Poetics

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARISTOTLE

Aristotle was born around 384 B.C.E. in Stagira, a village in Central Macedonia in Northern Greece. Not much is known about Aristotle's mother, Phaestis; however, Aristotle's father, Nicomachus, was a court physician for the Macedonian King Amyntas II. Both Phaestis and Nicomachus died when Aristotle was an adolescent, and he spent the rest of his childhood under the care of a guardian. When Aristotle was 17 years old, he went to Athens and enrolled in Plato's Academy, where he lived and studied for nearly 20 years. Aristotle was taught by Plato, who was taught by Socrates before him. Aristotle left the academy around the time Plato died, and he traveled to the island Lesbos to study botany. Here, Aristotle met and married his wife, Pythias, and had a daughter by the same name. Aristotle returned to the Macedonian court around the year 338 B.C.E. and served as personal tutor to Alexander the Great, the future king of Macedonia. During this time, Aristotle taught at the Lyceum, a temple in Athens, where he founded the Peripatetic school of philosophy, which was based on science and inductive reasoning. Aristotle had several prominent students, including Ptolemy, a general under Alexander the Great and the future pharaoh of Egypt. Around 335 B.C.E., Aristotle's wife, Pythias, died, and he went on to marry his second wife, Herpyllis and have additional children—including a son, Nicomachus, named after Aristotle's father. 335 to 323 B.C.E. are thought to have been the most productive years of Aristotle's life. He extensively studied subjects like philosophy, politics, physics, poetry, and biology, and he published over 200 books, likely in manuscript form on papyrus. Thirty-one of Aristotle's works have survived antiquity, including *Poetics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*. In 322 B.C.E, Aristotle died at age 62 of natural causes on the Greek island of Euboea. Aristotle had a profound impact on early thought and philosophy and is often referred to as the "Father of Western Philosophy." Along with Plato and Socrates, Aristotle pioneered many of the theories and ideas that inform modern economics, politics, ethics, and science.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Poetics*, Aristotle writes about irrationalities in poetry, and he gives Sophocles's *Electra* as an example. In Sophocles's play, Electra is told that her brother, Orestes, was killed in a chariot race during the Pythian Games. Aristotle considers *Electra* irrational, since the Pythian Games existed in Sophocles's lifetime, not during the time when the events of the play are set. The Pythian Games—also known as the Delphic Games because they were held in the stadium of the Delphi sanctuary—began in the sixth century B.C.E. and were one of the Panhellenic Games of Ancient Greece. The Pythian Games were held in honor of Apollo, the Greek god of archery and dance, and they took place every four years—in a rotation whereby they were held two years after the Olympic Games, in between the Nemean Games and the Isthmian Games. The Pythian Games included several events in track and field (including a race ran in full armor), wrestling, boxing, horseback races, and a chariot race drawn by four horses, like the one said to have killed Orestes in *Electra*. The games also included events in dance and music, including pipe music and singing. Winners of the Pythian Games were awarded wreaths of bay laurel, a plant that was sacred to Apollo.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

It is thought that Aristotle's *Poetics* was largely compiled from lecture notes and personal writings, which is the case with his other works as well, including *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Nicomachean Ethics* lays the groundwork for Aristotelian ethics, a continuation of the work put forth by Plato and the Socratic question of how to best live and be morally upright. This question and others are considered in Plato's *Republic*, a Socratic dialogue in which Socrates is the main character and has numerous philosophical talks with fellow Greek thinkers regarding morality, justice, and happiness. In Plato's *Ion*, another Socratic dialogue, Socrates talks with Ion, a young poet, and debates the merit and truth of poetry, art, and imitation—a topic which is visited in Aristotle's own work. *Poetics* is also concerned with language and rhetoric—including individual words, meaning, and parts of speech—an area of study that is explored in *How to do Things with Words* by J.L. Austin. In his book, comprised of lectures given at Oxford and Harvard, Austin argues that language *does* things as well as *says* things (meaning that certain words perform certain actions, such as, "I now pronounce you husband and wife"). Austin's theory of the performativity of language is also examined in Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*, in which Butler maintains that language, like an act of violence, has the power to inflict deep and lasting pain and injury.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Poetics
- **When Written:** Unknown; likely between 335 and 323 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** Unknown; likely between 335 and 323 B.C.E.

- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Literary Theory
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Rumor Has it. Aristotle and Alexander the Great had a falling out related to political disagreements, and after Alexander's death in 323 B.C.E. under somewhat mysterious circumstances, widespread rumor in Ancient Greece was that Aristotle poisoned him. There was little evidence to support this rumor, but Aristotle was charged with impiety and moral corruption not long after and fled to Euboea, where he died shortly thereafter.

Rights and Rituals. Aristotle knew the secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries, which means that he was initiated into the cult of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, a town in the West Attica region of Ancient Greece. The Eleusinian Mysteries encompassed longstanding secret religious rites in the ancient world. Today, no one knows exactly what the ritual involved, but initiates—including Plato, Socrates, and Cicero—were said to embrace eternal life through an immortal soul.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses poetry—both in general and in particular—and he also considers the effects of poetry on those who consume it and the proper way in which to construct a poetic plot for maximum effect. He explores each component part of poetry separately and addresses any questions that come up in the process. Aristotle starts with the principles of poetry, which he says is only "natural." He enumerates the different types poetry: epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and music by pipe or lyre. Additionally, he claims that all poetry is a form of imitation that only differs in three ways: its medium, its object, and/or its mode of imitation. The medium of imitation depends on the kind of art (a painter or a sculptor uses color or shape as a medium), whereas a poet uses the medium of rhythm, language, and melody—each of which can be used alone or together to create some desired effect. The object is the thing that is imitated in a work of art—in this case, in a poem. Objects, which include people, things, and events, can be either admirable or inferior, meaning that objects are either morally good or morally bad. Lastly, an object's mode of imitation is the way in which an object is imitated. In epic poetry, an object is imitated through narration; however, in tragedy, an object is imitated via actors on a stage.

Aristotle argues that human beings have a natural proclivity for imitation, and since humans learn lessons through imitation from a young age, he maintains that people have a strong tendency to imitate people and things. Furthermore, people take pleasure in viewing distressing images from a safe distance, such as a stage. The pleasure people feel in viewing an imitation is in large part due to understanding. A person views an imitation, recognizes the thing being imitated, and finds pleasure in this understanding. Aristotle further argues that human begins also have a natural proclivity for rhythm and melody, so it is no wonder they tend to create imitations like poetry, which relies on language that has both rhythm and melody. Tragedy was born from dithyrambic poetry, which incorporates both poetry and dance. From there, tragedy evolved into what it is in Aristotle's time—which he refers to as tragedy's "natural state."

Comedy imitates inferior people, Aristotle claims, but such characters are not inferior in every way. Characters in comedy are guilty of "laughable errors"; however, such errors do not elicit painful emotions in the audience. A comedy does not imitate pain, and it should not provoke these emotions in others. Conversely, tragedy and epic poetry imitate admirable people, but epic uses only verse and is in narrative form. Plainly put, an epic does not involve song, and it is usually told through the lens of a single character narration. Epics are usually long, whereas a tragedy is often restricted to the events of a single day. Those who have a firm understanding of tragedy will also have a firm understanding of epic, as everything present is epic is also present in tragedy. However, all that is present in a tragedy cannot be found in an epic poem.

A tragedy is an imitation of an admirable action that has unity and magnitude. Tragedy is written in language that has rhythm and melody, and it is performed by actors, not by narration. Most importantly, tragedy purifies the audience by producing in them the emotions of fear and pity in a process known as catharsis. A tragedy has six components—plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and lyric poetry—and these components determine a tragedy's quality. Plot, however, is the most important component part of tragedy. Tragedy imitates actions, not people, and these actions are the events that make up the plot. Plus, the most effective way in which a tragedy produces catharsis is through recognition and reversal, which are both part of the plot. A tragedy must be "whole," and it must have a definite beginning, middle, and end. A tragedy must have magnitude, meaning it must produce astonishment in the audience, but its imitation cannot be arbitrary. If the action being imitated in a tragedy is too big or too small, the entire plot cannot be appreciated at once, and unity is forfeited. An imitation has unity if it represents a complete action, and the same goes for plot—a plot is only unified if it imitates a complete action.

Poetry does not imitate "what *has* happened," Aristotle argues, it imitates "what *would* happen," as long as it is probable or necessary. Historians and poets are not different because one writes in prose and one in verse; they are different because the former writes what *has* happened, while the latter writes what

would happen. Even if all historian wrote in poetic verse, their writing would still not be considered poetry. It is a poet's job to make plots, and those plots can include the sort of thing that has happened, since the sort of thing that has happened is likely to happen again. It is not enough for a tragedy to simply imitate a whole action—the imitation must also provoke in the audience the emotions needed for catharsis, and catharsis is most effectively produced through events that are unexpected.

Every tragic plot involves a change of fortune, and such plots can be either complex (in which a change of fortune involves recognition, reversal, or both) or simple (in which a change of fortune does not involve recognition or reversal). A reversal "is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed," which, of course, occurs because of "necessity or probability"—that is, in a way that seems likely and that follows logically from the story's previous events. Recognition "is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of the people marked out for good or bad fortune." The best plot, according to Aristotle, is one in which recognition and reversal occur at the same time, as they do in Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex**. Recognition combined with reversal involves fear and pity, which are the very foundation of tragedy, and either good fortune or bad fortune will be the outcome of such a combination. Tragedies that involve human suffering, such as in war, are also effective in bringing about catharsis.

The best tragedies, according to Aristotle, are those with complex plots. A good tragedy should not depict an overly moral character undergoing a change in fortune from good to bad, as this upsets audiences and does not inspire fear and pity. Similarly, an overly wicked character should not undergo a change of fortune from bad to good, as such a change isn't tragic and will not inspire fear or pity either. Still, a good tragedy *does* include a change in fortune from good to bad, as such plots are more tragic than plots that end in good fortune and will therefore elicit more fear and pity. Tragedy includes acts that are "terrible or pitiable," and these acts can occur between people of a close relationship (like family members), between enemies, or between neutrals. There is maximum fear and pity in "terrible or pitiable acts" between close characters, such as the murder of one's father or son.

Aristotle next considers characters within tragedy: he defines four things that go into the construction of a character. The first is goodness, or the moral essence of a character's actions and disposition. A character's imitation must also be appropriate, and it must have likeness, or similarity. Lastly, a character must be consistent, and if it is necessary or probable that a character behave in an inconsistent way, they should be "consistently inconsistent." Poets should always visualize a plot as they construct it so that they can spot inconsistencies and inappropriateness. A tragedy must also have complication and resolution, and both complication and resolution should be constructed with equal care and attention. A tragedy includes reasoning and diction, which can be broken down further into several of its own component parts, including nouns, verbs, and utterances. Clarity is most important in diction, as long as there isn't "loss of dignity." Clear diction includes standard words in common usage; however, using only common words in a poem is unoriginal and inartistic and leads to a "loss of dignity." Thus, a balance must be struck between standard words in common usage and "exotic expressions," which are coined by the poet or are otherwise non-standard. Good poetry uses all forms of diction, especially metaphor and uncommon words.

According to Aristotle, objections to poetry usually involve one of the following: a poem is impossible, irrational, harmful, contradictory, or incorrect. Often, that which seems impossible or irrational isn't as impossible as it may seem, especially since it is paradoxically likely for unlikely things to happen. Furthermore, that which seems contradictory or incorrect might be an imitation of an object as it *should* be or as it is *thought* to be, not as it actually *is*. In other words, Aristotle easily dismisses each of the usual objections to poetry. People might ask if tragedy is superior to epic, and Aristotle maintains that tragedy is absolutely superior. An epic poem lacks spectacle and lyric poetry, which are a "source of intense pleasure," and a tragedy is shorter. Aristotle argues that "what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being extended in time." For instance, if Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* were as long as Homer's *Iliad*, it would be much less impactful. Lastly, since an epic is so much longer than a tragedy, unity in an epic can be difficult to achieve. Because of this, Aristotle considers tragedy superior; however, he argues that it is fear and pity, and the subsequent catharsis, that really make tragedy superior to epic poetry.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aristotle – Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived from 384 to 322 B.C.E. Aristotle's writing and theories had a profound influence in the development of modern politics, science, and ethics. *Poetics*, which is thought to be compiled from Aristotle's lecture notes and journals, is his examination of art, particularly poetry. In *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses poetry in general, especially tragedy and epic poetry, and he examines the effects of poetry and the best way to construct a good plot. He defines and explores each of the component parts of tragedy and epic poetry, and he uses *Poetics* to argue four major points: first, that tragedy is more artistic and pleasing to an audience than epic poetry. Second, he argues that all art, including poetry, is an imitation and that such imitation through art is a natural aspect of humanity. Third, he argues that a tragedy should provoke feelings of fear and pity in the audience, and he claims that experiencing these emotions

"purifies" the audience in a process known as catharsis. Finally, Aristotle argues that all poetry, especially tragedy, requires balance between morality and wickedness, between common and novel language, and between magnitude and unity. Aristotle's *Poetics* is the oldest surviving work of literary theory, and it has informed the understanding, analysis, and development of poetry since it was written around 335 B.C.E.

Oedipus – Oedipus is a mythical Greek king and the main character in Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex**. Oedipus unknowingly murders his father and has sex with his mother— after he becomes aware of what he has done, Oedipus puts out his own eyes in despair. Aristotle mentions Oedipus several times in *Poetics* and uses him as an example of reversal and recognition.

Iphigeneia – Iphigeneia is a princess in Greek mythology, Orestes's sister, and a character in Euripides's *Iphigeneia at Aulis* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. According to these plays, Iphigeneia is set to be sacrificed, but she escapes. She runs to a foreign country and is made a priestess. Years later, her brother, Orestes, arrives in the foreign country and is set to be sacrificed himself. Before Orestes is killed, both Orestes and Iphigeneia realize they are siblings, and Orestes escapes. Aristotle uses the *Iphigeneia* several times as an example in *Poetics*, especially of recognition.

Odysseus – Odysseus is a legendary hero in Greek mythology and the main character in Homer's *Odyssey*. Aristotle uses Odysseus as an example of reversal and recognition in *Poetics* and refers multiple times to the "bath-scene" in the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus's identity is discovered by a nurse when she notices his telltale scar.

Sophocles – Sophocles was an ancient Greek playwright of tragedy who lived in the fifth century B.C.E. Like Homer, Aristotle uses Sophocles and his tragic plays—including **Oedipus Rex**, *Antigone*, and *Electra*—to make specific points and arguments in *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the addition of a third actor (previous tragedies used only one or two actors to play all parts) and scene-painting are attributed to Sophocles.

Homer – Homer was a Greek writer who is thought to have lived between the 12th and eighth centuries B.C.E. Aristotle uses Homer and his famous epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to make specific points and arguments throughout *Poetics*. Aristotle admits that there must have been talented poets before Homer; however, since we know little about earlier poets, Aristotle's criticism of poetry begins with Homer. Aristotle argues that Homer greatly influenced the development of poetry as a whole, and he claims that Homer was the first poet to make good use of reasoning and diction.

Achilles – Achilles is a hero in Greek mythology and a character in Homer's epic poem the *Iliad*. Aristotle refers to Homer's portrayal of Achilles as a character with bad traits who is still depicted as a good person; Aristotle argues that such character (morality) should be a poet's aim. Achilles kills Hector, but Homer still manages to make Achilles look like a good and moral man overall.

Aegisthus – Aegisthus is a figure in Greek mythology. He is Orestes and Iphigeneia's stepfather, and he appears in Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, and Sophocles's *Electra*. As the story goes, Aegisthus is killed by Orestes as an act of revenge after Aegisthus works with Orestes's mother, Clytemnestra, to kill Orestes's father, Agamemnon. Aristotle briefly mentions Aegisthus to illustrate the violence involved in tragedy.

Aeschylus – Aeschylus was an Ancient Greek playwright of tragedy who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. Aristotle briefly mentions Aeschylus and his *Oresteia* plays to make specific points and arguments in *Poetics*. Aeschylus is generally known for increasing the number of actors in a production from one to two. Prior to Aeschylus, only a single actor interacted with the chorus during plays.

Ajax – Ajax is hero in Greek mythology and a character in Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles's *Ajax*. Aristotle doesn't mention a specific poem featuring Ajax; however, he does claim that any poetry that features Ajax will have plenty of suffering. As the story goes, Ajax loses Achilles's armor to Odysseus and subsequently kills himself with a sword given to him by Hector.

Creon – Creon is a king in Greek mythology and a character in Sophocles's *Antigone*. After Antigone hangs herself, Creon's son, Haemon, tries to kill Creon—but Haemon fails and then kills himself. Aristotle mentions Sophocles's play when he explains plots with characters who are on the verge of knowingly committing a "pitiable act" but stop, as Haemon does. Aristotle argues that such plots are the worst, since there is no suffering.

Hector – Hector is a prince in Greek mythology and a character in Homer's *Iliad*. According to Homer, Hector is killed by Achilles in a fight; however, Achilles chases Hector around the city of Troy three times before Hector faces him to fight. Aristotle claims Hector's pursuit would be ridiculous on stage in a tragedy, but such irrationalities are less problematic in epic poetry and often happen outside the story (meaning they are simply referred to rather than described in detail).

Medea – Medea is a figure in Greek mythology and the main character in Euripides's *Medea*. Medea murders her own children in revenge after her husband, Jason, runs off with a princess. Aristotle uses Medea and the murder of her children as an example of a "terrible and pitiable act" that produces pity and fear in the audience. Aristotle also refers to *Medea* as relying on "theatrical device," as Medea escapes by way of a supernatural chariot after she murders her children, which Aristotle considers less artistic than a resolution that arises from plot.

Menelaus – Menelaus is a king in Greek mythology. He is a major character in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but Aristotle references Euripides's Menelaus in *Orestes*. Menelaus is

Orestes's uncle, and in *Orestes*, Menelaus refuses to support Orestes after Orestes kills his step-father, Aegisthus, and his mother, Clytemnestra. Aristotle refers to Euripides's Menelaus as an example of "unnecessary badness" in a character, since it is expected that Menelaus will help Orestes because he is his uncle.

Merope – Merope is a queen in Greek mythology and a character in Euripides's lost tragedy *Cresphontes*, in which Merope nearly kills her son unwittingly but stops when she recognizes him. Aristotle uses Merope and *Cresphontes* as an example of the best kind of plot: one in which a "pitiable act" is unknowingly committed but stops because of recognition.

Orestes – Orestes is a figure in Greek mythology and Iphigeneia's brother. He is the subject of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Sophocles's *Electra*, and Euripides's *Iphigeneia at Aulis* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, all of which Aristotle mentions in *Poetics*. Aristotle uses Orestes, whose identity is concealed and later revealed in each of the tragedies that feature him, to explain how recognition works in tragedy.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Euripides – Euripides was a Greek playwright of tragedy during the fifth century B.C.E. Aristotle uses Euripides's tragedies *Medea* and *Orestes* to make points and arguments in *Poetics*.

Aristophanes – Aristophanes was an Ancient Greek playwright of comedy who lived during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Aristotle mentions Aristophanes only briefly in *Poetics*, which generally does not explore comedy (it is thought that the part of the manuscript focusing on comedy did not survive antiquity).

Herodotus – Herodotus was a Greek historian from the fifth century B.C.E. Aristotle uses Herodotus to illustrate his point that histories are different from poetry because histories focus on a specific time, while poems focus on a specific action.

TERMS

Catharsis – Catharsis is the process of feeling and therefore purifying one's body of strong emotion, particularly fear and pity. **Aristotle** refers to catharsis as "purification," and he argues it is the ultimate aim of tragedy. Tragedy is associated with fear and pity, Aristotle argues, and these are the emotions tragedy should provoke in the audience. The most effective way in which tragic poetry produces catharsis, Aristotle maintains, is through plots that include reversal and recognition. Catharsis can also be brought about through spectacle; however, Aristotle argues that catharsis through spectacle is "less artistic" and relies on production, not poetry. According to Aristotle, a properly-constructed tragedy should contain a plot that evokes catharsis at the mere mention of events, like **Sophocles**'s Oedipus Rex, in which **Oedipus** unknowingly murders his father, has sex with his mother, and then puts out his own eyes in despair.

Change of Fortune – A change of fortune is the part of a plot in which there is a change in fortune, either from good to bad or vice versa. Every tragedy has a change of fortune, **Aristotle** claims, and this change should occur because of a character's error rather than because of a moral defect. Aristotle argues that the best tragedies are those with a change from good fortune to bad, as such changes are tragic and "pitiable" and thus most effective for producing catharsis.

Character – Character is one of the component parts of tragedy. By character, **Aristotle** does not always mean the people depicted in poetry; instead, character in *Poetics* often refers to a character's moral fortitude and disposition. According to Aristotle, characters are either admirable or inferior, and their actions reflect this disposition. Aristotle argues that character is the second-most important component of tragedy after plot. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, is an imitation of an action, not merely of a person, and character determines if that action will be admirable or inferior—that is, moral or immoral. Aristotle believes that the best tragedies have balance between good and evil character. A character shouldn't be too moral, but their change of fortune should arise from an error that is *not* a moral deficiency.

Comedy – Comedy is one of the five forms of poetry. According to **Aristotle**, comedy is an imitation of inferior people; however, that is not to say characters in comedies are inferior in every way. A comedy is a play that depicts some sort of "laughable error" or disgrace that, in turn, elicits some emotion in the audience, such as embarrassment or delight. A comedy does not evoke fear or pity from the audience, as these emotions are particular to tragedy. *Poetics* does not include a detailed criticism of comedy, as Aristotle's assessment of comedy is thought to be in a part of the manuscript that did not survive antiquity.

Complex Plot – A complex plot is one of the two kinds of plot. Plots can be either simple or complex, and a complex plot is one in which the change of fortune comes about because of recognition, reversal, or both. According to **Aristotle**, the best plots are complex, as complex plots are most effective for producing catharsis, which is the trademark of tragedy. Aristotle gives **Homer**'s *Odyssey* and **Sophocles**'s Oedipus Rex as examples of complex plots, as **Odysseus** undergoes recognition and **Oedipus** undergoes both recognition and reversal.

Complication – A complication is the part of a tragic plot that includes everything from the beginning of the play up to the point of the change of fortune. A tragedy must have both complication and resolution, and a complication can even occur outside the events of a play, such as action that occurs before

the play starts but has bearing on the plot. Complications and resolutions should be constructed with equal care, **Aristotle** says, to avoid one part of the play overshadowing another.

Diction – Diction is the composition of a poem's verse. Diction includes utterances—like commands, answers, and prayers—along with the following: phoneme, syllable, connective, noun, verb, conjunction, and inflection. Diction's most important quality is clarity, **Aristotle** argues, as long as there is no "loss of dignity." The clearest words are those in current and frequent usage; however, use of only common words is unoriginal and can cause a poem to lose "dignity"—that is, it can make a poem appear inartistic. Balance must be found between clarity and dignity, Aristotle contends, and a poet's diction should include "exotic expressions," like nonstandard words and metaphor.

Dithyrambic Poetry – Dithyrambic poetry is one of the five forms of poetry. A *dithyramb* is an ancient Greek hymn and dance performed in honor of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and theater, and it is one of the earliest forms of theater and public performance. **Aristotle** claims that tragedy, another form of poetry, came directly from dithyrambic poetry.

Epic Poetry – Epic poetry is one of the five forms of poetry **Aristotle** examines in *Poetics*. Like tragedy, Aristotle argues that epic poetry is an imitation of admirable people, but he maintains that epic isn't as highly-regarded as tragedy. Unlike tragedies, epic poems use only verse and are narrative in form, and epics also lack spectacle and lyric. Epics are longer than tragedies and are unlimited in respect to time; however, Aristotle argues, epics should still imitate a whole action and have unity. An epic poem is either simple, complex, or based on suffering—and while epics generally have great scope, the plot of an epic should not be so large that it can't be understood in a single view. Unity can be difficult to achieve in an epic, Aristotle argues, which is one of the reasons why tragedy is superior to epic. In fact, Aristotle argues that tragedy surpasses epic in many ways, but mostly because tragedy leads to catharsis. Epic poetry can produce *any* emotion in the audience, whereas tragedy produces fear and pity specifically, which are required for catharsis. Aristotle mainly cites **Homer**'s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as examples of epic poetry.

Error – Error is often referred to by the Greek *hamartia*, and it is best understood as the fatal flaw that brings about a character's downfall. In the plot of a tragedy, **Aristotle** argues, there should be some change of fortune—a change from good fortune to bad or vice versa—and that change should arise from some sort of error. For instance, **Oedipus**'s error (his fatal flaw) in **Sophocles**'s Oedipus Rex is pride, which causes Oedipus to ignore a god's prophetic warnings. The best tragedies, Aristotle argues, are those with errors that lead to a change from good fortune to bad fortune, as such tragedies produce the level of fear and pity necessary for the audience to experience catharsis.

Iambic Trimeter – Iambic trimeter is a form of poetic verse that has three iambic units, or "feet," which is a unit of poetry composed of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. According to **Aristotle**, iambic trimeter was first developed by **Homer** and took the place of trochaic form, which has four iambic units instead of three. Aristotle claims that iambic trimeter is a natural form of poetic verse because it mimics movement and is closest to natural speech.

Imitation – **Aristotle** argues that all art—be it a painting, a dance, or a poem—is an imitation. Art imitates some object (like an apple in a still life or a war in a poem), and that object is either admirable or inferior, meaning it is either morally good or morally bad. Imitation is often referred to by the Greek *mimesis*, and Aristotle argues that imitation comes naturally to human beings, which means that poetry and other forms of artistic expression are natural to human beings as well. According to Aristotle, all imitations differ in one or more of three ways: their medium, object, and/or mode of imitation.

Lampoon – A lampoon is a type of comedy in which a single person is satirized. According to **Aristotle**, when comedy first emerged, lampoonists were known as poets of comedy because comedy was more highly regarded as a form of poetry than lampoons. Aristotle claims that Crates, an Athenian comic poet from the fifth century B.C.E., was the first to develop universal comic storylines rather than just lampoons.

Lyric Poetry – Lyric poetry is one of the component parts of tragedy. Lyric poetry is verse put to song, and it is not found in epic poetry. Lyric poetry (in addition to spectacle) "is a source of great pleasure," **Aristotle** argues, because human beings have a natural proclivity for rhythm and music. Lyric poetry is one of the reasons why Aristotle maintains that tragedy is superior to epic poetry.

Magnitude – For an artist to imitate an object of beauty, **Aristotle** says, that imitation must possess all the parts it aims to imitate, and its magnitude cannot be arbitrary. Magnitude speaks to the actual size of something, but it also refers to metaphorical size and scope. Objects of imitation must be large enough to produce astonishment but small enough to be readily taken in with one view to maintain unity.

Medium – Medium is the means through which an artist imitates an object. In visual art and painting, the medium of imitation is color and shape. In the art of poetry, which **Aristotle** is particularly concerned with, the medium is rhythm, language, and melody. According to Aristotle, imitations differ only in their medium, object, or mode of imitation.

Mode – Mode is the way in which an artist imitates an object. For example, in epic poetry, the mode of imitation is narration; however, in tragedy, the mode of imitation is actors on a stage. According to **Aristotle**, imitations differ only in their medium, object, or mode of imitation.

Object – An object is the thing that is imitated in a work of art.

According to **Aristotle**, an object can be anything—including a person, an inanimate object, or an event—and it is often beautiful, although this isn't always the case. Aristotle argues that an object is either admirable or inferior (it is either morally good or morally bad) and can be imitated in many ways (known as the mode). The means through which an object is imitated is known as the medium. An object must possess appropriate magnitude, Aristotle says, meaning it should be big enough (either literally or metaphorically) to produce astonishment, but not so big that unity is disrupted and the object can't be taken in a single view. Aristotle claims that an object can be imitated in one of three ways: as it is, as it is said or thought to be, or as it should be. For example, portrait-painters often paint people as better-looking than they actually are.

Plot – A plot is a component of tragedy and, according to **Aristotle**, the most important part. Per Aristotle, tragedy is an imitation of "actions and of life," and those events constitute the plot. Plots can be either complex, simple, or based on suffering. The best plots, Aristotle contends, are those in which reversal and recognition occur simultaneously, as in **Sophocles**'s Oedipus Rex. A plot must have magnitude, Aristotle says, but it should not be so large as to disrupt unity, which means it should be comprehensible with a single view. Plots with a change of fortune from good to bad are best for producing maximum catharsis, Aristotle says, and the mere mention of a tragic plot should elicit emotions of fear and pity in a listener. Tragedy and epic poetry are often judged by their plots; thus, Aristotle argues that plot should be carefully constructed.

Poetry – Poetry is the form of art discussed by **Aristotle** in *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the term poetry can be applied to any of the following forms: tragedy, epic poetry, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and music played on pipe or lyre.

Reasoning – Reasoning is a component part of tragedy. Reasoning is best understood as the effect produced by language—such as proof, refutation, or the production of fear and pity (catharsis)—and it allows characters to say what is important and appropriate. In written prose, reasoning serves the purpose of rhetoric and persuades readers to one point or another. Reasoning is the way in which a character argues a point or expresses an opinion, and according to **Aristotle**, it is the third-most important component of a tragedy.

Recognition – **Aristotle** defines recognition as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of the people marked out for good or bad fortune" within a poem, particularly in a tragedy or epic poem. Put simply, recognition is the plot device in which a character understands something that they didn't previously know. Like reversal, recognition should come from the structure of the plot, and it must occur according to necessity or probability. Recognition should occur *because* of events, Aristotle maintains, not just *after* them, and it can involve any number of things, such as people, items, or relationships. Aristotle frequently cites **Sophocles**'s Oedipus Rex as an example of recognition. In *Oedipus Rex*, a messenger comes to calm **Oedipus**'s fears that he has committed incest; however, the messenger ends up revealing Oedipus's true identity and confirming his fears—that Oedipus unknowingly murdered his father and had sex with his mother. There are several forms of recognition, Aristotle says, but the best kind of recognition arises directly from the plot rather than relying on simple tokens like a physical object or a scar.

Resolution – A tragedy has both complication and resolution, **Aristotle** says, and resolution is everything that happens from the beginning of the change of fortune to the end of the play. Aristotle argues that resolution and complication should be constructed with equal care, so one part of the tragedy does not overshadow the other. Both resolution and complication should rely on the plot, Aristotle maintains, not "theatrical devices" like **Medea**'s supernatural chariot at the end of **Euripides**'s *Medea*.

Reversal – **Aristotle** defines reversal as "a change to the opposite in the actions being performed" that occurs in accordance with necessity or probability. In other words, it refers to the kind of plot twist where things seem to be going one way but then go in the opposite direction. In *Poetics*, Aristotle cites **Sophocles**'s Oedipus Rex as an example of reversal. A messenger brings **Oedipus** news meant to calm his fear that he has committed incest, but in disclosing Oedipus's true identity, the messenger confirms Oedipus's fears instead of allying them. Reversal is most powerful, Aristotle argues, when it occurs along with recognition (as it does in *Oedipus*), and he contends that both should arise from the plot and not from an outside source. Recognition and reversal combined produce either good or bad fortune as an outcome, and they involve fear and pity and thus produce catharsis, which Aristotle argues is the true aim of tragedy.

Rhetoric – Rhetoric is reasoning in written word. **Aristotle** doesn't go too far into rhetoric in *Poetics* (he addresses that in his other manuscript *Rhetoric*); however, he does claim that poets of contemporary tragedy make their characters speak rhetorically, meaning they argue some point or express some idea.

Simple Plot – A simple plot is a plot in which a single, unified action is imitated and in which the change of fortune comes about without recognition or reversal. Episodic plots, in which the sequence of events is arbitrary and nonsensical, are, according to **Aristotle**, the worst kind of simple plot. As a general rule, Aristotle argues that complex plots are far superior to simple plots.

Spectacle – Spectacle is a component part of tragedy. Spectacle is best understood as the visual effects of a tragedy, and **Aristotle** argues that it has more to do with "the art of the property-manager" than with the art of the poet. Thus,

spectacle is the least important component of tragedy. Nevertheless, spectacle is still a source of pleasure in tragedy and has the ability to bring about catharsis, although Aristotle claims that catharsis from spectacle is less artistic than catharsis produced directly by the events of the plot.

Tragedy – Tragedy is one of the five forms of poetry, and it is the form **Aristotle** pays most attention to in *Poetics*. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, "is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude." Tragedy is written in "language made pleasurable" (meaning that language that has rhythm and melody), and it can be separated into parts of verse or song. Tragedy is performed by actors, not by narration, and it purifies the audience by producing in them the emotions of fear and pity in a process known as catharsis. Tragic poems have six component parts—lyric poetry, spectacle, plot, character, diction, and reasoning—and these parts determine a tragedy's quality. A tragedy should be whole and possess unity (meaning it should have a definite beginning, middle, and end) and can be one of four types: complex, simple, based on suffering, or based on character. Aristotle ultimately argues that tragedy is superior to epic poetry, mainly because tragedy produces catharsis and is more artistic.

Unity – Unity is the state of being complete or whole. According to **Aristotle**, an object of imitation must be whole or complete, and when an action is imitated in a tragedy or an event is imitated in epic poetry, the plot that makes up that action or event must be unified as well. Plots must have a definite beginning, middle, and end to be considered unified, and their magnitude cannot be so much as to prohibit holding the plot in a single view (that is, their scope should be neither too big nor too small). Unity in an epic poem is more difficult to achieve because epics are long, and that is one reason why Aristotle argues that tragedy, which is shorter and therefore easier to unify, is superior to epic poetry.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TRAGEDY VS. EPIC POETRY

Aristotle's *Poetics*, written around 335 B.C.E., is the oldest surviving work of literary theory, which is an area of study concerned primarily with the analysis of literature. *Poetics* is a critical look at poetry and the effect it has on those who consume it. According to Aristotle, poetry leads to a sort of "purification" through eliciting emotions—mainly pity and fear—in a process known as catharsis. In his definition of poetry, Aristotle includes epic poetry, like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and tragedy, such as Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex** and *Antigone*. Aristotle also includes comedy, like the plays of Aristophanes, dithyrambic poetry (hymns and dances performed in honor of the Greek god Dionysus), and all music performed on pipe or lyre. Despite this broad definition of poetry, however, Aristotle is chiefly concerned with tragedy and epic poetry—and with tragedy in particular. Through *Poetics*, Aristotle examines both tragedy and epic poetry and ultimately argues that tragedy, which he maintains is more pleasurable and more artistic, is a superior form of poetic expression.

Aristotle first examines tragedy, which he defines as an "imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude." According to Aristotle, tragedy must be put "in language made pleasurable," meaning the language should have "rhythm and melody" and even include song. A true tragedy can be separated into parts—plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and lyric poetry—is performed by actors, and elicits feelings of pity and fear in those who watch or read it. The most important component of a tragedy, Aristotle argues, is the plot: the purpose of tragedy is not to imitate people, but rather to imitate actions and life more generally. Therefore, "the events, i.e. the plot, […] is the most important thing of all." Tragedy imitates not "what *has* happened," Aristotle claims, but "the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e., what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity." Therefore, tragedy is not concerned with historical particulars, but with things that are more universal, like human suffering. For this reason, Aristotle maintains that tragedy is more poignant and meaningful than other forms of poetry. Tragic plots involve some change of fortune, either from good to bad or vice versa, and Aristotle maintains that the best tragedies are those with complex plots—those that involve a change of fortune that comes about because of reversal, recognition, or both. Reversal, of course, is a change in the opposite direction, and recognition involves a change from ignorance to knowing. As an example, Aristotle offers Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus discovers that he unknowingly murdered his father and slept with his mother. Aristotle argues that such complex plots are better than simple plots, which, by comparison, do not involve recognition or reversal in their change of fortune.

Epic poetry is similar to tragedy in that they both imitate admirable actions "in language made pleasurable." However, epic poetry relies only on verse (that is, poetry, as opposed to music) and is narrative in form, meaning it is often a story told through the lens of a single person rather than through multiple actors. Aristotle further points out that tragedies and epic poems differ in length, as epics are "unrestricted in time," but tragedies are usually confined to the acts of a single day and not much more. For instance, Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus Rex*

is just over 1,600 lines long; in contrast, Homer's epic poem the *Iliad* has over 15,000 lines of verse. Like a tragedy, an epic poem involves a plot that is either complex or simple, and it has the same components as tragedy. But only tragedy features lyric poetry (such as songs performed by the chorus of a play) and spectacle (action on a stage that is not related to language). Aristotle maintains that those who understand tragedy and what makes a tragedy either good or bad will easily understand epic poetry—everything that is present in epic poetry is also present in tragedy. However, all that is present in tragedy *cannot* be found in epic poetry, which is why Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to epic poetry.

Epic poetry has "language made pleasurable," meaning it is written in verse that is naturally rhythmic and melodic, like iambic verse—but it lacks spectacle and music. Aristotle argues that spectacle and music are sources of "intense pleasure" because people have a natural proclivity for rhythm and melody and are attracted to spectacle. Aristotle also claims that tragedy is better because "what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being extended in time." Imagine, Aristotle says, if *Oedipus Rex* had as many lines as the *Iliad*. The power of Oedipus's story and the resulting emotions it elicits in the audience would be diminished, Aristotle implies, if Sophocles's play was more drawn out. Overall, since a tragedy must produce feelings of fear or pity, rather just "any arbitrary pleasure" in those who consume it, tragedy surpasses epic poetry in "artistic effect" and is therefore a superior form of artistic expression.

IMITATION

Aristotle's *Poetics* is particularly concerned with *mimesis*, a Greek word used within literary theory and philosophy that loosely translates to "representation" or "imitation." In Ancient Greece, where Aristotle lived and wrote, art—including visual art and poetry—was considered mimetic. This idea means that, in one way or another, all art is a representation or imitation of nature, including human nature. *Mimesis* was a hot topic in Aristotle's time, and some writers and philosophers, such as Plato in his work *The Republic*, warned that art, especially poetry, should be approached with caution, as it is merely an imitation of nature as created in God's vision. Since poetry only imitates nature, Plato argues, it is too far removed from absolute truth. In *Poetics*, Aristotle weighs in on this broader argument about *mimesis*; however, he isn't concerned with imitation in quite the same way as Plato. Instead of arguing against poetry as Plato does, Aristotle more deeply explores the human tendency to imitate nature through art. In *Poetics*, Aristotle upholds the popular belief that all poetry is a form of *mimesis*; however, he implies that imitation isn't necessarily a bad thing, in large part because all human beings are naturally prone to imitation and respond to it with pleasure.

Aristotle argues that all forms of poetry—tragedy, epic poetry, comedy, dithyrambic poetry and dance; and music performed by pipe or lyre—are forms of imitation and can only differ three ways: their medium, their object, and their mode of imitation. In all poetry, Aristotle says, "the medium of imitation is rhythm, language and melody," and different types of poetic expression employ these mediums separately or together in some combination. For instance, music may use melody and rhythm, whereas dance uses only rhythm and tragedy uses all three. Imitations must have an object, and poetry imitates "agents," meaning people and events. These objects "must be either admirable or inferior," and the difference, Aristotle argues, is the difference between a tragedy and a comedy. According to Aristotle, comedies aim to "imitate people worse than our contemporaries," and tragedies imitate those who are "better" than us. Lastly, poetry differs in its mode of imitation. Imitation is accomplished in Homer's *Odyssey*, an epic poem, through the narration of a single person. In other forms of poetry, like tragic plays, imitation is created through multiple agents engaged in some activity. Poetry as a form of artistic expression can vary in many ways; however, Aristotle maintains that *all* poetry is a form of imitation.

Aristotle further argues that the human tendency to create art and poetry comes from a natural instinct for imitation. According to Aristotle, "imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood." This is how humans are different from animals, Aristotle says, as people learn through imitation and have a strong inclination to imitate people and things. Furthermore, Aristotle claims that human beings find "universal pleasure in imitations." People naturally take pleasure in looking at an accurate imitation of an object, especially those objects that otherwise cause some form of distress, like a wild animal or a corpse. The idea is that people find pleasure in viewing distressing and believable images, as long as there is adequate distance, such as that created through art and imitation. When human beings look upon an imitation in any form, Aristotle maintains, they find pleasure in the understanding of what exactly that form is attempting to imitate. Aristotle uses a painted portrait as an example. A portrait is the imitation of a specific person, and when one recognizes that person ("This is so-and-so"), it is a pleasurable experience. According to Aristotle, the pleasure derived from imitation is in knowing what an imitation aims to represent.

For Aristotle, imitation is not a question of good or bad, as it is for Plato; imitation, and therefore the creation of art and poetry, is simply human nature and will always be a part of the human experience. Aristotle maintains that some imitation is bad, such as a poorly-written poem that ignores probability or necessity, or a badly executed painting in which a female deer is depicted with antlers (because only male deer have antlers). But for Aristotle, the fact that *some* imitations are bad doesn't mean that *all* imitations are bad. While Aristotle doesn't

explicitly state whether imitation and therefore poetry is good or bad, he does imply that its existence is inevitable and should be assessed and questioned more thoroughly.

FEAR, PITY, AND CATHARSIS

In *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that the true aim of tragedy is to bring about a "purification" of emotion. Aristotle claims that "one should not seek every pleasure from tragedy, but the one that is characteristic of it." In other words, since fear and pity are characteristic of tragedy, these are the emotions a tragedy should produce in those who read or view it. This "purification," or production of fear and pity in the audience, is also known by the Greek word catharsis, and catharsis is evidence of the successful construction of a tragedy. According to Aristotle, writers of tragic poetry "should produce the pleasure which comes from pity and fear, and should do so by means of imitation." Such imitation is achieved one of two ways: through the representation of human suffering, which involves both destruction and pain, or the representation of events that occur "contrary to expectation but because of one another," as they do in a tragic plot that involves reversal and recognition. In *Poetics*, Aristotle underscores the importance of catharsis through fear and pity in the construction and consumption of tragedies, and he ultimately argues that tragic plots involving reversal and recognition are best for producing feelings of fear and pity.

Aristotle maintains that catharsis is a crucial part of tragedy and that tragic plots should evoke fear and pity specifically, as these are the emotions most often associated with tragic plots. Most tragedies involve human suffering, which, according to Aristotle, "is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on)." Such "terrible and pitiable" actions, as Aristotle calls them, should produce the emotions of fear and pity in the audience. A tragedy that does not elicit these emotions fails to meet the purpose of tragedy: to imitate a specific action as closely and accurately as possible, which in this case is human suffering. Aristotle ultimately argues that people find pleasure in viewing distressing imitations, like those found in tragedy, as long as such imitations are viewed from a safe distance. Catharsis through tragedy not only allows the audience to view a distressing image, it allows them to vicariously experience the same emotions.

According to Aristotle, the strongest catharsis comes from tragic plots that involve reversal. Aristotle defines reversal as "a change to the opposite in the actions being performed as stated—and this, as we have been saying, in accordance with probability or necessity." In other words, catharsis is best achieved during tragedies in which events occur contrary to what is stated, as long as those events are necessary and feasible. Aristotle gives Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex** as an example of tragic reversal: in Sophocles's tragic play, a messenger comes to Oedipus to free him of the fear that he has committed incest with his mother, and in doing so, the messenger produces the "opposite result." That is, instead of calming Oedipus's fears, the messenger confirms Oedipus's true identity and reveals that Oedipus really has committed incest and patricide. For Aristotle, catharsis is strongest in tragedies like *Oedipus Rex*, in which feelings of fear and pity are brought about because of an unexpected reversal of the plot. Unforeseen reversals add to astonishment, which, Aristotle maintains, is more powerful and complete when it is achieved spontaneously and happens for a reason.

In addition to reversals, Aristotle also argues that catharsis is best achieved through tragic plots that involve recognition. Aristotle defines recognition as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune." In other words, recognition is a sudden understanding or revelation, which for most of the plot remains unknown. Aristotle argues that there is more than one kind of recognition in tragedies. Recognition can occur "with respect to inanimate and chance objects; and it is also possible to recognize whether someone has or has not performed some action." Recognition can also occur on both sides of a tragedy, as it does in Euripides's *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, in which both Orestes and Iphigeneia recognize they are siblings, albeit at different times. However, Aristotle maintains, the type of recognition that involves good or bad fortune is particularly effective in the case of tragedy. Aristotle argues that recognition is most effective when it occurs at the same time as reversal, as it does in *Oedipus Rex*. In the play, Oedipus's recognition of his true identity unfolds simultaneously with the plot's reversal: when the messenger arrives with the intention of allaying Oedipus's incestuous fears, they reveal that Oedipus has murdered his real father and married his mother. The dual surprise of an unexpected reversal *and* recognition produces the strongest feelings fear and pity, which, Aristotle argues, is the true objective of tragedy.

Tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* that involve a change of fortune through reversal, recognition, or both are what Aristotle refers to as complex plots, as compared to simple plots, which do not involve either reversal or recognition. Aristotle contends that such reversals and recognitions "must arise from the actual structure of the plot, so that they come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability." Complex plots, Aristotle ultimately argues, are most effective at bringing about catharsis through feelings of pity and fear, which is the hallmark of a tragedy.

COMPONENT PARTS AND BALANCE

In *Poetics*, Aristotle examines the defining features of a successful poem, specifically of tragedy and epic poetry. He breaks down the required

component parts of an effective tragedy—including plot, character, diction, spectacle, reasoning, and lyric poetry—and he explores each component part individually. He discusses the parts of diction, the rhetoric behind reasoning, and the natural human inclinations that make lyric poetry and spectacle so pleasing and entertaining. Aristotle pays close attention to plot, which he contends is the most important component part of both tragedy and epic. Plots can be either complex or simple, but Aristotle maintains that the best tragedies and epic poems have complex plots with recognition and reversal occurring together at the same time, as they do in Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex**. Tragedy and epic poetry share many of the same component parts, and balance within each component part is equally important. For Aristotle, a good poem needs more than just the component parts—a good poem strikes the proper balance so that the poem is both astonishing and rational. Through *Poetics*, Aristotle implicitly argues that balance is a defining feature of all successful poetry, especially tragedy.

Aristotle discusses the component part of character, which he defines as the moral disposition of a character or action. Characters and actions can be either admirable or inferior—meaning they are either morally good or morally bad—but these traits must have proper balance in a poem. According to Aristotle, every tragedy includes a change of fortune from either good to bad or vice versa, and certain characters are marked within a play to undergo this change. A good tragedy should not depict overly moral characters undergoing a change from good fortune to bad, Aristotle argues, because this produces "disgust" in the audience. Moral characters who are left with bad fortune at the end of a play are upsetting to audiences. To avoid this, balance is needed within characters—they shouldn't be too good. Similarly, Aristotle argues that overly immoral characters who undergo a change in fortune from bad to good are also ineffective. A bad character changing from bad to good fortune is not tragic, Aristotle argues, and it will not lead to the feelings of fear and pity required for catharsis. Just as characters shouldn't be overly good, Aristotle likewise argues that they shouldn't be overly bad. A successful poem finds a way to make even bad characters look good, Aristotle says, but they shouldn't be so good as to be implausible. People are rarely *all* good and so implying they are isn't believable; however, a character mustn't be *all* bad either. A successful blending of good and bad traits in character, Aristotle argues, can be found in Homer's Achilles, who kills Hector in the *Iliad* but is still depicted as a good person. In Achilles, there is balance of good and bad character traits, which is what makes his death at the end of the *Iliad* tragic.

Aristotle also discusses the component parts of diction, which includes nouns and verbs, and he argues that a successful poem finds balance in its use of diction as well. The most important thing about diction, Aristotle says, is clarity, and the clearest words are those that are in frequent use and common circulation. Aristotle contends that clear words which are easily understood are best in poetry, provided their use does not result in a "loss of dignity." Using only common words in a poem is unoriginal and inartistic. Thus, a poem must find balance between common words and what Aristotle calls "exotic expressions." According to Aristotle, "exotic expressions" are those words not in common usage. Such "exotic expressions" may be in common use elsewhere, or they may be coined specifically by the poet. "Exotic expressions" can be created though lengthening and the addition of vowels or syllables, or through shortening and the removal of vowels or syllables. However, attention to balance is again required in diction, and too many "exotic expressions" can render a poem nonsense. Another form of "exotic expressions" is the use of metaphor, which is a noun applied to something else. For Aristotle, good use of metaphor is the mark of a natural poet and can disguise any number of poetic errors; however, the use of metaphor alone does not make a successful poem either. A good poem makes use of *all* parts of diction, including metaphor and other non-standard words. The blending of "exotic expressions" and common words is crucial in a successful poem so that it is both understandable and entertaining.

The need for balance is poetry is also seen in Aristotle's explanation of magnitude and unity. Magnitude is a tragedy's ability to produce astonishment and wonder, but this magnitude must be according to necessity or probability, and the tragedy must have unity. To have unity, a tragic plot must have a definite beginning, middle, and end, and it shouldn't be so large that it can't be readily held in one's memory. In other words, a tragedy needs balance between magnitude and unity, and it shouldn't be as big and astonishing as to disrupt unity or be implausible. For Aristotle, a defining feature of poetry is balance, and this balance is equally important in all of a poem's component parts.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

OEDIPUS REX

Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, which Aristotle mentions throughout *Poetics*, symbolizes the superiority of tragedy over other forms of poetry. As the story goes, Oedipus unknowingly murders his father and marries his mother. Oedipus is made king, but his pride keeps him from heeding prophetic warnings. One day, a messenger visits to calm Oedipus's incestuous worries and ends up confirming his fears instead. Upon realizing what he has done, Oedipus puts out his own eyes in despair. Aristotle cites *Oedipus Rex* as an

example of a complex plot in which reversal and recognition occur simultaneously, which is the best kind of plot for producing catharsis (a reaction of fear and pity in the audience). Oedipus's change of fortune occurs in the opposite direction at the exact moment he recognizes his true identity, and this tragic change ensures maximum fear and pity. In this way, *Oedipus Rex* is a near-perfect tragedy that represents the coming together of all components that Aristotle deems crucial to an effective, meaningful poem.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Poetics* published in 1997.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Let us discuss the art of poetry in general and its species—the effect which each species of poetry has and the correct way to construct plots if the composition is to be of high quality, as well as the number and nature of its component parts, and any other questions that arise within the same field of enquiry. We should begin, as it natural, by taking first principles first.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote constitutes Aristotle's introduction to *Poetics*, and it is significant because it explicitly lays out what Aristotle hopes to accomplish in his book. Aristotle claims he will discuss "the art of poetry and its species," which implies that there is more than one kind of poetry. Aristotle considers epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and certain types of music to fall under the greater umbrella of "poetry," and this understanding is reflected here. Aristotle says that he will discuss "the effect which each species of poetry has," which refers to the idea of catharsis. Catharsis is the emotional feelings an audience has in response to poetry, and Aristotle implies that different "species" of poetry have different effects. For example, a comedy provokes feelings of joy and humor, whereas a tragedy provokes feelings of fear and pity.

Poetics also explores "the correct way to construct plots if the composition is to be of high quality," and it details the component parts of tragedy and epic poetry, as well as the individual parts that make up diction, one of poetry's crucial components. Aristotle doesn't give step-by-step instructions on the proper way to construct a poem; rather, he gives a detailed explanation of each aspect of poetry and identifies what makes a poem either good or bad. The word "natural" here describes Aristotle's intention to begin with the principles when explaining poetry, but it also hearkens to his later argument that the creation of poetry as a form of imitation comes natural to human beings. *Poetics* is the oldest surviving piece of literary theory, and it outlines—perhaps for the first time—the very definition, effect, and purpose of poetry.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Epic poetry and the composition of tragedy, as well as comedy and the arts of dithyrambic poetry and (for the most part) of music for pipe or lyre, are all (taken together) *imitations*. They can be differentiated from each other in three respects: in respect of their different *media* of imitation, or different *objects*, or a different *mode* (i.e. a different manner).

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Aristophanes, Sophocles, Homer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the beginning of *Poetics*, and it is important because it identifies exactly what Aristotle considers to be poetry, and it also reflects Aristotle's opinion that all art, including poetry, is a form of imitation. Art was a popular philosophical topic during Aristotle's time, and many philosophers—such as Aristotle's teacher, Plato—considered art a form of imitation. Aristotle clearly agrees that art is an imitation (for example, a still-life painting imitates a piece of fruit or a vase). Poetry is no different: it imitates actions and people, and it is therefore a form of artistic expression.

Here, Aristotle lists all that he considers to be poetry. Tragedy, of course, refers to tragic plays such as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, and epic poetry includes lengthy poems such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Comedy, which isn't discussed in *Poetics* in any depth, includes humorous plays by writers such as Aristophanes. Aristotle even includes dithyrambic poetry—hymns and dances performed in honor of the

Greek god Dionysus—and music in his definition of poetry. Although *Poetics* is mainly concerned with tragedy and epic, Aristotle points out how broad the term "poetry" really is. Aristotle argues that all poetry is essentially the same thing (an imitation); the only difference among types of poetry, Aristotle implies, is *what* the poem imitates and *how* that imitation is accomplished.

Those who imitate, imitate objects; and these must be either admirable or inferior. (Character almost always corresponds to just these two categories, since everyone is differentiated in character by defect or excellence.). Alternatively they must be better people than we are, or worse, or of the same sort (compare painters: Polygnotus portrayed better people, Pauson worse people, Dionysius people similar to us).

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears in Aristotle's explanation of poetry as a form of imitation, and it is significant because it defines Aristotle's idea of an object and makes the distinction between his idea of "character" in poetry and the characters of any given poem. According to Aristotle, whatever an artist—in this case, a poet—choses to imitate is the "object" of imitation, be that object a person or a specific event. These objects are either "admirable or inferior," meaning that they are either morally good or morally bad, and this reflects Aristotle's idea of "character" in poetry.

This passage also implies that an imitation does not have to be true to life to be considered accurate. Aristotle claims that imitations, especially those of people in the form of characters, can be "better," "worse," or "the same sort" as people in general. To illustrate his point, Aristotle employs a list of painters from the fifth century B.C.E. Not much is known about Polygnotus, Pauson, or Dionysius; however, according to Aristotle's *Politics*, Pauson's work isn't suitable for young audiences. Many of Aristotle's references to artists and their works of art have been lost to antiquity, but Aristotle's point is clear: a piece of art can imitate an object as it is in life or in any other way an artist imagines.

Chapter 3 Quotes

In general, two causes seem likely to have given rise to the art of poetry, both of them natural.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during Aristotle's detailed account of the history of poetry, and it is significant because it implies that poetry is a natural and inevitable human creation. In the following chapter, Aristotle argues that human beings have a natural proclivity for imitation and for music, which are both reflected in the creation of poetry. Poetry imitates people and actions, and it does so in rhythmic language and song. Thus, as Aristotle implies here, the creation of poetry is, on both accounts, "natural."

The belief that humans have a natural instinct for music was also shared by Aristotle's teacher and fellow philosopher, Plato, who argued the same idea in his book *Laws*. This natural instinct for music, however, is one of the only ways in which Aristotle's view of poetry is similar to Plato's. In Plato's works, such as *Republic* and *Ion*, poetry is condemned as a poor imitation of that which was created by God. According to Plato, poetry as an imitation is too far removed from God's original to represent any real truth—but Aristotle doesn't consider poetry in quite the same way. For Aristotle, it isn't that imitation, and therefore poetry, is a good or bad thing; rather, imitation is merely an innate human tendency that will always be part of the human experience.

Imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from other animals, i.e. in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure in imitations. Wat happens in practice is evidence of this: we take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them (e.g. the shapes of the lowest species of animal, and corpses). The reason for this is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears in Aristotle's detailed account of the history of poetry, and it is significant because it further suggests that imitation, and therefore the creation of poetry, is a natural human instinct. Aristotle argues that beginning early in life, human beings learn from the process of imitation. Humans often learn to care for themselves and others by imitating their parents or others around them, and this point furthers Aristotle's argument regarding poetry. As poetry is itself a form of imitation, it is only natural for humans to create it.

Furthermore, Aristotle argues that human beings find natural pleasure in viewing objects of imitation, which also supports his theory that human beings have a tendency to create art and poetry. Aristotle is a philosopher, and he finds joy in knowledge and understanding; however, he implies here that everyone, not just philosophers, find joy in knowledge and understanding. (Despite the non-philosophers' "limited capacity" for deep knowledge and understanding, that is.) Aristotle also implies that human beings naturally find pleasure in viewing distressing images from a safe distance, such as on a stage or in the pages of a book, which further illustrates his argument that art and poetry are natural and therefore inevitable creations.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.

(By "language made pleasurable" I mean that which possesses rhythm and melody, i.e. song. By the separation of its species I mean that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song.)

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs in Aristotle's explanation of tragedy, outlines the key elements of tragic poetry, and it also reflects Aristotle's argument as to the importance of catharsis in tragedy. This passage illustrates exactly what makes a poem tragic: a tragedy imitates an action that is admirable (that is, it imitates an action that is morally good and associated with moral people), whole, and entertaining enough to inspire awe (it must possess "magnitude"). As explained in Aristotle's parenthetical aside, a tragedy can be separated into "different parts" of verse and of song, and it is written in "language made pleasurable," meaning it possesses rhythm through poetic meter.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is "performed by actors, not through narration," as is the case with other forms of poetry, like epic poetry, which is usually told through the lens of a single character narration. Furthermore, tragedy should also effect "through pity and fear the purification of such emotions." This line is a reference to catharsis, and it implies that consuming a tragedy should make the audience feel the emotions of fear and pity specifically. Here, Aristotle argues that each of these elements must be present for a poem to be considered a tragedy.

❝ So tragedy as a whole necessarily has six component parts, which determine the tragedy's quality. The medium of imitation comprises two parts, the mode one, and object three; and there is nothing apart from these.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in Aristotle's definition of tragedy, and it is important because it further explains tragedy and reflects the theory of art and poetry as a form of imitation. According to Aristotle, tragedy is made up of "six component parts"—plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and lyric poetry—and each of these elements together "determine the tragedy's quality." In *Poetics*, Aristotle breaks down poetry and tragedy specifically, and he suggests that what seems complicated and difficult to understand is really quite simple. Poetry, and all forms of imitation for that matter, vary in only three ways: the mode, object, and medium of imitation.

Aristotle says that "the medium of imitation comprises two parts" of the six component parts of tragedy, which refers to

lyric poetry and diction. The medium is the means through which an artist imitates an object, and a tragic poet imitates an object through lyric poetry and diction (music and language). The mode is how an artist imitates an object, and in a tragedy, a poet imitates through the use of reasoning, or rhetoric. Lastly, the object, or the thing that a tragic poet imitates, includes plot (the events that are imitated in tragedy), character (the people or actions that are imitated), and spectacle (the use of visual effects). There is nothing to tragedy except these six component parts, which correspond with either the mode, medium, or object of imitation.

❝ Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in actions, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality; people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare. So the imitation of a character is not the purpose of what the agents do; character is included along with and on account of the actions. So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in Aristotle's definition of tragedy, and it is important because it further illustrates Aristotle's idea of character and underscores his argument as to the importance of plot within a tragedy. For Aristotle, "tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life." These actions constitute the plot of a tragedy, and since tragedy itself seeks to imitate these actions, this highlights the importance of plot within a tragedy. For all intents and purposes, a tragedy is an imitation of the plot, and this is why it "is the most important thing of all."

This quote also illustrates how actions and plot reflect the "quality," or morality, of a character's actions, not necessarily the character alone. Actions determine if a character is good or bad, which is why Aristotle says "well-being and ill-being reside in actions." Thus, since one must do good to be good, it is the "goal of life" to do good things. Aristotle's argument suggests that morality is rooted in what people and characters do, not who they are, which makes their actions (the plot) especially important. However, Aristotle points out that people don't "achieve well-being" simply because they do good things; their "well-being" is entirely dependent on "how they fare," which is to say a character's wellbeing relies on chance and how others perceive and accept their actions. Being morally good is less about who a person is—it's more about how that person, or character, acts.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Any beautiful object, whether a living organism or any other entity composed of parts, must not only possess those parts in proper order, but its *magnitude* also should not be arbitrary; beauty consists in magnitude as well as order. For this reason no organism could be beautiful if it is excessively small (since observation becomes confused as it comes close to having no perceptible duration in time) or excessively large (since the observation is then not simultaneous, and the observers find that the sense of unity and wholeness is lost from the observation, e.g. if there were an animal a thousand miles long). So just as in the case of physical objects and living organisms, they should possess a certain magnitude, and this should be such as can readily be taken in at one view, so in the case of plots: they should have a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears when Aristotle outlines the basic concepts of plot, and it is significant because it explains the ideas of magnitude and unity, and it illustrates the importance of these concepts and their required balance within a tragic plot. Aristotle claims that "any beautiful object" in art, whether that object is a landscape imitated in a painting or a person imitated in a tragedy, must resemble whatever said art is meant to imitate. Furthermore, this passage explains that poetry's "*magnitude*," or its ability to inspire awe and wonder in others, "should not be arbitrary." In other words, an object of imitation—in this case, a tragic plot—must be enough to entertain and impress, but it should be neither too small nor too large.

Aristotle's argument has two parts: first, it is impossible to appreciate an object's beauty if it is "excessively small." Something that is too small escapes the human eye and is not appreciated for anything other than its small size. Secondly, if an object is too large, like "an animal a thousand miles long," it is likewise impossible to appreciate. This is

how Aristotle views art, and particularly how he views the plots of tragedies. A tragic plot must have unity—meaning it must be complete and possess a discernable beginning, middle, and end—and it must be of an appropriate length as to "readily be held in memory." A tragic plot must have both unity and magnitude, which also reflects Aristotle's argument that balance is a key element in all poetry, especially tragedy.

❝ It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would be a history in verse just as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Herodotus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The quote appears as Aristotle explains the basic concepts of a tragic plot, and it is important because it illustrates the difference between poetry and history in Aristotle's view. Aristotle claims that it is the job of a poet to imitate what "*would* happen," not "what *has* happened," and this distinction is the difference between a poet and a historian. In other words, a poet imitates what is "possible in accordance with probability or necessity," and a historian records what actually "*has* happened." What has happened before certainly could happen again, which is why poets are able to write about historical events.

Aristotle argues that it is not the type of language used that distinguishes poetry from history, and he offers Herodotus, a fifth-century B.C.E. Greek historian, as an example. Ironically, Herodotus uses language that is quite poetic, but this alone does not make him a poet. Since Herodotus writes about the sort of things that *did* happen, not what *could* or *would* happen, Herodotus is a historian, regardless of the language he uses in his writing. This passage also introduces Aristotle's argument that poetry must be "possible in accordance with probability or necessity," which is an argument that resurfaces throughout the book. Notably, Aristotle claims poetry must be probable *or* necessary, not probable *and* necessary. This distinction implies that what may be necessary is not always probable (and vice versa), which suggests that events in poetry are not always both probable and necessary.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ So there are these two parts of the plot—reversal and recognition; a third is suffering. Of these, reversal and recognition have already been discussed; *suffering* is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on).

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which appears as Aristotle explains the different types of poetry and components of plot, illustrates the importance of fear and pity in the production of catharsis. Furthermore, this passage identifies reversal, recognition, and the imitation of human suffering specifically as the means through which poetry provokes feelings of fear and pity in others. Plot includes both reversal and recognition, which Aristotle argues are most effective at bringing about catharsis in an audience. It also includes human suffering ("e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on"), which has much the same effect.

Aristotle refers to multiple tragedies and epic poems that include reversal and recognition, such as *Oedipus Rex*, the *Iphigeneia*, and the *Odyssey*, and he likewise gives plenty of examples of poetry that imitates the act of suffering and involves "destruction or pain." For example, in addition to the human suffering clearly present in *Oedipus Rex*, the *Iphigeneia*, and the *Odyssey*, there is also human suffering to be found in the *Iliad*, *Electra*, and *Medea*, all of which are also mentioned by Aristotle. In other words, Aristotle implies that suffering is a universal human trait, and he further implies that viewing the imitation of suffering brings about the feelings of fear and pity in an audience in part because they are so familiar with suffering and can easily empathize.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ The construction of the best tragedy should be complex rather than simple; and it should also be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity, since that is the distinctive feature of this kind of imitation. So it is clear first of all that decent men should not be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune—this does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust. Nor should depraved people be seen undergoing a change from bad fortune to good fortune—this is the least tragic of all: it has none of the right effects, since it neither agreeable, nor does it evoke pity or fear. Nor again should a very wicked person fall from good fortune to bad fortune—that kind of structure would be agreeable, but would not excite pity or fear, since the one has to do with someone who is suffering undeservedly, the other with someone who is like ourselves (I mean, pity has to do with the underserving sufferer, fear with the person like us); so what happens will evoke neither pity nor fear.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20-1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Aristotle outlines the best kind of tragic plots, and it is significant because it underscores the importance of the emotions of fear and pity in bringing about catharsis through tragedy; however, this quote also highlights the importance of balance within poetry, especially tragedies. According to Aristotle, catharsis brought about by a tragedy must include feelings of fear and pity, "since that is the distinctive feature of this kind of imitation." In other words, since a tragedy is supposed to imitate actions of fear and pity, these are the emotions that a tragedy should provoke in an audience.

Furthermore, this quote reflects the proper balance that must be struck between good and bad in order to elicit feelings of pity and fear in an audience. "Decent men," or those who are overly good and moral, should not be imitated as undergoing a change from good fortune to bad, as this produces feelings of "disgust," not pity or fear. A moral character who ends up with bad fortune is upsetting to audiences, and Aristotle argues that an overly immoral character who ends up with good fortune is likewise upsetting and is not tragic at all. A character who ends up with good fortune inspires anger, not fear and pity, and such an imitation will not bring about the desired catharsis. The best character to bring about feelings of fear and pity in an audience, then, is one who exhibits a balance between that which is considered too good and that which is considered too bad.

❝ We are left, therefore, with the person intermediate between these. This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change of bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind. He is one of those people who are held in great esteem and enjoy great good fortune, like Oedipus, Thyestes, and distinguished men from that kind of family.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Euripides, Sophocles, Oedipus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in Aristotle's account of tragic plots, and it is significant because it further reflects the balance required within poetry; however, this passage also introduces Aristotle's idea of an "error," which is also known within literature by the Greek *hamartia*. According to Aristotle, a character must strike the perfect balance between good and bad: a character shouldn't be too moral, but their change of fortune should come about because of an "error," not because of any "moral defect or depravity." This balance ensures that the audience will not be "disgusted" by the character's change of fortune, and this change will provoke feelings of fear and pity in the audience.

Aristotle references Oedipus and Thyestes as examples of his argument. Thyestes may be a reference to Euripides's lost play by the same name, but Oedipus is a reference to Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. In this tragedy, the titular Oedipus is neither overly good nor overly bad, and he commits his crimes—killing his father and having sex with his mother—in ignorance. The "error" that brings about Oedipus's downfall is that he is too proud to heed the prophetic warnings about these mistakes, and this "error" leads to maximum feelings of fear and pity in the audience.

It is possible for the evocation of fear and pity to result from the spectacle, and also from the structure of events itself. The latter is preferable and is the mark of a better poet. The plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens; this how someone would react on hearing the plot of the *Oedipus*. Producing this effect through spectacle is less artistic, and is dependent on the production. Those who use spectacle to produce an effect which is not evocative of fear, but simply monstrous, have nothing to do with tragedy; one should not seek every pleasure from tragedy, but the one that is characteristic of it. And since the poet should produce the pleasure which comes from pity and fear, and should do so by means of imitation, clearly this must be brought about in the events.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Sophocles, Oedipus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which appears in Aristotle's explanation of the best kinds of tragic plot, again underscores the importance of fear and pity specifically in bringing about catharsis for a tragedy's audience, and it further highlights how spectacle can also evoke the same emotions. According to Aristotle, the plot of a tragedy should elicit feelings of fear and pity by mere mention of the tragedy's events, as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* does. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus unknowingly murders his father and has sex with his mother—the mere mention of these mistakes is enough to make anyone feel emotions of fear and pity, so watching or reading *Oedipus Rex* is not necessary to experience the associated catharsis.

While Aristotle argues that intricate plots, like those developed by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, are the best at producing feelings of fear and pity in an audience, he claims the use of spectacle can achieve the same emotions. Spectacle is the visual effects that must accompany a tragedy—such as the blood, violence, and murder in *Oedipus Rex*—and these visual aspects have the power to elicit fear and pity in the audience. However, Aristotle implies that such approaches are "less artistic" and should be accomplished with a sound plot, as is also seen in *Oedipus Rex*. Spectacle is a component part of tragedy, but it is nevertheless the least artistic and therefore the least important, since its aims (the production of fear and pity) are better achieved elsewhere in a tragedy.

Chapter 8 Quotes

(Clearly, therefore, the resolutions of plots should also come about from the plot itself, and not by means of a theatrical device, as in the *Medea*, or the events concerned with the launching of the ships in the *Iliad*. A theatrical device may be used for things outside the play—whether prior events which are beyond human knowledge, or subsequent events which need prediction and narration since we grant that the gods can see everything. But there should be nothing irrational in the events themselves; or, failing that, it should be outside the play, as for example in Sophocles's *Oedipus*.)

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Homer, Oedipus, Sophocles, Euripides, Medea

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This is quote, which occurs in an aside during the explanation of tragedy, outlines what Aristotle means by a "theatrical device," and it implies that plots that do not rely on such devices are more artistic and more desirable in the construction of a good tragedy. Aristotle defines a "theatrical device" as something contrived that brings about a tragedy's resolution, and he uses Euripides's *Medea* as an example, in which Medea escapes after murdering her children by way of a supernatural chariot. Similarly, in Homer's *Iliad*, when Agamemnon suggests abandoning the Trojan War in a reverse attempt to stir the Greek troops, the goddess Athene must appear to inspire them. In both instances, such devices are contrived, and therefore less artistic than events that arise naturally from the plot.

Aristotle implies that in both the *Iliad* and *Medea*, these "theatrical devices" are irrational and quite unbelievable. It is not rational nor believable that Medea has a supernatural chariot, and it is not rational nor believable that the Greek soldiers need the intervention of a goddess to continue fighting the Trojans, their sworn and mortal enemy. Aristotle cites Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* specifically as an example of an artistic and effective tragic plot; however, this does not mean that nothing irrational or unbelievable is present in Sophocles's plot. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus fails to recognize the events of his father's death, which Aristotle implies is equally unbelievable. However, since this irrationality applies to events outside the actual poem, Aristotle is willing to excuse it.

Since tragedy is an imitation of people better than we are, one should imitate good portrait-painters. In rendering the individual form, they paint people as they are, but make them better-looking. In the same way the poet who is imitating people who are irascible or lazy or who have other traits of character of that sort should portray them as having these characteristics, but also as decent people. For example, Homer portrayed Achilles as both a good man and a paradigm of obstinacy.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Achilles, Homer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in Aristotle's explanation of tragedy, and it is significant because it further reflects the importance of balance in poetry and the value of depicting characters as good and moral people, even if they happen to commit immoral acts. Aristotle argues that all poetry is an imitation of real-life actions and people, and those actions are either admirable or inferior to humanity's general standards. Such actions and people can be imitated as they are, as they are said to be, or as they should be. Aristotle recommends imitating such people as they should be—morally good—even when they aren't so honorable and decent.

Aristotle uses the analogy of a portrait-painter to illustrate his point. Portrait- painters "paint people as they are, but make them better-looking." For instance, a portrait-painter renders believable imitations, but may minimize less attractive qualities, like a mole or a crooked smile. Aristotle recommends poets do something similar, and he offers Homer's portrayal of Achilles as an example. Achilles is a "paradigm of obstinacy"—he is stubborn and volatile and his disagreement with Agamemnon leads to considerable tension during the *Iliad*—but Homer still portrays Achilles as a "good man." Achilles is loyal and faithful to his men, and this balance of qualities (Achilles isn't overly bad or overly good) makes him more relatable. This makes his eventual change to bad fortune at the end of play (Achilles is killed by Paris, the prince of Troy) all the more tragic and conducive for catharsis among the audience.

The best recognition of all is that which arises out of the actual course of events, where the emotional impact is achieved through events that are probable, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and the *Iphigeneia* (her wish to send a letter is probable). Only this kind does without contrived tokens and necklaces. Second-best are those which arise from inference.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Odysseus, Orestes, Iphigeneia, Oedipus, Euripides, Homer, Sophocles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears as Aristotle describes the aspects of tragedy, and it is important because it further underscores the significance of recognition and its power to bring about catharsis, provided that recognition comes about from the plot and is not "contrived" or artificial and forced by the poet. According to Aristotle, recognition can be accomplished multiple ways: through "tokens," through "inference," or directly through the plot. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the recognition of Odysseus's identity is accomplished through a token—a scar on his foot—and his identity is often inferred because of this token. However, Aristotle implies there are more artistic and effective ways to imitate recognition and bring about catharsis.

In Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides's *Iphigenia*, recognition comes directly from the plot, not from a contrived incident as it does in the *Odyssey*. Oedipus recognizes his true identity from the visit of a messenger, and Iphigenia discloses her own identity as Orestes's sister through a letter. Aristotle implies that in both instances, recognition is either necessary or probable (Iphigenia's "letter is probable"), and they both arise "out of the actual course of events." As recognition is one of the primary ways in which fear and pity is evoked in an audience, Aristotle thus implies that recognition arising directly from the plot is the best way to evoke such emotions and subsequent catharsis from an audience.

Chapter 9 Quotes

The most important quality in diction is clarity, provided there is no loss of dignity. The clearest diction is that based on current words; but that lacks dignity (as can be seen from the poetry of Cleophon, and that of Sthenelus). By contrast, diction that is distinguished and out of the ordinary when it makes use of exotic expressions—by which I mean non-standard words, metaphor, lengthening, and anything contrary to current usage. […] So what is needed is some kind of mixture of these two things: one of them will make the diction of the ordinary and avoid a loss of dignity (i.e. non-standard words, metaphor, ornament and other categories I mentioned earlier), while current usage will contribute clarity.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Aristophanes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in Aristotle's explanation of diction, and it is significant because it further underscores the importance of balance within poetry, especially tragic poetry. According to Aristotle, "the most important quality of diction," or the words that make a poem, is clarity, which means that words must be clear and easily understandable; however, such clarity can result in a "loss of dignity," which is to say that such common words are unoriginal and can render a work of poetry inartistic.

Aristotle uses Cleophon and Sthenelus, two fifth-century tragic poets, as examples. Both Cleophon and Sthenelus overuse common words and expressions in Aristotle's opinion, and their unoriginality is also mocked in the plays of Aristophanes. Aristotle argues that a balance is needed between standard and non-standard diction to avoid a "loss of dignity," such as the incorporation of "metaphor, ornament, and other categories [Aristotle] mentioned earlier" in his full description and explanation of diction. By using both standard and non-standard diction, a poet ensures that their language is both clear and original, which is also more artistic.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Homer deserves praise for many reasons, but above all because he alone among poets is not ignorant of what he should do in his own person. The poet in person should say as little as possible; that is not what makes him an imitator. Other poets perform in person throughout, and imitate little and seldom; but after a brief preamble Homer introduces a man or a woman or some other character—and none of them are characterless: they have character.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Achilles, Homer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in Aristotle's explanation of epic poetry, and it is important because it reflects Aristotle's opinion of Homer's profound influence on the development of epic poetry and the power of good writing and sound diction to adequately imitate a character or action. Homer is the only epic poet Aristotle examines in *Poetics*, and he further argues that Homer was the writer to develop the form and technique best suited for epic poetry. Homer's epics are written in dactylic hexameter, a form that was perfected by Homer and is often associated with epic poetry as a whole.

According to Aristotle, a poet "should say as little as possible; that is not what makes him an imitator." In other words, a poet should not explicitly state what they intend to imitate. Instead, a poet's characters should do the talking for them, and Aristotle argues that Homer is especially good at such imitations. In Homer's poems, his characters are introduced with only a "brief preamble," and the characters then imitate the actions Homer wishes to impart. This hearkens to the importance of diction and the use of descriptive language in poetry. Language and characters that *show* rather than *tell* exactly what they intend to imitate are more effective and are therefore more artistic. In Homer's poems, whether a character is admirable or inferior is reflected in the character.

❝ While it is true that astonishment is an effect which should be sought in tragedy, the irrational (which is the most important source of astonishment) is more feasible in epic, because one is not looking at the agent. The pursuit of Hector would seem preposterous on stage, with the others standing by and taking no part in the pursuit while Achilles shakes his head to restrain them; but in epic it escapes notices.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Hector, Achilles, Homer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in Aristotle's explanation of epic poetry, and it is significant because it further underscores the differences between epic poetry and tragedy. Astonishment, or the ability of a poem to produce awe and wonder in an audience, is present in both epic and tragedy; however, Aristotle argues that the irrational—which is often a part of astonishment—is more easily accomplished in an epic, "because one is not looking at the agent." In other words, an epic is not performed in full view of an audience, as tragedy is, which makes that which may be considered irrational or unbelievable more possible and "feasible."

Aristotle uses Homer's *Iliad* and Achilles's pursuit of Hector as an example of the "irrational" in epic poetry. In the *Iliad*, Achilles chases Hector around the city of Troy three times before Hector turns and faces Achilles to fight, which Aristotle implies would be irrational on stage in a tragedy. In order to imitate this pursuit on stage, Hector and Achilles would have to run around the other characters in the play—namely, other Trojans—who likely wouldn't allow such events to transpire without interference. In Homer's epic poem, however, this unbelievable pursuit is simply referred to rather than played out in detail, which makes it less irrational and more believable.

❝ Homer, in particular, taught other poets the right way to tell falsehoods. This the false inference In cases where the existence or occurrence of *A* implies the existence or occurrence of *B*, people imagine that if *B* is the case than *A* also exists or occurs—which is fallacious. So if *A* is false, but its existence would entail the existences or occurrence of *B*, one should add *B*; then, on the basis of its knowledge that *B* is true, our mind falsely infers the reality of *A* as well. An example of this can be found in the bath-scene.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Odysseus, Homer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in Aristotle's explanation of epic poetry, and it is important because it further illustrates the influence of Homer and highlights Homer's development of the "false inference," a primary form of recognition in epic poetry. According to Aristotle, Homer is responsible for the "false inference," which allows for recognition of a character through an untrue implication. Aristotle's language in this passage may be a bit confusing, but his point is that a "false inference" allows for the belief of *B* given the existence of *A*, even if *A* does not necessarily mean that *B* must be true as well.

To better explain this rather complicated point, Aristotle again uses Homer's *Odyssey*, which is implied in his reference to "the bath-scene." In the *Odyssey*, a nurse discovers Odysseus's true identity as the king of Ithaca in a bathtub after Odysseus asks the nurse to wash his feet, revealing his telltale scar and a token of his identity. Of course, Odysseus's scar only means that he *could* be Odysseus, not that he definitely *is* Odysseus; however, the nurse believes that the presence of the scar definitively confirms the man's identity as Odysseus. In this case, the nurse's belief is a "false inference," and such inferences are typical of Homer and of epic poems in general.

❝ Probable impossibilities are preferable to implausible possibilities. Stories should not be constructed from irrational parts; so far as possible they should contain nothing irrational—or, failing that, it should be outside the narration (like Oedipus' ignorance of the manner of Laius' death) and not in the play itself (like the report of the Pythian Games in *Electra*, or the man who comes from Tegea to Mysia without speaking in the *Mysians*). Saying that the plot would have been ruined otherwise is absurd; plots should not be constructed like that in the first place. But is one does posit an irrationality and it seems more or less rational, even an oddity is possible; the irrationalities involved in Odysseus' being put ashore in the *Odyssey* would be manifestly intolerable if a second-rate poet had composed them, but as it is the poet conceals the absurdity with other good qualities, and makes it a source of pleasure.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Sophocles, Homer, Odysseus, Orestes, Oedipus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in Aristotle's explanation of epic poetry, and it is significant because it sheds light on the idea of "probable impossibilities." This quote may be confusing for modern readers; however, Aristotle means to imply that since a poet's job is to imitate actions that *could* or *would* occur according to probability or necessity, and improbable things have occurred before in the history of the world, it is paradoxically likely that unlikely things can and will happen again. Since such improbabilities are likely, they are fair game to be imitated in either an epic poem or a tragedy. To illustrate this point, Aristotle again uses the poetry of Homer and Sophocles.

Aristotle claims that "stories should not be constructed from irrational parts," but if they are, those irrational parts should occur outside the poem itself, as they do in *Oedipus Rex*. In *Oedipus Rex*, the titular Oedipus fails to recognize that the man, Laius, whom he murdered, is actually his own

father. Aristotle implies that Oedipus's failure to recognize Laius is irrational, but since the murder of Laius occurs outside the actual events of the poem, Aristotle considers this irrationality less significant than those that occur within the poem, as they do within Sophocles's *Electra*. In *Electra*, Electra is told that her brother, Orestes, has been killed in a chariot race during the Pythian Games. The Pythian Games existed in Sophocles's time, not in the time depicted in the play, which—since it appears in the poem itself—is more irrational than those unbelievable events that occur outside a poem, as they do in *Oedipus Rex*.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Furthermore, if the objection is that something is not true, perhaps it is as it ought to be; e.g. Sophocles said that he portrayed people as they should be, Euripides as they are. That is the solution to use.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Oedipus, Euripides, Sophocles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

This short passage occurs in the section of *Poetics* in which Aristotle identifies the problems and solutions of poetry, and it is significant because it implies that a major reason for the objection of poetry isn't really a problem at all. Aristotle maintains that people often object to poetry because it does not appear to be true—meaning that it is a poor imitation of whatever the poet means to imitate—but Aristotle argues this isn't always the case. According to Aristotle, an imitation, including poetry, can represent an object as it is, as it is thought to be, or how it should be. Therefore, poetry is often not untrue, per se—rather, in Aristotle's argument, a poem may just be a different kind of imitation.

To illustrate his point, Aristotle again turns to Sophocles and Euripides, two popular tragedians during his day. Earlier in the book, Aristotle claims that Euripides's tragedies always end badly with admirable characters enduring a change of fortune from good to bad. Here, Aristotle says that Euripides imitates characters "as they are," which is to say that human beings have a tendency to behave badly. Sophocles, on the other hand, portrays "people as they should be," which is to say that people should not be intentionally bad and should only behave badly out of ignorance, as Oedipus does. Sophocles and Euripides portray people and character differently, but neither is technically untrue since Sophocles and Euripides have different aims in their imitations.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Tragedy has everything epic does (and it can even make use of its verse-form), and additionally it has a major component part music and spectacle; this is a source of intense pleasure. [...] Also, the end of imitation is attained in shorter length; what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being more extended in time (I mean, for example, if one were to turn Sophocles' *Oedipus* into as many lines as the *Iliad* has).

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker), Homer, Sophocles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during Aristotle's comparison of epic poetry and tragedy, and it is significant because it reflects Aristotle's primary argument that tragedy is a superior form of poetic expression compared to epic poetry. Aristotle devotes much of *Poetics* to debating the merits of both epic and tragedy, though he explicitly states here that tragedy is better. "Tragedy has everything epic does," Aristotle says, which is to say that both tragedy and epic have plot, character, reasoning, and diction; however, only tragedy has lyric poetry and spectacle, which are a "source of intense pleasure," due in large part to the visual attraction of spectacle and the human inclination for rhythm and melody.

Aristotle also argues that tragedy is better than epic because it is shorter. For example, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* has around 1,500 lines, whereas the *Iliad* has over 15,000 lines. The implication here is that which "is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being more extended in time," which is to say that *Oedipus Rex* wouldn't have quite the same effect if it were longer and more drawn-out like an epic. Aristotle ultimately argues that tragedy is a superior form of imitation compared to epic, and this quote reflects that belief.

So tragedy surpasses epic in all these respects, and also in artistic effect (since they should not produce any arbitrary pleasure but the one specified); clearly, then, because it achieves its purpose more effectively than epic, tragedy must be superior.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears during Aristotle's comparison of epic poetry and tragedy, and it is important because it further illustrates Aristotle's primary argument as to the value of tragedy over epic poetry. Ultimately, Aristotle implies that tragedy is better than epic poetry because it is required to bring about catharsis through the provocation of fear and pity specifically. Epic poetry, on the other hand, brings about catharsis through *any* emotion, not fear and pity in particular. Since tragedy should evoke specific emotions in an audience, Aristotle implies that tragedy requires more "artistic effect" and therefore takes more talent than just imitating and eliciting any emotion.

Tragedy not only "surpasses epic" in this respect, but in others as well. A tragedy is shorter and more condensed than an epic, which Aristotle argues requires more talent and "artistic effect" than longer epics that have more space to imitate the very same characters and actions. Similarly, a tragic has lyric poetry and spectacle, which are also lacking in epic, and these elements are further evidence of tragedy's superiority. For Aristotle, tragedy is a better and more effective form of imitation, and he believes that tragedians are more artistic than epic poets.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle states that he will discuss poetry, both in general and in particular, and he will also discuss the effect poetry has on others and the proper way to construct a good plot. He will address the components and parts of poetry and consider any other relevant questions that come about in the process. He begins where it is "natural," with the principles.

Poetics is the oldest surviving work of literary theory, which means that it systematically and analytically examines poetry. Here, Aristotle lays out in plain terms exactly what he will be discussing. The book was likely compiled from Aristotle's personal lecture notes and journals; thus, it often jumps around and doesn't follow a traditional structure. The use of the word "natural" here is notable, as Aristotle later argues that imitation and poetry are natural, too. The effect of poetry that Aristotle alludes to is a reference to catharsis, a key element of tragedy.

CHAPTER 2. POETRY AS A SPECIES OF IMITATION

Epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and music by pipe or lyre are all forms of imitation, Aristotle says, but they differ from each other in three ways: their medium, object, and/or mode of imitation.

Aristotle's description of poetry as a form of imitation aligns with theoretical concepts popular during ancient times. Art was considered by many to be an imitation of the natural world (including human nature), and Aristotle confirms here that he supports the theory of art as a form of imitation. Furthermore, Aristotle considers poetry in particular to be a form of art and therefore a form of imitation, and he defines exactly what he considers poetry to be.

2.1 Medium. The medium of color and shape is used by some people to create various imitations in the form of visual art, and some create imitations with voice. Others create art through the medium of rhythm, language, and melody, as is the case with the arts Aristotle mentioned in the previous chapter. Each of these mediums can be used alone or together. For instance, art created by pipe or lyre uses melody and rhythm, whereas dance uses rhythm alone.

The medium of color and shape described here refers to painters and other visual artists who use different visual elements in their paintings, sculptures, etc. Imitations created with voice is likely a reference to mimicry, like animal noises or calls. Aristotle is chiefly concerned with poetry, as the previous chapter states, which imitates by means of rhythmic language or song.

The art produced through the medium of language alone does not have an official name. There is not a descriptive name for Socratic dialogues, nor is there a name for art written in iambic trimeters or any other form of verse. This art is often referred to as "poetry," and the people who produce it are "poets." Yet if someone writes a scientific text in verse, the same term is used. Aristotle points out that Homer has nothing in common with Empedocles other than the medium they both used; calling Empedocles a "poet" doesn't feel quite right.

Socratic dialogue is a genre of writing used in Ancient Greece, most notably by Plato, in which a philosophical question is discussed by characters (one of whom is often Socrates himself) in dialogue form. As the first work of literary theory, Poetics *formally defines the art of "poetry" for the first time, thereby giving poetry and poets an official name. Empedocles was a Greek philosopher from the 5th century B.C.E. who wrote about cosmogonic theory, which is concerned with the cosmos and the universe. Empedocles often wrote in poetic verse, but Aristotle means to make a distinction between poetry and scientific writing—even though Empedocles wrote in poetic form, Aristotle doesn't consider his writing poetry.*

Some arts, including dithyrambic poetry, tragedy, and comedy, combine the use of rhythm, melody, *and* language. The only differences among these arts is *how* they use the different media. Arts like dithyrambic poetry use all the media at the same time, while comedy and tragedy use them in different parts of the same work.

Aristotle implies that even though tragedy, comedy, and dithyrambic poetry (dance) seem incredibly different, the only way they truly differ is in how *they imitate something. This kind of systematic classification is common in the field of literary theory.*

2.2 Object. Aristotle claims that in order to create an imitation, one needs an object to imitate, and these objects are either admirable or inferior. Characters especially fall under one of these two distinctions because characters imitate people, and people are either admirable or inferior. Characters must be better, worse, or the same as people in general, so it is clear if the character is admirable or inferior.

For Aristotle, the term "character" is used in two different ways: Aristotle means either the actual characters in a poem, or the morality of any given character or action that takes place in a poem. In this way, characters have character, but so do things and events.

The distinction between the imitation of admirable objects and inferior objects can be made through music and dance or through language and verse. For instance, Homer imitates those who are better than people in general, Cleophon imitates those who are similar, and Hegemon of Thasos imitates those who are worse. This distinction is the difference between tragedy and comedy: tragedies imitate people who are better than people in general, whereas comedies imitate those who are worse.

As Aristotle argues that comedy imitates inferior people, he implies that comedy is for inferior audiences and tragedy is for admirable audiences, which reflects Aristotle's argument that tragedy is a superior form of poetic expression. Hegemon was a known epic poet from the 5th century B.C.E. Cleophon may refer to a tragic poet from the 4th century B.C.E.; however, since Aristotle's text is so old, knowing all the writers he references with certainty is difficult.

2.3 Mode. The last difference among imitations is the mode in which artists imitate an object. An object can be imitated through narration, or an object can be imitated by actors on a stage. In this way, Sophocles is an imitator just like Homer, as they both imitate admirable people (that is, they have an object in common). But in another way, Sophocles is also like Aristophanes, as they both imitate via actors on a stage—they use the same mode. In summary, imitations differ only in medium, object, and/or mode.

Homer is an epic poet, whereas Sophocles is a tragic playwright. The difference between their work is that Homer imitates via narration (a story), and Sophocles imitates via actors. Conversely, Aristophanes and Sophocles both imitate through actors on a stage, only Aristophanes imitates comedy and Sophocles tragedy. Thus, according to Aristotle's argument, Aristophanes and Sophocles are similar since they share the same mode of imitation.

CHAPTER 3. THE ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY OF POETRY

Imitation comes naturally to human beings, Aristotle says, which is what makes people fundamentally different from animals. Humans, especially during childhood, learn through imitation, and they have a strong tendency to imitate people and things. Pleasure through imitation also comes naturally to people. Humans take pleasure in viewing accurate imitations of things that are generally considered to be distressing, like a wild animal or a corpse.

Aristotle's argument that imitation is natural to humans suggests that art and poetry are natural, too. As such, imitation (mimesis) *is more than just a question of good or bad for Aristotle. If imitation is natural, than it can reasonably be expected that art, including poetry, will always be a part of the human experience.*

Aristotle argues that the pleasure humans take in viewing a distressing imitation comes from their understanding of that imitation. The idea is that people view an imitation, recognize and understand the thing meant to be imitated, and thus find pleasure in their knowledge and understanding. If pleasure *is* found in an imitation one does not recognize, Aristotle explains, that pleasure is related to color, execution, or some other factor. Since human beings have a natural proclivity to imitation, as well as to melody and rhythm, it is no wonder that creating poetry is a natural human inclination, especially since verse is a form of rhythm.

Here, Aristotle deepens his argument of imitation as a natural human tendency. In addition to imitation, human beings also have a specific liking for melody and rhythm—this makes people especially inclined to produce imitation through poetry, since poetry is imitation through the medium of rhythm and melody. Again, it is impossible for Aristotle to write off imitation and poetry as "bad" as other philosophers of the time did, since it's a normal and expected development. Plato also examines the human tendency for song and rhythm in his book the Laws.

3.2 Early History. Early in history, poetry branched into two separate types, and these types correspond with the kinds of characters they represent. Serious people imitate admirable people, and unimportant people imitate those who are inferior. Aristotle admits that there must have been many serious people before Homer—but since there is little known about them, Aristotle's argument begins with Homer. Homer was a serious person, and he imitated admirable people. He developed the form of iambic verse and is known for his epic poetry.

Aristotle again implies that some poetry, like Homer's epic poetry, imitates morally good people and is meant for an admirable and therefore superior audience—as opposed to comedy, which imitates inferior people for inferior audiences. Aristotle ultimately argues that tragedy is better than epic; however, epic targets admirable audiences, just like tragedy. Aristotle credits Homer with many of the poetic developments in history, such as the iambic form, which is typically used in poetry (and especially during Aristotle's time).


However, Homer also wrote lampoons, and Homer's *Margites* is as important to comedy as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are to tragedy. When comedy and tragedy first emerged, poets became known as either poets of comedy (not lampoons), or poets of tragedy (not epics). The reason for this, Aristotle argues, is that tragedies and comedies are more highly regarded than lampoons or epics.

Homer's Margites *is a narrative comedy in which the main character is so senseless that he doesn't know which of his parents gave birth to him. Most of* Margites *did not survive antiquity. Aristotle's point is that lampoons and epics have been around for a long time (hundreds of years before Aristotle) and have always been considered second-rate compared to comedy and tragedy—which, as modes of imitation, rely on actors rather than narration.*


3.3 Tragedy. Now is not the time to debate whether tragedy is fully developed regarding its parts, Aristotle says, but he does note that tragedy was born from improvisation. The same can be said for comedy; however, tragedy came specifically from dithyrambic poetry. From there, tragedy was enhanced and transformed into its "natural state." Aeschylus increased the number of actors to two, and Sophocles added a third actor and introduced scene-painting. Plot became more complex, satire was abandoned, and tragedy became associated with dignified people. Iambic form took the place of trochaic tetrameter—tetrameter is more like a dance, whereas iambic verse mimics that of natural speech.

Aristotle's statement that it isn't the time to debate if tragedy is fully developed, along with his reference to the current state of tragedy as its "natural state," imply that he believes tragedy is fully developed regarding its parts. Tragedy has developed into a state that Aristotle considers "natural," which is to say that its current state is perfect—or at least as close to perfect as possible. In early drama, plays consisted of a single actor interacting with the chorus, until Aeschylus increased the single actor to two, followed by Sophocles's addition of a third actor. In early dramatic performances, a single actor played multiple parts.

3.4 Comedy. Aristotle argues that comedy is the imitation of inferior people but that such people are not inferior in every way. "Laughable errors" or disgraces do not involve pain: for instance, a comedic mask may be "ugly and distorted," but it does not reflect pain. Comedy has not always been taken seriously, so little attention was initially paid to it. It took a long time for the comic chorus to become a standard feature, and it is unclear which poets were responsible for the development of comedy. However, it is clear that construction of plot came from Sicily, and Crates was the first to develop universal storylines rather than just lampoons.

Aristotle does not mean to imply that the people imitated in a comedy are all morally bad, which would mean that those imitated in tragedy are all morally good. Of course, this isn't the case. Instead, Aristotle means to draw attention to the type of emotion comedy brings out in an audience: a "laughable error" may bring about feelings of embarrassment or joy in an audience, but not painful emotions like fear or pity, which are reserved for tragedy.

3.5 Epic. Like tragedy, epic poetry is the imitation of admirable people. The difference between tragedy and epic is that epic uses only verse and is narrative. Epics are also longer; tragedies are often limited to the events of a single day. Some component parts of epic are also common in tragedy, but some parts are found in tragedy only. Generally speaking, those who understand what makes a tragedy good or bad will understand the same about an epic. All that is present in epic poetry can be found in tragedy, but all that is present in tragedy cannot be found in epic.

In saying that epic poetry uses only verse and is narrative, Aristotle means to say that epic poetry does not include song or spectacle. Additionally, epic poetry is usually told through the lens of a single character's narration, not through multiple actors on a stage as is the case in tragedy. Aristotle argues that tragedy has more parts than epic poetry, which is one of the reasons why he considers tragedy superior to epic.

CHAPTER 4. TRAGEDY: DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Definition. According to Aristotle, tragedy "is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude." Tragedy is written in "language made pleasurable" (meaning language that has rhythm and melody), and it can be separated into parts of verse or song. Tragedy is performed by actors, not by narration, and tragedy purifies the audience by eliciting in them the emotions of fear and pity in a process known as catharsis.

Here, Aristotle gives a thorough definition of exactly what a tragedy is. A poem must have each of the features listed here—otherwise, it is not a tragedy. Aristotle later returns to catharsis, which he argues is the most important defining feature of tragedy.

4.2 Component Parts. Since imitation is performed by actors in a tragedy, spectacle is a component part of tragedy. Additional components are lyric poetry (song) and diction (the composition of the verse), which are the media through which the imitation is performed. A tragedy imitates an action (the plot) that is performed by actors, and these actors have a certain kind of character (they are either admirable or inferior). The actors express themselves through reasoning, which they use to argue a point or state an opinion. To recap, a tragedy has six components—plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and lyric poetry—and these components determine a tragedy's quality.

Spectacle encompasses the special effects of tragedy that are not related to language. Spectacle can include sights or sounds, and it is not present in epic poetry. Much like Aristotle gave a comprehensive definition of tragedy, he likewise gives detailed definitions of each of the component parts of a tragedy. Just as in Aristotle's definition of tragedy, a tragedy must include all the component parts—otherwise, it isn't a tragedy at all.

4.3 The Primacy of Plot. Every tragedy, Aristotle repeats, has spectacle, character, plot, diction, lyric poetry, and reasoning; however, plot is the most important component part. Tragedy is not an imitation of people, Aristotle says, "but of actions and of life." People are either admirable or inferior, but their fortune and whether it is good or bad is based on "how they fare." The events of life—the plot—is what a tragedy aims to imitate, and this makes plot the most important component part of tragedy. Furthermore, the most effective way in which a tragedy produces catharsis is through reversal and recognition, both of which are part of the plot.

Aristotle claims that events and people are either good or bad, but their fortune (i.e., how they end up at the end of the play) has nothing to do with morality. A character's fortune is based on how they "fare" or manage good or bad events. Thus, it is possible in a tragedy for good characters to end up with bad fortune and for bad characters to end with good fortune. Catharsis through reversal and recognition is a primary part of Aristotle's argument, and he returns to it later in the text.

4.4 The Ranking Completed. Plot is the most important component part of tragedy, Aristotle repeats, and character is second in importance. Reasoning is third: it allows for characters to say what is appropriate and important, which, written in prose, serves the purpose of rhetoric. Contemporary poets make their characters speak rhetorically, and reasoning is the way in which they argue a point or express ideas. Fourth important is diction, or the "verbal expressions" used in tragedy, which does the same thing in verse and in prose.

Aristotle repeatedly says that plot is the most important part of tragedy, which reflects plot's significance within his broader argument of the superiority of tragedy. Aristotle only briefly touches on reasoning and rhetoric in Poetics. *A more comprehensive interrogation of the elements can be found in Aristotle's* Rhetoric.

Lyric poetry, or song, is the most important of the "sources of pleasure" within a tragedy. Spectacle (the visual effects of a tragedy) "is attractive," but it is not artistic and is least relevant to poetry. Spectacle has more to do with "the art of the property-manager," Aristotle says, than with the art of the poet.

Lyric poetry is a "source of pleasure" because it relies on rhythm and melody, which Aristotle has already identified as a natural source of pleasure for humans. Spectacle, something that by definition is visually appealing and "attractive," does not rely on language at all, but on stage production from the "property-manager." Thus, spectacle is least relevant component of poetry.

CHAPTER 5. PLOT: BASIC CONCEPTS

Aristotle claims that plot is the most important component part of tragedy, and so it is important to discuss the qualities and structure of plot.

Again, Aristotle points out how important plot is in tragedy, and he offers a comprehensive discussion of what exactly plot is.

5.1 Completeness. Tragedy "is an imitation of a complete, i.e. whole, action, possessing a certain magnitude." To be "whole," a tragedy must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning does not necessarily follow anything, but something must follow after it. An end, on the other hand, does follow something, but there is nothing after it. A middle has something before it and something after it. A successful tragedy does not begin or end at arbitrary points, and it follows this simple form.

Aristotle's definition of what makes a tragedy "whole" seems rather straightforward; however, it is important to remember that Aristotle was the first to put such definitions down in writing, thereby making them official and legitimate. Elevating literature to a scientific level is one of the aims of literary theory. Thus, every possible aspect of literature is defined, categorized, and explored, just as would be done within the sciences.

5.2 Magnitude. An imitation of an object, be that object a human being or something else, must possess all the parts it aims to imitate, and its magnitude cannot be arbitrary. "Beauty consists in magnitude as well as order," Aristotle says. If an object is too small, its beauty is too difficult to discern. Conversely, if an object is too large, its beauty can also be difficult to appreciate. The problem with objects that are too big is that unity of observation becomes impossible and the sense of completeness is lost.

Aristotle's statement that "beauty consists in magnitude as well as order" implies that there must be balance within a tragedy between magnitude and unity. A tragic plot must inspire wonder and awe in an audience, but that astonishment must be in keeping with the object it is meant to imitate.

Objects possess a specific magnitude, and they should be readily taken in with just one view. The same goes for plot, which should be of a very specific length and should be easily held in memory. Aristotle defines the magnitude of plot as "the magnitude in which a series of events occurring sequentially in accordance with probability or necessity" gives rise to a change in fortune from either good to bad or vice versa.

If an object is imitated as too large, the unity is disturbed—meaning its beginning, middle, and end cannot be taken in with one view. Similarly, Aristotle implies, if a tragic plot is too big (either literally too long or metaphorically too big), it cannot be held readily in one's memory, and therefore the plot's unity is disrupted.

5.3 Unity. Focusing on a single person is not what makes a plot unified—lots of things can happen to any one person, and any combination of these things does not necessarily constitute unity. Similarly, an actor may perform several actions, but these actions might not constitute a single action. This is why, Aristotle reasons, Homer did not include in the *Odyssey* every last thing that happened to Odysseus. Instead, the whole of the *Odyssey* constitutes a single unified action—Odysseus's journey home from the Trojan War—and nothing more.

Here, Aristotle explains that tragedies which focus on single characters (Sophocles's Oedipus Rex and Antigone, for example) are not whole and unified just because they focus on a single person. For the imitation of single person to be whole, it would have to include everything that person has ever done, which is impossible. Instead, a plot is unified if it imitates a single and complete action—like Oedipus's downfall or Antigone's suicide—rather than a single person.

5.4 Determinate State. An imitation is considered to have unity if it imitates a single object. The same goes for plot, which should imitate a single and complete action. The structure of a plot must be created in a way that if a single part of it is taken out or moved, it changes the plot as a whole. If the absence of a single part does not affect the whole, it is not truly a part of the whole and does not belong.

Aristotle implies that only those events which are necessary for the plot should be included in a tragedy. Events that do not pertain to the plot take up space in the audience's perception and memory, making unity more difficult. Getting rid of unrelated events helps ensure that a plot will have unity.

5.5 Universality. It is not the poet's job to write "what *has* happened," Aristotle claims, but to write what "*would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity." The historian and the poet are not different because one writes in verse and the other prose; they are different because one writes what *has* happened, and the other writes what *would* happen. Even if the works of Herodotus were written in verse, Aristotle claims, Herodotus would still be a historian.

Aristotle again underscores that the subject matter, rather than the kind of writing, is what separates history from poetry. It is important to note that Aristotle's definition of tragedy includes what is probable or *necessary, not what is probable* and *necessary—meaning that what might be necessary isn't always probable.*

History expresses particulars, but poetry expresses universals. A universal is speech or behavior that matches what a certain kind of person would most likely do or say. Because poetry is universal, it is more serious and philosophical than history. The plot of a comedy, for instance, is constructed based on probabilities, and then characters are selected. This process is different from the construction of a lampoon or tragedy, which often focus on a specific person. What *has* happened is possible in tragedy, Aristotle says, but even in such cases, only one or two characters are familiar and the rest are inventions.

Unlike comedies, lampoons and tragedies often include actual historical figures. This is not to say that a tragedy is an imitation of a specific person; instead, Aristotle argues that a tragedy is an imitation of a probable action, and since what has *happened is probable, it is fair game for a tragedy. The difference between history and tragedy, Aristotle maintains, is that history expresses what* has *happened (including people who have existed) in a given timeframe, whereas tragedy imitates a probable action that* would *happen.*

A poet is "a maker of plots," Aristotle clarifies, not a maker of verses, and the object of a poet's imitation is action. If a poet does write about the sort of thing that has happened, they are still a poet. If something has happened before, it is obviously the sort of thing that could and would happen. Writing about the sort of the thing that *would* happen (whether or not it actually *has* happened) is what makes a poet.

This passage, too, reflects the importance of plot in poetry, since a poet is a "maker of plots," not necessarily of poems per se. Again, if an event has happened before, it is probable, which makes it fair game for a tragedy; however, Aristotle also implies that even things that haven't happened can be probable in a tragedy.

5.6 Defective Plots. Episodic plots are by far the worst of the simple plots, Aristotle argues, which means the sequence of the episodes occur in such a way that seems unlikely or implausible. Bad poets compose episodic plots, as do some good poets for the purposes of "competitive display," during which a plot can be extended past its potential, wrecking the entire sequence.

Aristotle's mention of "competitive display" is a reference to the dramatic competitions during Ancient Greek times, such as the Dionysia competition. Plays were staged for competition, and known winners include Sophocles's Antigone *and Euripides's* Medea.

CHAPTER 6. PLOT: SPECIES AND COMPONENTS

6.1 Astonishment. It is not enough for a poet to imitate a complete action—they must also provoke emotions of fear and pity through catharsis. This is best accomplished when events occur "contrary to expectation but because of one another," which makes events more astonishing than if they occur spontaneously.

This passage reflects Aristotle's argument that catharsis is a key element of tragedy, and that tragedy must elicit feelings of fear and pity specifically, as compared to any other emotion. Here, Aristotle implies that catharsis is easiest to achieve when it is "contrary to expectation," i.e., a surprise.

6.2 Simple and Complex Parts. According to Aristotle, plot is either simple or complex. A simple plot is a plot in which a single action of unity is imitated, but the change of fortune is achieved without reversal or recognition. A complex plot is one in which the change of fortune comes about through reversal, recognition, or both. Reversal and recognition must come from the structure of the plot, and they must occur because of necessity or probability. In other words, reversal and recognition must occur *because of* events in the plot, not simply *after* them.

Every tragedy involves a change of fortune, and the difference between a complex and simple tragic plot is how that change unfolds. Aristotle implies here that reversal and recognition should arise from the plot itself and be necessary or probable. This argument aligns with Aristotle's point later in the text when he refers to Euripides's Medea, in which the final resolution is achieved by means of a supernatural chariot.

6.3 Reversal. A reversal "is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed," which, of course, occurs because of "necessity or probability"—that is, in a way that seems likely and that follows logically from the story's previous events. Aristotle cites Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex** as an example: a messenger brings Oedipus news meant to calm his fears that he has had sex with his mother, but in disclosing Oedipus's true identity, the messenger confirms Oedipus's fears instead of calming them.

Sophocles's Oedipus Rex is an example of reversal in plot because it is expected that Oedipus's fears will be calmed, not confirmed. This unexpected twist increases an audience's feelings of fear and pity and makes catharsis stronger and more effective. Again, it is important to note that Aristotle's definition is according to "necessity" or "probability." Thus, what is necessary may not always be the most probable.

6.4 Recognition. Recognition "is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of the people marked out for good or bad fortune." The best plot, according to Aristotle, is one in which recognition and reversal occur at the same time, as they do in **Oedipus Rex**. There are many kinds of recognition. Recognition can come about because of inanimate objects, and characters can recognize whether another character has performed a specific action.

Recognition and reversal occur at the same time in Oedipus Rex because the confirmation of Oedipus's incestuous fears occurs at the same time as Oedipus's recognition of his true identity and the fact that he has killed his father and had sex with his mother. Again, this simultaneous reversal and recognition leads to increased catharsis (feelings of fear and pity) in the audience.

Recognition combined with reversal involves fear and pity, which are the very foundation of tragedy, and either good fortune or bad fortune will be the outcome of such a combination. At times, only one character recognizes something; other times, recognition can occur between two characters, although not always at the same time. Aristotle gives Euripides's *Iphigeneia in Tauris* as an example, in which both Iphigeneia and Orestes recognize at different times they are siblings.

Iphigeneia's identity is disclosed through a letter in Euripides's play, but Orestes verbally discloses his own identity. Iphigeneia and Orestes's recognitions occur at different times; however, Aristotle implies that this type of recognition is still effective in bringing about catharsis because Orestes and Iphigeneia's close relationship is ultimately revealed.

6.5 Suffering. Suffering is also useful in plot, and it "is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on)."

Suffering, like the actions imitated in Oedipus Rex, is another component of plot that imitates life and that can evoke catharsis (feelings of fear and pity in the audience), too. In this way, suffering is a hallmark of tragic poetry.

6.6 Quantitative Parts of Tragedy. A tragedy can be divided into quantitative parts, which are different from the component parts, Aristotle explains. The quantitative parts of a tragedy are as follows: prologue, episode, finale, and choral parts (including entry-song and ode). The prologue occurs before the entry-song, and an episode is the part of the tragedy that occurs between choral songs. The finale is the end and does not have a following choral song.

Here, Aristotle breaks down the measurable parts of a tragedy, i.e., the exact structure that a tragedy has. Every tragedy has the parts listed here, which is another defining aspect of tragic plays. Again, in defining these terms, Aristotle makes them official for the first time in literary history.

CHAPTER 7. THE BEST KINDS OF TRAGIC PLOT

7.1 First Introduction. Next, Aristotle will discuss what poets should do and avoid when constructing plot, and he will also discuss the effect of tragedy.

As Aristotle does not claim to discuss tragic plots specifically, as he did with the effect (catharsis) that this type of plot has on an audience, the reader can assume that his critique of plot is applicable to both tragedy and epic poetry.

7.2 First Deduction. The best tragedy is complex, not simple, and it imitates events that provoke fear and pity in the audience. This process is called catharsis, and it is a distinct feature of tragedy. A tragedy should not depict overly moral characters with a change in fortune from good to bad, because this does not produce fear or pity—it produces "disgust." Similarly, immoral characters should not undergo a change from bad fortune to good. Such a change is not tragic, and it does not produce fear or pity.

For Aristotle, a tragedy must elicit feelings of fear and pity to be considered a tragedy, and he again alludes here to the balance needed in poetry. A good character left with bad fortune is upsetting to audiences, and a bad character left with good fortune doesn't induce feelings of fear and pity at all. Thus, a poet must find balance between a character that is too good or too bad.

The best tragedy finds balance between good and evil character. A character shouldn't be too moral, but the change a character undergoes should be due to an error, not immorality. A good plot does not involve a change from bad fortune to good, but from good to bad, and the best tragedies follow this structure. This is why, Aristotle says, people are wrong to criticize Euripides for writing tragedies that always end in bad fortune.

A play ending in good fortune isn't tragic, it is happy; thus, tragedies should always end with a change to bad fortune. Because of this, no character should be too moral, since it is likely that they will end with bad fortune. Euripides's tragedies are the best kind, Aristotle implies, because they end badly, which is most tragic and most effective for bringing about catharsis.

The second best structure of a tragedy is the "double structure," like Homer's *Odyssey*, which ends with Odysseus's triumph and the deaths of wicked characters. However, Aristotle points out, this structure does not produce the pleasure that *should* come from tragedy (that is, fear and pity). This structure is more like comedy, Aristotle argues, in which enemies resolve their differences (even bitter enemies like Orestes and Aegisthus make up) and no one is killed.

At the end of Sophocles's Electra, Orestes kills Aegisthus in revenge for Aegisthus's murder of Orestes's father, and the play has a tragic end for everyone. Obviously, if the play ended on a happy note and Orestes and Aegisthus reconciled, this wouldn't be tragic at all. Likewise, it is not tragic that Odysseus triumphs in the end of the Odyssey, because this triumph does not provoke fear and pity in the audience. An effective tragic plot ends in tragedy for all, not just those who morally deserve it.

7.3 Second Introduction. It is possible for fear and pity (which create catharsis) to result from either spectacle or the events of a plot. It is preferable for catharsis to come from plot, and better poets observe this general rule. The plot of a tragedy should be constructed in such a way as to bring about catharsis by mere mention of the events, as it does to those who are told the plot of **Oedipus Rex**. Producing catharsis via spectacle is "less artistic," Aristotle argues, and doing so relies on production. Poets should not seek every emotion from tragedy, but only those emotions associated with it—fear and pity—and they should do so through plot.

One does not need to watch or read Oedipus Rex to feel fear and pity. Oedipus's story of incest and patricide is so terrible that it provokes these feelings instantly. Catharsis provoked by spectacle is "less artistic," according to Aristotle, because spectacle includes stage production, not poetic production, which does not reflect poetic talent. This passage also implies that tragedy should make the audience feel fear and pity specifically, as compared to other emotions, because fear and pity are the emotions that tragedy seeks to imitate.

7.4 Second Deduction. Next, Aristotle considers those events which appear "terrible or pitiable." Tragedy is generally concerned with interactions among people who are closely connected, who are enemies, or who are neutral to one another. If enemies act on enemies, there is no pity, just as there is no pity if neutrals act on neutrals. The most pitiable events are those that occur between characters who are closely connected, such as brother killing brother, or son killing mother or father, and so on.

Acts that are "terrible or pitiable" are those that elicit feelings of fear and pity in the audience, and it is best if these terrible acts occur between those who are closely related, as they are in Oedipus Rex (Oedipus kills his father and has sex with his mother). Terrible acts done onto one's family are more "terrible and pitiable" than acts done onto unrelated enemies or neutrals.

Such a "pitiable action" can come about with a character acting in full knowledge, such as Euripides's portrayal of Medea killing her children. However, pitiable actions can also be performed in ignorance, as in Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex**. Pitiable actions can also be imitated by characters who almost perform a terrible act before being stopped by some recognition. These three possibilities are all there is, as a terrible and pitiable act is either performed or not, and that act is either performed in ignorance or in awareness.

Medea kills her children as revenge for her husband's infidelity, and she commits the act in full awareness of the terrible thing she is doing. Oedipus, on the other hand, doesn't initially know that the man he has killed is his father, nor does he know that the woman he has married is his mother. While Aristotle doesn't explicitly say it here, he implies that acts committed in ignorance are more tragic because they are unintentional.

A character who is on the verge of knowingly performing a "terrible and pitiable" act but then stops is the worst kind of plot. Such a plot is not tragic, and there is no suffering; thus, it is rarely used, except for Creon in *Antigone*. How the pitiable action is performed is less important, but it is better if the action is performed unknowingly and followed by recognition. There is no "disgust" to be found in an act committed in ignorance, Aristotle argues, and it has a strong "emotional impact." The best plots, Aristotle claims, are those like Merope's actions in *Cresphontes*: she nearly kills her son without knowing who he is, but she stops when she recognizes him.

In Antigone, Creon's son, Haemon, tries to kill Creon after Antigone hangs herself. When Haemon fails to kill Creon, he kills himself. Haemon fails to perform the "terrible and pitiable" act (he doesn't kill his father), and Aristotle implies that this isn't a tragic outcome (as compared to Haemon killing his father and then killing himself). Aristotle says that there is no "disgust" to be found in characters like Oedipus, who commit terrible acts unknowingly. Oedipus didn't know what he was doing, unlike Medea, so Oedipus can't be faulted; thus, catharsis is stronger and more effective. Cresphontes *is a play by Euripides that did not survive antiquity, but Aristotle's point is clear: when characters almost commit terrible acts but stop because of recognition, such a plot will produce the greatest feelings of fear and pity in the audience because it implies that a terrible act could accidentally happen to anyone.*

CHAPTER 8. OTHER ASPECTS OF TRAGEDY

8.1 Character. There are four things that go into making a good character. The first is goodness: speech and actions have character, as they reveal the essence of a specific choice. If the choice is good, the character is good as well. The second is appropriateness: if a character is courageous, they must be courageous in accordance with what type of character they are. For example, it is inappropriate for a woman to demonstrate "courage or cleverness" in the same way as a man.

Women during Aristotle's time were not stereotypically "courageous and clever," since most believe that these were traits more likely found in men. Therefore, Aristotle argues that it is inappropriate (during his time, that is) for women to be depicted as such. A character must be either good or bad, but that character must be in keeping with whom, or rather what, they are meant to imitate.

The third thing that makes a good character is likeness, but this is not to say that a character is likable. The fourth is consistency: even if a character's specific actions are inconsistent and this is fitting of their supposed character, such inconsistencies should be "consistently inconsistent." Menelaus in *Orestes* is an example of "unnecessary badness" in a character, and *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, when Iphigeneia pleads for her life, is an example of inconsistency. However, in these examples, it is necessary or probable that the characters behave in precisely such ways, so they can be considered "consistently inconsistent."

Likeness refers to the appropriateness of an imitation (how well it imitates something)—not a character's likability. Aristotle's language here is a bit tricky, but what he means to say is that if it is in a specific character's disposition to be inconsistent, they must be inconsistent in the same way all the time. The only exception to this rule is if inconsistency is necessary or probable. Iphigeneia *is Aristotle's example. When Iphigeneia is first set to be sacrificed, she begs for her life, but she soon comes to except her fate and embraces death. This inconsistency in Iphigeneia's actions is probable—she isn't likely to escape sacrifice, so she accepts it. She* does *escape, but for Aristotle, this is beside the point.*

The resolution of the plot should come about from the plot as well—it shouldn't rely on "theatrical device" as in *Medea* or the *Iliad*. "Theatrical devices" can be employed for things outside of the play, such as the power of gods, but there should be nothing irrational in the plot itself.

At the end of Medea, *Medea escapes by way a supernatural chariot. Medea's escape is irrational, and Aristotle implies that the resolution would be better if it came directly from the plot itself. Similarly, in the* Iliad, *the goddess Athene must intervene to keep the Greeks fighting the Trojan War. Aristotle implies that it would have been better for this resolution to come from the plot itself, not from the gods.*

A tragedy should imitate people who are better than us, Aristotle repeats, so poets "should imitate good portrait-painters." Good portrait-painters paint subjects as they are, only they make them better-looking. Even characters who have bad traits should be portrayed as good people, like Homer's portrayal of Achilles.

In Homer's Iliad, *Achilles kills Hector, the prince of Troy, in a duel. Achilles is a fierce warrior, and he kills easily, but he is also loyal and good to his men, the Myrmidons. Achilles has some immoral traits, but since he is still depicted as a good person, his death at the end of the* Iliad *is that much more tragic.*

8.2 Kinds of Recognition. The first and least artistic kind of recognition involves tokens: some tokens are congenital, like a birthmark, and some are acquired, like a scar. Tokens can also be external, like jewelry or a boat. For example, Odysseus is recognized by a scar. If recognition is employed merely for confirmation, this is less artistic than recognition that comes about from reversal, which is best. This superior kind of recognition can be observed "in the bath-scene" of Homer's *Odyssey*.

In the "bath-scene" of Homer's Odyssey, *a nurse washes Odysseus's feet and spots his telltale scar that identifies him as Odysseus. Odysseus doesn't intend to impart his identity to the nurse in the bath-scene, which is where the reversal comes in. This kind of recognition that also involves reversal is more artistic than the parts of the* Iliad *when Odysseus states his identity and uses his scar as confirmation.*

The second kind of recognition is created by the poet, and this form of recognition is not very artistic either. In the *Iphigeneia*, Orestes reveals his own identity, but Iphigeneia's identity is revealed through a letter. "Orestes declares in person what the poet (instead of the plot) requires," Aristotle says. That is, Orestes tells Iphigeneia he is her brother, but he could just as easily have been identified through a token of some kind, so this recognition isn't really superior to the kind that tokens can trigger.

Aristotle's language in this section can be difficult to interpret, but the edition notes explain that Orestes blurting out who he is isn't artistic either, since the same thing can be accomplished with a token of some kind. Whether Orestes is identified from his own confession or a token, such recognition is contrived and does not come from the plot, as Iphigeneia's letter does.

The third kind of recognition is the kind that arises from memory, when a character suddenly realizes something they forgot. Aristotle again raises the example of Odysseus, who weeps at the sound of a lyre because he is reminded of his past. This reminder results in a recognition. The fourth kind of recognition are those that come about from inference, like in the *Sons of Phineus*, in which the women surmise that it is their fate to die. There is also recognition that comes from "false inference," as it does in *Odysseus the False Messenger*. The best kind of recognition comes from the plot—the course of events—and it is probable, as in Sophocles's **Oedipus Rex** and the *Iphigeneia* (Iphigeneia's letter, Aristotle points out, "is probable"). This is the best kind of recognition because it doesn't rely on any kind of token, and inference is the second-best kind of recognition.

Odysseus's recognition comes about because of the events of the plot rather than being forced through admission or token; thus, Aristotle argues that recognition from memory is more effective in producing catharsis. Nothing is known about the Sons of Phineus *or* Odysseus the False Messenger, *neither of which appear to have survived antiquity; however, Aristotle's point is still clear. Recognition from inference is better than recognition from token, but the best recognition arises from events in the plot, as with the messenger in* Oedipus Rex. *Iphigeneia's letter can be considered a token, but Aristotle implies it is probable for one to reveal their identity in a letter, so this recognition isn't contrived in quite the same way as other tokens, like a scar.*

8.3 Visualizing the Action. Poets should always visualize the plot as they construct it. In doing so, a poet can spot inconsistencies and inappropriateness. Plots should also include the use of gestures, and such gestures are most believable if they are performed by those who are actually feeling the emotion the gesture is meant to imitate. "This is why," Aristotle says, "the art of poetry belongs to people who are naturally gifted or mad." The actions of the insane or talented appear the most authentic.

The idea that "the art of poetry belongs to people who are naturally gifted or mad" was a popular one during Aristotle's time, and it's also reflected in Aristophanes plays, such as Thesmophoriazusae. *The idea is that those who are naturally talented or insane are more convincing than those who are simply trying to act.*

8.4 Outlines and Episodization. Stories should bet set out first in "universal terms," and then they should be turned into episodes and expounded on. An example of what Aristotle means by "universal terms" is the *Iphigeneia*, in which a girl is supposed to be sacrificed but disappears without anyone knowing. She goes to another country where the custom is to sacrifice foreigners, but instead she's hailed as a priestess and spared. Her brother arrives and is captured, but before he is sacrificed, he discloses his identity and escapes. These are the "universal terms" of the *Iphigeneia*, Aristotle says, and Euripides turned these terms into episodes in his play.

Aristotle's explanation here of "universal terms" is different than the universals expressed and imitated though poetry that he explains elsewhere in the text. Instead of being something relatable that an audience will empathize with and that will therefore increase their catharsis, "universal terms" refers to the bare-bones structure of a story—in this case the myth of Iphigeneia—which is then expanded through episodes and made into a tragedy.

Episodes must be appropriate and concise in tragedy, but in epic poetry, they are often used to make a story longer. Take Homer's *Odyssey*. The story itself is short: a man is alone and away from home under close watch by Poseidon. While he is gone, his property is misspent and a plot is executed against his son. The man is shipwrecked, but he manages to get home, where he reveals his identity and destroys his enemies. Most of the *Odyssey*, Aristotle says, "is episodes."

A tragedy can't be extended to great lengths by episodes because creating a tragedy that is too long will disrupt unity. A tragedy the length of Homer's Odyssey *would be impossible to keep readily in one's memory or view; thus, numerous episodes in tragedy are inappropriate and better left to tragic poems.*

8.5 Complication and Resolution. A tragedy must have complication and resolution. According to Aristotle, the complication is "everything from the beginning up to and including the section which immediately precedes" the change of fortune. The resolution, he says, is "everything from the beginning of the change of fortune to the end." A complication can occur even outside the events of a play, as in *Lyceus*, Aristotle says, in which the child is taken before the play starts.

Very little is known about Lyceus, *so it is difficult to interpret Aristotle's point exactly. However, he seems to imply that complications occurring outside the events of a play—like Agamemnon's murder in Sophocles's* Electra, *which takes place before the play—can still have bearing on the events of a play. Thus, a complication does not necessarily have to occur* during *a tragedy.*

8.6 Kinds of Tragedy. According to Aristotle, there are four different kinds of tragedy: complex tragedy, which relies on reversal and recognition; tragedy of suffering, like plays about Ajax; tragedy of character, like *Women of Phthia*; and simple tragedy, like *Prometheus* and plays about the underworld. A tragedy should include all the component parts, but it is usually judged by its plot. Therefore, both complication and resolution should be constructed with the same attention.

Ajax was a great warrior during the Trojan War who, after losing Achilles's armor to Odysseus, kills himself with a sword given to him by Hector. Stories about Ajax involve both physical and emotional suffering, which, Aristotle implies, are best for bringing about catharsis. Little is known about the Women of Phthia *or exactly which* Prometheus *Aristotle is referencing to here; however, the mythical Prometheus was punished by Zeus for giving fire to man and was chained to the side of a mountain and tortured for all eternity. Prometheus's story is also rife with suffering and therefore fear and pity.*

8.7 Tragedy and Epic. A tragedy should not be constructed from material that would be better be as an epic. For instance, the *Iliad* contains many stories and is not appropriate for a tragedy because it's so long that the stories wouldn't have the right magnitude.

Again, a tragedy that is too long, with too great of magnitude, cannot be readily held in memory and would not have unity. An epic can sustain a multitude of stories, whereas a tragedy cannot.

8.8 Astonishment. Poets should use astonishment when constructing reversals and simple actions. This is achieved when characters who are "clever but bad" are deceived. Such an action is not improbable, Aristotle argues, because it is likely for unlikely things to happen.

Aristotle argues that since improbable things have happened before, it is likely that improbable or unlikely things will happen again. Aristotle's language can be confusing for modern readers, but his point is that just because something is unlikely doesn't mean that it couldn't or wouldn't happen.

8.9 The Chorus. The chorus is like any actor in a play and should contribute to the play as a whole. However, the poet need not write choral lyrics as they do the rest of the play—musical interludes can simply be marked and left to the producer to fill in.

Aristotle's language in this section is difficult to interpret as well, but the text notes indicate that Aristotle's point is that musical selection need not be the work of the poet; music, like spectacle can be delegated to the producer of a theatrical play.

CHAPTER 9. DICTION

9.1 Introduction. Aristotle will now discuss diction and reasoning, although he covers reasoning more thoroughly in his book *Rhetoric*. Reasoning can be understood as the effect produced by language, such as proof, refutation, the production of emotion (namely pity and fear), and the establishment of importance and unimportance. Diction includes utterances, like commands, threats, and answers.

As Poetics *is a work of literary theory, it seeks to define and systematically categorize every aspect of poetry—including relatively straightforward concepts like diction. This way, poetry as a whole can be more thoroughly discussed and analyzed.*

9.2 Basic Concepts. Diction includes the following: phoneme, syllable, connective, noun, verb, conjunction, inflection, and utterance. Phonemes are distinct units of sound and vocalization, and Aristotle classifies them into three categories: the first are vowels, which are audible sounds that do not involve contact between organs of speech. The second are continuants, which are audible sounds that do involve contact between organs of speech, such as the sounds made by the letter *s* or *r*. The third are mutes, which involve contact between organs of speech but do not have an audible sound unless combined with another phoneme, like the vocalizations made by the letters *g* or *d*. A syllable is a vocalization comprised of a mute and a phoneme, and a connective is a vocalization that should not occur by itself but that is capable of creating significance in combination with other vocalizations, such as the words "around" and "about."

Aristotle's upcoming argument about the importance of non-standard speech in poetry only makes sense if he first establishes what exactly standard speech is. Here, he defines and explains language and speech right down to the speech organs required to make sounds, so that he can more easily explain how a poet should alter standard language to make it more interesting and artistic.

A conjunction marks the beginning, end, or division of a significant vocalization. Aristotle further claims that a noun is a significant vocalization that does not express tense and is insignificant without another element of diction, whereas a verb is a significant vocalization that does express tense but is still insignificant on its own, much like a noun.

Again, the rather technical tone adopted in this section of Poetics *is typical of literary theory. Aristotle breaks down a single vocalization to its component parts so that he can better examine, study, and explain it.*

An inflection is a noun or verb that expresses case (such as "of him" or "for him"), number (as in "person" or "persons"), or mode of expression (such as a question or command). Lastly, an utterance is any significant vocalization that can be significant on its own, unlike a noun or verb.

Aristotle's breakdown of diction here allows readers to better understand exactly how an utterance is able to elicit emotion in tragedy. Different emotions are imitated though various inflections and modes of expression.

9.3 Classification of Nouns. Nouns can be simple (like the word "earth") or double, and nouns are classified as current, non-standard, metaphorical, ornamental, coined, lengthened, shortened, or adapted. A current noun is in popular use among a given group of people, and a non-standard noun is one used by people outside a given group of people. Metaphor is a noun applied to something else, and an ornamental noun is descriptive, like an epithet. A coined noun is created by the poet, and a noun is lengthened if it is given longer vowels or more syllables than usual. Conversely, a noun is shortened if something is removed. An adapted noun is one in which something is added, as in "rightward" for "right."

Aristotle later argues that a good poet uses all the elements of diction in constructing a poem, and he lays the groundwork for that argument here. Aristotle can't maintain that a poet should use certain elements without first explaining in detail what those elements are. Again, Aristotle uses a systematic and categorical approach to explaining and defining poetry, which is typical of works of literary theory like Poetics.

9.4 Qualities of Poetic Style. Diction's most important quality is clarity, as long as there is "no loss of dignity." Clear diction is based on current words, but current words can lack dignity. Diction is out of the ordinary when it is made up of "exotic expressions," which are non-standard words, metaphor, and lengthened words. There must be a balance between clarity and "exotic expressions," Aristotle argues, as a poem that is constructed only of "exotic expressions" is incomprehensible. Thus, a poem must be both clear *and* out of the ordinary.

Aristotle believes that poems which consist only of current and standard words are unoriginal and inartistic; thus, such poems suffer a "loss of dignity." Aristotle's idea of "dignity" here is a poem that uses current words but has enough "exotic expressions" to be interesting. This "dignity" speaks to the importance of balance in poetry that is reflected throughout the book.

It is important for a poet to use all the parts of diction, but the most import is the use of metaphor. Good use of metaphor is the only thing that a poet cannot learn, and it "is a sign of a natural talent."

This passage is the crux of the entire section—each of these elements should be represented in poetry, so they must be explained. Despite the importance of metaphor, Aristotle spends very little time explaining it, presumably because he believes that good use of metaphor can't be learned.

CHAPTER 10. EPIC

10.1 Plot. Like a tragedy, an epic should be constructed "dramatically." This means that an epic should imitate a whole action of unity, and it should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. An epic should not be constructed in the same way as a history, and it should not reflect a single period of time. Homer does not attempt to imitate the Trojan War as a whole, which would be much too large; instead, Homer uses one part of the war with many episodes.

Homer's Iliad *takes place during the Trojan War, which lasted 10 years. However, the epic poem focuses only on a short period of time (weeks compared to years) during which Achilles and King Agamemnon have an acute disagreement. Likewise, the* Odyssey *focuses on the Trojan War only in that it involves Odysseus's return home after the war. A tragedy should be constructed "dramatically," which hearkens to the stage, and should be condensed to fit the time restraints of a play. This again speaks to balance: a tragedy must be big enough to elicit astonishment, but it must have unity and be small enough to be held in a single view.*

10.2 Kinds and Parts of Epic. Also like tragedy, an epic is either simple, complex, or based on suffering. The components of an epic are the same, too, except an epic does not have lyric poetry or spectacle. An epic should have reversal and recognition, and an epic should make good use of reasoning and diction. Homer was the first to do this in an appropriate way, Aristotle says: "The *Iliad* is simple and based on suffering, [and] the *Odyssey* is complex (recognition pervades it) and based on character."

The Iliad *is "simple and based on suffering" because it imitates the action of men at war. The* Iliad *does not focus solely on any one person, and Achilles is only one many central characters. The* Odyssey, *on the other hand, focuses on Odysseus, and his identity is revealed through recognition at several points in the poem.*

10.3 Differences between Tragedy and Epic. Epic is different from tragedy in that the plot of an epic is longer; however, one should still be able to appreciate its unity. In an epic, many parts can occur simultaneously, which makes the poem more extraordinary. Different verse-forms can be used in an epic, such as heroic verse, which is "stately and grandiose." Iambic verse imitates movement, but no one has composed a lengthy poem in anything other than heroic verse, which Aristotle implies is most appropriate.

Heroic verse is a type of poetic verse typically used in epic poetry. Heroic verse (which Aristotle implies is more dignified, or "stately and grandiose," than other forms of verse) includes dactylic hexameter, which Homer uses in the Iliad *and* Odyssey. *It also includes iambic pentameter, which—for a more modern example—is used in John Milton's epic poem* Paradise Lost.

10.4 Quasi-dramatic Epic. According to Aristotle, "the poet in person should say as little as possible; that is not what makes him an imitator." Homer is the master of this craft. Homer briefly introduces characters with a short opening and then lets each one show their own character and speak for themselves.

Here, Aristotle implies that a poem should show *the events of an action, rather than a poet's language* telling *the events of an action. In other words, a poet should show how strong a character is through descriptive language rather than simply saying that said character is strong. For Aristotle, this produces a more accurate imitation.*

10.5 Astonishment and Irrationalities. Like a tragedy, there should also be astonishment in epic. However, the irrational is more possible in an epic, since readers are not always looking directly at the object. For example, Hector's pursuit would be irrational on stage, but this irrationality isn't noticed in the epic. According to Aristotle, Homer taught other poets how to use "false inference." If the existence of *A* implies the existence of *B*, Aristotle explains, people assume that if *B* occurs, *A* must occur as well. This assumption is false, Aristotle says, and it can also be seen "in the bath-scene" in the *Odyssey*.

In the Iliad, *Achilles chases Hector around Troy three times before Hector faces him to fight. This pursuit is only mentioned in passing (it is not played out as it would be in a tragedy), which makes it less irrational. In the bath-scene, the nurse assumes Odysseus's identity from a scar on his foot, but this scar doesn't mean that he* must *be Odysseus. Any number of people could have a scar on their foot; thus, the nurse's assumption has the potential to be a "false inference."*

Aristotle believes that impossibilities which are probable are better than those which are unlikely. Stories should not be irrational; however, if a story does contain the irrational, it should occur outside the story, like the mention of the Pythian Games in *Electra*. If a story has an irrationality that seems reasonable, a poet can conceal this absurdity "with other good qualities" and make it "a source of pleasure."

In Electra, *the titular Electra is told that her brother, Orestes, was killed in a chariot race during the Pythian Games. The Pythian Games, however, did not exist during the time in which the play takes place (the Pythian Games took place in Sophocles, the playwright's, lifetime). Aristotle considers this inconsistency an irrationality; however, the Pythian Games occur outside the play (they're only mentioned, not imitated). Aristotle implies that such irrationalities can be covered up "with other good qualities" to make it "a source of pleasure," presumably with spectacle or lyric poetry.*

10.6 Diction. In parts of an epic where nothing much is happening and neither character nor reasoning are being expressed, it's especially important to be careful about diction, because "excessively brilliant diction overshadows character and reasoning."

This passage again suggests that in areas where a tragedy is lacking, deficiencies can be covered up with other components of poetry. Here, Aristotle claims that parts of a tragedy which lack character and reasoning can be made up with "excessively brilliant diction."

CHAPTER 11. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

11.1 Principles. A poet is an imitator just as a painter is, and the poet must imitate an object in one of three ways: they imitate an object as it is, as it is said or thought to be, or as it ought to be. A poet's diction should include non-standard words, metaphors, and modified words. Errors in poetry are one of two kinds and are either intrinsic or incidental. If a poet fails to imitate because they are incompetent, that error is intrinsic.

A poet may imitate an object as it is said to be, thought to be, or ought to be, and none of these imitations will imitate an objects as it actually is. Aristotle is careful to point this distinction out because such imitations are not an error or wrong in anyway; they are simply different, like non-standard words.

11.2 Applications. If a poet includes impossibilities in a poem, it is an error; however, if this error achieves a desired effect, like the pursuit of Hector, then the error is "correct" and therefore not really an error. Aristotle also argues that errors are less serious if they are made in ignorance, like a painter who gives a female deer antlers. Plus, if something isn't true in a poem, it may just be that an object is imitated as it should be, rather than how it actually is. Aristotle urges the reader to remember that Sophocles imitated people "as they should be," while Euripides showed them "as they are."

Hector's pursuit, although irrational, adds to the suspense of the battle that Hector and Achilles engage in—which is, presumably, the desired effect. Thus, this irrationality isn't an error per se. Only male deer have antlers, but Aristotle doesn't consider mistakenly painting antlers on a doe to be a serious artistic error. The same objects and people can be imitated in different ways, as Sophocles and Euripides do—this is not to say that an imitation is incorrect or an error.

Some problems in poetry can be solved with close attention to diction. For example, use of non-standard words may be better, or it may be better to use metaphor. Even punctuation can change the meaning of any given utterance. Ambiguity can also be helpful in constructing a poem, like in the utterance "more of the night as passed." This statement does not say exactly how much of the night has passed—just that some of it has. When a word seems contradictory in a poem, it is helpful to consider the word in multiple contexts.

Considering contradictory words again suggests that not everything that seems wrong is an error. Common words are often used in uncommon ways, which isn't to say that the use of any particular word is wrong. In simpler terms, what may seem like an error may just need a bit more thought or investigation. This passage also speaks to the importance of balance between standard and non-standard words.

11.3 Conclusion. Generally, objections to poetry usually include one of the following: a poem is impossible, irrational, harmful, contradictory, or incorrect. A "plausible impossibility" in a poem is better than "what is implausible but possible," Aristotle says. Regarding irrationalities, it is likely that unlikely things will happen, so sometimes something that seems irrational actually proves to be rational. Contradictory utterances should be met with scrutiny, Aristotle repeats, and irrationality and wickedness are "correct" if they are necessary or probable. But if the poet doesn't use irrationality for a particular purpose, then readers can rightfully object to that irrationality.

Aristotle's language here may be confusing, but it again boils down to what is probable or *necessary. Improbable and irrational things have happened before, which is to say it is paradoxically likely for improbable things to happen again. If it is the sort of thing that* could *happen, it is fair game for imitation in a tragedy. In short, Aristotle implies that most of the objections made against poetry are moot, and that even events or actions that seem irrational or contradictory can be both necessary and probable.*

CHAPTER 12. COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF EPIC AND TRAGEDY

12.1 The Case against Tragedy. If superior art is "less vulgar," it is clear that art that "imitates indiscriminately is vulgar." This, some critics say, is the problem with tragedy. Epic is often thought to be meant for "decent audiences who do not need gestures," while tragedy is thought to be made for "second-rate audiences," which implies that tragedy is vulgar and therefore inferior.

Aristotle again implies that epic poetry is made for a more refined audience and that the "vulgar" imitations of the terrible acts depicted in tragedy are for less refined audiences. The use of "gestures," i.e., acting, implies that tragic audiences need additional gestures and signs to understand what is understood by a superior audience without gestures.

12.2 Reply. Aristotle argues that criticism of tragedy as vulgar and inferior is a critique of the performance, not the poem. Furthermore, tragedy's effects can be had from reading, not just watching, which means that gestures are not necessary to achieve catharsis. "Tragedy has everything that epic does," Aristotle says—plus, tragedy has lyric poetry and spectacle, which are a "source of intense pleasure." Additionally, a tragedy is shorter, and "what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being extended in time." For instance, if **Oedipus Rex** were as long as the *Iliad*, it would be much less impactful. Lastly, there is less unity in epic, and it can be difficult to hold the whole object in view.

The gestures of an actor are similar to spectacle and music—they are not necessarily created by the poet; thus, the gestures involved in tragedy are not a reflection of the poet's talent or the poem's effectiveness. Lyric poetry is a "source of intense pleasure" because it involves rhythm and melody, which, like spectacle, is attractive to human beings. To Aristotle, spectacle and lyric poetry are added perks that epic poetry lacks. In this passage, Aristotle lays out exactly why he believes tragedy is superior to epic.

Tragedy, Aristotle argues, "surpasses epic in all these respects, and also in artistic effect," as a tragedy is expected to provoke fear and pity in particular, and not just any emotion. Thus, "tragedy must be superior" to epic.

Again, this is the very heart of one of Aristotle's primary arguments. Tragedy is better than epic, at least in part, because tragedy must elicit fear and pity in an audience, whereas epic is not expected to provoke these emotions specifically.

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