

Poetics Study Guide

Poetics by Aristotle

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Plot Summary

The Poetics purports to be systematic analysis of the various types of poetry. In fact, however, the majority of the work is dedicated to studying tragic poetry, the highest form, and briefly discusses epic poetry. The analysis begins by distinguishing poetry from other forms of art: Unlike music, poetry uses only language; unlike prose, poetry uses text in rhythm. With poetry defined, it is necessary to know its purpose. Poetry is naturally attractive to men because it resonates with human nature; above all, poetry is a reflection on human action, and therefore is useful in learning, which is man's chief and highest instinct. Since poetry is spawned of human nature, it is not surprising that the various types of poetry spring from different types of humans. Comedies, for example, come from the souls of men who are less inspired and learned; tragedy, on the other hand, comes from men with noble souls who truly contemplate human existence.

There are very specific conventions that must be followed in the construction of a tragic poetry, and many of these recommendations apply to any narrative poem. The poem, for example, must have a well-constructed beginning, middle, and end, each fulfilling its proper role. Moreover, there must be a unity to the plot, such that a single action (however complex and convoluted) is depicted and the poet must make sure to leave nothing out which is essential to understanding that action nor include anything which is superfluous. Further, in the case of tragic poetry, the author must be sure to pick an action which inspires the emotions of either fear or pity, and the action depicted must be one which is intrinsically worthy of being in a poem. If a trivial, meaningless action is depicted, the poem, too, will lack substance. Further, while many tragedies are performed for audiences, and as such can take advantage of special effects on stage to impress those watching, a truly well-crafted poem will have no need for such things: The full effect of the poem should be able to be gleaned from merely reading it. Often, bad poets will mask their inferior product with garish productions on stage. Now the plot of any tragedy consists chiefly of two parts: the complication and the unraveling. In other words, in any tragedy a problematic situation is first created or depicted and then some resolution (whether good or bad) is achieved. In addition to ending well or poorly, the unraveling can also involve ignorance on the part of one of the characters—for example, a character may be about to kill a person without knowing that it is really their son—which is dispelled before the action takes place. Such an ending is the best kind of ending to a tragedy.

Unlike tragic poetry, epic poetry takes place on a very large scale and generally tells stories of much greater magnitude. While a tragic poem may focus on some political struggle within some wealthy family, an epic poem might give an account of an entire war (or at least certain parts of it). Nonetheless, many of the same restraints which apply to tragedy apply equally to epic poetry. For example, epic poetry, its large scale notwithstanding, still should focus only on a single action. Finally, any discussion of poetry should conclude with an evaluation of the different kinds of poetry. It would be easy to think that tragic poetry is lower than epic poetry, since tragic poetry is often performed for crude and uneducated audiences, but, this is not intrinsic to tragic poetry.



Indeed, as was already stated, tragic poetry ought to be able to stand on its own as text and a performance should not, strictly, be necessary to appreciate it. Moreover, tragic poetry can treat of the same subjects—or, at least, of subjects with the same substance—as epic poetry and, since it does the same thing much more briefly, ought to be considered the higher art.



Section I

Section I Summary and Analysis

Like any art, poetry is a kind of imitation. Arts are differentiated from one another in three ways: medium (the manner in which the art is produced), the objects (what the art imitates), and the manner of imitation. The medium specific to poetry is one which uses language alone, like prose, but, unlike prose, it uses rhythm in the form of a meter. The object which poetry portrays is men in action and, therefore, poets may differ in how they represent these men—some represent them worse than they are, some better, and some attempt to represent them how they actually are. Further, the method of imitation differs: Some poets may present the poem in the voice of one of the characters or simply straightforwardly describe the events as they happen, as if the reader were experiencing them himself.

Men are drawn to write poetry for several reasons inherent in human nature. First, man is naturally attracted to imitation since it is through imitation that he most easily learns, as is the case with children who learn everything initially through imitating their parents and others around them. Thus, man, whose greatest pleasure is in learning, finds poetry very attractive. Second, there is a natural attraction to rhythm and harmony, both of which are present in well-written poetry. The different types of poetry emerged from the personalities of different types of men. Grave, serious types gave birth to tragic poetry while more light-hearted personalities produced what would evolve into comedy and satire.

Comedy is a type of poetry which imitates the "lower" types of men—those who are defective in some way, but not altogether evil or malicious towards others. Tragedy is a type of poetry which focuses on serious and important actions. Plot is the most essential element of tragedy; it is the sole element without which a tragedy could not exist. The development of character, though important, is secondary to the development of plot.

The plot of a well-written tragedy ought to be structured in such a way that its beginning and end are logical: The beginning starts at a point where the narrative has no dependence upon events that happened prior to it; likewise, the end should end in such a way that there is no need to know what happens afterward. Further, the actions described in the plot should neither be so minute as to be trivial and uninteresting nor be so large that the reader cannot grasp the significance of the whole. The plot should also be unified in such a way that each part of it should be necessary to the whole, such that nothing could be added or removed without disrupting the whole. It should be noted, however, that the unity of plot is not equivalent to the unity of a character's actions, even though the plot is often closely related to the character's actions. For example, in the *Odyssey*, the subject is not all of Odysseus's actions—he does not attempt to show that everything that Odysseus does is part of an entire unified arc—but rather Homer excludes many things that Odysseus does on his voyage home because they do not relate well to the overall plot that is being constructed.



From this, it follows that a particularly poor type of story is one which is known as "episodic." In an episodic plot, the individual episodes of the story bear little or no relation to one another. They are simply isolated stories which, at most, involve the same characters. This form of storytelling is favored by poor poets who are incapable of constructing unified plots. However, good poets also sometimes write these kinds of stories, but simply just to showcase their skills in contests, which often force them to extend their stories to be longer than they normally would be.

Poetry differs from history in that history depicts what has happened while poetry depicts what happens according to the "laws of probability and necessity"—that is, the poet implies his understanding of how the world works, his notion of justice, and the role of the gods, to portray what events could possibly happen in the world. As such, the poetic work is a philosophical undertaking, and, therefore, is a higher pursuit than history, which is concerned simply with facts.

Tragedy is not only concerned with the depiction of just any action, but of actions which inspire pity in the reader or audience. These effects are best achieved when they occur in some surprising fashion, but it also important that the surprise be not entirely unrelated to the plot as it has occurred so far. Rather, the surprise should come about in some way which is consistent with the principles of probability and necessity which are the foundation of good poetry-writing.

Actions can be divided into two types: simple and complex. Simple actions are those which occur without "Recognition" or "Reversal of Situation." Complex actions, on the other hand, are those which involve one or both of the above. Recognition is essentially a change from ignorance to knowledge, and in poetry, the recognition is almost always between two characters. For example, one character may realize that another character is of a lower moral character than he once thought (due to some action or discovering his past history). Reversal of Situation occurs when an action, which is aiming to accomplish a certain goal, actually accomplishes the opposite goal. For example, if a character is attempting to save his friend by cutting him free from the ropes that are binding his hands, but accidentally cuts his wrists and kills him, this would be a straightforward instance of reversal of fortune. By employing one or both of these methods, the poet can turn a simple plot into a more complex one, assuming, as always, that these devices are used appropriately and keep the plot unified.



Section II

Section II Summary and Analysis

The goal of tragedy is to construct a plot which successfully inspires either fear or pity in the spectator or reader. As such, the actions depicted in the plot ought to be appropriately chosen. An evil man who is suddenly thrust into misfortune satisfies the moral sense of the audience but it does not inspire pity, since the man will be perceived as receiving what he deserved. Further, the effect of a sad plot will be magnified if the misfortune is greater. Thus, the greatest poets always choose characters who belong to wealthy and prominent families; a fall from such a great height will impress the spectator. Finally, though the poet must not choose a character who is altogether evil, nor can the main character be one who is totally without fault, since then his fall would not be due to his own fault, but rather simply to poor fortune. Rather, the main character ought to be weak in some way, and this weakness ought to be the cause of his misfortune. Some poets, more concerned with pleasing their audience than with creating worthwhile art, attempt to create tragedies which result in no one remaining in misfortune; rather, all wind up unharmed and ultimately happy. However, these kinds of poems are more accurately characterized as comedy rather than legitimate tragedy.

While some tragedies may use impressive visual effects when performed on stage to impress their spectators, the superior tragedy will not require such spectacles; rather, the poet will move the emotions of his audience through the interior workings of his plot. In order for a plot to be truly effective in achieving these emotional responses, the actions portrayed in it must be of a certain character. First, the poet must pick characters whose relationships to one another make the actions of the plot interesting. No audience would be moved to pity to see two evil men fight and kill one another. However, the most tragic event would be a member of a family killing another, and as such these situations occur frequently in tragedy.

Further, an action can either be done or not done; further, the action may be either done knowingly or unknowingly. The least impressive type of action—and the least effective poetically—is the action which is failed to be performed by a person who is aware of the circumstances. An example of this might be a mother who is about to kill her son—and she is aware that it is her son—but does not carry the action out. This is a poor development in the plot because it manages to be shocking without actually committing itself to any real disaster and, as such, is like the plays which attempt to please the audience rather than craft a worthwhile piece of poetry. On the other end, the most successful kind of action would be that which is not done, but only after a discovery by the character. For example, if a man is about to kill his brother, thinking him to be his enemy, but discovers his true identity and therefore spares his life. For, in these cases, the audience is moved to fear that the action may happen, but the moral character of the character remains intact.



In depicting his main character, the poet should always accomplish four things: The character ought to be, first of all, good; second, the goodness of the character ought to be appropriate to his station in life—thus a woman or a slave cannot be good in the same way a man can be; third, the character represented must be realistically; finally, the character must be portrayed consistently.

The plot device of recognition can be divided into several kinds. First, the recognition can occur through some recognition of a sign. For example, some character might be known for having a certain scar or birthmark and thus another character, at first unsure of his identity, realizes who it is on that basis. These are used poorly if the sign's only function in the story is for recognition. Other recognitions occur simply by the will of the poet—for example, one character may reveal himself to another, for no reason obviously connected with the flow of the plot. Artistically, this is a serious flaw, since a requirement of a good plot is that it be unified, and in this case, there is no clear relationship between the action and the rest of the plot. Third, the recognition may occur through the awakening of some memory or latent emotion. Fourth, one of the characters may use reasoning to determine the true identity of another one of the characters. Finally, the recognition may occur through some means that is natural and consistent with the plot—these maintain the unity of plot and therefore are superior to any other kind of recognition.

When constructing the plot, the poet ought to outline the plot in totality before filling out the individual episodes and scenes of the story. If he proceeds in this way, he is much less likely to introduce inconsistencies and holes into it, which will be unpleasant to the audience. Likewise, he should make sure that the actors—if the story is to be performed—act with appropriate gestures to accurately demonstrate their emotions and thoughts as the story progresses, as many spectators will not be able to infer these simply from the dialog alone.

The plot of a tragedy can be divided into two parts: the complication and the unraveling. In the complication, a problem is created which the characters of the story must confront, or ought to confront. This is the beginning of the story and draws the reader in with the suspense of how the problem will be resolved—if it ever is. The complication leads to the unraveling—the conclusion of the story which shows how the problem is eventually solved, or not solved; the characters can either conquer the problem and the story ends happily, or the problem can conquer them and the story ends unhappily. It is important that any poet master both parts of writing: A well-crafted story will have a masterfully written complication and unraveling. Simply doing one well leaves a mediocre piece of art.

The poet should also be careful in picking the content for his poem. Some stories are more fit for epic poems—poems of considerably greater length and scope—than for tragedies, which should have a much more limited scale. Thus, for example, Homer's Iliad should not be attempted to be put in the format of a tragedy, since the many episodes and sub-stories within would simply not fit. This fact can be seen by observing the failure of poets who have attempted to put tales of epic proportion into the constraints of a tragic poem.



Finally the poet must be sensitive to the nature of language, since language is his medium. Language can be subdivided into several parts—for example, one might distinguish the different types of words as nouns and verbs, or even classify different sorts of sounds one can make. It is through the artful combination of these elements that the poet can create a rhythmic and pleasant-sounding poem which has a meter that is appropriate to the type of poem he is creating as well as to the subject-matter.



Section III

Section III Summary and Analysis

There are many different uses of words in writing. "Current" words are those which are commonly used by a certain group of people; everyday words which every member of the audience ought to understand. The opposite of this would be "strange" words—words which belong to some other culture or society.

The poet also uses words metaphorically, and this is done in many ways. For example, the poet may use a general word to mean a more specific one. One may say that a wagon is moving, and this is true, but it would be more accurate to say that the wagon is moving on its wheels, which are moving. However, the writer uses the more general term ("moving") to suggest the more specific one ("moving on rolling wheels"). Likewise, metaphor can be used in the opposite way, where a specific thing is used to suggest a more general one. For example, when Homer says that Odysseus accomplished "ten thousand deeds," it is not necessary to interpret this literally; rather, the reader is meant to infer that Odysseus simply accomplished a large number of deeds. In this way, the writer—Homer—is using a specific kind of large number (ten thousand) to suggest the more general notion of a large number.

Metaphors frequently rely upon analogy. In the abstract, an analogy exists when one set of things has the same relationship to one another as a second set of things has to each other. For example, one might find an analogy between the pen of a writer and the plow of a farmer—in both cases, the person uses the tool to make a living. Once this analogy has been identified, the poet can incorporate this into a metaphor—for example, by referring to the writer's pen as his plow.

As for writing style, the poet ought to strike a balance between writing in a way that is so clear that the poem becomes mundane and uninteresting and, on the other hand, writing in a way that is so filled with metaphor and obscure words that the audience will not be able to understand it. Well-written poetry should, above all, clearly express its meaning, and in order to do this effectively, it should employ metaphor and rich words; however, to insert metaphor or strange words gratuitously would be contrary to the general purpose of poetry, which is to express an idea.

The poet must always be sure to keep the plots for his stories simple: Many poets' downfall is that they attempt to put stories with many parts, or that involve very complex actions, and make it into a poem. However, as has been discussed, the plot of a poem should always be based upon a single, complete action. In writing a history, one necessarily writes of actions which are not unified and which do not come together into a single, tidy conclusion; for, in history, one is writing of events which actually happened, and they are generally not as organized as the story produced by a writer. However, many writers take history as their archetype and produce stories which are as disorganized and scattered as history is. Homer, however, gives a great example of how



one can take even an historical event and reduce and organize it into a simple and elegant story. He does this by omitting many parts of the story—for example, he does not attempt to trace the entire history of the fall of Troy in the Iliad—but rather focusing only on those relevant to his particular story arc.

While epic poetry is similar in many ways to tragic poetry, it is not confined by the limits of a stage and actors in the same way. Epic poetry is always written as a narrative and, as such, it has the freedom to depict several events happening in quite different places simultaneously. It is for this reason the scale of story told by epics can be much greater than what is allowed by the format of tragedy. Epic poetry ought to also follow the established conventions that poets have developed over the centuries. The "heroic" meter—hexameter—should always be used since it is the one most fit to handle grand metaphors and strange words.

The poet should also be careful to exclude anything irrational or inconsistent from his plot. Since poetry is supposed to be a reflection of the laws of the natural world, he should only depict those things which could actually happen in the real world. Thus, Homer, even when retelling stories that others have written, excludes as much as possible those elements which are irrational and nonsensical. In those situations in which irrationality cannot be avoided, the skilled poet will obscure their absurdity with "poetic charm"—the pleasantness of his words will make up for the inconsistencies in the story.

Poetry can have errors in two ways. First, the poet can err through lacking the artistic capacity to properly imitate his subject. For example, if a poet is attempting to depict a scene of love between a man and a woman, and he does not fully understand the notion of love, then he will necessarily fail to create good poetry. Moreover, since the essence of poetry is to depict such things, this kind of error can rightly be called an essential error. On the other hand, the poet may make errors in other ways, but of a less serious nature. For example, if a poet represents a horse as being larger than any horse actually would be, this error is not great, since it is only really incidental to the real purpose of the poem. These types of errors are still to be avoided, but are of a less serious nature.

Now, a poet may depict men and their actions inaccurately on purpose, and this can still be acceptable. For example, as has been discussed earlier, some poets attempt to depict men not as they are, but as they should be. Other poets attempt to depict men or events as others have described them, for example, when they re-tell a received legend or myth. In both cases, the deviation from reality is justified since there is good reason behind it.

Poetry can also suffer from inexact use of language. Often poets will use words with certain connotations that may confuse the reader into believing that something is said which really is not. However, while this fault does exist, critics should consider that perhaps the fault lies more in the reader at times than with the writer. For, the poet may be speaking metaphorically and the reader may not understand it or there may be several meanings for a given word and the reader is assuming one specific meaning.



When comparing two forms of art, the more refined is the higher form. That which depicts anything and everything is necessarily less refined, since refined arts will exclude unsuitable subject matter. Since tragic poetry is performed for an audience generally, it often is embellished with episodes and gestures to make it easily understood. Epic poetry, however, is addressed to a much more cultivated audience. Therefore, it would seem that epic poetry is the superior art form.

However, these objections only apply to the performance of tragic poetry, and not the poetry itself. Well-written tragedy will produce the same effect if it is read or watched on stage. Further, tragedy has many superior qualities to the epic; it is, for example, shorter, and that which is able to achieve the same effect in fewer words should be considered a finer form of art. Therefore, tragedy is the higher art, because it more effectively achieves the end of poetry. The end of poetry, as stated at the outset, is to imitate human action within the bounds of a sound understanding of the world and how events occur within it.



Characters

Homer

Homer is, according to Aristotle, the model poet which all other poets should try to emulate. He is frequently mentioned throughout the book and whenever his poetry is mentioned it is always given as an example of the correct way of writing poetry. Even when Homer seems to defy the guidelines given for writing good poetry, Aristotle finds a way to excuse or explain away these deviations. For example, Aristotle condemns "episodic" poems—poems which have a number of unrelated scenes—as contrary to the concept of unity which is essential to good poetry. However, Homer has a number of episodes in the *Odyssey* and yet Aristotle excuses this by saying that they somehow form the unity of a single action. Homer is a kind of Greek hero: He is the preeminent poet and even philosophy—which, as Aristotle explains, is deeply involved in the writing of poetry—defers to some extent to the thoughts expressed in his poems. It is also important to know that Homer is one of the oldest poets, as Aristotle mentions, and therefore is seen as a kind of founder of poetry.

Bad Poets

Aristotle frequently criticizes the writing of certain poets—not always naming them—who tailor their poetry more towards being accepted by the uneducated masses and, in so doing, forgo creating anything with true substance. One way in which a poet might do this is simply by creating a number of scenes which depict some impressive or thrilling action; beneath the superficial flair, however, there is little worth seeing. Moreover, some poets attempt to disguise the defective nature of their poetry by using various impressive effects when the poem is acted out on stage. Since tragedy is a much more common form of poetry, there is much more badly written tragedy than epic poetry, and often tragic poets attempt to divert attention from the poetry itself by having actors use exaggerated gestures to portray it. However, such criticism cannot be rightly directed at tragic poetry itself; rather, it is the fault of the the bad poets. It might seem that Aristotle thinks all poets, with the exception of Homer, are bad at their art, as he gives few examples of well-written poetry (again, outside of Homer's works), but this is probably more the result of the fact that Aristotle is more interested in teaching by giving examples of what not to do rather than an arrogant attitude that only he knows how to create good poetry, which would surely be a strange belief as he himself was not a poet.

Megarians

Megarians are one of the many Greek ethnicities and claimed to have invented the poetic genre of comedy, though this claim is contested by many other peoples.



Polygnotus

Polygnotus is a painter who is noted for depicting the character of his subjects well, and is the artistic counterpart to what a good poet ought to be.

Zeuxis

Unlike Polygnotus, Zeuxis' works of art are "devoid of ethical quality" (14) and is like the poet whose characters are one-dimensional and unrealistic.

Oedipus

Oedipus is a fictional character which appears in one of Sophocles' famous tragic poems. His story is a good example of how tragic plots ought to be constructed.

Sophocles

Sophocles is a famous Greek poet who wrote mainly tragedies, including Oedipus Rex.

Eucleides the Elder

Eucleides is a thinker who criticized poets for manipulating language and forcing it to fit within the rules of their poem.

Ariphrades

Ariphrades is a thinker who criticized the dialogue used in tragic poetry for using phrases which ordinary speakers would never use.

Callippides

Callippides is a tragic poet who is accused of trying to use wild gesticulations on stage to cover up the faults of his poetry.



Objects/Places

Poetry

Poetry is defined in opposition to other forms of art. Like music, poetry uses rhythm and melody; unlike music, however, poetry uses only language. Prose, which uses only language, differs from poetry in that it does not use rhythm or melody. It is also essential to poetry that it depicts a single human action.

Tragedy

Tragedy is a form of poetry which is characterized chiefly by the emotions it attempts to evoke from the audience: pity and fear. Additionally, a tragedy always takes place over a single day. Many tragic poems were performed on stage. This is the highest form of poetry.

Epic Poetry

Epic poetry is a form of poetry which is never performed but always concerns some subject of great magnitude, such as a war or a great hero. Epic poems are never performed on stage, as they are often very long.

Comedy

A comedy is a type of poem which tells some story, generally something light-hearted, which ends well for the characters involved. Comedy is the lowest type of poetry, due to the subject matter it depicts.

Meter

Meter is the rhythm of the poetry. Some meters are proper to certain types of poetry (such as "epic meter") while others denote the tone of a scene, that is, some rhythms are happy while others are grave.

Recognition

Recognition is a plot device in tragedy in which a character realizes some fact that he or she was previously ignorant of—for example, in the Oedipus, the title character realizes that the man he killed was his father.



Reversal of Fortune

Reversal of fortune is a plot device in tragedy in which a character is attempting to achieve some goal, but in so doing actually achieves the opposite. For example, a character might be trying to become wealthy, but in his pursuit of wealth, actually makes himself poor.

The Odyssey

The Odyssey is one of Homer's epic poems which depicts Odysseus's journey from the battle of Troy to his home.

The Iliad

The Iliad is one of Homer's epic poems. It depicts a certain story arc within the Trojan War. It should be noted, however, that though it treats of an historical event, the Iliad is not a history, since it focuses, rather, on one specific arc within the Trojan War, and does not attempt to describe it in general.

Human Nature

Human nature is the source of poetry. Man naturally wants to learn, and the chief way he learns is through contemplating. Poetry is, therefore, a great way to learn, since it depicts human action and by contemplating a poem, man contemplates human action.



Themes

The Supremacy of Homer

Throughout the Poetics, the work of Homer is held up as the example of ideal poetry which all other poets should strive to imitate. Homer was something of a national and cultural hero for the Greeks, and he was largely viewed as producing the greatest works of any Greek. It is only natural, then, that Aristotle would give so much weight to Homer's style of writing that it nearly suffices to give an example of how Homer did something in one of his poems to prove its artistic legitimacy. While most of the artistic guidelines in the Poetics are totally consistent with the Homeric poems, it is interesting to see how Aristotle attempts to reconcile apparent contradictions between his own theory of poetry with the poetry of Homer. With other poets, Aristotle readily condemns them when they deviate from the formula he lays down. However, it is almost as if he is treating a fatal objection to his theory when he recommends something which is at variance with the Odyssey or Iliad. For example, Aristotle condemns "episodic" poetry because it lacks the unity that is essential to a well-written poem. According to him, only a single action ought to be depicted, and therefore depicting a number of unrelated scenes in a poem totally violates this fundamental quality of a good poem. However, the Odyssey, and the Iliad to a lesser extent, depict a great number of episodes, whose relations to one another are at times questionable. Yet, without quite explaining how, Aristotle claims that all of the episodes depicted in the Odyssey cohere together, while those things which Odysseus did on his voyage home which are not depicted somehow fall outside of that unity. It would almost seem that Aristotle is trying desperately to squeeze the Homeric poems into his poetic theory.

The Supremacy of Tragedy

The final conclusion of the Poetics is that tragedy is the highest form of poetry. He argues for this in a few brief paragraphs, but it is evident throughout the work what his opinion is. For example, a solid half to two-thirds of the work is dedicated to describing the proper form of a tragic poem, a decision on Aristotle's part which would be difficult to understand if he did not think that tragedy was more deserving of discussion and consideration than all other forms of poetry. Epic poetry, which is the next highest form, receives only a few paragraphs worth of discussion in the final pages. Comedy, the lowest form, receives even less—little more than a mention—early in the work.

What Aristotle means exactly when he says that tragedy is the highest form of poetry is not immediately clear. However, it is likely that it refers, at least in part, to the nobility of the subject matter as well as the skill involved in the craft. Comedy is a low form of poetry because it treats of subjects which are mundane and lack substance. Epic poetry treats of the greatest subjects, but it fails because it lacks the elegance of tragic poetry, which can say the same thing as an epic poem, but in much fewer words.

Art as a Reflection of Human Nature

In the initial discussion of poetry in general, Aristotle makes the claim that poetry is attractive to man due to his very nature. All men—not only philosophers and great thinkers—desire to learn more than anything else. Poetry is an occasion to reflect upon human action and learn from it, almost as one might learn about a horse from studying pictures of one (in fact, Aristotle frequently employs the analogy between painting and poetry). However, unlike a horse, human action is one of the most important things for a man to understand and, therefore, poetry takes on a great significance. Not all human action is equal, though; the kind of action depicted in comedy, for example, is often trivial and meaningless. Truly great poetry—such as tragedy—depicts truly worthy actions, which touch not only on human actions of great significance, but display an adept understanding of how the world works and how events are related to one another.



Style

Perspective

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who wrote over three hundred years before the common era. While reading the Poetics it is important to understand that many of the conventions mentioned in it are very much specific to his time and place. For example, the distinctions between the various genres, at least as Aristotle gives them, are more or less irrelevant in a culture far removed from ancient Greece. It is also clear that Aristotle's poetic theory is largely influenced by the artistic conventions of his time; in fact, he goes so far as to say that the conventions which have evolved for tragedy and poetry are perfect. It is, therefore, necessary to understand his historical position when reading the Poetics.

Like most Greeks, Aristotle is greatly enamored with the works of Homer, and it is clear that the way in which the Homeric poems are composed largely influences the poetic theory which Aristotle puts forth. So great is his deference that even when his theory is clearly at variance with something in the Homeric poems, Aristotle takes great pains to reconcile them.

Tone

Aristotle's tone throughout the Poetics is objective, as he attempts to use both reason, history, and tradition to make a case for the poetic theory he is presenting. However, while he is objective, he is also highly critical of almost all of the poets that he mentions. In fact, the only poet discussed at any length which does not receive some criticism is Homer. This could come across to some as an arrogant approach, since Aristotle, who himself is not a poet, seems to judge all other poets and places himself in a position over and above all of them. However, this may be a misleading inference; Aristotle gives great deference to the artistic conventions of his time, going so far as to say that tragedy has been perfected over time. This arrogant appearance may simply be a result of the fact that Aristotle tends to mention only examples which are at variance with his theory, and generally does not give a great many examples of poetry which he thinks are good.

Structure

The Poetics is divided into three parts, however these divisions were not made by Aristotle, but by a later editor. It is not clear exactly how these divisions were made, since they do not really break at any convenient point in the text. For example, the break between parts two and three occurs in the middle of a discussion about poetic language. Therefore, not much significance ought to be given to this.



However, Aristotle clearly does have a definite structure in the *Poetics*. The work begins first of all with a definition of poetry, which is fitting since the first question asked when working with any subject is what that thing is. Next, Aristotle considers the source of poetry—that is, why people decide to write and read poetry. Then he talks about the various parts of a poem and how one, ideally, ought to be constructed. Much of his focus throughout the work is on tragedy, and this is fitting since he concludes that tragedy is the highest form of poetry. Near the end of the book, when he is nearly done, he briefly considers epic poetry, the second most noble form of poetry. The conclusion of the poem is evaluative: Which form of poetry is the highest? As mentioned, he ultimately concludes that tragedy is the best.

Quotes

"Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are." (10)

"Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated." (19)

"Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature. Next, there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm. Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special aptitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to Poetry." (20)

"Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action." (33)

"A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation." (44)

"Every tragedy falls into two parts- Complication and Unraveling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication; the rest is the Unraveling. By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The Unraveling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end." (56)

"The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean." (90)

"As to that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single meter, the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it." (96)

"Homer, admirable in all respects, has the special merit of being the only poet who rightly appreciates the part he should take himself." (104)



"Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded . . ." (111)

"If the more refined art is the higher, and the more refined in every case is that which appeals to the better sort of audience, the art which imitates anything and everything is manifestly most unrefined." (128)

"If, then, tragedy is superior to epic poetry in all these respects, and, moreover, fulfills its specific function better as an art- for each art ought to produce, not any chance pleasure, but the pleasure proper to it, as already stated- it plainly follows that tragedy is the higher art, as attaining its end more perfectly. " (131)



Topics for Discussion

What is the definition of poetry?

What distinguishes poetry from prose?

Is Aristotle's definition of poetry correct? Are there examples of writing which fit his definition but which, nonetheless, would not be considered poetry?

What are the components of a well-crafted plot according to Aristotle?

Many stories do not follow the specific guidelines given by Aristotle in this work. Are they flawed?

How much weight should be given to artistic conventions?

Do you agree that man naturally takes pleasure in imitation? If so, why?

What does it mean for one form of art to be higher than another?

Is Aristotle's argument that tragic poetry is higher than epic poetry sound?