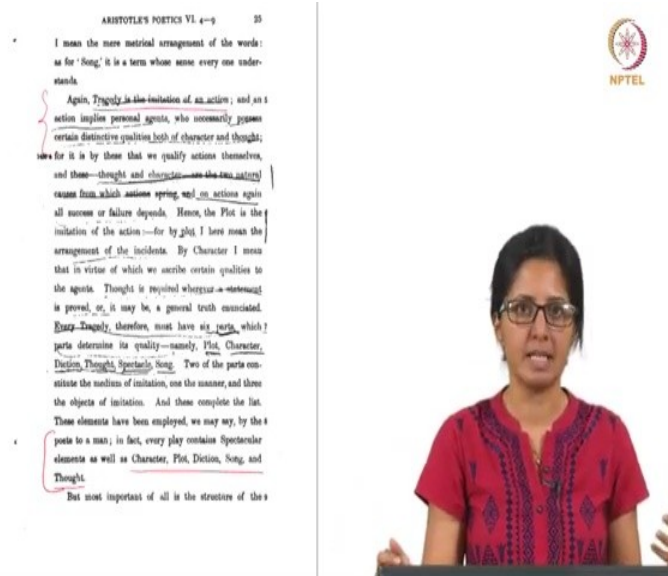


Aristotle's Poetics (Sessions 1)
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Literary Criticism

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Hello, and welcome to today's session of the course Literary Criticism. We continue discussing Aristotle's *Poetics*. In the last session, we started looking at some of the details, with which Aristotle also talks about how to engage with this particular genre- tragedy. Today we focus on the idea of tragedy and how Aristotle has given certain components and some prescriptive sort of notions about how a good tragedy is being performed and how that is perceived.

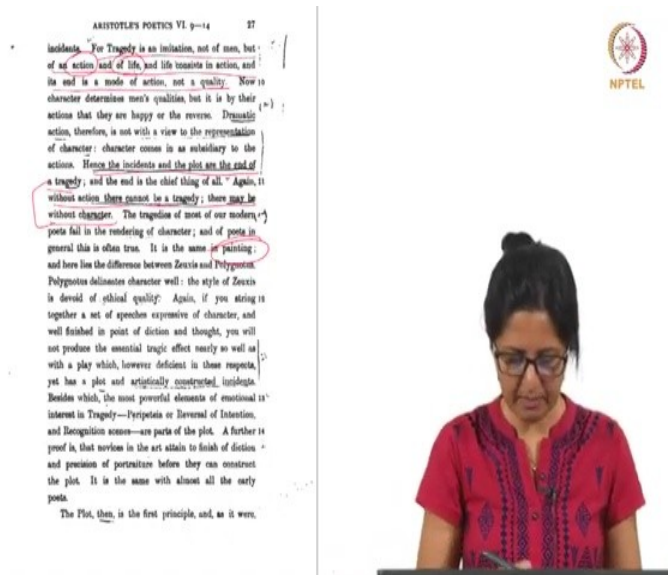
And we also spoke about how Aristotle is the first thinker to talk about the connection between the text and the audience, between what is being performed on stage and responses that the audience who are watching it are also having. Coming back to the discussion on tragedy, it is also important to note that Aristotle's principles on tragedy continued unrefuted for centuries and even in the height of Elizabethan drama, which is supposedly the best kind of dramatic output that England also had received; even during that time, most of the principles which the native traditions also emerged from had to depart from Aristotle.

And in many discussions even in the contemporary when one is talking about tragedy, when one is talking about various dramatic components and elements, even when we are departing from the classical principles, it always continues to be situated as the starting point- *Poetics* and Aristotle's ideas about tragedy.

We saw in the last section how tragedy was being seen as the imitation of an action. And if we read through these relevant sections in *Poetics*, we will know that Aristotle places action as an important thing more than anything else. And he even goes to the extent of saying that there can be a tragedy without character but without action, there is no way in which any kind of tragedy, any kind of good tragedy can be performed.

And in this process, he also gives the details of six important elements: character, plot, diction, song and thought. And these six elements, he informs us that they are constitutive to any good tragedy. It does not mean that all elements will be present in a particular kind of form all the time. But what he is trying to say is that a good tragedy will have elements from all these six constituent parts, and in this he is also trying to prioritize one over the other.

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As we will begin to see over here: “For tragedy is an imitation not of men, but of an action and of life and life consists in action and its end is a mode of action, not a quality.” Though the tragic hero, the protagonist, is extremely important in determining the various causes of action, we also find how Aristotle gives a universal rendition to it by focusing not on men, not on people, not on what people do and how they direct the course of action.

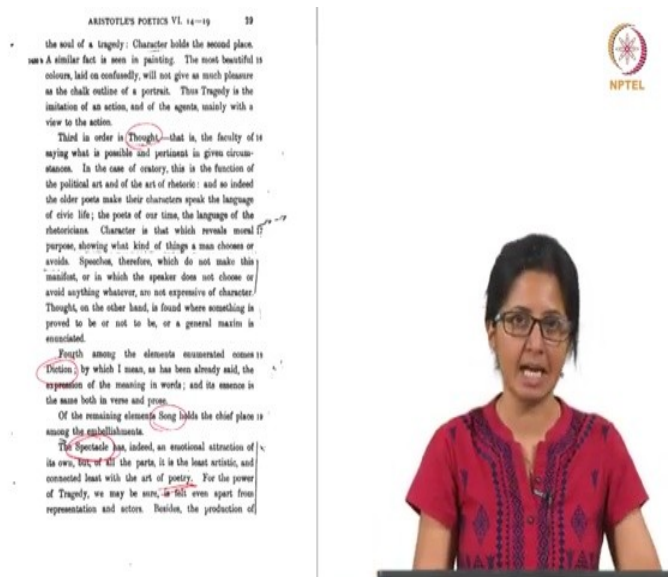
On the contrary, he is focusing on action and on life, which is what makes a good tragedy universal too, he argues. This principle is something that we find continues to get applied to various kinds of art forms that we see even in the contemporary when the significance is on life, on action more than people and their pettiness. We find that there is a certain universal aspect, there is an added value addition, and there is an added emotional appeal to it. And

going on, he also says, incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action, there cannot be a tragedy, there may be without character.

Here is where he prioritizes action over character. And he also says the ending is extremely important. If you look at some of the tragedies that you are familiar with, we realize that it is the end which gives the overall significance, it is the end, which also places the entire canvas in a very contrasting way, it is the end, which also shows the mighty fall that the protagonist has had to undergo, it is the end, which also shows what various courses of action what significance various courses of action had to play in this entire scheme of tragedy.

And there are examples that he gives in between and he also tries to give certain comparisons and certain sorts of differential opinions in the context of painting as well. And this sort of large canvas Aristotle engages with continues to be significant in most of his writings, and he continues to engage with these different genres. Even when he is talking about tragedy as the central element over here, he also brings in other sorts of familiar tropes, other familiar genres, other familiar players in order to make sense so that the reader/listener can make sense of the various things that are being discussed over here. If you look at the structure of *Poetics*, we find it over and over again. Aristotle takes pains, he makes an effort to clarify things and this is why it is said that it is also in the form of lecture notes. It is also in the form of certain sessions being taken for the disciples. Look at this for instance:

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“The plot then, is the first principle and as it were, the soul of a tragedy, character holds a second place. A similar factor seen in painting, the most beautiful colors laid on confusedly will not give as much pleasure as a chalk outline of a portrait. This tragedy is an imitation of an action and of the agents, mainly with a view to the action.”

Look at the way in which he is prioritizing character and plot. And in the same way, look at the kind of comparisons which are being given over here. Aristotle knows his audience, his listeners at that point of time and he knows that they are very familiar with painting too.

So, look at these examples which he is bringing from apparently two different kinds of art forms. But he is talking about the evocative senses. He is talking about the responses that it elicits on different kinds of audience and that is being given as a comparison.

This also takes us back to the original point that we were trying to make. Aristotle is perhaps the first critical thinker to see the connection between the audience and the text. And this response, the response from the audience continues to be important for him at various stages of this discussion.

It is not just about what happens on stage and the various elements in the stage, the various constituent parts of what makes action possible on stage. That becomes important because, only because, that also has a relevance in response that is elicited from the audience and in the rest of the section he also continues to prioritize it.

Third in order is thought, fourth is diction. And then there is song, it holds chief place among the embellishments and spectacle has an emotional attraction of its own. But it is the least artistic and least connected with the art of poetry.

Look at these connections that he makes on and off, which also gives us a sense that even though it is a tragedy, even though it is drama which is being enacted over there, you can also see and feel and experience the elements from other related art forms, whether it is poetry or painting and disconnect. And this sort of a universal appeal is extremely important for us to understand and situate the relevance of *Poetics* as the starting point of all critical tradition in terms of literature, art and culture.

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spectacular effect depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.

VII These principles being established, let us now discuss the proper structure of the plot, since this is the first and most important part of a tragedy.

Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and which, part of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which first of itself follows anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at happiness, but conform to these principles.

Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a picture of a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence an exceedingly small picture cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. No, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were a picture a thousand miles long. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and pictures, a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magni-

In the seventh section, there is a detailed discussion of what happens within a tragedy, about the structure of a tragedy. Let us read through this together: “These principles being established, let us now discuss the proper structure of the plot since this is the first and most important part of a tragedy.”

Now, according to our definition, tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete and whole and is of a certain magnitude. If you notice, this definition is occurring here for the third time, this is also the way in which he reiterated things for his disciples.

None of this, as you have already noticed, is written in any cryptic form. It is very direct, very lucid. And Aristotle is writing with the objective that it should make sense to the ones who are reading it, that it should completely unravel the mysteries of what happens as a constituent part of a tragedy or what happens in the minds of the audience.

And now he is trying to unpack some of the words that he is using over here. Here we see as per the definition, “tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain magnitude.” And what is a whole? A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end.

When we come to think about it, this is actually such a simple thing, such a commonsensical thing, but look at the kind of gravity that it has. In the structure of any well-conceived plot, any well-conceived story, there has to be a beginning, a middle and an end, even in the post-modernist rhetoric, even in the post-modernist narratives, when this idea of having a proper beginning, a middle and an end is being thwarted, is being challenged, is being even ridiculed in certain ways, we begin to realize that you need to depart from this well-set conventional notion of a beginning, middle and an end.

And for someone to say that the story does not begin at the beginning, it is also a way in which we realize that there is a standard which has already been set, which is the beginning, middle and the end. And in order to challenge that you also depart from that standard, depart from that notion which has already been there.

And here Aristotle is almost making a big deal out of this commonsensical thing one might think, but this structure we also realize, is extremely important in making sense of what happens on stage, in making sense of how the play itself is conceived in the first place, and also in making sense of how certain emotions have been progressively developed in the minds of the audience.

Let us read through this together, “a beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity. But after which something naturally is or comes to be”. Look at how beautifully this description is being given. A beginning does not necessarily have to be somewhere, a beginning can be anywhere, provided there is a certain kind of causal connect that it has with the actions that follow. End on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it.

A well-constructed plot, therefore must neither begin nor end at haphazard but conform to these principles. Now, we see that there are two things which are happening over here simultaneously: One, Aristotle is drawing a lot from the existing kind of tragedies. On the other hand, based upon the experiential relation that he had with the tragedies that he has

been reading, he has been witnessing, he has been watching as an audience, he is also trying to lay out certain principles.

This is the twin purpose that Aristotle's poetics also has in a very large context. He is drawing upon existing principles, but he is also laying out rules, which also means that there must have been different kinds of tragedies at work, different kinds of dramas at work during that period when Aristotle was living and writing and teaching. And from that, he perhaps has taken the best of the lot, as per whatever yardsticks (We shall not be getting into those). And through that process, he is also giving out some principles.

He is laying out some principles so that things are clearer and simpler for posterity. And when he talks about a beginning, a middle and an end it is not just for the sake of having a beginning, a middle and an end. But it is for having a well-constructed plot. And that becomes extremely important when you go back to this first point about plot being extremely important in the scheme of a tragedy, we also realize the minor constituent parts about something like a beginning, a middle or an end. That also becomes important only because it eventually leads us towards a well-constructed plot.

This well-constructed plot about the sequences that he has in mind, about things that would follow, about a sense of an ending, about the beginning, which has a causal connect with the other events that would follow also has an almost scientific kind of a structure to it, which is why again, as we mentioned in the previous session, he is also seen as one of the first critics who also brought in the scientific elements while doing literary criticism.

Now, he is dealing with another word that he uses in the definition: "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain magnitude." First, in this entire paragraph he is talking about how the whole can be achieved by focusing on a well-constructed plot, which also has a beginning, a middle and an end.

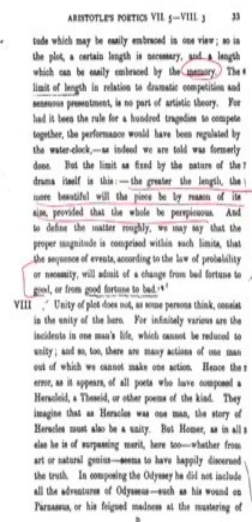
Now, he is talking about magnitude and how important that is. And for this, he begins by talking about an example about looking at and about the simple act of perceiving and admiring a beautiful object. Let us read through this: "Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a picture or a living organism, or any whole composed of parts must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts"- please notice this orderly arrangement of parts.

That is what the whole does -the beginning, the middle and the end. It must also be of a certain magnitude. He is dealing with other words that he has used in the definition which is

also telling us in multiple ways that when Aristotle is trying to define something, he is not using words loosely. Each word, and if you are familiar with Greek original words, you would also know that all these words are very very loaded, one cannot be substituted with the other. It is not just a gap-filling exercise that he does by giving us these definitions. Each word has a gravity, each word has a specific meaning and intent as well.

So, while using magnitude, for beauty depends on magnitude and order. So, these are the two things that he considers as extremely important while talking about a tragedy. There should be order, there should be a structure, there should be a well-conceived plot, and there should be magnitude- just order will not bring in beauty. Order and magnitude together will work towards a well-written or well-conceived or well-received play, tragedy here for instance. Hence an exceedingly small picture cannot be beautiful, for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time, nor again can one of vast size be beautiful. For as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator. It is all about the spectator and how he or she receives it. As for instance, if there were a picture a 1000 miles long as therefore, in the case of animate bodies and pictures, certain magnitude is necessary.

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spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machine than on that of the poet.

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And a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view. So, in the plot a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory. Again, we can see here that the spectator/ the listener/ the audience becomes extremely important. So, let us take a closer look at this: he is giving the example of the picture, a painting or a living organism. He is comparing that with the idea of magnitude, he is using that to elicit the idea of magnitude. He talks about how a very big thing or a very small thing may not be very appealing because either it is too small for our comprehension or it is too big for our eyes and for our comprehension.

So, he talks about a certain magnitude, about the significance of having a particular kind of length, a particular kind of order so that the human mind can also conceive it, so that the human mind can also comprehend it and also make sense of things which eventually will be felt as beautiful, as magnificent. Now, when he is talking about the length, it is about what the human mind can also embrace. You look at this, how this is very beautifully put, “a length which can be easily embraced by the memory.”

If you think about any well-constructed fictional plot or a cinematic experience that you have experienced, you will realize it cannot be beyond a certain canvas. It cannot be too minute, it cannot be beyond a certain canvas either. They should be a certain length, which is comprehensible to human memory, which is comprehensible to human experience.

So, the limit of length in relation to dramatic competition and sensuous presentment is no part of artistic theory. For had it been the rule for a hundred tragedies to compete together, the performance would have been regulated by the water-clock as indeed we are told was formally done. But the limit as fixed by the nature of the drama itself is this.

“The greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous. And to define the matter roughly, we may say that a proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events according to the law of probability, or necessity will admit of a change from a bad fortune to good or from a good fortune to bad.” Look at the connections which are being made over here.

He begins by talking about magnitude, and how that is as important as order. He talks about what a human memory can embrace, what a human memory can comprehend. And from there, he talks about how this is significant for artistic theory.

Then he gives his example of water-clock being used in former times in the earlier performances. He is also talking about the contemporary experience which is relevant to his times, about the greater the length the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous.

And to sum it up, towards the end of the section, he takes us to another discussion altogether and he says, of necessity and this sequence, this magnitude, which is also inherently part of the plot, it will also admit of a change from bad fortune to good or from good fortune to bad. Later when we enter the discussion on tragedy about character, about the various things which are important for a good well-constructed tragedy, we will know that the fall of the protagonist is extremely important, the tragic fall of the tragic hero is extremely important.

So, this plot, the magnitude, the length of it, should also have enough room to make allowances for these movements from bad fortune to good, from good fortune to bad. So, these things which are part of action, the things which happened to the tragic hero, there should be enough space, there should be enough room for many things to happen within this tragedy. A sense of order and the sense of magnitude ensures that structurally it is being made possible.

And these are some of the things which we now take for granted, which we now think is part of common sense. And it is very important for us to realize that what we now understand as common sense, as part of any kind of artistic rhetoric, is also something which has been laid out as a principle, which has been noticed and the details have been worked upon by someone like Aristotle centuries back.

So, before we move on to the next discussions, which are central to tragedy, about catharsis and about the processes, which happened on stage and how that connects with the spectator,

it would be useful if you read through the rest of these sections, from eight onwards, to get a sense of what are the different constituent parts that Aristotle is bringing together in order to enter this discussion on catharsis, enter the discussion on the tragic hero and what happens to the tragic hero.

So, there are two parts to this discussion which we will take up in the next session. One is about the tragic hero and the distinct characteristics of a tragic hero. It is very important to look at that and also see how our contemporary ideas have either corroborated or departed from that.

And in the second part, we will talk about the twin emotions, the two things which happen on stage and in the minds of the audience. We will talk about the different stages that the drama, that the tragedy undergoes; the different stages that the tragedy goes through while it is being performed and the different stages of emotional catharsis, emotional purgation that the audience also goes through. And it is in this connect that Aristotle begins to talk about criticism, the act of criticism as well. He is also trying to tell us that criticism cannot survive independently, it cannot be entirely about the text, and it cannot be entirely about the audience. There needs to be a connect, there needs to be an interface which we begin to identify and the critical principles need to be situated within that. That perhaps is the greatest contribution that Aristotle has given to laying the foundations of western critical thought in multiple ways.

And for the same reason, this needs to be reiterated even when we go further down and talk about other important critical thinkers who were either natively-produced from England or who had contributed much to English literary criticism. We will begin to see that there is this significance always to either depart from Aristotle or to see how that connects well with *Poetics* and Aristotle, regardless of the differentiations in genre and regardless of the differentiations in the manner of discussion.

So, with this, we also come to the end of this session and in the following session, we will continue the discussion on *Poetics*. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.