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PG SEM II  
ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

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Aristotle's **Poetics** clarifies his intention of judging poetry on following touchstones:

1. How to treat the poetic art and its kinds
2. To discuss what kind of plot is required for a good poem.

The fundamental principle of the POETICS is that a poem is a mimesis, i.e. , an imitation.

**A tragedy**, in particular, is an imitation of an action. It being an imitation, and not being metric discourse that makes something a poem. Thus, the Socratic dialogues are poems, while the philosophical discourses of Parmenides and Empedocles (which were written in epic metre) are not.

**Aristotle discusses a number of genres.**

Some of the genres are obscure such as: ancient performance genres (namely dithyrambs and nomos). He seems to include instrumental music and dance as poetry. He ultimately focuses on four kinds—

- i. Epic tragedy
- ii. Comedy
- iii. Dramatic tragedy
- iv. Comedy.

**Poetry has three kinds of differentiate**—traditionally translated as medium, object, and mode (“in which,” ”what,” and “how”). Some of the details of these are obscure, but the main ideas are:

- a. Medium is the sensory characteristic in terms of which the imitation is made.

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- b. Analogy with other imitative arts: color and figure for painting and sculpture.
- c. The three media of poetry are rhythm, discourse (speech), and harmony or music.
- d. The objects of poetry are kinds of moral character—good, bad, and intermediate.
- e. The modes are methods of exposition of the story—narration or enactment or mixed.

Examples of applying these differentiate: flute playing involves rhythm and harmony, whereas dancing involves rhythm alone.

Horizontal: objects Vertical: modes	Good	Bad
Enacted	Tragedy	Comedy
Narrated	Tragic epic	Comic epic

**What is tragedy according to Aristotle:-**

“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of enactment not narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.” Aristotle defines the **genre of tragedy** as the culmination or perfection of the poetic art. The so-called “parts” of tragedy are:

1. Story or plot
2. Character
3. Thought

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4. Language
5. Spectacle
6. Song

**The story** is the series of episodes. It ought to have causal unity and completeness.

**The character** is the moral quality of the agent.

**Thought** is the viewpoint of the agent and how he argues for it.

**Language** is the language of the discourse—it ought to be elevated and still clear.

**Spectacle** is the sensory appearance of a dramatic presentation. Spectacle seems to be thought of by Aristotle as a means of exposition of the story, and to essentially belong to stagecraft as opposed to poetry.

**Song**—music as used in drama.

By means of some of these elements poetics is connected to other parts of philosophy— plot and character connects poetics with ethics, thought with logic and rhetoric, language with grammar.

In Aristotle's ethical theory, happiness is the supreme end of human life, and happiness is virtuous activity (in a complete life). Happiness is thus a product of virtue and fortune and of these two only virtues is within our power.

**Virtue is of two kinds:-**

- i. Intellectual
- ii. Moral.

**Intellectual virtue** has three spheres—

- a. The theoretical,
- b. The productive

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- c. The practical.
- iii. **Moral virtue** is the tendency or inclination towards those actions which practical reason determines is conducive towards (individual and collective) happiness. Moral virtue is the product of training in the youth and the cumulative effect of one's history of choices as an adult. All action is for ends, and choice is "deliberate desire," that is what one desires to do as a result of calculating the means to an end.

**Aristotle evaluates everything in poetry based on:-**

1. The tragic effect
2. The purgation of the emotions of pity and fear—about which he says very little.

Thus he relegates what some might think of as the existential or theological meaning of the tragedy to the element of thought (that is, which the characters think the meaning of the events is). According to Aristotle the most essential element is story. Here to conceptualise plot as per Aristotle one can refer to the plot of Sophocles' "Oedipus Tyrannus".

**PLOT of Oedipus Tyrannus**

Upon Oedipus' birth to the King and Queen of Thebes, a prophecy predicts that he is destined to kill his father. Because of the prophecy the baby Oedipus is exposed but is found and rescued by shepherds. He is adopted and raised by the King and Queen of Corinth, all the time believing that they are his real parents, but as a young man he learns of a prophecy that he is destined to mate with his mother and kill his father. He leaves Corinth to avoid the fulfilment of the

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prophecy. Travelling to Thebes he quarrels with and kills a man he meets on the road, who, unbeknownst to him, is his biological father, Laius. After arriving in Thebes, he gains power by solving the riddle of the Sphinx and marries the widowed queen, who is, of course, unbeknownst to him, his biological mother. With her he has children. The city falls prey to a plague, and this is generally interpreted as a punishment for its harbouring the murderer of Laius. As a conscientious ruler Oedipus resolves to root out and rid the city of its pollution, and in his determination approaches ever more closely to learning the truth. His wife/mother guesses the truth and hangs herself, and when Oedipus finds her he blinds himself with her brooches. He becomes an exile. **Aristotle classifies plots** as  
i. Simple or ii. Compound.

**Compound plots** contain one or both of the elements of recognition and reversal, and are superior to simple ones. Recognition is the revelation of a character as someone other than he or she has purported to be. Reversal (of fortune) is the transition from good or bad fortune to the opposite. Oedipus Tyrannus obviously contains both recognition and reversal—recognition brings reversal. According to Aristotle, the best tragic plot, because it best evokes the emotions of pity and fear leading to purgation, is the downfall of a good man on account of his **Hamartia, Sin, Fault, or Flaw**. Thus, the plot of Homer's *Odyssey* is not ideal in this respect, because the bad fall and the good (Odysseus) rises.

**Aristotle says that in constructing a good plot the poet ought to**

A. "Place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes."

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- B. Aristotle also says that Homer is most imitative of epic poets because he has the characters, as opposed to the poet, nearly always doing or talking. (Chapter 24)
- C. Applying the six elements to fantasy and science fiction, it can be argued that there is a seventh element, "world." (In ancient Greek tragedy the world was usually given as the world of the Homeric heroes.)
- D. Character can be expanded to include personality—the personalities of the kinds of aliens in the Known Space of Larry Niven. Thought seems to be the primary means by which a poem has philosophical content.
- E. Spectacle can be thought of as including description of the world and action of the story—what is seen in the mind's eye or felt by the reader as he / she reads or listens.

**Few Important Concepts illustrated by Aristotle**

1. **Hamartia** is a personal error in a protagonist's personality, which brings about his tragic downfall in a tragedy. This defect in a hero's personality is also known as a "tragic flaw." **Aristotle** used the word in his Poetics, where it is taken as a mistake or error in judgment.

**2. Cathartic Reversal**

Aristotle argues that the best tragedies - and thus the best plays, since Aristotle considers tragedy to be the highest dramatic form - use reversal and recognition to achieve catharsis. He writes that reversal works with a story's spine or centre to ensure that the hero comes full circle. Oedipus is his exemplar of a hero who undergoes such a reversal and thus has cathartic self-recognition. Aristotle considers catharsis to be a form of redemption. For instance, even though Oedipus' recognition is tragic it

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still redeems him: he is no longer living in ignorance of his tragedy but instead has accepted fate.

And redemption is not the only result of catharsis; the audience too undergoes a catharsis of sorts in a good drama. The hero's catharsis induces both pity and fear in the audience: pity for the hero, and fear that his fate could happen to us.

### **3. Complication and Denouement**

There are only two parts to a good drama, says Aristotle - the rising action leading to the climax, which is known as the complication, and the denouement, or the 'unravelling' that follows the climax. This twofold movement follows **Aristotle's theory of poetic unity**. The complication leads up to the revelation of the unity at the heart of the work. After this revelation, a play naturally turns to the denouement, in which the significance and ramifications of the unity are explored and resolved.

### **4. The Imitative Nature of Art**

There are two common ways to think of art: some consider it to be an expression of what is original and unusual in human thinking; Aristotle, on the other hand, argues that that art is 'imitative,' that is to say, representative of life. This imitative quality fascinates Aristotle. He devotes much of the *Poetics* to exploring the methods, significance, and consequences of this imitation of life. Aristotle concludes that art's imitative tendencies are expressed in one of three ways: a poet attempts to portray our world as it is, as we think it is, or as it ought to be.

### **5. The Standard of Poetic Judgment**

Aristotle thinks that this tendency to criticize a work of art for factual errors - such as lack of historical accuracy - is misguided. He believes

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that instead we should a judge work according to its success at imitating the world. If the imitation is carried out with integrity and if the artwork's 'unity' is intact at its conclusion, a simple error in accuracy will do little to blemish this greater success. Art, in other words, should be judged aesthetically, not scientifically.

### **6. Tragedy vs. Epic Poetry**

In Aristotle's time, the critics considered epic poetry to be the supreme art form, but to Aristotle, tragedy is the better of the two forms. Aristotle believes that tragedy, like the epic, can entertain and edify in its written form, but also has the added dimension of being able to translate onstage into a drama of spectacle and music, capable of being digested in one sitting.

### **7. Tragic Hero**

The tragic hero, in Aristotle's view of drama, is not an eminently 'good' man; nor is he necessarily a paragon of virtue that is felled by adversity. Instead, the hero has some 'frailty' or flaw that is evident from the outset of a play that eventually ensures his doom. The audience, moreover, must be able to identify with this tragic flaw.

### **8. The Unity of Poetry**

Aristotle often speaks of the unity of poetry in the *Poetics*; what he means by "unity," however, is sometimes misunderstood. Unity refers to the ability of the best dramatic plots to revolve around a central axis that 'unites' all the action. Aristotle believes that a unified drama will have a 'spine': a central idea which motivates all the action, character, thoughts, diction and spectacle in the play.



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**Long Question**

**Q.1 Elucidate Aristotle's concept of 'Hamartia.'**

Hamartia is a hero's tragic 'flaw' or 'frailty' that leads to his demise. Aristotle believes that a good tragedy presents a character whose downfall happens due to a flaw in him- 'an error or frailty'. Though he is renowned, prosperous, even seeming virtuous there is a chink in his armour that will inevitably be found- and will be the source of his demise. Fear and pity truly can only be elicited through this tragic flaw in the hero which in turn is motivated by the 'unity' or spine of the whole piece. Some poets, says Aristotle, use spectacle to motivate fear and pity, but this ultimately does not resonate for long, since spectacle produces a different type of 'pleasure' than the one requisite for tragedy. Only pity and fear can produce true 'purgation' or emotions rather than a spectacle of false catharsis.