

Biographia Literaria

The written monument of Coleridge's critical work is contained in 24 chapters of *Biographia Literaria* (1815-17). In this critical work Coleridge concerns himself not only with the practice of criticism, but also with its theory. In his practical approach to criticism we get the glimpse of Coleridge the poet; Whereas in theoretical discussion, Coleridge the philosopher came to the centre stage. In chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge's view on nature and function of poetry is discussed, in philosophical terms. The poet within Coleridge discusses the difference between poetry and prose, and the immediate function of poetry.

Explanation of Coleridge's view in chapter XIV Biographic Literaria:-

Coleridge begins this chapter with his views on two cardinal points of poetry.

Two cardinal points of poetry :

- The power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of Nature, and.....
- The power of giving the interest of novelty by modifying with the colors of imagination.

According to him, it was decided that words worth would write poetry dealing with the theme of first cardinal point and the other was to be dealt with by him. For the first type of poetry, the treatment and subject matter should be, to quote Coleridge,

In first point about poetry, Coleridge tries to say that a poet writes a poem related to nature in very simple form and style. Any people can read and enjoy poetry. So who poet is devoted and loyal to the nature and has power to move reader's heart and mind towards the nature is writing this type of poetry and it was decided and by him that William Wordsworth would write poetry dealing with the theme according to first basic point and that type of poem is very near and realistic to the nature and ability to lead out the people near the nature. He quoted that:

"The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature."

In this type of poems subjects are very common and taken from and chosen from day to day life and very ordinary life. The characters of this type of poems are very general and ordinary and we can easily find out this type of characters in each village.

In second point about poetry, Coleridge draws our attention towards supernatural elements and the events. And he also said that he used to write poems, related with this second cardinal point. He quoted that:

“The excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.”

And he talks about supernatural elements, too. He said that poet convert poetry and atmosphere of poetry with the help of his self-imagination and with mind's eyes poet can turn all natural things into supernatural. Poet can create an imaginative world with his thoughts. After describing both these types of poetry Coleridge gave example to prove his point. ‘The Lyrical Ballads’ - volume of poems written by Coleridge and Wordsworth in collaboration -deals with these two core points. Wordsworth quoted that:

“Was to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.”

Coleridge's Views on Wordsworth's Poetic Creed:

Coleridge himself not agrees with Wordsworth's views on poetic diction. And so his different point of view about poetic faith he gives in ‘Biographia Literaria’. Wordsworth adopted language of day to day life in poetry in ‘Lyrical Ballads’. And even in preface Wordsworth giving strong and powerful criticism on using of common language in poetry. Coleridge's view is differs with him and so in his point of view's defense he wrote:

“Had Mr. Wordsworth's poems been the silly, the childish things, which they were for a long time described as being had they been really distinguished from the compositions of other poets merely by meanness of language and inanity of thought; had they indeed contained nothing more than what is found in the parodies and pretended imitations of them; they must have sunk at once, a dead weight, into the slough of oblivion, and have dragged the preface along with them.”

He thinks that if these poems go through criticism then they will be criticized negatively by Critics. Preface is also criticized because of its simple language and simple formation. But it is not happened and Wordsworth's views were accepted by Critics. So he gives full credit to the genius of Wordsworth and quoted that:

“With many parts of this preface in the sense attributed to them and which the words undoubtedly seem to authorize, I never concurred; but on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same preface, and to the author's own practice in the greater part of the poems themselves. Mr. Wordsworth in his recent collection has, I find, degraded this prefatory disquisition to the end of his second volume, to be read or not at the reader's choice.”

Here we can say that Coleridge is frank and straight forward to point out his own views even if he differs with Wordsworth and he was saying that Wordsworth is wrong in theory and contradictory, not only in parts of the Preface but also to the practice of the poet himself in many of his points. He opposed with Wordsworth's analysis of poetry so he told him honestly that he is not agree or in favor of his point of views.

Difference between Prose and Poem:

This is third part or we can say it a point of Coleridge's 'Biographia Literaria'. We can easily recognize that the poem includes the same elements as prose compositions. So it is bit difficult to differentiate poem and prose but the difference is between combination of those elements and objects aimed at in both the composition. So they both are different in their particular aim for which they are written by poet. For it Coleridge says:

“While it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware, that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical process of philosophy. But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the result of philosophy. A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed. According to the difference of the object will be the difference of the combination.”

If we differentiate poem and poetry in very simple way then we can say that which object's subject is very simple, and main reason to write an object is just to remember all olden facts and memories with inner flow of feelings without taking extra care of rhyme or meter that composition is known as poem. A poet should make use of artificial words and arrangement words with the help of meter. It can be done without rhyme or meter sometimes.

“A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed. According to the difference of the object will be the difference of the combination. It is possible, that the object may be merely to facilitate the recollection of any given facts or observations by artificial arrangement; and the composition will be a poem, merely because it is distinguished from prose by metre, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly.”

As an example here I gave two lines of poem, which contains name of months and days. It is without any rhyme or metre:

“Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November, &c.”

But in prose composition is done by metre or rhyme and it is compulsory and it is the main difference which is differentiating an object in prose or poem. Then Coleridge makes an addition that only rhyme and metre cannot create a poem or poetry. Then he talks about some other prose writings and its instant purpose and final end. A form of literary work named prose; poem and poetry are required and written for instant purpose and the final truth because it can be written for any subject like science, fiction, novel, romance and etc. And it has to convey some information to the reader or give pleasure or delight in at a moment and the final end may be to give truth. So the most important thing about work is to give immediate pleasure and delight to the reader not metrically composed. After this discussion Coleridge himself raises the question that:

“Would then the mere super addition of metre, with or without rhyme, entitle these to the name of poems?”

Then he himself gives answer of it with saying that if metre is wonderfully added the other parts of composition that also must suite and match with it. And if every part of composition like, metre, diction, topic, subject, theme, background, and rhyme must be harmonize with wholeness with the composition and then and then that composition can take form of poem or deserve the name of poem. In Coleridge’s words:

“The answer is, that nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise. If metre be superadded, all other parts must be made consonant with it. They must be such, as to justify the perpetual and distinct attention to each part, which an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound are calculated to excite. The final definition then, so deduced, may be thus worded. A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species--(having this object in common with it)--it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.”

Difference between Poem and Poetry:

In the last point Coleridge gives arguments about poem and Poetry and he also points out that

“Poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre and even without contradistinguishing object of Poetry”

And he gives example of Plato, Jeremy Taylor and Bible. The quality of that prose in these writing is equal to that of high poetry. Coleridge also said that the poem of and length neither can be nor ought to be all poetry.

Conclusion:

Here we find that as poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge has written a theory which was 'Biographia Literaria'. And it contains 24 chapters and we have learned only 14th chapter but we can see that how Coleridge has divided the things like prose, poems and poetry.

Thus Coleridge is the first English critic who based his literary criticism on philosophical principles. We may say in his own words, Coleridge established the principles of writing rather than to furnish rules about how to pass judgment on what had been written by others.

Biographia Literaria Chapter XVII

In chapter XVII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge refers to Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (second edition). In this preface, Wordsworth made three important statements that Coleridge found unacceptable. First, Wordsworth asserts that the proper diction of poetry consists in the language or the real conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings. So he chose humble and rustic life, Coleridge points out that this statement is imperfect as all his characters are not chosen from low and rustic life, e.g. the characters in poems like "Ruth", "Michael", "The Brothers" etc. Coleridge argues that their language and sentiments do not necessarily arise from their social standing. They spring from the general causes which produce identical feelings either in urban life or in the country. Moreover, Coleridge maintains that Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction can only be applied to particular types of poetry and it can never be a rule of general application. In this connection, he refers to Aristotle's conception of poetry as essentially ideal, that individual characters in poetry should be general and typical, and their feelings should be typical and representative of the whole class.

Examining Wordsworth's theory of Poetic Diction

Coleridge maintains that the language of the rustic, purified from its defects and grossness, will not differ materially from the language of any other man of common sense, no matter how learned or refined he is. He points out that the experience of the rustic is very limited; the facts at his disposal are society; so he cannot think logically. He is unable to connect with facts and express himself logically, as an educated man can. Therefore, the language of the rustic lacks expressive visions (and range) making it unfit for poetry. Coleridge also finds fault with Wordsworth's conviction that the best part of the human language is derived from the objects into which the rustic daily communicates. He argues that rustic life is narrow and the rustic is actually acquainted with only a few things of life. Therefore, the words and the combinations of words derived from the very few objects with which the rustic are familiar, cannot be considered to form the best part of human language which is the reflections of mind basically. Poetry is formed by the use of appropriate signs and symbols of human imagination and reflection which the uneducated man cannot have. Whatever noble and poetic phrases the rustic use, are derived not from nature, but from repeated words, listening to the Bible and to the sermons.

Giving his critical assessment of the language of prose and poetry as reflected in Wordsworth's theory of Poetic Diction, Coleridge objects to the ambiguity in the use of the word 'real'. Wordsworth maintains that the language of poetry is the selection of the real language of men. Coleridge argues that everyone's language varies according to the extent of his knowledge, the activities of his faculties and the depth and quickness of his feelings. Everyman's language has its individual characteristics and the common properties of the social class to which he belongs.

Everyman has a set of words and phrases to use universally. He points out that the language used in the poems of Wordsworth differs greatly from the language of a common peasant. Coleridge opines that the word 'real' should be substituted with the word 'ordinary'. He also objects to Wordsworth's addition of the words 'in a state of excitement' for emotional excitement which may result in a more concentrated expression, but it cannot create a noble and richer vocabulary. Moreover, a common uncultivated mind, overpowered by a strong passion can utter broken words or repeat the sets of words and phrases known to him. So, it would be very difficult for a poet to make such a language fit for poetry.

Coleridge also disagrees with Wordsworth regarding the statement that if there is an essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. Coleridge asserts that there is and there ought to be an essential difference between the language of prose and poetry. Coleridge argues that the language of written prose obviously differs from that of common conversation, in the same way, reading differs from talking. Even though some words are common to prose and poetry, they are differently arranged in the two compositions, making the language of the two essentially different. This difference arises from the fact that the poetry use metre and metre requires different arrangement of words. Coleridge has already pointed out that meter is not more superficial decoration but an essential organic part of a poem. Therefore there must be an 'essential' difference between the language of prose and that of poetry. The use of metre creates a different atmosphere in poetry and using metaphors and smiles make all the difference in quality, but not in art.

Aristotle's Poetics

Context

Plato (427–347 B.C.E.) is notorious for attacking art in Book 10 of his *Republic*. According to Plato's Theory of Forms, objects in this world are imitations or approximations of ideal Forms that are the true reality. A chair in this world is just an imitation or instantiation of the Form of Chair. That being the case, art is twice removed from reality, as it is just an imitation of an imitation: a painting of a chair is an imitation of a chair which is in turn an imitation of the Form of Chair. Further, Plato argues that art serves to excite the emotions, which can detract from the balanced reasoning that is essential to virtue.

Aristotle's *Poetics* can be read as a response to Plato's attack on art. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) was a student at Plato's Academy from the time he was seventeen until Plato's death some twenty years later. He spent the next twelve years engaging in scientific research and serving as tutor to the then teenaged Alexander the Great. He returned to Athens in 335 B.C.E., and founded his own school on the steps of the Lyceum. He remained there until 323 B.C.E., when he was forced to leave as a result of his associations with Alexander. He died a year later of natural causes. The Lyceum remained open until 525 C.E., when it was closed by the emperor Justinian.

None of the works of Aristotle that we have today were actually published by Aristotle. He wrote a number of treatises and dialogues, but these have all been lost. What survives are collections of notes, possibly from lecture courses Aristotle gave at the Lyceum, which are often unclear or incomplete. The *Poetics*, in true form, was likely a much longer work than the one we have today. Aristotle supposedly wrote a second book on comedy, which is now lost.

The main focus of the *Poetics* is on Greek tragedy. Though there were thousands of tragedies and scores of playwrights, we only have thirty-three extant tragedies, written by the three great tragedians: Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.E.), Sophocles (496–405 B.C.E.), and Euripides (485–406 B.C.E.). Tragedies were performed in Athens twice annually at festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and excess. Though the tragedies likely evolved out of religious ceremonies celebrating the cycle of the seasons, they became increasingly secular. The dramatic festivals were immensely important events, and the winning playwrights achieved great fame.

The *Poetics* also discusses epic poetry, using the example of Homer (eighth century B.C.E.) almost exclusively. Homer wrote two great epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which deal with the fall of Troy and Odysseus's subsequent wanderings respectively. These epics are the source of a great number of Greek tragedies and are considered among the earliest great works of world literature.

Though the *Poetics* is not one of Aristotle's major works, it has exercised a great deal of influence on subsequent literary theory, particularly in the Renaissance. Later interpreters unfortunately turned many of Aristotle's suggestions into strict laws, restricting the flexibility of drama in ways that Aristotle would not have anticipated. The tragedies of Racine and Corneille in particular are formed according to these demands. Even though such great playwrights as Shakespeare often went against these laws, they were held as the model for writing tragedy well into the nineteenth century.

Important Terms

Mimesis - *Mimesis* is the act of creating in someone's mind, through artistic representation, an idea or ideas that the person will associate with past experience. Roughly translatable as "imitation," *mimesis* in poetry is the act of telling stories that are set in the real world. The events in the story need not have taken place, but the telling of the story will help the listener or viewer to imagine the events taking place in the real world.

Hamartia - This word translates almost directly as "error," though it is often rendered more elaborately as "tragic flaw." Tragedy, according to Aristotle, involves the downfall of a hero, and this downfall is

effected by some error on the part of the hero. This error need not be an overarching moral failing: it could be a simple matter of not knowing something or forgetting something.

Anagnorisis - This word translates as "recognition" or "discovery." In tragedy, it describes the moment where the hero, or some other character, passes from ignorance to knowledge. This could be a recognition of a long lost friend or family member, or it could be a sudden recognition of some fact about oneself, as is the case with Oedipus. *Anagnorisis* often occurs at the climax of a tragedy in tandem with *peripeteia*.

Mythos - When dealing with tragedy, this word is usually translated as "plot," but unlike "plot," *mythos* can be applied to all works of art. Not so much a matter of what happens and in what order, *mythos* deals with how the elements of a tragedy (or a painting, sculpture, etc.) come together to form a coherent and unified whole. The overall message or impression that we come away with is what is conveyed to us by the *mythos* of a piece.

Katharsis - This word was normally used in ancient Greece by doctors to mean "purgation" or by priests to mean "purification." In the context of tragedy, Aristotle uses it to talk about a purgation or purification of emotions. Presumably, this means that *katharsis* is a release of built up emotional energy, much like a good cry. After *katharsis*, we reach a more stable and neutral emotional state.

Peripeteia - A reversal, either from good to bad or bad to good. *Peripeteia* often occurs at the climax of a story, often prompted by *anagnorisis*. Indeed, we might say that the *peripeteia* is the climax of a story: it is the turning point in the action, where things begin to move toward a conclusion.

Lusis - Literally "untying," the *lusis* is all the action in a tragedy from the climax onward. All the plot threads that have been woven together in the *desis* are slowly unraveled until we reach the conclusion of the play.

Desis - Literally "tying," the *desis* is all the action in a tragedy leading up to the climax. Plot threads are craftily woven together to form a more and more complex mess. At the *peripeteia*, or turning point, these plot threads begin to unravel in what is called the *lusis*, or denouement.

Analytical Overview

Aristotle approaches poetry with the same scientific method with which he treats physics and biology. He begins by collecting and categorizing all the data available to him and then he draws certain conclusions and advances certain theses in accordance with his analysis. In the case of tragedy, this means he divides it into six parts, identifies plot as the most important part, and examines the different elements of plot and character that seem to characterize successful tragedies. He tentatively suggests that tragedy ultimately aims at the arousal of pity and fear and at the *katharsis* of these emotions. Then he begins to lay out certain theories as to what makes a good tragedy: it must focus on a certain type of hero who must follow a certain trajectory within a plot that is tightly unified, etc. Aristotle's conclusions, then, are based less on personal taste and more on an observation of what tends to produce the most powerful effects.

Aristotle's method raises the fundamental question of whether poetry can be studied in the same way as the natural sciences. Though there are some benefits to Aristotle's method, the ultimate answer seems to be "no." The scientific method relies on the assumption that there are certain regularities or laws that govern the behavior of the phenomena being investigated. This method has been particularly successful in the physical sciences: Isaac Newton, for example, managed to reduce all mechanical behavior to three simple laws. However, art does not seem to be governed by unchanging, unquestionable laws in the same way that nature is. Art often thrives and progresses by questioning the assumptions or laws that a previous generation has accepted. While Aristotle insisted on the primacy and unity of plot, Samuel Beckett has achieved fame as one of this century's greatest playwrights by constructing plays that arguably have no plot at all. Closer to Aristotle's time, Euripides often violated the Aristotelian principles of structure and balance in a conscious effort to depict a universe that is neither structured nor balanced. Not surprisingly, Aristotle seems to have preferred Sophocles to Euripides.

These remarks on Sophocles and Euripides bring us to another problem of interpreting Aristotle: we have a very limited stock of Greek tragedies against which to test Aristotle's theories. Aristotle could have been familiar with hundreds, or even thousands, of tragedies. All we have today are thirty-three plays by three tragedians. As a result, it is difficult to say to what extent most tragedies fit Aristotle's observations. Those

that we have, however, often grossly violate Aristotle's requirement. The best example we have of an Aristotelian tragedy is *Oedipus Rex*, so it is no wonder that Aristotle makes such frequent reference to it in his examples.

Three points stand out as probably the most important in the *Poetics*: (1) the interpretation of poetry as *mimesis*, (2) the insistence on the primacy and unity of *mythos*, or plot, and (3) the view that tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and then to effect a *katharsis* of these emotions. (1) is discussed in the commentary on Chapters 1–3, (2) is discussed in the commentary on Chapter 6 and Chapters 7–9, and (3) is discussed in the commentary on Chapter 6 as well.

Chapters 1–3

Summary

Aristotle proposes to approach poetry from a scientific viewpoint, examining the constituent parts of poetry and drawing conclusions from those observations. First, he lists the different kinds of poetry: epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing. Next, he remarks that all of these kinds of poetry are mimetic, or imitative, but that there are significant differences between them.

The first kind of distinction is the means they employ. Just as a painter employs paint and a sculptor employs stone, the poet employs language, rhythm, and harmony, either singly or in combinations. For instance, flute-playing and lyre-playing employ rhythm and harmony, while dance employs only rhythm. He also addresses the question of non-poetic language, arguing that poetry is essentially mimetic, whether it is in verse or in prose. Thus, Homer is a poet, while Empedocles, a philosopher who wrote in verse, is not. While Empedocles writes in verse, his writing is not mimetic, and so it is not poetry. In tragedy, comedy, and other kinds of poetry, rhythm, language, and harmony are all used. In some cases, as in lyric poetry, all three are used together, while in other cases, as in comedy or tragedy, the different parts come in to play at different times.

The second distinction is the objects that are imitated. All poetry represents actions with agents who are either better than us, worse than us, or quite like us. For instance, tragedy and epic poetry deal with characters who are better than us, while comedy and parody deal with characters who are worse than us.

The final distinction is with the manner of representation: the poet either speaks directly in narrative or assumes the characters of people in the narrative and speaks through them. For instance, many poets tell straight narratives while Homer alternates between narrative and accounts of speeches given by characters in his narrative. In tragedy and comedy, the poet speaks exclusively through assumed characters.

Analysis

The very first paragraph of the *Poetics* gives us a hint as to how we should approach the work: it is meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, Aristotle is not so much interested in arguing that poetry or tragedy *should* be one thing or another. Rather, he wants to look at past examples of poetry—tragedy in particular—and by dissecting them and examining their constituent parts to arrive at some general sense of what poetry is and how it works.

This is the same scientific method that Aristotle employs so successfully in examining natural phenomena: careful observation followed by tentative theories to explain the observations. The immediate and pressing question, then, is whether Aristotle is right in applying his scientific method to poetry. Physical phenomena are subject to unchanging, natural laws, and presumably a careful study of the phenomena matched with a little insight might uncover what these natural laws are. Aristotle seems to be proceeding with the assumption that the same is true for poetry: its growth and development has been guided by unchanging, natural laws, and the *Poetics* seeks to uncover these laws.

The results are mixed. In some cases, what Aristotle says seems quite right, while in others his conclusions seem very limiting. We will examine this question further when Aristotle delves deeper into the elements of tragedy.

Before going any further, we might do well to clarify some terms. When Aristotle talks about "art" or "poetry" he is not talking about what we might understand by these words. "Art" is the translation of the Greek word *techne* and is closely related to "artifice" and "artificial." Art for Aristotle is anything that is made by human beings as opposed to being found in nature. Thus, poetry, painting, and sculpture count as "art," but so do chairs, horseshoes, and sandals.

Our conception of "art" is more closely (but not exactly) approximated by what Aristotle calls "mimetic art." The Greek word *mimesis* defies exact translation, though "imitation" works quite well in the context of the *Poetics*. A chair is something you can sit in, but a painting of a chair is merely an imitation, or representation, of a real chair.

Paintings use paint to imitate real life, and sculptures use stone. Poetry is distinguished as the mimetic art that uses language, rhythm, and harmony to imitate real life, language obviously being the most crucial component.

This raises the question of in what way poetry imitates, or "mimics," real life. The events in *Oedipus Rex* did not actually happen in real life. In fact, it is important that tragedy be fictional and that there be an understanding that the events taking place on stage are not real: no one should call the police when Hamlet kills Polonius. Still, tragedy deals with humans who speak and act in a way that real humans conceivably could have spoken and acted. It is important that there be an understanding that the account is fictional, but it must also be close enough to reality that it is plausible.

There are significant differences between the kind of poetry discussed here and our conception of poetry. In modern times, the definition of poetry is closely linked to its being written in verse. Aristotle directly contradicts that definition, pointing out that Empedocles' philosophical verses are not poetry; they present ideas rather than imitate life.

Further, narrative is essential to Aristotle's definition of poetry. Not only comedy and tragedy, but also the epic poetry of the Greeks tells stories, as we find in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Both drama and epic poetry are fictional accounts that imitate real life in some way. On the other hand, a great deal of poetry in the modern world does not imitate life in any obvious way. For instance, the Robert Burns line, "My love is like a red, red rose" may be said to "imitate" or represent the poet's love for a woman, but by that token, Empedocles' verses might be said to "imitate" or represent certain philosophical concepts.

Aristotle is not trying to condemn Robert Burns for writing love poems; he is simply trying to catalog the different kinds of poetry that existed in his time. They all employ language, rhythm, and harmony in some way or another, they all deal with people who are engaging in certain kinds of action, and they all involve some sort of direct or indirect narrative. Whether something is an epic poem, a comedy, or a tragedy depends on how it fits within these categories. For instance, a tragedy is a composite of language, rhythm, and harmony that deals with agents who are on the whole better than us, and the poet speaks directly through these agents.

Chapters 4–5

Summary

Aristotle suggests that it is human nature to write and appreciate poetry. We are by nature imitative creatures that learn and excel by imitating others, and we naturally take delight in works of imitation. As evidence of the claim that we delight in imitation, he points out that we are fascinated by representations of dead bodies or disgusting animals even though the things themselves would repel us. Aristotle suggests that we can also learn by examining representations and imitations of things and that learning is one of the greatest pleasures there is. Rhythm and harmony also come naturally to us, so that poetry gradually evolved out of our improvisations with these media.

As poetry evolved, a sharp division developed between serious writers who would write about noble characters in lofty hymns and panegyrics, and meaner writers who would write about ignoble characters in demeaning invectives. Tragedy and comedy are later developments that are the grandest representation of their respective traditions: tragedy of the lofty tradition and comedy of the mean tradition.

Aristotle stops short of saying that tragedy has achieved its complete and finished form. He lists four innovations in the development from improvised dithyrambs toward the tragedies of his day. Dithyrambs were sung in honor of Dionysus, god of wine, by a chorus of around fifty men and boys, often accompanied by a narrator. Aeschylus is responsible for the first innovation, reducing the number of the chorus and introducing a second actor on stage, which made dialogue the central focus of the poem. Second, Sophocles added a third actor and also introduced background scenery. Third, tragedy developed an air of seriousness, and the meter changed from a trochaic rhythm, which is more suitable for dancing, to an iambic rhythm, which is closer to the natural rhythms of conversational speech. Fourth, tragedy developed a plurality of episodes, or acts.

Next, Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that comedy deals with people worse than us ourselves, saying that comedy deals with the ridiculous. He defines the ridiculous as a kind of ugliness that does no harm to anybody else. Aristotle is able only to give a very sketchy account of the origins of comedy, because it was not generally treated with the same respect as tragedy and so there are fewer records of the innovations that led to its present form.

While both tragedy and epic poetry deal with lofty subjects in a grand style of verse, Aristotle notes three significant differences between the two genres. First, tragedy is told in a dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and employs several different kinds of verse while epic poetry employs only one. Second, the action of a tragedy is usually confined to a single day, and so the tragedy itself is usually much shorter than an epic poem. Third, while tragedy has all the elements that are characteristic of epic poetry, it also has some additional elements that are unique to it alone.

Analysis

Aristotle further elaborates on the value of the mimetic arts with his assertion that we are naturally imitative creatures who delight in imitation. Aristotle relates this claim to our ability to learn and reason: we exercise our reason when seeing something as an imitation of something else. It takes a certain level of recognition to see a bunch of men dancing and singing in masks as imitations of characters from ancient myths, to see stylized gestures as imitations of real action, or to see the emotional intensity generated both by actors and audience as an imitation of the emotional intensity that would have been felt if the action on stage were transpiring in real life. Aristotle defines humans as rational animals, suggesting that our rationality is what distinguishes us from other creatures. If the ability to recognize an imitation and understand what it is meant to represent requires reasoning, then we are delighting in that very faculty that makes us human.

Aristotle's account of the origin of tragedy seems on the whole quite sound. The sparseness of archaeological and other evidence has long frustrated scholars, but it seems that Aristotle's suggestion that tragedy evolved from the dithyramb is as good as any we have. Dionysus is the Greek god of vegetation and wine, and the dithyrambs in honor of him are thought to have been part of festivals celebrating the harvest and the changing of the seasons. These songs were thus part of religious ceremonies, and the speaker that accompanied the large chorus was probably a priest of some sort.

Though initially improvised, these dithyrambs developed a more rigid structure, and the speaker often engaged in dialogue with the chorus. Aeschylus is generally credited with the innovation of adding a second actor, which transformed choral singing into dialogue, ritual into drama. In short, Aeschylus invented tragedy and is the first great playwright of the Western tradition.

Near the end of Chapter 5, Aristotle mentions that one of the differences between tragedy and epic poetry is that the action of a tragedy usually unfolds in the space of a single day. This is often interpreted as one of the three "unities" of tragic drama. In fact, the three unities—unity of action (one single plot with no loose threads), unity of time (action takes place within a single day), and unity of place (action takes place in a single location)—were not invented by Aristotle at all. The Italian theorist Lodovico Castelvetro formalized these unities in 1570. This formalization was inspired by the *Poetics*, but it is far more restrictive than anything Aristotle says. The only unity he insists upon, as we shall see, is the unity of action. His reference here to the unity of time seems to be a general guideline and not one that must be followed strictly, and there is even less evidence to suggest that Aristotle demanded unity of place. The fact is, Aristotle's formulas were all drawn from Greek tragedy, and these tragedies frequently violated the unities of time and place.

Chapter 6

Summary

Aristotle now narrows his focus to examine tragedy exclusively. In order to do so, he provides a definition of tragedy that we can break up into seven parts: (1) it involves *mimesis*; (2) it is serious; (3) the action is complete and with magnitude; (4) it is made up of language with the "pleasurable accessories" of rhythm and harmony; (5) these "pleasurable accessories" are not used uniformly throughout, but are introduced in separate parts of the work, so that, for instance, some bits are spoken in verse and other bits are sung; (6) it is performed rather than narrated; and (7) it arouses the emotions of pity and fear and accomplishes a *katharsis* (purification or purgation) of these emotions.

Next, Aristotle asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six component parts, and that every tragedy is made up of these six parts with nothing else besides. There is (a) the spectacle, which is the overall visual appearance of the stage and the actors. The means of imitation (language, rhythm, and harmony) can be divided into (b) melody, and (c) diction, which has to do with the composition of the verses. The agents of the action can be understood in terms of (d) character and (e) thought. Thought seems to denote the intellectual qualities of an agent while character seems to denote the moral qualities of an agent. Finally, there is (f) the plot, or *mythos*, which is the combination of incidents and actions in the story.

Aristotle argues that, among these six, the plot is the most important. The characters serve to advance the action of the story, not vice versa. The ends we pursue in life, our happiness and our misery, all take the form of action. That is, according to Aristotle, happiness consists in a certain kind of activity rather than in a certain quality of character. Diction and thought are also less significant than plot: a series of well-written speeches have nothing like the force of a well-structured tragedy. Further, Aristotle suggests, the most powerful elements in a tragedy, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis*, are elements of the plot. Lastly, Aristotle notes that forming a solid plot is far more difficult than creating good characters or diction.

Having asserted that the plot is the most important of the six parts of tragedy, he ranks the remainder as follows, from most important to least: character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Character reveals the individual motivations of the characters in the play, what they want or don't want, and how they react to certain situations, and this is more important to Aristotle than thought, which deals on a more universal level with reasoning and general truths. Melody and spectacle are simply pleasurable accessories, but melody is more important to the tragedy than spectacle: a pretty spectacle can be arranged without a play, and usually matters of set and costume aren't the occupation of the poet anyway.

Analysis

Aristotle's definition of tragedy at the beginning of this chapter is supposed to summarize what he has already said, but it is the first mention of the *katharsis*. The Greek word *katharsis* was usually used either by doctors to talk about purgation, the flushing of contaminants out of the system, or by priests to talk about religious purification. In either case, it seems to refer to a therapeutic process whereby the body or mind expels contaminants and becomes clean and healthy. Determining exactly what role *katharsis* is meant to play in tragedy is somewhat more difficult.

First, we might ask what exactly *katharsis* is in reference to tragedy. The idea, it seems, is that watching a tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in us and then purges these emotions. But, by virtue of *mimesis*, we aren't feeling real pity or real fear. I may feel pity for Oedipus when he learns that he has killed his father and married his mother, but this is a different kind of pity than the pity I feel for the homeless or for those living in war zones. I know that Oedipus is not a real person and that no one is really suffering when I watch Oedipus suffer. As a result, I can empathize with the character of Oedipus without feeling any kind of guilt or obligation to help him out. Watching tragedy has a cathartic effect because I can let go of the emotional tension built up in me as I leave the theater. I am able to experience profound emotion without having its consequences stay with me and harden me to subsequent emotional shocks.

Second, we might ask to what extent *katharsis* is the purpose of tragedy, and to what extent it is an occasional effect of tragedy. The question of in what way art may be good for us is a very difficult question to answer. The best art (and this applies to Greek tragedy) is not didactic: it does not try to tell us outright how we ought or ought not to behave. At the same time, there is definitely a lot we can learn from a subtle appreciation of art. The value of art, on the whole, seems to stem more from its ability to arouse emotion and awareness on an abstract, general level, rather than to teach us particular truths. *Oedipus Rex* is valuable because it engenders a certain state of mind, not because it teaches us to avoid marrying older women whose family histories are uncertain.

Though *katharsis* may be an important effect of tragedy, it is hardly the reason for which poets write tragedies. If that were so, poets would be little more than emotional therapists. Again, Aristotle is writing as an observer more than as a theorist. He has observed that tragedy has a cathartic effect on its viewers, but he is not trying to enunciate this as the end goal of all tragedy.

The other important concept we encounter in this chapter is that of *mythos*. While "plot" is a pretty good translation of this word in reference to tragedy, *mythos* can be applied to sculpture, music, or any other art form. The *mythos* of a piece of art is the way it is structured and organized in order to make a coherent statement. Thus, when Aristotle speaks about the "plot" of a tragedy, he is not just referring to who did what to whom, but is speaking about how the events in the story come together to bring out deeper, general themes.

Plot, then, is central to a tragedy, because that is where, if at all, its value lies. If character were central to tragedy, we would be watching *Oedipus Rex* in order to learn something about Oedipus, about what makes him tick, or how he reacts in different situations. The character of Oedipus in itself is uninteresting: why should we care about the personality of someone who never existed? The value of Oedipus lies in what we can learn about ourselves and our world from observing his fate. What we learn from a tragedy—the effect it has on us—results from the way it is structured to draw our minds toward general truths and ideas; that is, from its *mythos*.

Chapters 7–9

Summary

Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that the action of a tragedy is complete in itself and with magnitude. For a plot to be a complete whole, it must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is a point that does not necessarily follow from anything else, which naturally has consequences following from it. The end is a point that naturally follows from preceding events but does

not have any necessary consequences following it. The middle is a point that is naturally connected both to events before and after it.

The magnitude of a story is important, as it is in any art. Paintings are neither infinitesimally small nor monstrously big because they must be of such a size as to be taken in by the eye. Similarly, a tragedy must be of a moderate length so as to be taken in by the memory. Usually, time limits are set by the audience or other outside factors, but Aristotle suggests that the longer the play the greater the magnitude, provided the poet can hold the tragedy together as one coherent statement. As a general rule of thumb, he suggests the action should be long enough to allow the main character to pass through a number of necessary or probable steps that take him from fortune to misfortune or vice versa.

In insisting upon the unity of plot, Aristotle makes it clear that he does not mean that it is enough to focus the plot on the life of one individual. Our lives consist of all sorts of disconnected episodes, and the story of a man's life would rarely have the completeness necessary for a unified plot. Rather, the poet must select some series of events from a character's life—as Homer does in the *Odyssey*—and craft them into a coherent whole. Any part of a story that could be added or removed without any great effect on the rest of the story is superfluous and takes away from the unity of the piece.

Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history, saying that while history deals with what has been, poetry deals with what might be: it presents the possible as probable or necessary. Poetry is superior to history because history always deals with particular cases while poetry can express universal and general truths. Tragedy gives a feeling of necessity—or at least probability—to the way certain characters behave in certain situations and thus gives us insight into general principles regarding fate, choice, and so on. The worst kind of plot is the episodic plot, where there is no seeming necessity or probability whatsoever between events.

As a medium that arouses pity and fear, tragedy is most effective when events occur unexpectedly and yet in a logical order. The ideal is to have the audience see the final outcome of a tragedy as the necessary consequence of all the action that preceded it, and yet have that outcome be totally unexpected.

Analysis

Essentially, a good plot is a complete causal chain that leads, with necessity or probability, from beginning to end. The beginning is the first link in a chain that is itself not necessarily caused by any events that precede it. The events that follow are necessary or probable consequences of this un-caused beginning. Each event follows the next until we arrive at the end, which is also a necessary or probable consequence of all the events that have preceded it. This end does not itself cause any further events with any kind of necessity or probability and so concludes the causal chain.

What kinds of plot does this definition exclude? Aristotle explicitly condemns the episodic plot, where one event follows another without any clear connection. Obviously, no plot is entirely episodic, though we could also say that very few plots are so tightly organized as to tie in every moment with seeming inevitability. The plot with a fully integrated beginning, middle, and end is an ideal to be approximated rather than an easily attainable goal.

That the plot of a tragedy should consist of one uninterrupted causal chain with no superfluous elements (nothing that is not a necessary part of this chain) is the essence of what Aristotle means when he talks about the unity of plot or action.

Again, we should be clear that the Greek *mythos* is not quite the same as the English "plot": we are not so much talking about the sum total of the events in the story so much as the way they are held together to form a coherent statement. If we were thinking simply in terms of the events taking place on stage, it would be obvious that a tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and end. In talking about a beginning, however, Aristotle is not talking about the first things that happen on stage so much as the first link in a causal chain that leads logically to the conclusion.

We might come to a clearer understanding of the unity of plot if we examine Aristotle's contrast between tragedy and history. Aristotle seems to hold the point of view that history is one thing after another. Event follows event, and there does not always seem to be a connection between them. This view is contestable, to say the least: the job of the historian, to a large extent, is to uncover some sort of connection between events. Aristotle says that history only deals with isolated, particular events, but a good historian can read more general truths into these events, just as a good tragedian can draw general truths out of the stories of particular characters.

Perhaps we would do better to understand Aristotle's distinction as being between fact and fiction. We tell stories to help make sense of a world that at times may seem frighteningly meaningless. There are no beginnings or ends in real life, and the stuff in between is nowhere near as neatly organized as it is in tragedy. The role of the tragedian is to take a certain series of events and to trace a logical sequence between them. The tragic action then shows us that there is some order, some necessity, in the world around us. We learn that certain kinds of behavior, certain choices, lead to certain consequences. Tragedy draws patterns out of a meaningless swirl of experience. The end of the tragedy gives meaning to all that preceded it, as if to say, "these sorts of situations, these sorts of characters, these sorts of decisions, tend to result in this kind of a conclusion."

This causal chain need not be evident; in fact, Aristotle suggests that it is more interesting if it isn't. The best plots have unexpected outcomes, but this does not mean that they take place outside the realm of causality. Rather, unexpected twists make us aware of how poor we are at following the momentum of necessity. To take a modern example, the surprise ending to the movie *The Usual Suspects* does not make us feel cheated, as if something illogical took place. Rather, it makes us realize how poorly we had understood all the action that had preceded us: it makes us think of the whole movie in a new light.

Aristotle explicitly mentions pity and fear in reference to the logical sequencing and unexpected outcome of tragedy. We see that our character and actions determine our fate with chilling justice and efficiency, but that we are mostly ignorant of the causes of this fate and can never see it coming. We don't need to suffer Oedipus's fate to recognize our own ignorance and vulnerability in the character of Oedipus.