

Unit-X PRINCIPLES OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Aristotle: *Poetics*

- ❖ Aristotle (c. 384 B.C. to 322 B.C.) was an Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist
- ❖ considered one of the greatest thinkers in politics, psychology and ethics.
- ❖ Popular student of Plato's Academy.
- ❖ In 338, he began tutoring Alexander the Great.
- ❖ In 335, Aristotle founded his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens, where he spent most of the rest of his life studying, teaching and writing. Some of his most notable works include *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, *Metaphysics*, *Poetics* and *Prior Analytics*.

'Poetics'

Poetics is a scientific study of writing and poetry where Aristotle observes, analyzes and defines mostly tragedy and epic poetry. Compared to philosophy, which presents ideas, poetry is an imitative use of language, rhythm and harmony that represents objects and events in the world, Aristotle posited. His book explores the foundation of storymaking, including character development, plot and storyline.

'Nicomachean Ethics' and 'Eudemean Ethics'

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is believed to have been named in tribute to Aristotle's son, Nicomachus, Aristotle prescribed a moral code of conduct for what he called "good living." He asserted that good living to some degree defied the more restrictive laws of logic, since the real world poses circumstances that can present a conflict of personal values. That said, it was up to the individual to reason cautiously while developing his or her own judgment. *Eudemean Ethics* is another of Aristotle's major treatises on the behavior and judgment that constitute "good living."

On happiness

In his treatises on ethics, Aristotle aimed to discover the best way to live life and give it meaning — "the supreme good for man," in his words — which he determined was the pursuit of happiness. Our happiness is not a state but but an activity, and it's determined by our ability to live a life that enables us to use and develop our reason. While bad luck can affect happiness, a truly happy person, he believed, learns to cultivate habits and behaviors that help him (or her) to keep bad luck in perspective.

The golden mean

Aristotle also defined what he called the "golden mean." Living a moral life, Aristotle believed, was the ultimate goal. Doing so means approaching every ethical dilemma by finding a mean between living to excess and living deficiently, taking into account an individual's needs and circumstances.

'Metaphysics'

In his book *Metaphysics*, Aristotle clarified the distinction between matter and form. To Aristotle, matter was the physical substance of things, while form was the unique nature of a thing that gave it its identity.

'Politics'

In *Politics*, Aristotle examined human behavior in the context of society and government. Aristotle believed the purpose of government was make it possible for citizens to achieve virtue and happiness. Intended to help guide statesmen and rulers, *Politics* explores, among other themes, how and why cities come into being; the roles of citizens and politicians; wealth and the class system; the purpose of the political system; types of governments and democracies; and the roles of slavery and women in the household and society.

'Rhetoric'

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes and analyzes public speaking with scientific rigor in order to teach readers how to be more effective speakers. Aristotle believed rhetoric was essential in politics and law and helped defend truth and justice. Good rhetoric, Aristotle believed, could educate people and encourage them to consider both sides of a debate. Aristotle's work explored how to construct an argument and maximize its effect, as well as fallacious reasoning to avoid (like generalizing from a single example).

'Prior Analytics'

In *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle explains the syllogism as “a discourse in which, certain things having been supposed, something different from the things supposed results of necessity because these things are so.” Aristotle defined the main components of reasoning in terms of inclusive and exclusive relationships. These sorts of relationships were visually grafted in the future **through the use of Venn diagrams.**

Other Works on Logic

Besides *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle's other major writings on logic include *Categories*, *On Interpretation* and *Posterior Analytics*. In these works, Aristotle discusses his system for reasoning and for developing sound arguments.

Works on Science

Aristotle composed works on astronomy, including *On the Heavens*, and earth sciences, including *Meteorology*. By meteorology, Aristotle didn't simply mean the study of weather. His more expansive definition of meteorology included “all the affectations we may call common to air and water, and the kinds and parts of the earth and the affectations of its parts.”

In *Meteorology*, Aristotle identified the water cycle and discussed topics ranging from natural disasters to astrological events. Although many of his views on the Earth were controversial at the time, they were re-adopted and popularized during the late Middle Ages.

Aristotle's *Poetics* Summary

- ❖ Aristotle's *Poetics* seeks to address the different kinds of poetry, the structure of a good poem, and the division of a poem into its component parts.
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Aristotle lays out six elements of tragedy: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. Plot is 'the soul' of tragedy, because action is paramount to the significance of a drama, and all other elements are subsidiary.
- ❖ A plot must have a beginning, middle, and end; it must also be universal in significance, have a determinate structure, and maintain a unity of theme and purpose.
- ❖ Plot also must contain elements of astonishment, reversal (*peripeteia*), recognition, and suffering. Reversal is an ironic twist or change by which the main action of the story comes full-circle.
- ❖ Recognition, meanwhile, is the change from ignorance to knowledge, usually involving people coming to understand one another's true identities. Suffering is a destructive or painful action, which is often the result of a reversal or recognition. All three elements coalesce to create "catharsis," which is the engenderment of fear and pity in the audience: pity for the tragic hero's plight, and fear that his fate might befall us.
- ❖ When it comes to character, a poet should aim for four things. First, the hero must be 'good,' and thus manifest moral purpose in his speech. Second, the hero must have propriety, or 'manly valor.' Thirdly, the hero must be 'true to life.' And finally, the hero must be consistent.
- ❖ Tragedy and Epic poetry fall into the same categories: simple, complex (driven by reversal and recognition), ethical (moral) or pathetic (passion). There are a few differences between tragedy and epic, however.
- ❖ First, an epic poem does not use song or spectacle to achieve its cathartic effect. Second, 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 often uses other forms of meter to achieve the rhythms of different characters' speech.
- ❖ Aristotle also lays out the elements of successful imitation. The poet must imitate either things as they are, things as they are thought to be, or things as they ought to be. The poet must also imitate in action and language (preferably metaphors or contemporary words). Errors come when the poet imitates incorrectly - and thus destroys the essence of the poem - or when the poet accidentally makes an error (a factual error, for instance). Aristotle does not believe that factual errors sabotage the entire work; errors that limit or compromise the unity of a given work, however, are much more consequential.
- ❖ Aristotle concludes by tackling the question of whether the epic or tragic form is 'higher.' Most critics of his time argued that tragedy was for an inferior audience that required the gesture of performers, while epic poetry was for a 'cultivated audience' which could filter a

narrative form through their own imaginations. In reply, Aristotle notes that epic recitation can be marred by overdone gesticulation in the same way as a tragedy; moreover, tragedy, like poetry, can produce its effect without action - its power is in the mere reading. Aristotle argues that tragedy is, in fact, superior to epic, because it has all the epic elements as well as spectacle and music to provide an indulgent pleasure for the audience. Tragedy, then, despite the arguments of other critics, is the higher art for Aristotle.

Character List

Aeschylus

Aeschylus is the author of the frequently-cited *Oresteia*, a play trilogy which includes *Agamemnon*. Aristotle attributes Aeschylus with a number of important innovations in the theater, including introducing a second actor, diminishing the importance of the chorus, and focusing on dialogue rather than music or dance (both of which were important elements in Ancient Greek theater). But Aristotle also faults Aeschylus, arguing that the playwright did not create a distinct poetic language.

Euripides

Aristotle refers to the tragedian Euripides - the author of *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, and over seventy other plays of which only nineteen have survived - as a master of plot. Aristotle comes to Euripides' defense often in the *Poetics*, saying that though critics censured his work as morose, his plays were often the best because they were the 'most tragic.' Aristotle conceives of the tragic effect in Euripides' plays as flowing from the inner logic of their plots, which always included a fall from good fortune to bad.

Sophocles

Sophocles is the author of *Oedipus*, and considered by Aristotle the master of the tragedy. He draws men 'as they ought to be,' and creates a higher view of humans. Aristotle compares Sophocles to Homer for his tendency to idealize humanity. The playwright is also credited with raising the number of actors on the stage to three, and with adding scene-painting as a part of spectacle.

Major Themes

Cathartic Reversal

Aristotle argues that the best tragedies - and thus the best plays, since Aristotle considers tragedy to be the highest dramatic form - use reversal and recognition to achieve catharsis. He writes that reversal works with a story's spine or center to ensure that the hero comes full circle. *Oedipus* is his exemplar of a hero who undergoes such a reversal and thus has cathartic self-recognition. Aristotle considers catharsis to be a form of redemption. For instance, even though *Oedipus'* recognition is tragic it still redeems him: he is no longer living in ignorance of his tragedy but instead has accepted fate.

And redemption is not the only result of catharsis; the audience too undergoes a catharsis of sorts in a good drama. The hero's catharsis induces both pity and fear in the audience: pity for the hero, and fear that his fate could happen to us.

Complication and Denouement

There are only two parts to a good drama, says Aristotle - the rising action leading to the climax, which is known as the complication, and the denouement, or the 'unraveling' that follows the climax. This twofold movement follows Aristotle's theory of poetic unity. The complication leads up to the revelation of the unity at the heart of the work. After this revelation, a play naturally turns to the denouement, in which the significance and ramifications of the unity are explored and resolved.

The Imitative Nature of Art

There are two common ways to think of art: some consider it to be an expression of what is original and unusual in human thinking; Aristotle, on the other hand, argues that that art is 'imitative,' that is to say, representative of life. This imitative quality fascinates Aristotle. He devotes much of the *Poetics* to exploring 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.

The Standard of Poetic Judgment

Aristotle thinks that this tendency to criticize a work of art for factual errors - such as lack of historical accuracy - is misguided. He believes that instead we should judge work according to its success at imitating the world. If the imitation is carried out with integrity and if the artwork's 'unity' is intact at its conclusion, a simple error in accuracy will do little to blemish this greater success. Art, in other words, should be judged aesthetically, not scientifically.

Tragedy vs. Epic Poetry

In Aristotle's time, the critics considered epic poetry to be the supreme art form, but to Aristotle, tragedy is the better of the two forms. Aristotle believes that tragedy, like the epic, can entertain and edify in its written form, but also has the added dimension of being able to translate onstage into a drama of spectacle and music, capable of being digested in one sitting.

Tragic Hero

The tragic hero, in Aristotle's view of drama, is not an eminently 'good' man; nor is he necessarily a paragon of virtue that is felled by adversity. Instead, the hero has some 'frailty' or flaw that is evident from the outset of a play that eventually ensures his doom. The audience, moreover, must be able to identify with this tragic flaw.

The Unity of Poetry

Aristotle often speaks of the unity of poetry in the *Poetics*; what he means by "unity," however, is sometimes misunderstood. Unity refers to the ability of the best dramatic plots to revolve around a central axis that 'unites' all the action. Aristotle believes that a unified drama will have a 'spine': a central idea which motivates all the action, character, thoughts, diction and spectacle in the play.

Summary

Chapters 1-5

Aristotle begins with a loose outline of what he will address in *The Poetics*:

- a. the different kinds of poetry and the 'essential quality' of each
- b. the structure necessary for a 'good poem'
- c. the method in which a poem is divided into parts
- d. anything else that might tangentially comes up in his address of the above topics.

But before he begins tackling these topics, Aristotle first seeks to define poetry. Poetry, as Aristotle defines it, is first and foremost a 'medium of imitation,' meaning a form of art that seeks to duplicate or represent life. Poetry can imitate life in a number of ways, by representing character, emotion, action, or even everyday objects.

Poetry, as Aristotle defines it, 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.' He notes three differences.

1. Medium of Imitation

In general, poetry imitates life through rhythm, language, and harmony. This is more pronounced in music or dance, but even verse poetry can accomplish imitation through language alone

2. Object of Imitation

Art seeks to imitate men in action - hence the term 'drama' (dramatis, in Greek). In order to imitate men, art must either present man as 'better' than they are in life (i.e. of higher morals), as true to life, or as 'worse' than they are in life (i.e. of lower morals).

Each author has his own tendencies - Homer 'makes men better than they are,' Cleophon 'as they are,' Nichochares 'worse than they are.' But more important is a general distinction that Aristotle makes between forms of drama: comedy represents men as worse than they are, tragedy as better than they are in actual life.

3. Mode of Imitation

A poet can imitate either through:

- a. narration, in which he takes another personality (an omniscient 'I' watching the events 'like an observer')
- b. speak in his own person, unchanged (the first-person 'I')
- c. presents all his characters as living and moving before us (third-person narrator)

Continuing on from imitation, Aristotle turns to the anthropology and history of poetry. As Aristotle sees it, poetry emerged for two reasons -- 1) man's instinct to imitate things and 2) the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm.

Once poetry emerged, it evolved in two directions. One group of poems imitated 'noble actions,' or the actions of good men. A second group of poets imitated 'the actions of meaner persons' in the form of satire. The former evolved into tragedy, the latter into epic poetry, then tragic drama.

Tragedy began as improvisation and evolved over time, through the contribution of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others into its natural form of dramatic plot, dialogue, and iambic verse.

Comedy began as an imitation of characters 'of a lower type', meaning a representation of a defect or ugliness in character, which is not painful or destructive. Comedy was at first not taken seriously, but once plot was introduced in Sicily comedic theater, it soon grew into a respected form.

Epic poetry, finally, imitates men of noble action, like tragedy. But epic poetry only allows one kind of meter and is narrative in form. Moreover, tragedy usually confines itself to a single day, whereas epic poetry has no limits of time. Ultimately, all the elements of an epic poem are found in tragedy, but not all the elements of tragedy are found in an epic poem.

Chapters 6-9

Tragedy is an imitation of action with the following characteristics: it is serious, complete, of significant magnitude, depicted with rhythmic language and/or song, in the form of action (not narrative), and produces a 'purgation' of pity and fear in the audience (also known as catharsis).

Since tragedy is the imitation of action, it is chiefly concerned with the lives of men, and thus presents a stage for character and thought. Character - the qualities ascribed to a certain man - and thought, according to Aristotle, are the two causes from which actions spring. These elements also determine the success of a given action. Plot, then, is arrangements of incidents (successes or failures) that result from character and thought giving way to action.

With the above in mind, Aristotle lays out the six parts that define a tragedy:

- a. plot
- b. character
- c. diction (rhythmic language)
- d. thought
- e. spectacle
- f. song

Plot is the most important part of a tragedy for a number of reasons. First, the result of a man's actions determines his success or failure, and hence his happiness, so it is action which is paramount - not character, which doesn't necessarily affect every action. Second, without action, there cannot be a tragedy - but there can be a tragedy without character. Thirdly, diction, song, and thought - even elegantly combined - cannot replicate the action of life without plot.

Plot, then, is the 'soul of a tragedy,' and character comes second. Rounding out his rankings: thought, meaning what a character says in a given circumstance, followed by diction, song, and spectacle.

Aristotle goes on to describe the elements of plot, which include completeness, magnitude, unity, determinate structure, and universality. Completeness refers to the necessity of a tragedy to have a beginning, middle, and end. A 'beginning' is defined as an origin, by which something naturally comes to be. An 'end,' meanwhile, follows another incident by necessity, but has nothing necessarily following it. The 'middle' follows something just as something must follow it.

'Magnitude' refers simply to length -- the tragedy must be of a 'length which can be easily embraced by the memory.' That said, Aristotle believes that the longer a tragedy, the more

beautiful it can be, provided it maintains its beginning, middle, and end. And in the sequence of these three acts, the tragedy will present a change 'from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.'

'Unity' refers to the centering of all the plot's action around a common theme or idea.

'Determinate structure' refers to the fact that the plot all hinges on a sequence of causal, imitative events, so if one were to remove even one part of the plot, the entire tragedy 'will be disjointed and disturbed.' More simply, every part of a good plot is necessary.

'Universality' refers to the necessity of a given character to speak or act according to how all or most humans would react in a given situation, 'according to the law of probability or necessity.'

Aristotle ends this discussion of plot elements by pointing his out his particular disdain for 'episodic' plots - plots in which episodes succeed one another 'without probably or necessary sequence' (like a weekly sitcom, for instance). These episodic dramas stretch plot 'beyond their capacity,' and hence are inorganic.

Chapters 10-12

In order for plot to function, it not only needs the basic concepts from the previous chapters, but the following components as well: astonishment, reversal (or peripeteia), recognition, and suffering.

Astonishment refers to a tragedy's ability to inspire 'fear and pity.' Both fear and pity are elicited from an audience when the events come by surprise, but *not* by chance. The surprise that drives the tragedy must feel like it is part of a grander design.

Reversal is the change by which the main action of the story comes full-circle -- for example, In Oedipus, the messenger who comes to free Oedipus from his fears of his mother produces the opposite effect with his news.

Recognition is the change from ignorance to knowledge, usually involving people coming to understand the identities of one another or discovering whether a person 'has done a thing or not.' The best forms of recognition are linked with a reversal (as in Oedipus) and, in tandem, will produce pity and fear from the audience.

Suffering is a destructive or painful action, which is often the result of a reversal or recognition. Aristotle points out that a 'simple' plot omits a reversal or recognition, but a 'complex plot has one or the other - or both, if it is truly transcendent. All tragedies, however, depend on suffering as part of its attempt to elicit pity and fear from the audience.

Finally, Aristotle points out the structural parts of a tragedy (or 'quantitative' parts, as he calls them). These are the prologue, episode, exode, and choric song.

The prologue is the part of the tragedy which precedes the first undivided utterance of the chorus. The episode is the part of the tragedy between choral songs, and the exode is the first part of a tragedy with no choric song after it.

Chapters 13-16

Aristotle next addresses what elements comprise the 'best' tragic plots. First, a perfect tragedy should have a complex plan - thus using reversal and recognition to imitate actions which elicit

fear or pity in the audience. And yet, a good tragedy does not simply present the spectacle of a virtuous man suffering adversity, for that is merely 'shocking' and does not make us empathize with the hero.

If pity is aroused by 'unmerited misfortune,' and fear by 'the misfortune of a man like ourselves,' then a good tragedy presents a character whose downfall comes because of a flaw in him - 'an error or frailty.' Though he is renowned, prosperous, even seeming virtuous, there is a chink in his armor that will inevitably be found - and will be the source of his demise.

Fear and pity truly can only be elicited through this tragic flaw in the hero which in turn is motivated by the 'unity' or spine of the entire piece. Some poets, says Aristotle, use spectacle to motivate fear and pity, but this ultimately does not resonate for long, since spectacle produces a different type of 'pleasure' than the one requisite for tragedy. Only pity and fear can produce true 'purgation' or emotions, rather than a spectacle of false catharsis.

Aristotle next summarizes the circumstances that make for good tragedy. First, it must involve incidents between people who are 'dear to one another' - i.e. a son killing a mother, a brother killing a brother, etc. There are all kinds of permutations of such an incident:

- a. the act can be done consciously and with knowledge of the people involved (i.e. Medea slaying her children)
- b. the act can be done ignorantly, and the tie of family or friendship discovered afterwards (i.e. Oedipus)
- c. the act is not done, because the hero can't go through with it
- d. the act is about to be done, but then the discovery reveals the true identities of the characters, and the deed is stopped before it does irreparable harm.

Aristotle points out that case c) is the least dramatic (though it works in *Antigone*), and that d) is likely the most effective.

When it comes to character, a poet should aim for four things. First, the hero must be 'good,' and thus manifest moral purpose in his speech. Second, the hero must have propriety, or 'manly valor.' Thirdly, the hero must be 'true to life.' And finally, the hero must be consistent.

The concept of 'true to life' is addressed further, and Aristotle points out that a well-drawn character acts out of 'probability and necessity,' not because of some arbitrary traits bestowed upon him by the author. Moreover, the unraveling of the plot comes from the actions of the plot itself - the inner logic of the chain of events, rather than the character himself. Indeed, a well-drawn character is simply in service of the plot.

Aristotle next lists the types of recognition available to a poet. First, there is recognition by signs - bodily marks, external ornaments like jewelry, or some other marking that delineates the secret identity of a person. Aristotle calls this type of recognition the 'least artistic type.'

Second, there is recognition 'invented by will,' or the sudden revelation of an identity without forewarning or necessity. This too, says Aristotle, is a type of device 'wanting in art.'

A third type is recognition from memory, where a character sees an object and it 'awakens a feeling,' and recognition from 'reasoning' provides a fourth type, where the character determines

a secret identity through a process of deduction. Fifth is recognition involving 'false interference,' where a messenger or outside character facilitates the revelation.

But the sixth and best type of recognition is one that 'arises from the incidents themselves' and the discovery is made naturally in the course of the plot. Again, Aristotle points to *Oedipus Rex* as the model, since nothing in the construction of the revelation is artificial. It is simply a process of the plot's unravelling from the center, an essential core of the drama's unity.

Chapters 17-20

Aristotle points out that visualizing the action is crucial for a poet in order to avoid gaps in logic or inconsistencies. Rather than see the action in his head, Aristotle says the poet must work out the action 'before his eyes.'

Aristotle also suggests that a poet construct a general outline and then fill in episodes and detail. Thus, a poet can work out a play's essence, and then focus on the episodes that will support this essence and in effect, create 'unity.'

Every tragedy contains two parts - complication and unraveling (denouement). The complication refers to everything from the beginning of the action to the turning point, or climax where bad fortune turns to good, or good fortune turns to bad. The unraveling, or denouement, extends from the climax to the end, and tracks the final transformation of a hero to good or bad fortune.

Aristotle presents four kinds of tragedy:

- a) complex - depending entirely on reversal and recognition at the climax
- b) pathetic - motivated by passion
- c) ethical - motivated by moral purpose
- d) simple - without reversal or recognition

Aristotle concludes his discussion of reversal and recognition by suggesting that a tragedy should not assume an epic structure - involving many plots. One plot that creates unity of action is all that is required for tragic catharsis.

Aristotle moves on to diction next, or the expression of thought through speech. Speech can be divided into a) proof and refutation, b) excitation of feelings (pity, fear, and anger), or c) the suggestion of importance. Indeed, action can be divided similarly - but the difference between action and speech is that action can stand alone without exposition, while speech depends on the effect of the speech in order to gain a result. The speech, in itself, is an action.

Chapters 21-24

Aristotle classifies Greek words in an esoteric discussion of 'simple' and 'compound' terms, and the reader can sift through a majority of this analysis and focus instead on his definition of a few key literary terms.

First is 'metaphor,' or the use of 'transference' to link two unlike things. 'Life's setting sun,' for instance, does not hedge or qualify its comparison with 'like' or 'as' (that would be a simile), or

create primacy around one term (as in an analogy). Instead, a metaphor simply links two objects with the understanding that the reader will find the unity of concept that connects them.

Aristotle points out that the best poetry uses only 'current and proper words,' meaning the contemporary lexicon. When an author resorts to 'lofty' or esoteric language, he alienates the reader. Indeed, a metaphor, says Aristotle, only truly works when it uses ordinary words; if one were to use 'strange' or 'raised' words for a metaphor or other literary device, it simply collapses into jargon.

And yet, Aristotle also permits the good poet to lengthen, contract, and alter words to fit his purpose. By playing with ordinary words, the poet creates 'distinct' language, but at the same time ensures that the reader will maintain clarity. By playing with accepted or ordinary words, the poet can engage the reader at the highest level. (One can think of Shakespeare here, and the way he so often uses recognizable words in extraordinary ways to achieve his rhythms and images.)

Aristotle next proceeds to a discussion of the epic form - which employs a single meter, a dramatic plot, unity, and all the other features of a tragedy. (As mentioned before, a proper epic maintains all the elements of a tragedy, since tragedy evolved from the epic form.) An epic does not portray a single action, but rather a single 'period,' thus often charting the course of many characters over the course of many events.

Epic poetry falls into the same categories as tragedy: simple, complex, ethical or pathetic. Also like tragedy, it requires reversals, recognitions, scenes of suffering, and artistic thought and diction. There are a few differences between tragedy and epic, however.

First, an epic poem, however, will not use song or spectacle to achieve its cathartic effect. Second, epics often cannot be presented at a single sitting, whereas tragedies are usually capable of being brought within a single view. Epic poetry, after all, is not confined to the stage - and thus, many events and characters can be presented simultaneously because of its narrative form. Finally, the 'heroic measure' of epic poetry is hexameter, where tragedy often uses other forms of meter to achieve the rhythms of different characters' speech.

Aristotle points out that the poet should take as little part as possible in the actual story of an epic - meaning limited first-person narration, and no personal appearances in scenes if possible. At the same time, 'wonderment,' created by absurdity or irrational events for the purposes of indulging the reader's pleasure, is allowed in an epic poem - even more so than in a tragedy. An absurd event or moment can pass more unnoticed in an epic poem, simply because it is not being dramatized onstage.

That said, Aristotle notes that a tragic plot cannot have 'irrational parts.' There must be likelihood, no matter how seemingly impossible the circumstances - as long as we trust that given the initial incident, the plot follows logically and probably, then the poet is in the realm of good drama. But if we believe neither the inciting incident, nor the chain of events that follows, the poem is simply absurd, and thus summarily dismissed.

Chapters 25-26

Aristotle next tackles 'critical difficulties' that a poet may face and the solutions that will ensure his success. He names three major 'solutions' for poets in attempting to imitate action and life:

- a. The poet must imitate either things as they are, things as they are thought to be, or things as they ought to be
- b. The poet must imitate in action and language; the latter must be current terms, or metaphors (and occasionally rare words)
- c. Errors come when the poet imitates incorrectly - and thus destroys the essence of the poem - or when the poet accidentally makes an error (a factual error, for instance), which does not ultimately sabotage the entire work. The only error that matters is one that touches the essential of the given work - for instance, 'not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically.'

Critics often argue with a poet's work if it is seen as either impossible, irrational, morally hurtful, contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness. Aristotle refutes all of these judgments by saying simply that it is the purpose - the essence - of the work that matters, and its goal in imitating reality as it is, as it is thought to be, or as it ought to be.

Aristotle concludes by tackling the question of whether the epic or tragic form is 'the higher.' Most critics of his time argued that tragedy was for an inferior audience that required the gesture of performers, while epic poetry was for a 'cultivated audience' which could filter a narrative form through their own imagined characters.

Aristotle replies with the following:

- a. Epic recitation can be marred with overdone gesticulation in the same way as a tragedy; there is no guarantee that the epic form is not one motivated by the oral gestures of the ones who recite it for audiences
- b. Tragedy, like poetry, produces its effect without action - its power is in the mere reading; enacting it onstage should give the exact same effect as reading a good epic loud
- c. The tragedy is, in fact, superior, because it has all the epic elements as well as spectacle and music to provide an indulgent pleasure for the audience. Moreover, it maintains a vividness of impression in reading as well as staging.

Tragedy, then, despite the argument of critics is the higher art. And with this quite controversial conclusion Aristotle ends his work.

