Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)

* A student of Plato’s
* Trained at various times in medicine, philosophy, rhetoric, natural sciences etc.
* He must have written many critical works but only two, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* are extant.
* *Poetics* deals with many issues of literature and aesthetics. It delineates general principles of literature based on a close analysis of the form and content (and probably of the audience also) of the Greek literature/theatre of his time. Here, we see Aristotle the empiricist.
* Many of his ideas have validity today also, in art, aesthetics, entertainment etc.
* *Poetics* is a very small book of 26 chapters and about 45 pages. It deals primarily with tragedy, poetry etc.
* A second part/book of *Poetics* dealing with comedy, catharsis etc. is believed to have been lost. *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco is built on this premise.
* In his time, tragedy was considered the highest form of poetry. Aristotle’s primary concern in *Poetics* is tragedy. He briefly mentions comedy, epic, lyric poetry etc. in relation to tragedy.

**On Poetry**

1. According to him, a poet is an imitator like other artists. He says we have a natural tendency to imitate. But unlike Plato, he does not consider art/poetry to be twice removed from reality. Art is creative imitation which encompasses things as they are, things as thought to be and things as they should be.

Thus, poetry reveals truths of a universal and permanent kind. He clarifies this point by contrasting poetry with history. History, he says, is an account of things as they are of particular issues. Poetry is more philosophical and higher than history because it expresses universal truth.

Children have a natural tendency to imitate elders. Thus, imitation comes naturally to us and it is not something artificial or forced.

We imitate because of another impulse too: our love of beauty and harmony which, too, is a natural proclivity.

1. The function of poetry is to please, not really to teach. The creative aspect of poetry as well as its inclination towards beauty and harmony gives us pleasure. Thus, unlike Plato, Aristotle stresses the aesthetic aspects of poetry and does not explicitly discuss the moralistic/didactic function. Teaching virtue is incidental to the pleasure.
2. Poetry appeals directly to emotions. Taking tragedy as the highest form of poetry he says that it arouses the emotions of pity and fear.

Whereas Plato considered this arousal of emotions unhealthy, Aristotle believed that it leads to catharsis/purgation/purification. Thus for Aristotle, the emotional appeal of poetry is healthy and artistically satisfying. Besides, by learning to feel pity for other people we become nobler and better.

**On Tragedy**

Aristotle defines tragedy as the imitation of an action that is serious and also having magnitude (large effect) and is complete in itself. It should arouse the feelings of pity and fear resulting in catharsis. It is presented in an embellished language.

Complete in itself = with a beginning, middle and end (i.e., logic, order and continuity)

Tragedy – from epic (which is about heroes and stately actions; also about Gods)

Comedy – from satirical poems (which is about lowly/bad men and things which deserve to be made fun of)

Tragedy has **six constituent elements**:

1. Plot – the soul of the tragedy/drama
2. Character
3. Thought – thoughts and feelings of the character
4. Diction – suitable words with embellishments
5. Songs – a very important aspect of drama then
6. Spectacle – attractive visual elements. (from ocula = കണ്ണ്)

* Drama/tragedy is not simply an imitation of men; it is an imitation of actions of men. What is presented in are the actions/deeds of the characters and not simply their qualities. (But mostly, action arises from qualities.)
* Plot is an arrangement of incidents in a sequence. (The sequence should be logical and effective.)
* According to Aristotle, tragedies should have unhappy endings in order to produce catharsis through pity and fear.
* Structure of plot/dramatic line according to Aristotle:

climax

falling action

rising action

exposition

resolution

The action of drama moves forward through conflicts between good and evil, wealth and poverty, justice and injustice etc. The more intense the conflict, the greater the involvement and the excitement of spectators. And more intense the feelings aroused in the audience.

Aristotle favors complex plots because they please us more through suspense, surprise, greater emotional possibilities etc.

• A complex plot should have:

Peripeteia – a sudden reversal of events, feelings etc.

Anagnorisis – a sudden revelation of hidden facts, or passage from ignorance to knowledge

Tragic hero – not too good or too bad but a generally good person (who is done in by hamartia)

The misfortunes of a very bad man give us moral satisfaction; his fall does not arouse pity and fear. The misfortunes of a perfectly good man shock us; his fall does not arouse pity and fear because he is not like us.

• Plato stresses upon the moralist/ethical aspects of art/poetry whereas Aristotle stresses upon the aesthetic aspects.

• According to Plato art should teach people virtue and values in order to build good character and thus to make them good citizens and good individuals (both on a collective basis and a personal basis). Thus to build good society and state.

• For Plato the emotional appeal of poetry is bad because indulgence in emotions corrupts people. But for Aristotle it is this emotional appeal which is the greatest quality and function of poetry. It is healthy and aesthetically satisfying as well as purifying.

• Flaw – fault, imperfection

• Drama should proceed through dramatic action. It is the presentation of actions of the characters. The qualities, feelings etc. of the characters are presented before the audience through actions.

• Kamal Haasan’s Pushpakavimanam. (Only actions, no talk); Dr Biju’s films have more talk than action?

• 335 BC – Lyceum established (Aristotle’s school)

• His writings run into about 300 volumes.

• Tutor of Alexander the Great

• Naturalist (scientist), philosopher

• He was described by T S Eliot as a ‘perfect critic’.

• Aristotle does not mention Plato in Poetics. But Plato is ever present there.

• Later Hegel, Marx and other philosophers say almost the same thing about the conflict of opposites as Aristotle says about dramatic conflict. (thesis, antithesis and synthesis by Hegel; dialectical relationship of historical forces.)

• In Shakespeare’s tragic heroes we see flaws in character:

- Hamlet (inaction or vacillation)

- King Lear (bad judgement)

- Othello (credulousness)

- Macbeth (greed and overambition, vaulting ambition)

- But in many ancient Greek plays we see error in judgement as well as character flaw.

Tragic Hero

- Not perfect but generally a good person; not a bad person

- Hamartia – tragic flaw or error in judgement

- Hubris is a tragic flaw – destructive pride.

- Nemesis is the retribution for hamartia. (Poetic justice; kaavyaneethi)

Hamartia

Originally, an error of judgement, mistake etc. That is, the fall is the result of an ignorant decision or action. But later hamartia came to be commonly defined as fatal or tragic flaw or a fault in character. (e.g., pride, ambition, greed, inaction etc.)

**On the unities**

We can see that Aristotle’s ideas of unity are the result of the material and practical conditions (of travel, of communication etc.) of his times.

• Travel and communication were naturally much slower than in present time.

• Aristotle actually does not speak about the unity of place. This was an addition during post-Renaissance or Enlightenment period by Italian and French Neoclassical writers through interpretations of the unity of time. (Castelvetro, Racine, Moliere et al.)

• Unity of place is deduced from the unity of time.

The three unities

- Action – Only the incidents which are intimately connected with one another should form part of the plot. There should be a unified plot.

- Time – Events falling within a day. (Aristotle casually mentions this one.)

- Place – Only places which can be reached in 24 hours can be shown.

**On Comedy**

Comedy should make fun of the sin or fault and not the sinner. Personal attacks should be excluded so that it does not cause pain to the subject. Thus, Aristotle rules out maliciousness.

**Conclusion**

• Aristotle differs from Plato in approach. Plato takes a moralist position while Aristotle takes an aesthetic position.

• Great influence on later generations.

• His approach is analytical, almost scientific. Empirical

• He defends poetry and drama (or art) against the charges raised by Plato.

\*\*\*\*\* Biju Joseph’s classnotes; typed by Ranju CK \*\*\*\*\*