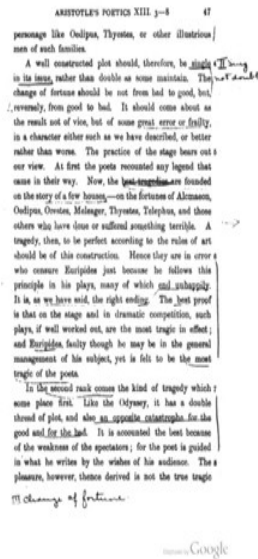


Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Aristotle's Poetics (Session 3)

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Hello and welcome to today's session on Literary Criticism. In this session which also happens to be the final discussion on Aristotle's *Poetics*, we shall be talking about Catharsis and the kind of effect that tragedy has on the spectators. So, throughout a discussion on *Poetics* from the beginning, we have noticed that in the first section, in the first few sections, Aristotle talks about the character of a good poetry and the kind of elements and characteristics that it has.

And then he went on to talk about the nature of good tragedy. And we realize that, even though, Aristotle begins by focusing on poetry, the nature of poetry and the kind of things that go into the making of good poetry, he begins to focus on drama at large. And as we enter the heart of discussion in *Poetics*, we also realize that it eventually becomes solely and largely about tragedy.

And we also realize that in multiple ways Aristotle is also trying to tell us how he sees tragedy as a supreme kind of art form. And it becomes supreme, because of the kind of effect that it has on the spectator. And we realize that though Aristotle has written many scientific treatises in other forms, his approach to life, his approach to governance, his approach to the various things that he saw around him, it was very realistic. He never was an idealist, but still we see that, there is a

kind of ideal situation that he hopes will get generated when a spectator is viewing a well-conceived, a well-constructed tragedy.

And for that we are also being introduced to, in course of the discussion about the various characteristics that would come together as he puts it in a perfect structural union, the various aspects that would come together in order to give a holistic kind of pleasure to the spectator. And as mentioned, right from the beginning of this discussion, he is also one of the first, the earliest critics to identify the connection between what happens on stage, the text, what is written, what is performed and the response of the audience, the response of the spectators who are there watching the play.

In today's session, which is also the final discussion on *Poetics*, we focus on Catharsis that is the emotion, that is the stage that is the ultimate stage of a perfect tragedy that Aristotle also focuses upon. So, when he reaches the end of Section 13, he begins to identify, he begins to differentiate, what makes a tragedy different based on the kind of effect that it generates on the spectator.

And towards the end of Section 3, he tells us that there are different kinds of tragedy and different kinds of ending, and this is a discussion on comedy at large in Section 13. And let us read out from this section, "It is accounted for the best because of the weakness of the spectators. So, the poet is guided in what he writes by wishes of his audience.

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ARISTOTLE'S POETICS XIII & XIV. 49

pleasure. It is proper rather to Comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies—like Orestes and Aegisthus—quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain.

XIV Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a low artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents.

Let us then determine what are the circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful.

Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention, —except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to

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The pleasure however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure, it is proper rather to comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies- like Orestes and Aegisthus- quit the stage as friends at the close and no one slays or is slain.” So, this is the conclusion that he gives to the discussion on comedy. Where there is a reversal of fortune, we find that the characters are not really consistent. There are things that, there are changes in behavior, there are changes, there are unpredictable things that happen towards the end.

And if you remember, when he spoke about the elements of a good tragedy, one of the things that Aristotle was very particular about was the consistency of the character, consistency of the protagonist, the tragic hero. And taking off from that, when we come to Section 14, he focuses on these twin emotions, fear and pity. These two are the important things which are instrumental in generating, in creating the feeling of Catharsis.

Catharsis, to begin with, was a medical term, it was spelt with K. K. A. T. H. A. R. S. I. S., and Katharsis was a medical term to begin with. Katharsis, originally also meant “to cleanse or to wash”. And in here, in this context also we will see that, he is talking about “purgation of feelings”, he is talking about “the cleansing of feelings”. And by arousing these two emotions, fear and pity, which are also seen as a supreme kind of artistic emotions, we find that Aristotle is also placing tragedy as a superior kind of art form.

And if we look through various examples that we will see in different kinds of artistic and cultural productions, we will find that these twin emotions whenever they are generated, there is a sense of superiority that also gets attributed to that art form. For instance, recall that famous line in TS Eliot's "Wasteland", where he writes "I will show you fear in a handful of dust".

And if we look at the various ways in which fear gets generated whether it is an Alfred Hitchcock movie or some of the fictional texts we are familiar with, we find that it is not really about the objects which we see. It is largely about the narrative, largely about the characters within which these twin emotions of pity and fear are generated.

And given the time during which Aristotle has written this work, it is also significant that he was very insightful about human emotions, and how a form of art, a work of art, a fictional piece gets performed on stage. He has the ability to theorize that, he has the ability to know what happens within the spectator's mind and to see how that also contributes to the superior, the elevated status of art.

And if we read from this section, "Fear and pity maybe aroused by spectacular means, but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece which is the better way and indicates a superior poet." This is very, very important. And as mentioned, it is not really about the spectacular things which are shown on stage, it is also about the inner structure. And if you recall, throughout the discussion on *Poetics*, Aristotle always gives a lot of emphasis on the structure, the structural union that he talks about, about how the combination is extremely important, how it is important for these various elements to come together in a beautiful design, artful design is also another beautiful term that he uses.

And here, while talking about the superior poet, and while referring to the kind of superior tragedies that he is familiar with, he is also giving us the example of Oedipus. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of Oedipus. And what is that impression? "For the plot ought to be so constructed that even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place."

And this is a very, very significant. And again and again, Aristotle in this piece of writing, he is reiterating that it is really not about what we see over there, it is about what gets generated. And

this generation is from a well-conceived, a well-constructed plot; from a well-conceived, a well-crafted tragedy. “But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method.” And look at the way in which he is also trying to see what is inferior and what is superior.

Just to show something very spectacular and then expect the audience to have pity and fear, the emotions generated out of what they see, that what they actually witness on stage, he fears, is not the superior of kind of art. It is a less artistic method and dependent on extraneous aids. He is talking about the inner structure, he is talking about the craft of the poet, the craft of the dramatist, which makes it possible. Even if someone cannot see it the mere hearing of the tale should be able to evoke these sort of emotions. Think about the example of Shakespeare's *Othello*. How through a series of events, look at the interactions between Iago and Othello, there we find that it is really not about the spectacular things that we see on stage, it is about what is going on in terms of conversations, what is going on in terms of emotions, what the tragic hero is experiencing at that point of time. And we find that that also gives, arouses, the twin emotions of pity and fear. Then he says, “Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of tragedy.” So there is a purpose for tragedy.

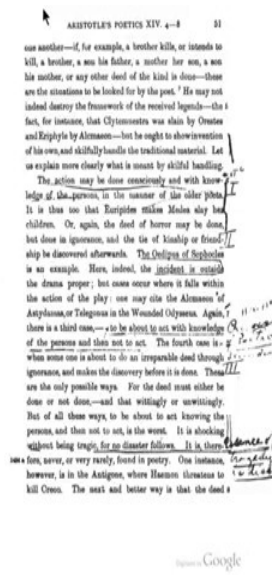
And this is what makes Aristotle's *Poetics* very different from the other kinds of writings of those times, he is focusing on a purpose. This is a very, very scientific approach. He is also dealing with something very sensitive about human emotions, about the twin emotions of pity and fear. At the same time, the approach is very scientific. He is talking about the purpose of the tragedy, this is not about an emotional tale that can be churned out at the spur of a moment. It is not about the sensitivity part alone. It is also about having a proper structure and having a sense of purpose.

“For we must demand of tragedy, any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poets should afford is that which comes from pity and fear, through imitation it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents.”

Now, I want you to connect this with the set of discussions that we had in the earlier sessions about the quality of the tragic hero, about the various other forms of plot that should come together, and significantly about imitation. This is an imitation of life. The spectacular which is shown on stage, the emotions which are generated, the twin emotions of pity and fear, which are generated, which are aroused, which are generated on stage and aroused in the minds of the spectator, it should be an imitation of life, there should be a sense of life that you get from it, it should be relatable, it should be something that will have a permanent effect on the audience.

And now he gives us an example of a set of things which could be considered as terrible or pitiful. “Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity, either in the act or the intention except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful.” So, these are all self-explanatory.

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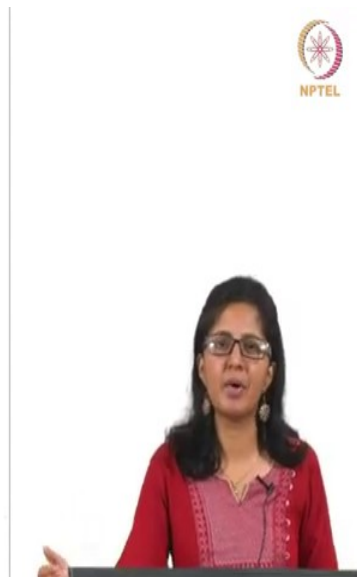
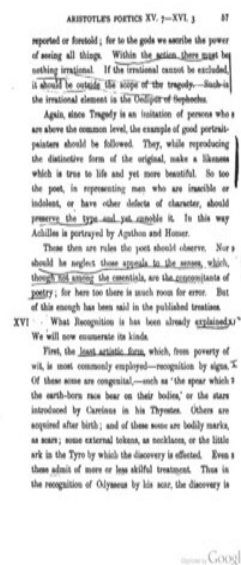
“So again, with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another, if for example, a brother kills or intends to kill a brother, a son, his father, a mother her son, a son his mother or any of other deed of the kind is done- these are the situations to be looked for by the poet.”

So, there are certain situations in human life, in human mind which will generate particular kinds of emotions. And here, Aristotle is also by and large betting on that. He may not indeed destroy the framework of the received legends, the fact for instance that Clytemnestra was slain by Orestes, and Eriphyle by Alcmaeon- but he ought to show invention of his own, and skillfully handle the traditional material. Let us explain more clearly what is meant by skillful handling.

So, he talks about what goes into the making of a good tragedy, and he is also trying to reiterate that it cannot be just about any kind of action which looks terrible at the outset. It needs to have a context. It cannot be an instance of an enemy killing an enemy because that is not entirely terrible, that is not entirely pitiful-that is something that we had already expected. Again, let me take you to the example of *Othello*:

Iago and Othello who were best friends. Iago is seen as 'honest Iago', Iago is seen as the best confidante that Othello could ever have. And for that Iago to turn into 'a devil'-that is how he is referred to at the end- for that Iago to turn into someone who also instigates murder, who brings about the ruin of whom the world thought was his friend. So that is where the pity lies, that is where the tragedy and the terrible deed lies. And he gives some examples about the skillful handling in Greek drama and Greek poetry.

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And what is extremely ironic and noteworthy over here is that there is a paradox inherent in tragic pleasure because it is not entirely happy, but it also gives you pleasure. It is only in the coming together of these terrible emotions that the pleasure element and tragedy is complete. If you think about any comedy, if you think about any ending which is pleasurable, which is happy, that does not really leave behind a happy feeling in terms of having received a sense of fulfillment in terms of looking at art.

And which is why, this tragic pleasure is seen as a paradox, and this is seen as one of the finest kinds of discussions to ever have within the scheme of Literary Criticism-about how tragedy which is aroused by the twin emotions of pity and fear makes you feel good, because there is a purgation of emotions which happens. And how does this happen?

In order to make sense of this I again want you to think about the characteristics of a good tragic hero which Aristotle has put forward in one of the sections and which we had discussed in one of the earliest sections. And there we find that the characters should be relatable. So, what happens is when the spectator is witnessing this play on stage he or she also realizes that 'this could happen to me as well'.

So, there is an empathetic identification with the character, with the incidents, with the turn of events which happens on stage. And there is a way in which we find that the spectator is willing to forget for a moment that this is something which just happens on stage. This is something which has been conceived in someone's mind. And later we know about how this gets talked about in the form of 'suspension of disbelief.'

So, this is a very fundamental thing in terms of making sense of what the spectator goes through, what are the kind of emotions that are generated in the minds of the spectators when they are watching a play. Especially when they are undergoing these significant emotions which could be life-changing as well. We know about a number of incidents where you read a fictional thing or you watch something which has been generated and crafted in this way; you will find that it has an appeal, an instant appeal, an emotional appeal to your own life and to your own sentiments.

Following Aristotle's lead, it would be appropriate to say that there are five things that he identifies as markers of a good tragedy. And based on the discussions that we have had so far, it

is also easy to identify these five markers. So, I would also like to wrap up this discussion by drawing your attention to these five markers which we find at a later point that these are things that would keep coming back to most of our discussions about fiction, about various kinds of art forms.

First of all, the first marker of tragedy is that it imitates an action. Remember, Aristotle also believed that, there can be tragedy, there can be a good tragedy, without character. But without action nothing is possible, action is very, very central to the conception to the construction of a good tragedy.

Secondly, it arouses pity and fear, and this response from the audience is what makes the tragedy superior to the other kinds of art forms. Thirdly, it displays the human image as such. And look at the way in which here we also find him focusing on the humanistic element, and we will of course have some discussions on Aristotelian humanism and how some of the later theorists have departed from it at a later point.

And fourthly, it ends in wonder. This is another important part that we shall keep coming back to when we refer to the other critics as well. There is an element of wonder that any kind of art form, any kind of literature leaves behind. And that is what makes the literary experience very different from that of the real experience that we have and just like when we see on stage terrible and pitiful things happening, and that gives us pleasure just like that paradox works. We find that anything which is well-conceived within the space of literature also has the power to generate wonder in human minds.

And finally, it is inherently beautiful. And there is something that we find which is written throughout in this discussion of *Poetics*, Aristotle also believes that tragedies are inherently beautiful, because wherever these twin emotions are generated, wherever this paradoxical emotion of pity and fear together give spectators a sense of pleasure, he also believed that it is inherently beautiful. You look at any number of examples around us and we find that there is no tragedy, there is no depiction of tragedy- we are talking about well-conceived, well-crafted tragedies- there is no tragedy which does not give this paradoxical pleasure. There is no tragedy which does not leave behind a sense of fulfillment. And there is always a sense of Catharsis, this

purgation that the spectator goes through, and sometimes it also lasts for some time. And for being able to theorize this Aristotle must have had a very fine mind which we also see in this beautiful structural analysis, which we also find in this almost scientific, clinical analysis that Aristotle has when it comes to identifying different components, about talking about how they all come together.

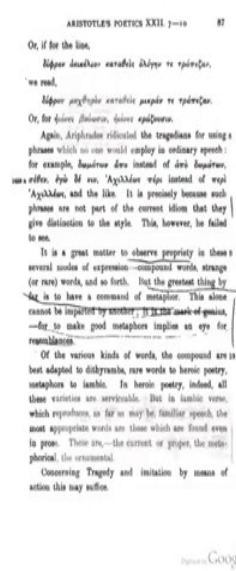
There is a sense of detachment that he employs while he is talking about these various components. But at the same time, there is a sensitivity, there is an involvement which he shows when he is talking about the human element and the emotional appeal that art or, by extension any kind of art form, has the capacity to generate.

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The slide displays a page from Aristotle's *Poetics*, specifically Book III, Chapter 1. The text is presented in a two-column format. The left column contains the original Greek text, and the right column contains an English translation and commentary. The English text discusses the use of metaphor and simile in poetry, noting that while such devices can be used for ornamentation, they should be used with moderation and to enhance the meaning of the text. The slide also features a video inset of a woman with glasses and a red top, who appears to be the presenter. In the top right corner of the slide, there is a logo for NPTEL (National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning).

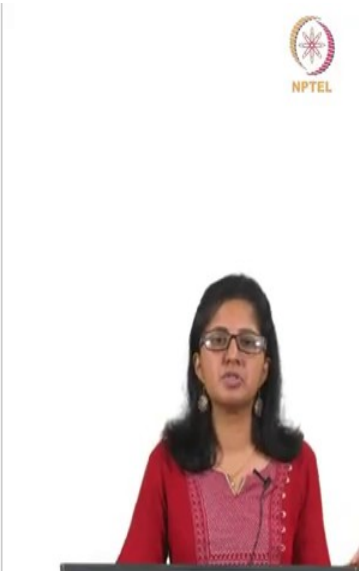
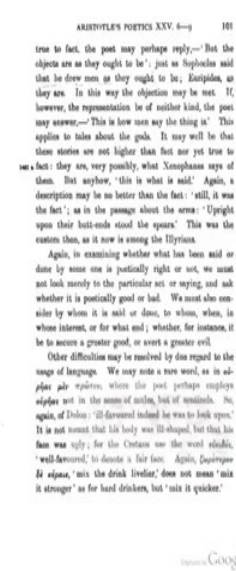
As we wrap up, it is also important to notice that Aristotle deals with these various elements at the micro as well as the macro level. He is infinitely concerned about the effect that tragedy has on the audience, but he also spends some time, considerable amount of time, towards the end and various sections talking about the minute details, about the micro details giving us examples from his contemporary times.

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And telling us in detail about how these minor things are also, these micro things are also extremely important in coming together and producing that effect.

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I encourage you to go through these final sections as well, and as you can already see, it is written in very lucid language and it is very easy to follow as well. And bear this in mind, even as we go on with the discussions related to other critics and theorists, this is one of the foundational texts. And we shall be coming back to many of the aspects that Aristotle spoke

about to see how the other critics departed from it or how they also built their own formulations based on this. I thank you for listening, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.