

Course – English Hons.

Paper – CC2 (European Classical Literature)

Study Material on Aristotle's concept of Classical Tragedy,

Prepared by Pallab Das,
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Mankar College

Aristotle, Classic Technique, and Greek Drama

IT is to the Greeks that we owe not only the first great plays, but also the first principles of criticism and of dramatic construction. Not every Athenian was a good critic, as some would have us think; but we know that the comic poets took it upon themselves to deliver judgments, to compare one writer with another, and in some measure, to lay down the laws of drama. It fell, however, to Aristotle, a philosopher and teacher born in the first quarter of the fourth century, to become not only the most important mouthpiece of Greek dramatic criticism, but also one of the most important influences in all the history of literature. He analyzed the plays of the fifth century as well as those of his own time, classified the kinds of drama, and laid down rules for the construction of tragedy.

Aristotle had the very human characteristic of harking back to the good old days, and thinking them much better than the days in which he lived. Taking scant account of Aeschylus, he regarded Sophocles and Euripides as models in tragedy. His chief complaints were that the poets of his own time spoiled their work by rhetorical display; that the actor was often of more importance than the play; and that the poets tampered with the plot in order to give a favorite actor an opportunity of displaying his special talent. He said that the poets were deficient in the power of portraying character, and that it was not even fair to compare them with the giants of the former era; that the drama was greatly in need of fresh topics, new treatment, and original ideas; that it was polished in diction, but lacking in force and vitality. The playwrights too frequently made use of the god-from-the-machine for the purpose of extricating characters from their troubles. Such was the tenor of Aristotle's "reviews" and criticisms.

THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF ARISTOTLE

The greatest tragedy, in the opinion of Aristotle, was Oedipus the King by Sophocles. The reasons for its supremacy lay in the excellent management of plot and chorus, in the beauty of the language, in the irony of the situations, and in the general nobility of conception. Aristotle cited also the Helena of Euripides as

a model of its kind, and lauded the author for the skill with which he had set forth the complicated plot. Euripides was to him the most tragic of the poets. At the same time, he found much in Euripides to censure. Only in Sophocles, the perfect writer, were united ideal beauty, clearness of construction and religious inspiration--the three qualities which alone make tragedy great.

The subjects of tragic drama, Aristotle said, were rightly drawn from ancient mythology, because coming from that source they must be true. If man had invented such strange incidents, they would have appeared impossible. The chief characters of a tragic action should be persons of consequence, of exalted station. The leading personage should not be a man characterized by great virtue or great vice, but of a mixed nature, partly good and partly bad. His errors and weaknesses lead him into misfortune. Such a mixture of good and evil makes him seem like ourselves, thus more quickly arousing our sympathy. The course of the tragic action should be such as to saturate the spectator with feelings of compassion, drive out his petty personal emotions, and so "purge" the soul through pity and terror (Catharsis). The crimes suitable for tragic treatment may be committed either in ignorance, or intentionally, and are commonly against friends or relatives. Crimes committed intentionally are generally the more dramatic and impressive. (This is in spite of the fact that the central crime in Oedipus the King was committed in ignorance.) As to style, a certain archaic quality of diction is needful to the dignity of tragedy.

THE THREE UNITIES

The most famous of the Aristotelian rules were those relating to the so-called unities--of time, place, and action. The unity of time limits the supposed action to the duration, roughly, of a single day; unity of place limits it to one general locality; and the unity of action limits it to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, "having a beginning, a middle, and an end." Concerning the unity of time, Aristotle noted that all the plays since Aeschylus, except two, did illustrate such unity, but he did not lay down such a precept as obligatory. Perhaps tacitly he assumed that the observance of the unity of place would be the practice of good playwrights, since the chorus was present during the whole performance, and it would indeed be awkward always to devise an excuse for moving fifteen persons about from place to place. The third unity (that of action) is bound up with the nature not only of the Greek but of all dramas.

Definition of Tragedy (From the Poetics of Aristotle [384-322 BC])

"Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification (catharsis[*], sometimes translated "purgation") of such emotions."

- a) "imitation" (mimesis)[*]: Contrary to Plato, Aristotle asserts that the artist does not just copy the shifting appearances of the world, but rather imitates or represents Reality itself, and gives form

and meaning to that Reality. In so doing, the artist gives shape to the universal, not the accidental. Poetry, Aristotle says, is "a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars."

- b) "an action with serious implications": serious in the sense that it best raises and purifies pity and fear; serious in a moral, psychological, and social sense.
- c) "complete and possesses magnitude": not just a series of episodes, but a whole with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The idea of imitation is important here; the artist does not just slavishly copy everything related to an action, but selects (represents) only those aspects which give form to universal truths.
- d) "language sensuously attractive...in the parts": language must be appropriate for each part of the play: choruses are in a different meter and rhythm and more melodious than spoken parts.
- e) tragedy (as opposed to epic) relies on an enactment (dramatic performance), not on "narrative" (the author telling a story).
- f) "purification" (catharsis): tragedy first raises (it does not create) the emotions of pity and fear, then purifies or purges them. Whether Aristotle means to say that this purification takes place only within the action of the play, or whether he thinks that the audience also undergoes a cathartic experience, is still hotly debated. One scholar, Gerald Else, says that tragedy purifies "whatever is 'filthy' or 'polluted' in the pathos, the tragic act" (98). Others say that the play arouses emotions of pity and fear in the spectator and then purifies them (reduces them to beneficent order and proportion) or purges them (expels them from his/her emotional system).

The Tragic Hero

The tragic hero is "a [great] man who is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake."

- a) a great man: "one of those who stand in great repute and prosperity, like Oedipus and Thyestes: conspicuous men from families of that kind." The hero is neither a villain nor a model of perfection but is basically good and decent.
- b) "mistake" (hamartia): This Greek word, which Aristotle uses only once in the Poetics, has also been translated as "flaw" or as "error." The great man falls through--though not entirely because of--some weakness of character, some moral blindness, or error. We should note that the gods also are in some sense responsible for the hero's fall.

Plot

Aristotle distinguished six elements of tragedy: "plot, characters, verbal expression, thought, visual adornment, and song-composition." Of these, PLOT is the most important. The best tragic plot is single and complex, rather than double ("with opposite endings for good and bad"--a characteristic of comedy in which the good are rewarded and the wicked punished). All plots have some pathos (suffering), but a complex plot includes reversal and recognition.

- a) "reversal" (peripeteia): occurs when a situation seems to develop in one direction, then suddenly "reverses" to another. For example, when Oedipus first hears of the death of Polybus (his supposed father), the news at first seems good, but then is revealed to be disastrous.

- b) "recognition" (anagnorisis or "knowing again" or "knowing back" or "knowing throughout"): a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate. For example, Oedipus kills his father in ignorance and then learns of his true relationship to the King of Thebes. Recognition scenes in tragedy are of some horrible event or secret, while those in comedy usually reunite long-lost relatives or friends. A plot with tragic reversals and recognitions best arouses pity and fear.
- c) "suffering" (pathos): Also translated as "a calamity," the third element of plot is "a destructive or painful act." The English words "sympathy," "empathy," and "apathy" (literally, absence of suffering) all stem from this Greek word.

GREEK DRAMA MORE CONCERNED WITH PLOT THAN WITH CHARACTER

Aristotle conceived the action, or plot, of a play as of far greater importance than the characters. This conception he gained from the plays of the fifth century, which, in general, centered around a personified passion rather than around a character. The action was "the vital principle and very soul of drama." Again he says, "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of actions." Second in importance was characterization; and third were the sentiments aroused by the action. He insisted very clearly that in tragedy the plot does not rise out of the characters, but on the contrary the plot tests the characters through the working-out of destiny -- "blind fate." The main duty of the dramatist was to organize first the action, then display the moral character of his people under the blows of fate. "The incidents of the action, and the structural ordering of these incidents, constitute the end and purpose of tragedy." Finally and perhaps most important of all, was Aristotle's beliefs that although tragedy should purge the emotions through pity and terror, yet all dramas were meant to entertain: tragedy through the sympathies, comedy through mirth.

PERVERSION OF ARISTOTLE'S PRINCIPLES

In this manner was begun the formulated technique of the drama. The principles enunciated by Aristotle were deduced from a study of the plays which were effective in his time, and under the conditions of the Athenian stage; but as time went on, critics and playwrights often studied Aristotle instead of plays, and left out of consideration differing circumstances and conditions. In this way, rules, created for the open-air Athenian production, were applied indiscriminately to all sorts of stages, whether indoors or out. Many writers failed to recognize the new life in their own art, and missed seeing the truth that a first-hand observation of life is always of more value than rules of any sort. Therefore an immemorial war has been waged between the sticklers for old laws, on the one side, and, on the other, the genuinely creative writers. In no art has this war been more apparent than in the drama; and in no art have rigid rules been more oppressive. There have been long periods when the dominance of technical rules, wholly or partially outgrown, has sterilized and all but killed the theater.

ARISTOTLE & THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy depicts the downfall of a noble hero or heroine, usually through some combination of hubris, fate, and the will of the gods. The tragic hero's powerful wish to achieve some goal inevitably encounters limits, usually those of human frailty (flaws in reason, hubris, society), the gods (through oracles,

prophets, fate), or nature. Aristotle says that the tragic hero should have a flaw and/or make some mistake (hamartia). The hero need not die at the end, but he/she must undergo a change in fortune. In addition, the tragic hero may achieve some revelation or recognition (anagnorisis--"knowing again" or "knowing back" or "knowing throughout") about human fate, destiny, and the will of the gods. Aristotle quite nicely terms this sort of recognition "a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate."

Consulted books and websites:

https://www.persee.fr/doc/rbph_0035_0818_1971_num_49_1_2856

<https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature/Theory-of-tragedy>

Kenny, Sir Anthony; *Aristotle: Poetics*; Oxford University Press; London; 2013.