

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 05
Literature & Mimesis: Aristotle (II)

Hello everyone. Today in this lecture series on literary theory, we will continue with our discussion on Aristotle and his contribution to the concept of mimesis. As you will know the text by Aristotle, which frames our discussion on this topic of mimesis is the extent volume the surviving volume of poetics. And in my previous lecture I have already pointed that this text can be read as a sort of dialogue, between Plato's concept of mimesis and mimetic art, and Aristotle's critique of that concept. Indeed, Plato's conception of mimesis forms a point of departure for Aristotle in poetics. And in our previous lecture, we had already we had started analyzing how Aristotle while agreeing with Plato's basic idea that all art is mimetic defends mimesis against Plato's accusations.

Now, one significant way in which Aristotle critiques Plato's position on mimesis is by redefining the relationship between the mimetic process, and the object of mimesis. And I have argued in my earlier lecture on Aristotle that he does Aristotle does not consider mimesis as a simple mirroring of an object. Rather than looking at it like a mirror image the process of mimesis according to Plato presence a more complex relationship between the mimetic end product mimetic product and the object of mimesis. And this relationship can be best understood through the concept of icon.

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- Plato presents mimesis as a flawed mirroring.
- Aristotle presents mimesis as an icon-making process.

In other words, where as Plato presents mimesis as a flawed mirroring, Aristotle presents mimesis as an icon making process. In today's lecture we will elaborate on this idea of a mimetic product as an icon, and we will see how this understanding redeems mimesis from being regarded as merely flawed mirroring. After that we will move on to the idea of catharsis, and see how Aristotle uses it to counter Plato's argument that mimesis or more specifically mimetic poetry is harmful, because it stirs passionate emotions and thereby suppresses the rational faculty of human beings. But let us start with the issue of mimesis as icon making. Here I would like to reiterate the question with which I had ended my previous lecture.

And the question that I had posed was this.

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If the relationship between *mimesis* with the *object of imitation* is not that of transparent mirroring, then what other kinds of imitation is possible?

If the relationship between mimesis with the object of mimesis or imitation is not that of transparent mirroring, then what other kinds of imitation is possible. If mimesis is not mirroring, then what other kind of mimesis is possible, what other kind of imitation is possible? To answer this question, let us first look into these lines which we find in book 4 of poetics, I quote from Aristotle.

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“Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.”

(Book IV, *Poetics*)

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The pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution the coloring or some such other cause. Note here that according to Aristotle the chief pleasure that mimesis or mimetic art offers is the pleasure of recognition. A likeness is produced through mimesis, and when the audience or the reader or the spectator of this mimetic product, confronts the likeness she experiences a rapturous sense of recognition that is he.

Indeed, without this act of recognition in which likeness of the object of mimesis is located by the audience within the mimetic product, the effect of mimesis seems to fall flat. As Aristotle points out and I quote from the section which I have already referred to, if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such but to the execution the coloring or some such other cause.

The word likeness here and the stress on the idea of recognition; however, might lead us to believe that Aristotle like Plato is presenting here mimesis as a form of transparent mirroring. We might assume that for Aristotle the chief pleasure offered by a mimetic product like the painting of an animal a horse. For instance, is provided by the spectators recognizing how accurately the artist has reflected or mirrored a real horse upon the canvas by working on the minutest of details. This interpretation which might seem very logical, if we take these lines from book 4 out of the context. However, is problematized if you place the lines from book 4 or chapter 4 of poetics, against these lines that appear in book 25, and again I quote Aristotle.

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“Within the art of poetry itself there are two kinds of faults- those which touch its essence, and those which are accidental. If a poet has chosen to imitate something, [but has imitated it incorrectly] through want of capacity, the error is inherent in the poetry. But if the failure is due to a wrong choice- if he has represented a horse as throwing out both his off legs at once, or introduced technical inaccuracies in medicine, for example, or in any other art- the error is not essential to the poetry.”

(Book XXV, *Poetics*)

Within the art of poetry itself, there are 2 kinds of folds. Those which touch it is essence and those which are accidental. If a poet has chosen to imitate something, but has imitated it incorrectly through want of capacity, the error is inherent in the poetry. But if the failure is due to a wrong choice, if he has represented a horse as throwing out both his off legs at once, or introduced technical inaccuracies in medicine for example, or in any other art the error is not essential to the poetry.

Though here Aristotle is talking about the mimetic art of poetry, the kind of reference that he makes to the horse will help us connect these lines with our ongoing discussion of mimesis Visavi painting. In the quoted lines Aristotle talks about 2 kinds of errors that we can encounter in a mimetic production and he classifies them as essential and non-essential.

This classification is in fact, also a kind of gradation. The latter kind of error non-essential error is not a very serious one whereas, the former the error that touches the essence of the mimetic production can seriously degrade the quality of the mimetic product. Now what is a non-essential error? Let us take the example of the horse.

According to Aristotle if mimetic artist represents a galloping horse throwing both of it is front legs up in the air, then it is regarded as a non-essential error. Since horses in real life do not throw their off legs together while galloping, it is an error, but nonetheless an error of a kind that is not essential to the mimetic product.

Indeed, in book 25 Aristotle even excuses the portrayal of such impossibilities by mimetic artists by saying that, and I quote if he describes the impossible, he is guilty of an error, but the error may be justified if the end of the art be thereby attained, if that is the effect of this or any other part of the poem is thus rendered more striking.

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“If he describes the impossible, he is guilty of an error; but the error may be justified, if the end of the art be thereby attained [...] - if, that is, the effect of this or any other part of the poem is thus rendered more striking”.

(Book XXV, *Poetics*)

Now as far as transparent mirroring is concerned, porting a galloping horse with both its front legs up in the air be it in poetry or painting or any other mimetic form is a grave error. Because if what is being portrayed is an impossibility, then it cannot be called a mirror image of a real life object yet Aristotle seems to be perfectly accommodative of such errors as far as mimesis is concerned.

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Aristotle argues, “not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically”.

(Book XXV, *Poetics*)

Again I quote, not to know that a hind. A hind is a female deer, not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it in artistically. The inherent or essential error here is the lack of the artistic skill of the painter, which may arise for instance of the painter does not know how to use the tools of his craft properly.

If let us say he cannot properly paint with a brush or he cannot properly mix his colours. The question of how accurate the painting of the hind is *visa via* hind in real life is; however, regarded as a less serious or non-essential error. So, even if the painter paints a hind with horns, though hinds do not have horns in real life, then that error is regarded by Aristotle as an insignificant error as a non-essential error, which does not degrade the quality of the mimetic product.

Now, this clarifies one thing. As far as Aristotle is concerned the pleasure of the likeness that the mimetic artist produces is not dependent upon the degree of accuracy with which the details of a real life object are portrayed by him. In other words, the way to judge mimesis is not through the lens of strict referentiality. But if such inaccurate depictions of hinds with horns and galloping horses, with both of its front legs up in the air are acceptable in mimesis. Then what happens to the notion of recognition that we had encountered in book 4. As I have said before the pleasure of mimesis is derived from recognizing it recognizing in the mimetic product a likeness of some other object. How


can you recognize the likeness of an original in a mimetic product if the mimetic artist portrays the details inaccurately?

So, this is a question that we are confronted with. And it is here that we need to bring in the notion of icon. Now if you think about it, you realize that a mirror image is only one of the many ways in which things can be represented to our consciousness.

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The semiotician **C. S. Peirce (1839-1914)** talks about three major ways in which representation can be done:

1. **symbol**
2. **index**
3. **icon.**



Source: Wikipedia

The semiotician C S pierce talks about 3 major ways in which representation can be done. They can be done through symbol, they can be done through index and they can be done through icon. All of these 3 things have 2 constant elements in them.

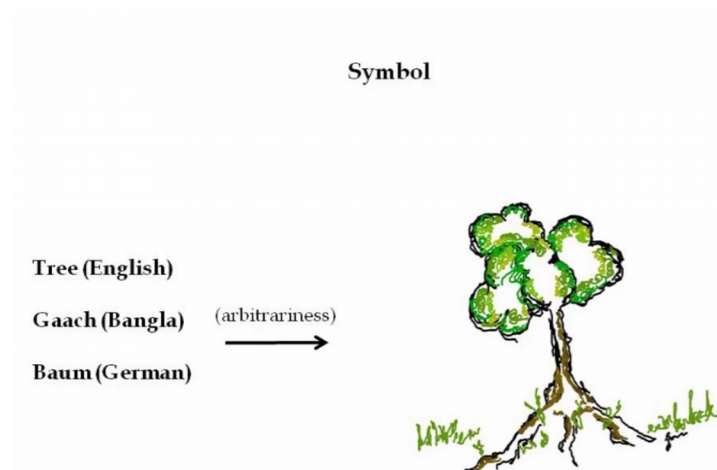
And one of those constant elements is called the signified, which is the object that is being represented, and this object can be something concrete like a pencil or a horse or an aero plane for instance or it can be something abstract, like a concept a taught a plan. But there is also another constant element in each of these 3 things that I mentioned symbol index and icon.

And that second constant element is called the signifier, which is basically a visual or an auditory mark which is used to represent the signified. Now let us take in the case of a symbol. In a symbol, there is no inherent connection between the signifier and the signified. The connection is in fact, absolutely arbitrary, and to give you an example, when I utter any word, and I use it to refer to some object in the outside world, then that

word is actually a symbol that I am using for the purpose of reference. For instance, when I utter the word tree, you will immediately recognize that I am talking about a thing rooted in the soil with brown woody stem supporting a green leafy top.

But the word tree is a symbol because there is no inherent connection between that word, and the thing with a woody stem and a green leafy top. This is proved by this sort of arbitrariness that sort of separates the word tree from the signified is proved by the fact that I can refer to the same signified, the same green leafy object with a brown stem by using completely different sounding words if I shift from one language to another.

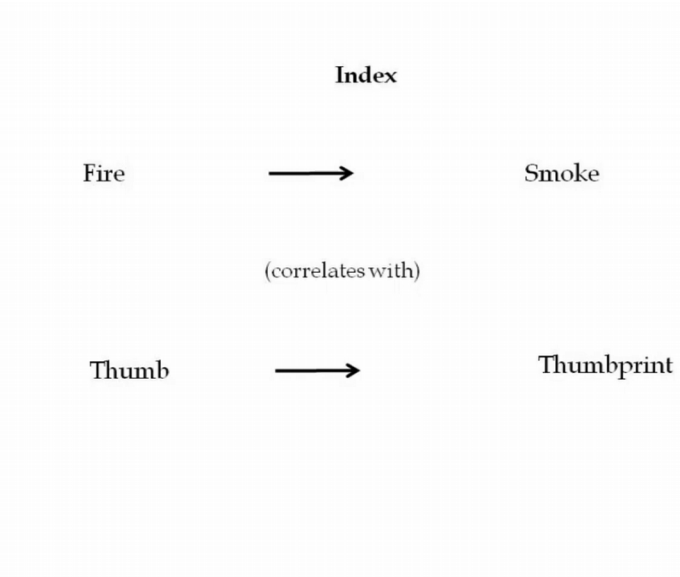
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If for instance I were to signify the same thing in Bangla, I would call it a gaach.

And again if I were to shift to German, I would refer to the same thing as baum. I can do this shifting and refer to the same thing by using different words like tree gaaach or baum, because neither of these 3 words have any inherent connection with the signified, rather the connection is arbitrary and is culturally learned. Now you will understand this better if you contrast it with an index. For instance, an index is a way of referring to a signified by drawing attention to a mark, which establishes the presence of the signified.

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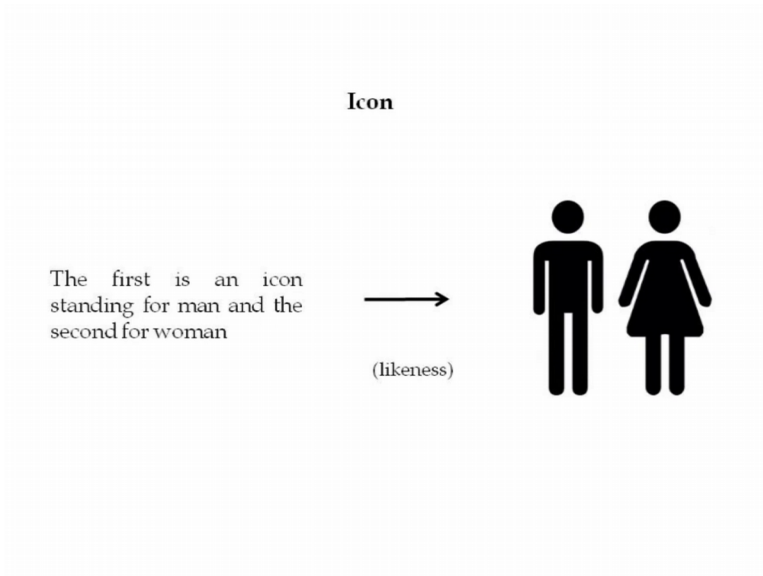


To give you an example, fire produces smoke, right there is nothing arbitrary about this connection, there is almost a causal relationship. Fire produces smoke therefore, is a mark of the presence of fire. Smoke is thus categorized as an index of fire. To give you another example of an index for instance a thumbprint is an index of a thumb.

If you see the poor mark of a tiger somewhere around you that is a fair indication that is a fair index which would signify that there is a tiger roaming somewhere around. Now let us come to an icon, an icon is a way of representing in which there is a significant and inherent overlapping between the signifier and the signified. Here let us try and understand the idea by taking an example. And let us say I take a picture of your face. In that case, your face will be the signified and the picture of your face will be the signifier.

And as you can guess, there will be an inherent connection between the signifier and the signified in this case. The picture would be an exact likeness of your face, and it will contain all the accurate details of your face, and when you post that picture on social media, let us say the people who know you might derive pleasure from the mimetic product by recognizing the likeness and exclaiming that is he or that is she. The picture can therefore, be classified as an icon of your face. Now here let us look at another kind of iconic image.

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Now, as you can see these are 2 images that we regularly encounter on lavatory doors, and recognize them as one standing for man and the other standing for woman. The reason why we are able to recognize the man as man and the woman as woman is because we can recognize their likeness with the signified. However, unlike the photograph, they are not accurate portrayals or mirror images of the object. However, then we come across a question how do we then recognized in these iconic signifiers the likeness of the signified they are not mirror images.

So, how do we recognize? Well, we recognize them because even in these simplified forms the images build upon certain features. The arms for instance, the legs the round head, and these features are inherent parts of the signified as well so, there is a great degree of overlapping. But here notice one very interesting thing, in either of these images, iconically representing a man and a woman we do not see the neck, the neck region, yet it is impossible to find a human beings or at least living one's without neck. So, the representation here is of an impossibility. That is similar to the image of hinds with horns or horses galloping with both their front legs thrown up in the air.

But this does not disrupt the process of recognition. This is because the process of recognizing mimetic production happens within the shared conventions of a cultural matrix, that connects the mimetic artist and the reader or the audience of the spectator who recognizes in the mimetic representation the likeness of the object of mimesis. Since

the cultural conventions that we share help us perfectly well to understand the 2 necklace figures to represent man and woman, we do not feel the need to question why the neck is missing, right. Thus as you can see from this argument though mirror images can be part of the vast array of mimetic objects, that are possible factual very similar is not a yardstick to judge the quality of mimesis. Mimetic products can hold value even without a strict referentiality. And consequently the platonic argument that mimesis produces flawed mirror images does not hold because though I mean through Aristotle we understand that mimesis is not a mirroring activity. It is a production of iconic representations.

And iconic representations can be mirror images but there is no compulsion that they have to be mirror images. They can also be something like the figures of the necklace human beings. Now at this point I would briefly like to touch upon the issue of probability. And it is relationship to plot structure which for Aristotle is a quintessence of poetry as a mimetic product. Now as our discussion on mimesis as a production of icon has revealed. Mimesis is an imitation not just of possible things rather mimesis can also be of impossible things like necklace human beings for instance.

But in order for it to be a successful mimesis, it has to be recognized as a likeness or a representation of something else. If that recognition is not there, then the effect of mimesis falls flat. Now whether or not it will be recognized, the mimetic product will be recognized by the reader or the spectator or the audience will depend upon the notion of probability. And the sense of what is probable and what is not probable will in turn depend upon the conventions that underline the cultural context shared by the mimetic artist and her reader or audience or spectator.

To give you an example in the cultural context that is shared by me and my student's sitting here in this room, a man biting a tiger is an improbable event. This is not to say however, that such an event is impossible, because there may be some instances of humans biting tigers that we do not know of but even if such an event is possible, it is not probable to us. Aristotle argues that a mimetic production yields the pleasure of recognition because it deals with probability. A Shakespearean tragedy like King Lear for instance is a successful mimesis not because we actually know of a king called Lear, who had to undergo such torture in the hands of his daughter's name Goneril and Regan, rather it is a successful mimesis because the plot narrates a sequence of event that is

accepted as probable. Or at least it is accepted as probable by people who share the cultural menu that enables an understanding of Shakespearean tragedy.

Now, this probable plot structure can have technical faults like for instance, the probable plot structure of king Lear might have horses galloping with the 2 front legs shown up in the air, but as you will understand now that this impossibility does not impede the process of recognition. According to Aristotle it is precisely this notion of probability that distinguishes a tragedy from say a history. History can only narrate events, which has actually happened, and which are therefore, all in the domain of possibility because if something has happened then it is of course, possible.

A tragedy on the other hand depicts human actions based on probability and not on possibility. Therefore, a man eaten live by a tiger might find it is place in a tragic plot. But a man trying to bite a tiger, irrespective of whether it is possible or not will perhaps not be very read readily incorporated in the plot by a tragic playwright. Therefore, to judge any mimesis, on how accurately it is imitating a real life object is perhaps to miss the point. Because we must remember here that in the Aristotle world of mimetic art something like the Mona Lisa is as valid a representation of human likeness as the gendered images on the doors of the lavatories. With this in mind let us now move on to the concept of catharsis.

Now, as you know one of the reasons why Plato complained about mimetic poetry, was because it stirred emotions and thereby suppress the functioning of reason or at least that is Plato's argument. Now here again Aristotle uses Plato's theory as a point of departure. Referring to a tragedy which is a variety of mimetic poetry, Aristotle argues that it does indeed stir up such give rise to such emotions like pity, like fear; these are the 2 predominant emotions that Aristotle talks visa vi tragedy. But he then goes on to argue that stirring even of such painful emotions like pity and fear, does not pose any problem, they do not have any harmful effect.

And his argument is that a rational man experiences a catharsis of these emotions when he encounters them in a form of a mimetic product. So, catharsis does not allow these emotions to have a harmful impact on the spectator. But this sentence or this argument has a problem at least it has a problem for us modern readers. And the problem lies in the fact that what is the exact meaning of the word catharsis; especially, what is the exact

meaning within the context of poetics, that has become or has remained for more than 2000 years now a matter of dispute.

And therefore, there are a number of differing interpretations regarding why Aristotle considers catharsis as a valuable end product of tragedy. In this lecture I will mention only 2 of the popular interpretations of catharsis. And we will then try to see how each of these interpretations can be used to critique Plato's complaint about mimetic poetry.

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- Catharsis is understood as a process of purgation.
- This purgation theory is mostly associated with the German scholar **Jacob Bernays**, who suggested that the pity and fear evoked in a tragedy acts like "pharmakon".

Now, the first popular interpretation that I would like to consider here is catharsis understood as a process of purgation.

And this purgation theory is mostly associated with the German scholar Jacob Bernays. And this German scholar suggested that the pity and fear evoked in a tragedy acts like Pharmakon. Now this Greek word Pharmakon from which we have derived our modern English word pharmacy, can be understood in 2 ways it can be understood simultaneously as a medicine, but also as poison. And the basic idea behind Pharmakon is that the same substance which is poisonous, when administered in well regulated doses can act as a medicine and can cure the effects of that very poison.

So, looking from this perspective someone like bearnaise for instance would argue, that tragedy by producing emotions like fear and pity in a regulated way helps purge the excess of these noxious or troubling emotions fear for instance is rather problematic

emotion if not pity, but even pity is a problematic emotion it is a painful emotion nonetheless. And the other theory so, this is the theory of purgation catharsis is understood as purgation, but I want to refer to another theory which is also very popular. And this is a theory regarding catharsis understood as an educative process.

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- Catharsis as an educative process.
- In the form of a mimetic product we can observe and study pity and fear from a sufficient distance.
- By repeatedly encountering the emotions like pity and fear from a distance the spectator gets to know as well as train his emotions.

In this theory fear and pity the argument goes that the that fear and pity when encountered in real life are problematic to deal with, and they can easily overwhelm us.

However, when experienced in the form of a mimetic product, we can observe and study them from a sufficient distance, even though they are painful emotions. And by repeatedly encountering the emotions like pity and fear, tragedy evokes within the spectator and urge to associate them with the right kind of objects, right. So, it is a matter of repeated habituation, the more you encounter these emotions, the more you will learn it is an educative process the more you will learn the right objects onto which you need to invest these emotions.

And in fact, through such a process of repeated encountering of such emotions the spectator gets to know as well as to train his emotions in a way which is not possible otherwise in circumstances where the emotion overwhelms that person. Now as you can see each of these 2 interpretations of catharsis are very different from each other. Yet, both of them can be used to produce a critique of Plato's view on mimesis.

For instance, if catharsis is understood as purgation, then mimetic poetry like tragedy for instance does not suppress reason by arousing emotions. Rather, the action of a rational man is made free from the ill effects of noxious emotions, through the purgative cleansing of those emotions by catharsis, catharsis cleanses emotions, right?

And therefore, makes rationality all the more possible. If on the other hand catharsis is understood as an education of emotion, even then reason is not suppressed, because catharsis then becomes a training process through which a young spectator might learn to guide his emotions rationally towards the right objects.

So, in either of the 2 cases in either of the 2 interpretations, we can see that we can critique Plato's argument that mimetic poetry suppresses reason as Aristotle shows through the instance of tragedy an example of mimetic poetry; that it does not suppress reason, it affects a catharsis of emotion, which helps a rational human being. With this we end our discussion on Aristotle. And this is also the end of our discussion on mimesis. In our lecture, next lecture we will move forward in time and see how a first century roman text titled on the sublime expanded and modified our understanding of literary theory.

Thank you.