

Poetics

—

The important tragic manuscript

To Recap...

Poetics is the manuscript that Aristotle wrote in which his theory about tragic literature is laid out.

“A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language;...in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions.”

Key Terms

Define the following terms and refer to these throughout our exploration of *Poetics*:

1. Exposition/ *protasis*
2. Inciting Incident
3. Rising Action/ *epistasis*
4. Climax
5. Reversal/ *peripeteia*
6. ***Hamartia***
7. ***Hubris***
8. Falling Action/ *catastasis*
9. *Catastrophe*
10. *Denouement*
11. Recognition/ ***anagnorisis***
12. *Catharsis*

Extract One: The Outline

1. The Greek term for “imitation of action” is mimesis.

What does Aristotle mean by “imitation of action”? Explain.

2. Aristotle lists six traits that determine the quality of a tragedy. What are they?

3. Is there anything else you think might be important to creating a quality tragedy?

Why or why not?

Extract Two: The First and most Important Element

1. To Aristotle, which trait is the most important: plot or character? Support your answer with a quotation from the extract.
2. Why does he argue that this trait is more important than the other?
3. Do you agree or disagree with this theory? Why or why not?

Extract Three: Plot Structure

1. What does Aristotle suggest here about causation and plot structure?
2. What does Aristotle say about unity of action?
3. Where do subplots fit into Aristotle's definition of "unity"... or do they?

Extract Four: Peripeteia and Anagnorisis

- How does Aristotle define peripeteia and anagnorisis?
- What is the connection between peripeteia, anagnorisis, the 'scene of suffering' and catharsis?
- According to Aristotle, what kind of reversal is best for evoking pity or fear in the audience?

Extract Five: Types of Anagnorisis

- Explain the key types of Anagnorisis that Aristotle discusses in this extract.
- Which type of anagnorisis does Aristotle believe is the most effective and why?

Extract Six: Catharsis

- Paraphrase Aristotle's explanation of catharsis.
- What circumstances does Aristotle believe provoke feelings of fear or pity?
- **Bonus external reading:** why would an author want to construct a work of literature that aims to achieve a cathartic experience for the reader?

Extract Seven: Character

- What are Aristotle's requirements for the character of the tragic hero?
- What does Aristotle think about *deus ex machina* as a plot device?
- Describe a character from literature that you have felt a fondness for or related to well. Explore why you think that particular character held appeal for you.

The Final Important Points...for now:

1. Aristotle describes six main elements of tragedy: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song.
2. Plot is the most important aspect of a story and more important than character.
3. The plot must possess a beginning, middle, and end with a clear cause/effect relationship between each part of the story.
4. The plot must have “unity of action,” meaning that the story focuses upon one primary plot line with no deus ex machina, or divine intervention/ random acts without cause magically changing the course of events.
5. The plot must be “serious” in nature and not about something trivial.

6. Episodic plots are the worst because they are not connected by a clear cause/effect relationship. Each plot point must cause subsequent plot points to occur.
7. The plot must be long, complex, and serious, weaving together as many themes as possible into a single, unified story.
8. The plot may be either simple or complex, but a complex plot is more effective. A complex plot contains both a reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis) while a simple plot does not.
9. The best tragedies involve a character who experiences a reversal from good to bad as a result of hamartia— making a bad decision.
10. The character should be believable and should act appropriately for his stage in life.

11. Tragedy should evoke catharsis, or a purging of pity or fear within the audience. This means that the audience should pity the tragic hero and/or fear for the tragic hero as a result of what happens in the play, which is “purged” by the end of the play once balance is restored— meaning the tension is broken, and the audience no longer feels such dramatic feelings.

12. The plot also involves some horrible deed that is either committed consciously or unconsciously by the tragic hero— meaning that the character may not be aware of the mistake he is making. In order for the audience to truly experience catharsis, the horrible deed must be done to someone important to the tragic hero. To make the dramatic tension even stronger, it is best if the horrible deed happens to a family member.