

**Introduction to Literary Theory**  
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**Lecture – 04**  
**Literature & Mimesis: Aristotle (I)**

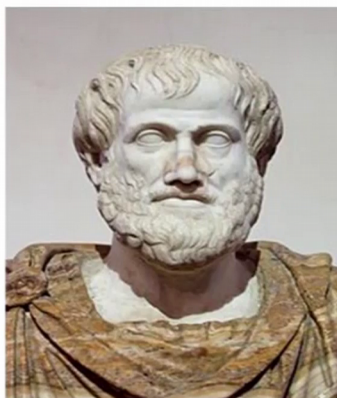
Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on Literary Theory. In the course of today's discussion, we will shift our focus from Plato, and we will shift from Plato to his most famous student and rival in fame Aristotle. As you will remember from our earlier lectures, the main term that we are focused on in our discussion of these ancient Greek intellectuals is mimesis.

And we have already discussed how the concept of mimesis was at the very heart of Plato's understanding of art in general and literature in particular. In our discussion of Aristotle 2, we will see that the concept of mimesis plays a very key role and during our lectures on Aristotle we will therefore, keep an eye on how his conceptualization of mimesis resembles or departs from Plato's understanding of the term.

But before we start discussing Aristotle's engagement with the concept of mimesis, let me briefly give you some biographical details about the philosopher.

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**Aristotle**  
(384 BCE – 322 BCE)



Source: Wikipedia

Aristotle was born in contemporary Macedonia, but as you will know from our previous discussions in this course. Our contemporary understanding of the world geography in terms of distinct and separate nation states; is not the right lens through which to approach the world of the ancient Greeks. During the time of Socrates or Plato or even Aristotle, Greece was simultaneously smaller as well as a larger entity than what we know as Greece in today's form of a nation state. Why smaller? Well, it was smaller than today's Greece.

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Greece around 450 BCE



Source: Wikipedia

Because, politically the whole of the Greek peninsula was fragmented into several small city states, or as they were known as polis. And each of these polis or city states, they had their own independent identity political identity; however, on the other hand this ancient Greece that we are talking about was also a larger entity than today's modern nation state. And the reason for this is because Greece was not merely a cluster of independent political entities, but it was also a culture sphere.

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And this culture sphere not only included the city states of the Greek peninsula, but it is stretched across northern Africa, southern Italy, and western Turkey as well.

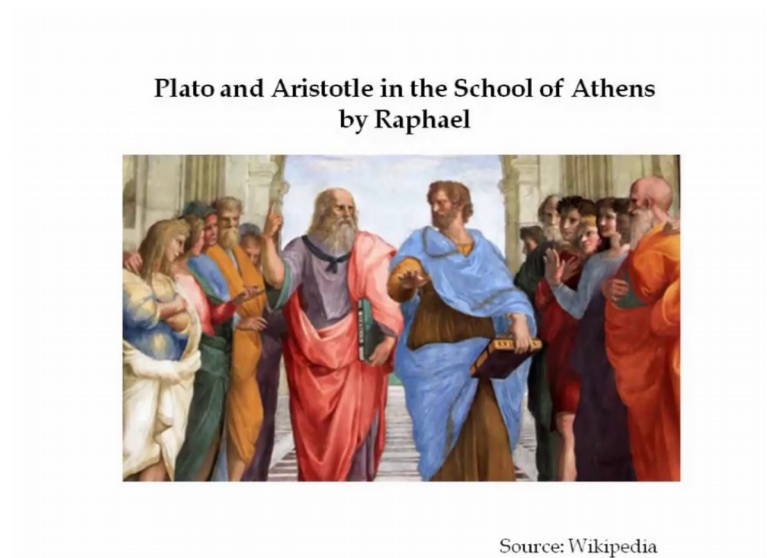
So, it was a much larger entity than what is covered by today's Greece as a nation state. Aristotle, who was born in Macedonia in 384 BCE, was very much a part of this larger Greek culture sphere. And at the age of 17, Aristotle came to Athens and joined the circle of researchers and scholars who had gathered around Plato in his academy. This association between Plato and Aristotle has had a tremendous influence in the history of human thought. And as I have suggested at the beginning of today's lecture with reference to mimesis, we see the two intellectuals working on a number of similar concepts which have gone on to form the very basis of western philosophy.

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And in this famous painting by the Italian renaissance artist the file and the painting is titled the school of Athens.

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We can see Plato and Aristotle occupying the center stage amidst a host of other philosophers. They are completely engrossed in a conversation with each other even as the figures around them look on with awe and veneration. Between 347 BCE which was if you remember the year when Plato died, and 335 BCE, Aristotle stayed away from Athens, most probably because of certain political reasons. And in these 12 years he was

associated with another important figure who has cast a very long shadow in the human history.

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**Bust of Young Alexander III  
of Macedon (commonly  
called Alexander the Great)**

**(356 BCE - 323 BCE)**



Source: British Museum

Here I am referring to the emperor Alexander who is also known in history books as Alexander the great. A few years into his political exile from Athens, Aristotle was appointed as a tutor of Alexander by his father king Philip. The number of years that Aristotle taught Alexander is uncertain.

And we also do not know much about the amount of influence that Aristotle might have exercised up upon the young Alexander. However, it is tempting to make certain connections here. As we have already discussed Plato the teacher of Aristotle was born during a time when Athens was going through a political change. The time tested mode of democratic government was faltering in Athens. And Plato himself was one of the most prominent critiques of the democratic form of government, and we have discussed this when we were discussing the republic.

Little student was Aristotle and it was Aristotle who taught Alexander. The man who would comprehensively wipe away the vestiges of democracy from the Greek world and who would become the founder of one of the largest empires that the world has ever known; however, tempting though it might be to connect Plato Aristotle and Alexander in this way.

We really cannot be certain about how much Aristotle molded Alexander's political views and his desires to establish an empire. What we can be sure of, however, is Aristotle's influence on a later generation of Greek philosophers who gathered in his school Lyceum which Aristotle established in Athens after returning back to the city state in 335 BCE.

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**Lyceum where Aristotle founded his school in 335 BC**

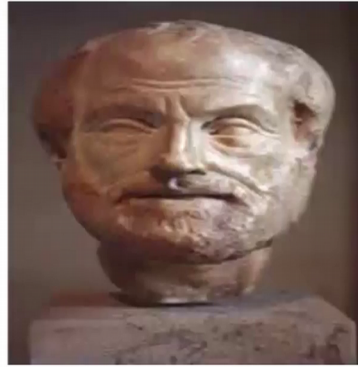
Source: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports

He would stay in Athens till the very end of his life and till almost the very end of his life actually, but he would retire from the city in 322 BCE. And in fact, he died that very year in a place called Chalcis. So now, that we have a rough sketch of his biographical details, let us move on to his work. One of the earliest catalogues of Aristotle's work that is still extant today was produced by the Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius.

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**Diogenes Laërtius**

(3<sup>rd</sup> century AD)



Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclopedia\\_Britannica\\_Eleventh\\_Edition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclopedia_Britannica_Eleventh_Edition)

And Laertius lists about 550 books that were supposedly written by Aristotle. Now this list is not absolutely reliable and in fact, it does not mention some of the very key works that is today attributed to Aristotle while at the same time mentioning some works which might not have been authored by Aristotle. So, this list is slightly dubious, but in spite of these ambiguities, the list bears witness to the staggering achievement of Aristotle as a scholar. What is even more astonishing than the number of books that Aristotle wrote is a number of topics that he covered in these books.

The scope of Aristotle's work included among other things, rhetoric, poetics, sciences especially the science of biology, politics, ethics, metaphysics and in all of these subjects Aristotle remained an undisputed authority for more than a 1000 years after his death. It is therefore, not surprising that the medieval Christian poet Dante.

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Dante Alighieri as Painted by Michelino



Source:

<http://www.intoscana.it/shared/intoscana/immagini/generica/2010/12/13/75e0b15058c422781c84914fd03d3cb4.jpg>

Even while relegating the pagan Aristotle to the zone of hell in his famous book the divine comedy would nevertheless refer to him as quote the master of those who know.

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The medieval Christian poet Dante, even while relegating the pagan Aristotle to the zone of hell in his famous book *The Divine Comedy* would nevertheless refer to him as "The master of those who know".

Unfortunately, the writings of Aristotle that have survived is only about one fifth of the total corpus that is mentioned by Laertius.

And even more unfortunately, most of the writings that Aristotle consciously prepared for publication and for circulation have been lost. What survives are mostly lecture notes



which are often cryptic, and which lacks the polished quality of a work that has been expressly prepared for publication and circulation.

Thus reading the available writing of Aristotle after being exposed to the exquisitely wrought dialogues of Plato can come as a disappointment in terms of literary style; however, if we can put aside the question of literary finesse, we are bound to be enthralled by the quality of discourse that we encounter even in the surviving writings of Aristotle. The work of Aristotle with which we will specifically concern ourselves in our lectures on mimesis is a volume titled politics. Like most of his surviving writings poetics too reads like a set of cryptic notes that Aristotle might have prepared for his lectures in Lyceum.

Therefore, it has an unvarnished quality and carries a sense of incompleteness, because many of the key ideas including the idea of mimesis are often mentioned but not elaborated. However, poetics has an incomplete character in another very different way. It is assumed that the volume that we are familiar with today is only one part of a larger work indeed the present volume which focuses especially on the literary form of tragedy had a complimentary volume on comedy which is now lost.

So, even while we prepare to delve on to the extant volume of poetics dealing with tragedy, I would urge you to read a wonderful mystery novel written by the Italian author Umberto eco titled *Il Nome della Rosa* or the name of the rose; which has at its heart the quest for the lost volume of poetics that deals with the subject of comedy and laughter. But, now let us commence our exploration of the surviving volume of poetics, and see how it relates to the idea of mimesis that we have been discussing in this course. The volume the surviving volume of poetics can be divided into 3 related segments.

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*Poetics* can be divided into three related segments.

- The first segment (part 1 to 5) acts as a kind of general introduction to artistic mimesis and its classifications.
- The second segment (parts 6 to 22) discusses tragedy as a form of mimesis.
- The last segment (parts 23 to 26) compares the form of tragedy vis-à-vis the form of epic poetry.

The first segment which includes chapter one to chapter 5 or part 1 to part 5 acts as a kind of general introduction to artistic mimesis, and its classifications. The second segment covering chapters 6 to 22 discusses in details tragedy as a form of mimesis. And the last segment covering chapters 23 to 26 situates the form of tragedy vis-a-vis the form of epic poetry and presents us with a comparative study between these 2 forms.

It is however, important to note at this point that in our discussion of poetics, we are not really going to you know summarize the different sections of the work or even find out how one part of the book connects to the other. Rather we would be more interested to know how poetics contributes to our understanding of mimesis. And how it carries forward or alters or even negates the discussion of mimesis and mimetic art that we have encountered in Plato's republic.

So, our lens through which we would view Aristotle's poetics is Plato, and his work in the republic which we have already discussed in our previous lectures. Now, it has long been part of the received knowledge, that Aristotle's poetics was a conscious effort to challenge the negative views that Plato posed about artistic mimesis in his works like the republic.

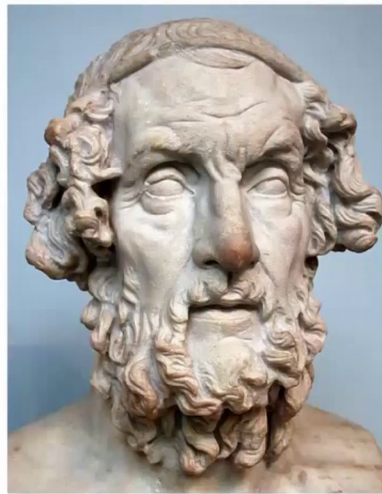
But it is very difficult to conclusively prove this assertion and it is difficult because the text of the poetics the surviving volume of poetics does not mention explicitly either Plato or his book the republic. In fact, to anyone who approaches this text without having

read about Plato's writings on mimesis, poetics will appear to be perfectly self-sustained in its scope.

And therefore, it does not require another earlier work for better understanding; however, those who are more aware of Plato's writings will glimpse unmistakable traces of Aristotle's engagement with his teacher in the poetics, both in what the text mentions, and also in what the text neglects to mention.

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**Homer**



Source: Wikipedia

Thus when Aristotle in his poetics sings high praises of Homer it becomes difficult not to read it as a counter to Plato's condemnation of Homer in his *Republic*. This is also true about the more general idea of artistic mimesis whereas, Plato banishes the Mimetics and especially the mimetic poets from his ideal republic.

Aristotle invites back the poets with open arms and establishes artistic mimesis as an integral aspect of our human identity. But I think Aristotle's engagement with Plato reveals itself even more interestingly by something that poetics neglects to mention or neglects to really elaborate upon. As I have already mentioned, though mimesis is the key focus in poetics, the text does not define what mimesis means.

Now, this lack of definition gives the reader the strange impression of starting in media (Refer Time: 17:13) of being suddenly thrown into the middle of the discussion about mimesis without first getting her bearings, right. One of the reasons why mimesis is not

defined at the very onset in poetics may perhaps be because it was written in the shorthand form of lecture note, and certain things when we prepare for lectures. We take certain things for granted and we assume that our intended audience will already have a knowledge about what mimesis is or what some other things might be. And therefore, we do not go into a definition.

However, I think a more probable explanation is that Aristotle intended poetics to be an engagement with Plato's idea of mimesis. Therefore, it was expected that the reader of poetics will already be familiar with the general contours of the discussion about mimesis from the work of Plato, and thus would not require a separate introductory definition. In other words, poetics was conceptualized as a continuation as well as a critique of Plato's writings like the republic, and not as a separate work with a separate starting point. However, be as it may Aristotle quite significantly reworks the concept of mimesis in his poetics, and by the time we finish our discussion on Aristotle you will see how different and distinct Aristotle's idea of mimesis is from Plato's.

Now, the first major distinction that we observe while comparing Aristotle's treatment of mimesis in poetics with Plato's treatment of the same idea is the insistence of the former which means the insistence of Aristotle that mimesis is quote unquote natural. Now, if you remember our lectures on Plato you will know that for him mimesis was a fake, it was an illusion a deceptive copy which was far removed from the true nature of things. In sharp contrast to this Aristotle writes in the 4th chapter of his poetics and I quote poetry in general seems to have sprung from 2 causes.

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“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.”

(Book IV, *Poetics*)

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. These lines closely pack a number of assertions and we will be taking up most of the points made here later on including poetry being a form of mimesis or imitation, and the connection between mimesis and pleasure that Aristotle makes here.

But here what I would ask you to note is that Aristotle identifies imitation not only as a natural instinct, which is to be found in us even as children. But he also underlines it as one of the key features which makes us what we are as human beings and which distinguishes us from other animals. Clearly, for Aristotle mimesis is neither fake nor is it insignificant. But this idea that mimesis cannot be simply dismissed as fake comes out even more strongly in the introductory segment of *poetics*, when it emphasizes the fact that mimesis including the mimetic form of poetry involves craft.

Which means each mimetic form of representation involves its own distinct medium, its own distinct objects and its own distinct manners. Let us take for instance the craft of furniture making. The furniture maker uses implements like a chisel or hand saw to work on pieces of wood in order to produce various pieces of furniture like the chair, the

table, beds, cupboards and so on. And these furnitures might resemble the louical style of furniture or the art deco style of furniture or the queen and style of furniture.

Similarly, in the first 3 chapters of poetics, Aristotle draws our attention to how a mimetic artist depending on what kind of a craftsman he is chooses his medium of imitation; like, language for instance or tune or rhythmic movements. He selects the object which he seeks to express through his mediums of my mimesis, they may be actions of exalted individuals or they may be actions of lowly men. And he also selects the manner of his craft of imitation.

That is a poet for instance after choosing language as his medium, and the actions of exalted men as the object of his imitation will still need to decide whether he is going to present his imitation in a manner of a tragic drama or in a manner of epic. So, this means that depending upon the medium of mimesis, depending upon it is object of imitation and depending upon the manner employed to imitate the object, we will encounter different kinds of mimetic products.

And though these may be all forms of artistic mimesis, they are not one and the same thing. A tune played on a bamboo flute is a very different kind of mimetic product compared say for instance to a picture painted on a canvas using colours, or dance performed in the rhythms of a drum for instance.

So, at the root of this difference lies the fact that mimesis is a craft. And just like different kinds of crafts produce different kinds of end products, similarly different kinds of mimesis produce different kinds of artistic imitation. But the question here is why is this insistence on the nature of mimesis as a craft important at all. Now, let us look at this point carefully, and let us look at it by comparing it with Plato's understanding of mimesis. As you will remember from our discussion on the theory of forms; for Plato mimesis was primarily a mirroring activity. One of the reasons why mimesis was considered as fake by Plato was because this attempt at transparently mirroring an object was prone to deceptive illusion.

According to Plato, the mimetic artist feels not because he deliberately wants to misrepresent his object of imitation, but rather because his very effort to produce a mirror image of the object was underlined and undermined by his faulty perception. So, if a stick which is immersed in water is painted by a painter as a bent stick, then it results

in a fake representation of the stick, not because the painter deliberately wants to mislead us. Rather, because he wants to produce a mirror image of what he perceives in front of him. Aristotle insistence that mimesis is a craft critiques this notion of transparent mirroring.

Let us again take the case of painting for instance. A painting no matter how realistic, it is, is not a mirroring surface. It is distinct and different from a mirror. And the reason why it is distinct and different from a mirror, even if it is a realistic painting is because the ability of a painter to represent or mimic an object is shaped as well as limited by the tools mediums and manners of his craft. His canvas, his colours, his palette and all such things that he employs to create his painting shape the kind of imitation that he is able to produce.

And therefore, a painter's imitation of an object is different from say a sculptors imitation of the same object. Because, these 2 crafts painting and sculpting are different and neither the end product of a painter's craft, nor the end product of a sculptors craft would produce a transparent mirroring of the object, irrespective of how realistic they are. Which means that to judge a mimesis as a faulty mirroring would be a misplaced judgment.

Because no mimesis is an act of mirroring faulty or otherwise, and all mimesis are determined shaped and limited by the requirements of particular mimetic crafts. Be it flute playing for instance, poetry writing, painting, sculpting or dancing. Now 2 important things follow from this change in perspective. The first is that looking at mimetic products as peal and faulty mirror images of the original is incorrect. A mimetic product should be studied and appreciated by itself.

And it should be studied and appreciated as an instance of a particular kind of craftsmanship. This is in fact, highlighted at the very opening of poetics which begins with the words *anaquote*; I propose to treat of poetry in itself and not as a copy of something else.

The second thing that follows from this reorientation of our understanding of mimesis is that a mimetic product relates to it is object of imitation in ways other than transparently mirroring if the relationship, but then this opens a number of questions. For instance, what is this other way, or these other ways in which mimesis relates to it is object of

imitation. If the relationship is not that of mirroring, then what other kinds of imitation is possible. Moreover, in this change perspective what happens to the other objection that Plato has against mimesis; namely, that mimesis promotes emotional excesses and thereby suppresses the rational faculties of man. We will take up these questions in our next lecture.

Thank you.