good men or the mean actions of bad men. Tragedy was born from the former and comedy from the latter. Tragedy has resemblances to epic and comedy to satire. Aristotle considers tragedy superior to epic. Tragedy has all the epic elements in a shorter compass.

Its characteristics

By a serious action Aristotle means a tale of suffering exciting the emotions of pity and fear. The writer of ‘tragedy’ seeks to imitate the serious side of life just as a writer of ‘comedy’ seeks to imitate only the shallow and superficial side.

All art is representation (imitation) of life, but none can represent life in its totality. Therefore, an artist has to be selective in representation. He must aim at representing or imitating an aspect of life or a fragment of life.

Action comprises of all human activities including deeds, thoughts and feelings (so, soliloquies, chorus etc. is also Action).

The action should be complete which means that it must have a proper beginning, middle and end.

It should also be arranged sequentially also. In other words it should have an organic unity. The tragic section presented on the stage in a drama should be complete or self-contained with a beginning, middle and an end.

A beginning is that before which the audience or the reader does not need to be told anything to understand the story. If something more is required to understand the story than the beginning gives, it is unsatisfactory. From it follow the middle. In their turn the events from the middle lead to the end.

Thus the story becomes a compact and self-sufficient one. It must not leave the impression that even after the end the action continues or that before the action starts certain things remain to be known.
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