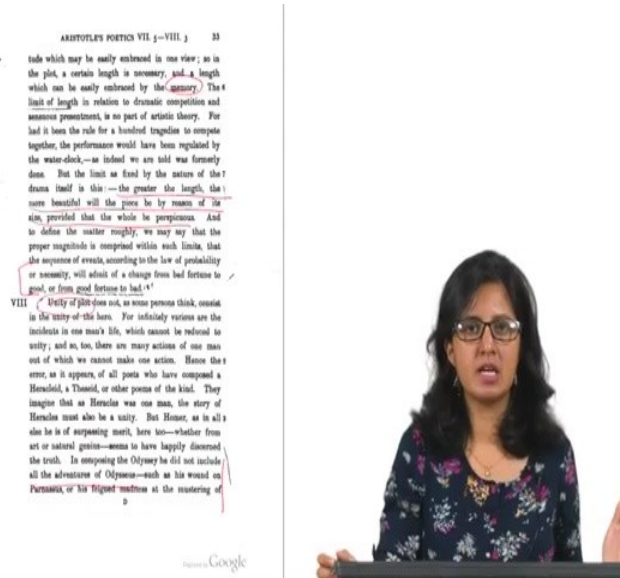


**Aristotle's Poetics (Sessions 2)**  
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**Lecture No 2**

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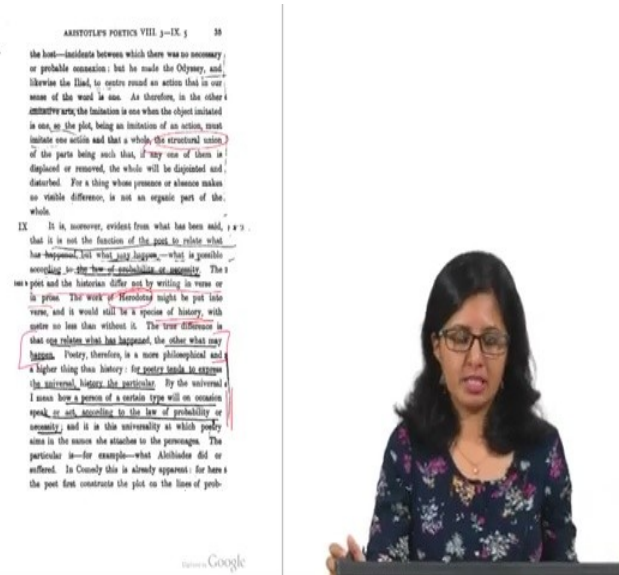
Hello and welcome to today's session. We continue our discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics*. In Section 8 Aristotle begins to talk about the unity of plot. And the three unities as they were discussed during the classical tradition, they continued to be important in various traditions across languages and across cultures until about the sixteenth and seventeenth century. And as we know, even during the Elizabethan times when the English drama, especially the Elizabethan drama when they began to depart from the idea of these three unities, it was a very big deal.

It had to be discussed, and there were a lot of objections and across traditions, even during the neoclassical period, it was always with a sense of departure that one spoke about whether the Aristotelian sense of unity is very important or not. So, here in Section 8, we find Aristotle talking about the unity of plot. Why is this important for Aristotle? Aristotle gives an example while discussing *Odyssey*.

You can see over here: "In composing the *Odyssey*, he did not include all the adventures of Odysseus. And that is not practically possible either. Here we find Aristotle not becoming an idealist as we have already noticed in the initial discussions while differentiating between Plato and Aristotle as well. So we begin to see that there is a sense of practicality that he brings in even when he is addressing Literary Criticism. When he is talking about the unity of

plot he also talks about how in *Odyssey*, all the adventures are not included, but there is a certain kind of a selection which is employed.

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And this selection gives unity to the structure, it gives a certain structural union as he puts it. I read you this section: “As therefore in the other imitative arts the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot being an imitation of an action must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be destroyed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole.” So, this is very, very important even today, when we think about the composition of various art forms.

There are different parts which make the whole and as Aristotle puts it, if the presence or absence of one part does not make any difference in the whole, in the structural union, in the overall composition, then you might as well get rid of that part because that is not really contributing to the structural union. It is not an organic part of the whole and there is a sense of oneness that this structural union also brings in and if you remember the discussion in the previous session, he also talks about the kind of actions which are brought together that can also be comprehensible in human memory.

Memory and human time should be able to embrace that. So there are multiple things that he brings in together in order to make this structural union possible. And by giving examples from the kind of art, the kind of drama that he sees around during his time, he is also making

this very relatable. He is also making the discussion very, very relatable to his audience, to his disciples.

In Section 9, there is a distinction that he tries to bring in between poetry and history. And this he says, is not just about form. It is not just that one is written in verse and the other is written in a prose. As it is evident over here, in Section 9 he points out, “the poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose.” So it is not merely that structural difference in terms of genre which differentiates our historian from a poet or a poet from historian. And he gives the example of Herodotus, one of the renowned historians of the time.

And he says, even if Herodotus had written in verse, the body of his work will still be categorized as a species of history. It is really not about the genre. It is really not about the form. And he says the difference lies in the content and the treatment and how does he put it? “The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen” This is very important. Here he is bringing in some very significant differences between imaginative art forms and other kinds of disciplines. And we also know that these are some of the distinctions which we still consider, which we still maintain as being true.

The true difference is that one relates what has happened, which is the historian in this case, and the other what may happen, that is where he situates all kinds of imaginative literature. Further down, he also says poetry is more philosophical and a higher thing than history. Now look at the kind of prioritization which happens over here, history which is considered as factual which is considered as a report of something that has happened, that is real that is given a slightly inferior position, compared to that of poetry. Poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history.

Poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. Look at these distinctions working over here. And for someone like Aristotle who is not an idealist, who is a rationalist, who is a practical person, who is also employing the pragmatic practical techniques to sort out these differentiations, for him, poetry is certainly of a higher order. In the following discussions that we might have in the next few weeks, starting from Sydney onwards, we will always begin to notice that this kind of prioritization is at the heart of contentions, at the heart of discussion in the English literary critical tradition, especially in the earliest centuries.

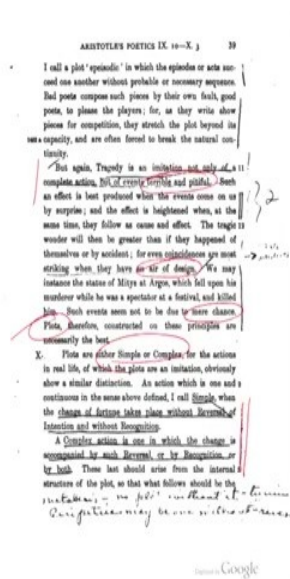
There is always this debate about which discipline is more superior compared to the others and more often than not the differentiation is between imaginative arts and the other kinds of

disciplines which are apparently more fact-based. And here, Aristotle also talks about his idea of universality, what he means by the idea of the universal. This is something which we can also contend with in the contemporary. Going back to what Aristotle says, by the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act according to the law of probability or necessity.

This also indicates to us that Aristotle maintains that there are different kinds of people, there are different types of people and they are bound to respond, they are bound to react in particular ways on any given occasion. And this is a universal law, as Aristotle states it and there are of course, many ways in which we can contend this in the contemporary given the many newer forms of theories and many kinds of postulations which we have around us today.

But at that point of time, universality was something that Aristotle considers extremely important. And looking back and given that this was written centuries back, it is also very important to situate imaginative art forms within that universal rubric, within that universal framework at that point of time, because that also gave the imaginative art forms a sense of validity, a sense of legitimacy. And to situate the universal against the particular was also a way in which poetry and other kinds of imaginative arts were being elevated to a superior level, because they always cater to the universal, they always cater to certain human types, which are inherent, irrespective of their ethnicity or nationality or their socio-political backgrounds.

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He also gives detailed examples from the contemporary, from the plays of his times, from comedy and also from other kinds of writings of those times. And moving on towards the end of Section 9, he again comes back to the idea of tragedy, but again tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action but of events terrible and pitiful. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on as by surprise and the effect is heightened, when at the same time they follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will be then greater than if they had happened of themselves or by accident for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design.

And I want you to particularly pay attention to these few words that Aristotle also highlights. The kind of events that tragedy has, they are out of the ordinary. The out-of-ordinariness of those tragic events is also because they are terrible and pitiful. Those events are terrible and pitiful. And how does Aristotle define the events which are terrible and pitiful? That is something we shall be seeing shortly. And he talks about how there should be an element of surprise built into it.

If those were predictable events, if those were the ordinary kind of events that would happen, it would not have the effect of being terrible and of being pitiful. And what he considers as even more important is that even when events happen as a surprise, even when events happen as a coincidence, there should be an air of design. And that is what, according to Aristotle, makes an art form superior to the other. There is a sense of universality.

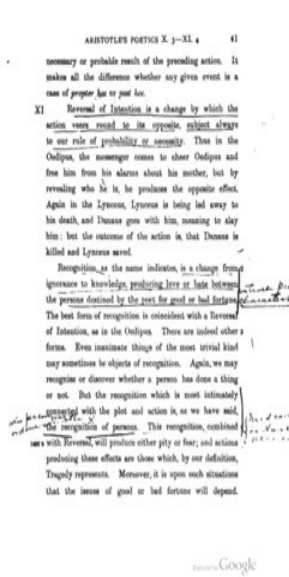
There are certain kinds of predictable behaviours that certain kinds of people are supposed to elicit. But in spite of that, there is an element of surprise, there are coincidences. And everything over here is brought together by an air of design. It is a wonderful word which is being used over here, the air of design, to talk about how these elements come together- not coincidentally, not accidentally. They come together, because they are brought together and that is where Aristotle, without really using that word, also points out to the idea of craft to the importance of an idea of skilful, a craftful writing at work when he is talking about these imaginative forms of art. And he also gives the example over here. We may instance the statue of Mityls at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while he was a spectator at a festival and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to mere chance. Plots therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best. So look at the fine differentiation that he brings over here. It is a fine line that he treads over here. The events happen and they seem as being very coincidental.

They also seem as a mere chance, it was also given to the audience as a surprise. There is a surprise element built into it but there is an air of design to all of this. Think about the other words that he used prior to this discussion, the structural union. This is where we realize how the seemingly different things that are being talked about in *Poetics* all come together to talk about what a perfect kind of art form should be like. It is not really prescriptive in nature.

It is drawing from the examples which have been seen around and it is also talking about how best an effect can be produced when all of these elements come together in the right proportion. When Section 9 ends, Aristotle is talking about plots and the necessity to construct plots, and this is something that also needs to be kept in mind: plots are constructed, good plots are constructed. It is not something that would happen eventually, as and when the process of writing or the process of performance goes on. It is constructed, it is well conceived and it is presented for an audience to consume.

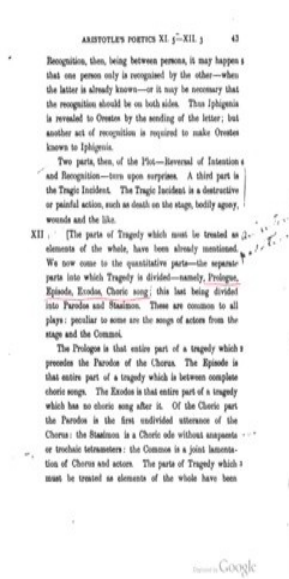
And as the section ends, he talks about the necessity to construct good plots and how the best plots are produced and from there, he moves on to the different kinds of plots, simple or complex, and he talks about the differentiations between simple plots and complex plots. One is simple because the change of fortune takes place without reversal of intention and without recognition. A complex action is when change is accompanied by such reversal or by recognition or by both. And there are examples also being given.

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Section 10 is a very short section where he just introduces us to the idea of a complex plot and a simple plot. Then in Section 11, he details what he means by the reversal of intention and how this recognition is important.

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And there are lot of examples that are woven into this discussion now, as always, and when we reach Section 12, he talks about the parts of tragedy and draws our attention to the different quantitative parts: Prologue, Episode, Exodus and Choric song, the last being divided into Parodos and Stasimon. Look at these compartments and divisions that Aristotle is bringing in and this is something that we will see almost throughout Aristotle's *Poetics*.

His eye for detail is amazing and he talks like a scientist or a naturalist and these differentiations, this fine tuning is extremely important for him. And these categories, we will

also realize, this is not something which was always already in place, this categorization also helps to situate literary criticism. In a more disciplinary sense, this categorization also helps to give a sense of clinical detachment between the text and the audience and also to employ a certain kind of a scientific technique while one is talking about literature and critical traditions.

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We will now quickly move to Section 15, where Aristotle talks about the significance of character and as you may remember, he has already stated that action is more important than character. But for this action to happen, the action should also be driven forward, the action should also be tied to the presence of a very, very significant character and this character in the sense of a tragedy, is embodied by the tragic hero, the tragic hero being the most important character in any of these tragedies that Aristotle talks about or later in the critical tradition that we come across.

So when we talk about Aristotle's system of tragedy, the tragic hero is of immense significance, and that is where he talks about the four distinct characteristics of a tragic hero. And here we find him having an eye for detail like a scientist, like a naturalist. He likes to categorize and he also identifies four necessary qualities in a tragic hero. And this is where he also begins to look at the tragic hero in a very objective way. And we find that in the examples that he gives and discussion that he has over here, he is not willing to make any kind of compromise. The 4 necessary characteristics have to be there, if it is a well-crafted, a well-conceived tragedy.



So first of all, according to Aristotle, the good tragic hero, the perfect tragic hero of an ideal tragedy must be good. And why should the character be good? Why should the hero be good? In order to elicit sympathy from the audience, it is very important that the character also has some very good qualities that anyone across the universe can empathize and sympathize with.

And here we also need to think about the universal character, the universal appeal that *Poetics* talks about almost throughout and unless the audience has an emotional appeal towards this, unless the audience feel for this character, tragedy cannot work. The emotions of pity, the emotions of feeling terrible, the emotions of fear cannot be elicited at all. So there has to be a certain universal sense of the character being good. Even today, when we think about any fictional rendition or any cinematic experience, the tragedy of a character, the tragedy of a hero that we see on screen makes sense to us, we feel empathy towards the character only when we can relate to it.

So this is that idea of relatability that Aristotle also brings in when he talks about the character, the tragic hero being good in a very universal way. And secondly, he talks about propriety. The tragic hero, in order to elicit the audience's sympathy, in order for the audience to be able to identify with this character, he has to have the ideal kind of propriety.

And what is propriety according to Aristotle? Here we find that he is defining these terms in accordance with the moral conditions of those times, in accordance with the dominant social fabric of those times. For him propriety is virtues that are appropriate to character which also means that one should act, one should behave, one should respond in accordance with the type and position, not just being good, just being good, just being seen as a nice person is not good enough.

And it also should have propriety which means the person's response, the person's behavior, the person's attitude should be in accordance with the position that he holds with the type of character that he is inhabiting. And this again, is all conditioned socially, familialy and these are some of the aspects which are also seen as universal and later hence are critiqued by a lot of other critics. And some are also of the opinion that Aristotle's notion of propriety, notion of being good, especially in the context of defining the tragic hero, is also very, very sexist. It does not take into account the differentiation of gender roles, the differentiation of the many other factors that go into the making of what we now see as good or appropriate.

For example, Aristotle gives the examples of certain values and certain appropriate behaviors of being, qualities such as nurturing, the idea of being caregiving, and the idea of family, these are some of the things which he associates with the woman. And man, the male figure is almost always invariably associated with ideas such as justice, valour, honour. These are seen as very male virtues, vis-a-vis the other, more domesticated virtues which is nurture, care, family, love, affection, so on and so forth.

These are some of the things which have also always been critiqued at later points of time. But for the time being, we focus on the four distinct characteristics that Aristotle talks about in the context of the tragic hero. First one being good, the second one being propriety. The third one is that the character, the tragic hero must be true to life, he must be realistic. This is entirely in accordance with the realist tradition, within which Aristotle is also rooted.

And this is significantly important because the audience should be able to connect with the tragic hero, the tragic hero should not appear as if he belongs to a different world altogether, which is why Aristotle feels that if the main character is, for instance, a god figure that may not have that sense of relatability with the audience because the audience should be able to connect with a real world, a real character, which they also see on stage and are able to empathize with and sympathize with. So the character should be true to life in that sense.

And finally, the character should be consistent, consistency is the fourth point, the first one being that the character must be good. And second one propriety, third one true to life and fourth one, the character must have consistency. By consistency he means certain virtues that are inherent, that the character, that the tragic hero should always act according to a consistent psychology. He cannot fluctuate between different human types, between different human behaviors.

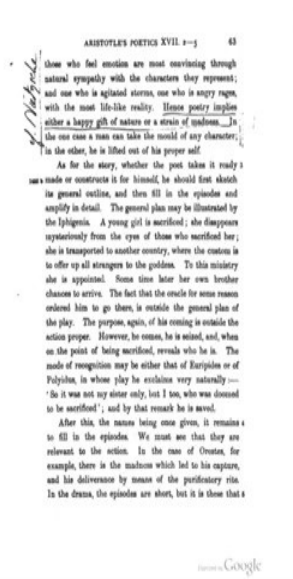
For instance, even if the character is erratic, he has to be consistently erratic. He cannot have a firm disposition at some point and then have an erratic behavior at another point. That according to Aristotle is not a well formed, a well-conceived tragic hero. It is a flawed conception of a tragic hero. And there should be a singleness of purpose that this character also exhibits. There should be some certain value systems that this tragic hero would subscribe to and that should also give him a sense of direction, a singleness of purpose. And there is no room for any significant character changes, the character should remain consistent with all his flaws almost throughout.

And in that sense, in the Aristotelian scheme of tragedy, the tragic hero is not allowed to undergo a radical change of behavior. And this also begs the question whether all literary characters or fictional characters have been consistent throughout. If you think about the many characters that you have come across in the fictional world, you can also take time to analyse now to see whether the characters have always been consistent, or do we find some kind of a departure and differentiation as compared to Aristotle's conception of the tragic hero. So here again, we need to notice that even when he is talking about the tragic hero, the fictional character, he is more concerned about the relationship between the text and the audience.

It is all about how well the audience will be able to relate to this character which is portrayed on stage. And the success of a tragedy and the convincing power of this tragic hero, it all depends on how well the audience will be able to relate. This also begs another question whether these responses would differ from audience to audience. These are some of the questions that Aristotle unfortunately does not deal with. Perhaps that is also beyond the scope of the discussions of those times.

And these are clearly not noted down anywhere, documented anywhere. We have no evidence of knowing whether Aristotle had engaged in such discussions or not. But having said that, it is very, very important to understand that, to underscore the point that the audience, the idea of a reader, that begins to get foregrounded from the times of Aristotle onwards through these discussions. And this relatability and the way in which the character needs to be convincing or character needs to come across as someone who is real, someone who is in flesh and blood, that those sort of ideas also become extremely important in understanding the idea of criticism as well at a later point of time. Especially in the context of reader response criticism, which we shall come back to at a later point of time. This begins to make more sense as well.

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In the final session of our discussion on *Poetics*, which shall be the next session, we shall also talk about how the relation between what happens on stage and what happens in the mind of the audience, it begins to take literary criticism to a different level altogether. So, having seen how a tragic hero is conceived, ideally within the scheme of a tragedy, within the scheme of a Greek tragedy, in the next session, we should also look at how what happens to this tragic hero begins to entirely control the tragedy. It begins to also take over what the audience go through, and the entire sequence of events within a tragedy.

Setting apart the other formal elements of it, we begin to realize then that the action at various levels zeroes in on what happens to the tragic heroes. And it also becomes a kind of an emotional discourse between the tragic hero who is shown on stage and the audience who is trying to relate with him and trying to in fact empathize with him and trying to imagine what could have happened if I were that tragic hero, if I were in that situation. That sort of accentuates the emotional appeal of the tragedy, and this also becomes the crux of many things that we begin to understand in terms of literary criticism.

So in the following session, which also is the final session of our discussion on *Poetics*, which we will wrap up by talking about how these cathartic feelings have become extremely important in identifying some of the abstract elements which are part of literary criticism, and how that also laid the foundation towards a sense of a scientific approach towards literary criticism but without compromising on the human and the emotional elements of it. We will also see how his analysis is very, very technical and even when it is talking about human emotions, even it is talking about such abstract things, there is a technicality that Aristotle tries to bring in, which gives a more rational and a more scientific framework to the

following discussions as well. So with this, we come to the end of today's session. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.