

1.Plato & Aristotle



Plato & Aristotle

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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 critical enquiry had begun almost in the 4th century B.C. in Greece. 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*. In *The Ion*, he advocated poetry as a genuine piece of imaginative literature, but in *The Republic* which is a treatise on his concepts of Ideal State, he rejected poetry on moral and philosophical grounds. 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. On the other hand, Aristotle – the most distinguished disciple of Plato – was a critic, scholar, logician and practical philosopher. The master was an inspired genius every way greater than the disciple except in logic, analysis and commonsense. He is known for his critical treatises: (i) *The Poetics* and (ii) *The Rhetoric*, dealing with art of poetry and art of speaking, respectively. Aristotle examines poetry as a form of art and evaluates its constituent elements on the basis of its aesthetic beauty. For the centuries, Aristotle had been considered as a law-giver in the field of criticism in Europe. Aristotle actually observed the then available forms of literature and analyzed them and codified the rules. In his work he has described the characteristics of Tragedy, Comedy and Epic in elaborative manner. But unfortunately, the library of Athens was burnt down in which the most part of his treatise was lost whatever is available at present is considered as *The Poetics*. Fortunately we find a detailed note on Tragedy, which throws light also on the fundamental elements of good literature.

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you are expected to learn about:

- Understand what Literature is and What Criticism is
- Understand the relevance of Classical Criticism
- Plato's theory of Mimesis and his objection to Poetry
- Aristotle's Defence of Poetry and his Concept of Tragedy
- Aristotle's definition and explanation of Tragedy
- Six Formative Elements in Tragedy
- Aristotle's explanation of Plot, Character and Tragic Hero
- The Function of Tragedy

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) -1

Notes: (I) Workout the questions as instructed.

(ii) Compare your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

(iii) ***To work on the SAQs through Moodle LMS and get instant feedback and score [click here](#). Please note that you need to create a NEW ACCOUNT (only first time), and then only you will be able to work.***

(1) Fill in the blanks:

(i) All that is literature seeks to communicate power, all that is not literature seeks to communicate knowledge” – Who said this?

- (a) Aristotle
- (b) Thomas De Quincy
- (c) F.R. Leavis

(ii) Plato was a disciple of _____.

- (a) Aristophanes
- (b) Aristotle
- (c) Socrates

(iii) Plato enquired poetry on _____ and _____ grounds.

- (a) Moral and Philosophical
- (b) Art and Morality
- (c) Political and Moral

(iv) **According to Plato, Poetry is _____ in nature.**

- (a) Moral
- (b) Mimetic
- (c) Artificial

(v) **Aristotle wrote _____**

- (a) The Poetics
- (b) The Ion
- (c) The Republic

(vi) **Aristotle examines poetry as _____ form.**

- (a) A moral treatise
- (b) An art
- (c) A Philosophical Treatise.

1.2 The Relevance of Classical Criticism

Study of Classical Criticism gives insight to a student into the critical way of thinking. By studying Classical Criticism students get sense and understanding about how the literary theories increase his/her capacities to think critically without the bias or prejudice or preconceived notions. The student also has a chance to study different points of view in the context of different genres of literature. Furthermore, s/he can develop critical sight and insight not only to judge the literature but also to evaluate any good piece of literature of the present time. The Greek and Roman critics belong to the classical school of criticism which is still relevant today. The basic concepts they have given us to study literature with are still important and supply us with the basic ideas whereby to examine the literary text. When we study Plato's theory of Mimesis we come to know that literature is an imitation of nature. Further in Aristotle when we study his definition of tragedy, we come to appraise that this imitation is nothing but the imitation of an action. Since Aristotle, in Europe tragedy has never been a drama of despair, causeless death or chance disaster. The drama that only paints horrors and leaves souls shattered and mind un-reconciled with the world may be described as a gruesome, ghastly play, but not a healthy tragedy, for tragedy is a play in which disaster or downfall has causes which could carefully be avoided and sorrow in it does not upset the balance in favour of pessimism. That is why, in spite of seriousness, even heart-rending scenes of sorrow, tragedy embodies the vision of beauty. It stirs noble thoughts and serves tragic delight but does not condemn us to despair. If the healthy notion of tragedy has been

maintained throughout the literary history of Europe, the ultimate credit, perhaps, goes back to Aristotle who had propounded it in his theory of Catharsis.

Catharsis established tragedy as a drama of balance. Sorrow alone would be ugly and repulsive. Beauty, pure would be imaginative and mystical. These together constitute what may be called tragic beauty. Pity alone would be sentimentality. Fear alone would make us cowards. But pity and fear, sympathy and terror together constitute the tragic feeling which is most delightful though, it is tearfully delightful. Such tragic beauty and tragic feeling which it evokes, constitutes the aesthetics of balance as propounded for the first time by Aristotle in his theory of Catharsis. Therefore, we feel, the reverence which Aristotle has enjoyed through ages, has not gone to him undeserved. His insight has rightly earned it.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) -1

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(1) Fill in the blanks:

(i) **The Greek critics belong to _____**

- (a) Classical Criticism
- (b) Romantic Criticism
- (c) Modern Criticism

(ii) **Aristotle was a disciple of a _____**

- (a) Plato
- (b) Socrates
- (c) Euripedis

(iii) **Tragedy serves _____.**

- (a) Tragic Flaw
- (b) Tragic Delight
- (c) Tragic Temper

(iv) **Tragedy is a drama of _____.**

- (a) Balance

- (b) Imbalance
- (c) Resemblance

1.3. Plato's Theory of Mimesis and Aristotle's Defense

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 the 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 out of wood and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, 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 the ideas whereas poetry deals with illusion – things which are twice removed from reality. So to Plato, philosophy is superior to poetry. Plato rejected poetry as it is mimetic in nature on the moral and philosophical grounds. On the contrary, Aristotle advocated poetry as it is mimetic in nature. According to him, poetry is an imitation of an action and his tool of enquiry is neither philosophical nor moral. He examines poetry as a piece of art and not as a book of preaching or teaching.

1.3.1 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.

1. 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, idealizes 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.

2. 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."**

3. 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.

1.3.2 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 byproduct 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.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) -2

Notes: (I) Workout the questions as instructed.

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1) Choose the right option:

(i)Plato wrote his treatise in the form of:

- a. Dialogues
- b. Paragraphs
- c. Poetry
- d. Story telling

(ii)On which three grounds did Plato object to poetry?

- a. Educational, philosophical and moral
- b. Sexual, moral and philosophical
- c. Educational, obscene and sexual

2)Fill in the blanks:

(i) According to Plato, poets are breeders of _____ and poetry is _____ of lies.

- a. Falsehood and mother
- b. Truth and mother
- c. Falsehood and sister

3) Say whether the following statement is true or false:

(ii) According to Plato, poetry is superior to philosophy.

- (a) True
- (b) False
- (c) Cannot say

3) Choose the right option:

(i) Aristotle's well-known treatises are:

- (a) Dialogues
- (b) Poetics and Rhetoric
- (c) Poetry and Drama
- (d) Tragedy and Epic

(ii) Who thus 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."

- (a) Bywater
- (b) Scott-James
- (c) David Daiches
- (d) S.H. Butcher

4) Fill in the blanks:

(i) Plato confused the study of _____ with the study of _____.

- (a) Falsehood and Mother
- (b) Aesthetics and Psychology
- (c) Morals and Aesthetics

5) Say whether the following statement is true or false:

(i) Aristotle did not agree with Plato in calling the poet an imitator and creative art, imitation.

- (a) True
- (b) False
- (c) Cannot say.

To check you answers, click [Literary_Criticism_Page_2](#).

1.4 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. "Even if a theory of medicine or physical philosophy be put forth in a metrical form, it is usual to describe the writer in this way; Homer and Empedocles, however, have really nothing in common apart from their metre; so that, if one is to be called a poet, the other should be termed a physicist rather than a poet." 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.

OBJECT: Which object of life is imitated determines the form of literature. If the life of great people is imitated 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.”

1.4.1 The Definition of Tragedy

“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)

Explanation of the definition: The definition is compact. Every word of it is pregnant with meaning. Each word of the above definition can be elaborated into a separate essay. 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 all human activities including deeds, thoughts and feelings. Therefore, we find soliloquies, choruses etc. in tragedy. 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. The tragic section presented on the stage in a drama should be complete or self contained with a proper beginning, proper middle and proper 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 follows the middle. In their turn the events from the middle lead to the end. Thus the story becomes a compact & self sufficient one. It must not leave the impression that even after the end the action is still to be continued, or that before the action starts certain things remain to be known. Tragedy must have close-knit unity with nothing that is superfluous or unnecessary. Every episode, every character and a dialogue in the play must carry step by step the action that is set into motion to its logical dénouement. It must give the impression of wholeness at the end. The play must have, then, a definite magnitude, a proper size or a reasonable length such as the mind may comprehend fully. That is to say that it must have only necessary duration, it should neither be too long to tire our patience nor be too short to make effective representation impossible. Besides, a drama continuing for hours – indefinitely may fail to keep the various parts of it together into unity and wholeness in the spectator’s mind. The reasonable duration enables the spectator to view the drama as a whole, to remember its various episodes and to maintain interest. The language employed here should be duly embellished and beautified with various artistic ornaments (rhythm, harmony, song) and figures of speech. The language of our daily affairs is not useful here because tragedy has to present a heightened picture of life’s serious side, and that is possible only if elevated

language of poetry is used. According to need, the writer makes use of songs, poetry, poetic dialogue; simple conversation etc is various parts of the play. Its manner of imitation should be action, not narration as in epic, for it is meant to be a dramatic representation on the stage and not a mere story-telling. Then, for the function/aim of tragedy is to shake up in the soul the impulses of pity and fear, to achieve what he calls Catharsis. The emotions of pity and fear find a full and free outlet in tragedy. Their excess is purged and we are lifted out of our selves and emerges nobler than before.

1.4.2 Six Formative Elements of Tragedy

After discussing the definition of tragedy, Aristotle explores various important parts of tragedy. He asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six constituent parts. They are: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song and Spectacle. The Plot is the most important part of a tragedy. The plot means 'the arrangement of the incidents'. Normally the plot is divided into five acts, and each Act is further divided into several scenes. The dramatist's main skill lies in dividing the plot into Acts and Scenes in such a way that they may produce the maximum scenic effect in a natural development. Characters are men and women who act. The hero and the heroine are two important figures among the characters. Thought means what the characters think or feel during their career in the development of the plot. The thought is expressed through their speeches and dialogues. Diction is the medium of language or expression through which the characters reveal their thoughts and feelings. The diction should be 'embellished with each kind of artistic element'. The song is one of these embellishments. The decoration of the stage is the major part of the spectacle. The Spectacle is theatrical effect presented on the stage. But spectacle also includes scenes of physical torture, loud lamentations, dances, colourful garments of the main characters, and the beggarly or jocular appearance of the subordinate characters or of the fool on the stage. These are the six constituent parts of tragedy.

1.4.3 Plot and Character

Aristotle argues that, among the six formative elements, the plot is the most important element. He writes in *The Poetics*. 'The plot is the underlying principle of tragedy'. By plot Aristotle means the arrangement of incidents. Incidents mean action, and tragedy is an imitation of actions, both internal and external. That is to say that it also imitates the mental processes of the dramatic personae. In answering a question once he said that a tragedy could be written without a character but not without a plot. Though his overstatement on plot, he accepts that without action there cannot be a tragedy. The plot contains a beginning, a middle and an end, where the beginning is what is "not

posterior to another thing,” while the middle needs to have something happened before, and something to happen after it, but after the end “there is nothing else.” The characters serve to advance the action of the story, not vice versa. The ends we pursue in life, our happiness and our misery, all take the form of action. Tragedy is written not merely to imitate man but to imitate man in action. That is, according to Aristotle, happiness consists in a certain kind of activity rather than in a certain quality of character. As David Daiches says: ‘the way in which the action works itself out, the whole casual chain which leads to the final outcome.’ Diction and Thought are also less significant than plot: a series of well-written speeches has nothing like the force of a well-structured tragedy. Lastly, Aristotle notes that forming a solid plot is far more difficult than creating good characters or diction. Having asserted that the plot is the most important of the six parts of tragedy, he ranks the remainder as follows, from most important to least: Character, Thought, Diction, Melody, and Spectacle. Character reveals the individual motivations of the characters in the play, what they want or don't want, and how they react to certain situations, and this is more important to Aristotle than thought, which deals on a more universal level with reasoning and general truths. Diction, Melody/ Songs and Spectacle are all pleasurable accessories, but the melody is more important in tragedy than spectacle.

1.4.4 The Tragic Hero

The ideal tragic hero, according to Aristotle, should be, in the first place, a man of eminence. The actions of an eminent man would be ‘serious, complete and of a certain magnitude’, as required by Aristotle. Further, the hero should not only be eminent but also basically a good man, though not absolutely virtuous. The sufferings, fall and death of an absolutely virtuous man would generate feelings of disgust rather than those of ‘terror and compassion’ which a tragic play must produce. The hero should neither be a villain nor a wicked person for his fall, otherwise his death would please and satisfy our moral sense without generating the feelings of pity, compassion and fear. Therefore, the ideal tragic hero should be basically a good man with a minor flaw or tragic trait in his character. The entire tragedy should issue from this minor flaw or error of judgment. The fall and sufferings and death of such a hero would certainly generate feelings of pity and fear. So, Aristotle says: “For our pity is excited by misfortunes undeservedly suffered, and our terror by some resemblance between the sufferer and ourselves.” Finally, Aristotle says: “There remains for our choice a person neither eminently virtuous nor just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error or human frailty; and this person should also be someone of high-fame and flourishing prosperity.” Such a man would make an ideal tragic hero.

The characteristics of Tragic Hero According to Aristotle, in a good tragedy, character supports plot. The personal motivation / actions of the characters are intricately involved with the action to such an extent that it leads to arouse pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist / tragic hero of the play should have all the characteristics of a good character. By good character, Aristotle means that they should be:

- (i) True to the self
- (ii) True to type
- (iii) True to life
- (iv) Probable and yet more beautiful than life.

The tragic hero having all the characteristics mentioned above, has, in addition, a few more attributes. In this context Aristotle begins by the following observation,

1. A good man – coming to bad end. (Its shocking and disturbs faith)
2. A bad man – coming to good end. (neither moving, nor moral)
3. A bad man – coming to bad end. (moral, but not moving)
4. A rather good man – coming to bad end. (an ideal situation)

Aristotle disqualifies two types of characters – purely virtuous and thoroughly bad. There remains but one kind of character, who can best satisfy this requirement – ‘A man who is not eminently good and just yet whose misfortune is not brought by vice or depravity but by some error of frailty’. Thus the ideal Tragic Hero must be an intermediate kind of a person- neither too virtuous nor too wicked. His misfortune excites pity because it is out of all proportion to his error of judgement, and his over all goodness excites fear for his doom. Thus, he is a man with the following attributes: He should be a man of mixed character, neither blameless nor absolutely depraved. His misfortune should follow from some error or flaw of character; short of moral taint. He must fall from height of prosperity and glory. The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so that his change of fortune can be from good to bad. The fall of such a man of eminence affects entire state/nation. This change occurs not as the result of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character. Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience. The ideal tragic hero should be an intermediate kind of a person, a man not preeminently virtuous and just yet whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgement. Let us discuss this error of judgement in following point.

The meaning of Hamartia? Hamartia (‘fatal flaw’ or ‘tragic flaw’) may consist of a moral flaw, or it may simply be a technical error/ error of judgement, or, ignorance, or even, at times, an arrogance (called hubris in Greek). It is owing to this flaw that the protagonist comes into conflict with Fate and ultimately meets his/her doom through the workings of Fate (called Dike in Greek) called Nemesis.