

Aristotle

Poetics

Some of the key principles of dramatic construction can be found in Aristotle's text, perhaps the earliest surviving works of literary criticism, certainly one of the most influential. Even though it is two thousand years old, the relevance of Poetics should not be underestimated, and it remains an extraordinarily useful rulebook for the writing of dramatic literature. One could even argue that all screenwriting books are merely footnotes to Aristotle. That said, like all material of this kind, you are encouraged to take what you find useful and leave the rest behind. After all, it's important to bear in mind that these writings are descriptive, not proscriptive, even if, as Kenneth McLeish writes, "Aristotle in Poetics seems persistently to imply, without ever saying explicitly, that if more writers of the present followed the routes taken by geniuses of the past – routes he sets out in detail – both drama and its spectators would be far healthier." Note that the idea of unity of time and place appears nowhere in the original text of Poetics. It was developed centuries later by neoclassical Italian literary critic Lodovico Castelvetro. The notion of unity of action, however, is one of Aristotle's key tenets.

The following extracts are taken from N.G.L. Hammond's translation (Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2001). Mackendrick used an older and somewhat less user-friendly translation (Butcher). All text in this section not attributed to Aristotle was written by Mackendrick. Emphasis below is mine, as are the choices of extracts from Aristotle (as informed by Mackendrick's original handout for his CalArts students) and the summary on the final pages. – PC

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Aristotle was born in Thrace in 384BC. When he was seventeen he went to Athens to study with Plato, and remained in Athens for twenty years. When he was in his forties, he was appointed tutor to the son of King Phillip of Macedonia, the boy who subsequently became Alexander the Great, teaching him the arts of science and politics. Thereafter he returned to Athens to form his own school, the Lyceum.

Aristotle's treatises and dialogues were circulated during his lifetime. But in 323BC, because of his connections with Macedonia, he was driven out of Athens and his writings were hidden in order that the manuscripts not be destroyed by his enemies. Not until the first century BC was the first Greek edition of his writings published. The year after his escape from Athens he died in Chalcis at the age of sixty-two.

The following are excerpts from *Poetics*, Aristotle's essay on the Greek drama that had flourished a couple of hundred years before his time. It is regarded as the first piece of dramatic criticism and dramatic theory.

If some of the language in *Poetics* needs some translation for us in the late Twentieth Century, it is because in the days when Aristotle was writing, the theatre was much nearer to its first beginnings. In the fairly primitive societies of that time, one should remember, there was not much distinction made between what is now considered history, religion and myth. The supernatural figures of Homeric epic poetry – heroes like Odysseus – were indeed fables which described to the Greeks

how their world originated, how the great tribal houses of the small city-states of the Attic peninsula came into being at the time of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

In practice, anthropologists argue that this is the real function of dramatic ritual in its earliest stages: to act out how societies and communities began. "Myth" nowadays has taken on a negative connotation. We use the word to mean something that is untrue, a belief that is mistaken, unfounded. But for the student of anthropology, it has another meaning. Myths in primitive societies are "poetic" answers to the kind of questions that were beyond the science of the time, like how the world was created, what the stars in the sky are, and why the seasons change. "Poetic" truth can, at a functional level, be as significant as rational and scientific interpretation of the way in which we understand the great mysteries of human existence.

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Summary of contents

Our subject is the nature and the forms of poetry... [and] the **proper arrangement of the plot if the poem is to succeed**.¹

The nature of poetry

On the whole poetry seems to have arisen from two causes, both inherent in man's nature. The first is that from childhood **man has an instinct for representation** (indeed man is distinguished from the rest of the animal world in that he is most given to representation and learns his first lessons through representation). The second is that all men take pleasure in representation.

The reason for their pleasure is that to learn something is most pleasurable not only to philosophers but also to all men alike (although the others' share in learning is small). The truth of this is obvious when we consider what happens in the cases of works of art. Men take pleasure in looking at pictures, because, as they do so, they learn and ponder what each thing is – saying, for instance, "that is so and so" (of course, if one has never seen the subject, the picture will cause pleasure not as a representation but because of the treatment or the colour or some other aspect). Indeed, when the subject is one which is painful to see in real life – a corpse or a most foul beast – the most accurate portrayal of it gives us pleasure.

We were then endowed from the beginning with the instinct of representation and with the sense of tune and rhythm (including, of course, metres as divisions of rhythm). These in particular were gradually developed by men until from their improvisations they brought poetry to birth.²

¹ p.11.

² p.11.

The differences between the forms of poetry

The subjects of representation are men in action. Now these men must be either good or bad (for character nearly always falls into these two categories alone, since all men's characters vary in degree of goodness and badness), they must be either better than we are or worse than we are or such as we are.³

The nature and the parts of tragedy

A tragedy is a representation of an action which is noble and **complete** and of a **certain magnitude**... **A tragedy is presented by men in action and not by narrative.** A tragedy arouses pity and fear and thereby effects a purgation of these and similar emotions.

Every tragedy must have six parts. Its quality depends on the quality of these parts, namely **plot, character, thought** (these three being the subjects represented), diction (this being the manner of representation), song and spectacle (these being means of representation). By "plot" I mean in this case the arrangement of the incidents; by "character" I mean that which determines for us the quality of those who are acting; and by "thought" I mean passages where men prove and point the argument or pronounce an opinion. Of these three, "plot" is the part which represents the action. For, while tragedy is itself a representation of an action and is enacted by men in action, "character" and "thought" are the parts which determine the qualities of the men in action. For when we refer to actions being of a certain quality, we really mean the "character" and the "thought" which prompt it, since these two are the causes of every action and **it is men's actions which lead to success or failure.**

The arrangement of the incidents then is the most important of the six parts. For it must be emphasised that a **tragedy is a representation not of men but of action**, of life, of faring well or ill (which turns on action); and that the object of tragedy is to represent a piece of action and not a quality. For, **while men's qualities correspond to their characters, their faring well or ill corresponds to their actions.** To put it another way, **men do not act in order to represent character, but qualities of character emerge as a result of their actions.** In short, the aim of tragedy is the expression of the incidents and plot, and the aim is always the most important of all. **The plot then is the beginning and, as it were, the soul of tragedy.**

Character is secondary. Compare painting, wherein the smearing of the most beautiful colours at random gives less pleasure than a likeness drawn in black and white. Further, a tragedy cannot dispense with action but it can dispense with character; for a tragedy is a representation of action and it is for that reason mainly that it represents men in action. Indeed, most of our younger tragedians write

³ p.14.

tragedies devoid of character, and this is a general feature of many creative artists [...]. Again, suppose someone writes a string of speeches which illustrate qualities of character with excellent diction and thought. He will not achieve the function of tragedy as well as a play which has a plot and an arrangements of episodes although it maybe inferior in diction and thought. [...]⁴

Character (as we have said) comes second. Character is that which portrays **choice**, indicating what sort of thing a man **chooses or rejects** in a situation where the course is not obvious. There is thus no “character” in speeches which are entirely devoid of any issue involving choice or rejection on the part of the speaker.

Third is “thought.” It occurs in speeches which demonstrate that something is or is not so or which pronounces a belief of general validity. It consists in the ability to express the points at issue and the appropriate course in any situation. This is indeed the aim of the statesman’s or the orator’s art in speech-making, and that is why the ancient poets made their speakers speak like statesmen and the modern poets make them speak like orators. [...]

Lastly, “spectacle.” Fear and pity may be aroused by the setting of the stage, but it may also be aroused by the actual arrangement of the incidents and this is to be preferred as the mark of a better poet. **Indeed the plot should be so constructed that even without seeing the play a man who hears of the sequence of events will shudder with fear and pity at what happens.** This would be the experience of anyone who heard the plot of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. **But to obtain this effect by means of spectacle is less artistic and depends upon the help of the producer.** Those who use spectacle to obtain an effect which is not terrifying but monstrous have nothing to do with tragedy; for one must not look for every form of pleasure from tragedy but only the pleasure appropriate to tragedy. The poet then should afford the pleasure which results from pity and fear, and **he should do so by means of the representation.** Therefore it is obvious that this quality should be inherent in the incidents themselves.

Finally “spectacle” may transport the imagination but it is the least artistic and the least relevant of the poet’s art – the least artistic because the skill of the carpenter matters more than the art of the poet in gaining spectacular effects, and the least relevant because the power of the tragedy is not dependent on staging and production.⁵

⁴ Bywater (online): “beginners succeed earlier with the Diction and Characters than with the construction of a story; and the same may be said of nearly all the early dramatists.”

⁵ pp.17 – 20. Grube (p.15): “As for the spectacle, stirs the emotions, but it is less a matter of art than the others, and has least to do with poetry, for a tragedy can achieve its effect even apart from the performance and the actors, Indeed, spectacular effects belong to the craft of the property man rather than to that of the poet.” Heath (p.13): “Spectacle is attractive, but it is very inartistic and is least germane to the art of poetry. For the effect of tragedy is not dependent on performance and actors; also, the art of the property-manager has more relevance to the production of visual effects than does that of the poets.”

The plot

We have already defined tragedy as the representation of an action which is **complete and whole and which has also a certain magnitude**, for a thing may be whole and yet have no magnitude. Now to be whole is to have **a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which of necessity does not follow something else and of its very nature must be followed by some event or happening. An end is just the opposite; of its very nature it must follow something else either inevitably or generally so, and it must not be followed by anything else. A middle is that which follows something and is succeeded by something.** Well-constructed plots should then not begin casually nor end casually. They should follow the principle we have stated. [...]

[T]here is a natural limit for the length of the action; provided that it is comprehensible as a whole, the longer the action the more beautiful it is. As a general definition we may say that the proper limit is one which permits **a change from bad fortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to bad fortune through a sequence of events which occur in accordance with necessity or with probability.**

A plot does not, as some suppose, have unity when it concerns one person. For many, indeed innumerable things happen to an individual and yet some of them do not constitute any unity at all; and an individual makes many acts, but they do not constitute any single action. In the other representational arts unity of representation lies in the unity of the subject. So too in tragedy, which represents an action, the unity lies in the unity and the completeness of the action, of which the component incidents must be so arranged that the alteration or the withdrawal of one incident distorts and destroys the whole. For, **if its presence or absence makes no visible difference, it is not a part of the whole.**

It then follows then that the dramatic poet should be rather the creator of plots than the creator of verses, inasmuch as representation is his form of creative art and what he represents is action. Further, it follows from our statements that his task is **not to relate actual events but to write the sort of things which may happen and are possible in accordance with probability or necessity.** [...]

[T]he actions with which history generally is concerned are those which, of their very nature, illustrate **not a single action but the happenings of a single period.** Between these happenings to one or more individuals there is a purely fortuitous relationship. For example, the battle of Salamis and the battle against Carthage in Sicily took place at the same time but did not conduce to the same result; and this is sometimes true of events in a continuum of time, namely that they occur one after another but do not lead to any single result. In poetry, however, and especially in dramatic poetry **the plot should be concerned with a single action,**

whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, a middle and an end, and designed, like a single and complete living organism, to create its own form of pleasure.⁶

Illogicalities

If an author has to choose, **he should prefer an impossible probability to an improbable possibility.** His plot should not be composed of illogical elements. Ideally, it should contain nothing illogical. Failing that, anything illogical should be outside the story as related in the play.⁷

Traditional stories

Whether a playwright has chosen a traditional story or one of his own making, his first task is to set it down in **general outline...** When the general outline is completed and not before, one should add the names, expand the story and insert the episodes.⁸

Plots

Plots divide into two classes, the “**simple**” and the “**complex**,” just as the actions which the plots represent are immediately divisible into two such classes. By a “simple” action I mean an action which, being simple and continuous in the sense of our definition, undergoes the transition without a “**reversal of fortune**” or a “**discovery**”; and by a “complex” action I mean an action in which the transition coincides with a “**discovery**” or with a “**reversal of fortune**” or with both.

Of the simple plots and actions the “episodic” ones are worst. By an “episodic” plot I mean a **plot in which the sequence of the episodes is not in accordance with probability or necessity.** Episodic plays are made by bad poets because they are bad, and by good poets to please the actors; for, writing as they do for a dramatic competition, they expand the plot beyond its capacity and often yield to the necessity of distorting its continuity. Since tragedy is a representation not only of a complete action but also of events which inspire fear and pity, the best arrangement of the incidents is an arrangement in which the incidents occur **one in consequence of another** and yet are contrary to expectation. In this way the amazement of the spectators will be greater than if the incidents occur fortuitously and spontaneously.⁹

⁶ pp.20 – 3.

⁷ p.23.

⁸ p.24.

⁹ p.25.

Reversals and discoveries

A “**reversal**” is a change of the situation into the opposite, as we have defined it, and this too should accord, as we say, with necessity or with probability. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* gives us an example. A man comes to cheer Oedipus and to allay his fears about his mother; but he shows Oedipus who he is, and thereby reverses the situation...

A “**discovery**,” as the word implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge. [...]

Of “discovery” the best are those which coincide with reversal, as for example in the discovery in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is most integral to the plot and most integral to the action. Such a discovery linked with a reversal will move pity and fear, and such actions are by our definition the very subject which tragedy sets out to represent. Moreover, such actions as these will result in adversity and in prosperity.

Reversal and discovery are the two parts of the plot which serve this purpose, and they constitute the best means of transporting the audience.¹⁰

Character

[S]ince character is revealed, as we have said, by a choice which is made manifest in the dialogue or in the action, **a good character will be revealed by a good choice.** [...]

In the drawing of character, as in the arrangement of the incidents, one should always aim at a necessary or probable sequence, so that for such and such a man to do so and so is necessary or probable and for this to follow that is necessary or probable.¹¹

Thought

“Thought” and “speech” still remain to be discussed. The definition of thought and its aspects, which I have given in my treatise on Rhetoric, should be accepted; for **this subject is more appropriate to the scope of that enquiry.**¹²

Forms of tragedy

In every tragedy there is a “**complication**” and an “**unravelling**” [“the untying of the knot”]. The complication is often formed by incidents which are outside the play and by some of the incidents inside the play, and the unravelling is formed by the remainder of the play. To explain what I mean, the complication is that part of the play which extends from the beginning to the point where the transition from adversity to prosperity or from prosperity to adversity commences; and the

¹⁰ pp.26 – 7.

¹¹ pp.27.

¹² pp.28.

unravelling is that part which extends from the beginning of the transition to the end of the play. [...]

Now the unravelling of the plot should obviously result from the plot itself. It should not be brought about by divine intervention, as for instance by the *deus ex machina* [...] The *deus ex machina* has indeed its uses; but it should be employed only for events outside the play, that is to say either for antecedent events, which a human being could not know, or for subsequent events, which need a prophetic view and utterance. This is logical, for we grant that the gods see all things. On the other hand, in the incidents there should be nothing illogical; and should anything illogical be necessary, it should be outside the play...

Many playwrights complicate well but unravel badly. One should always master both.¹³

The tragic hero

The structure of the best tragedy should be not simple but complex, and in addition it should represent events which arouse pity and fear, this being a peculiar feature of such representative art. It clearly follows from this that one should not show men of excellence passing from prosperity to adversity, since that does not excite fear and pity but disgust; nor villainous men passing from adversity to prosperity, which is the least tragical of all, since it has none of the appropriate effects, exciting neither sympathy nor pity nor fear; nor again a thoroughly bad man passing from prosperity to adversity, for although such an arrangement might satisfy our feelings, yet it would not excite pity or fear. For **we feel pity when a man does not deserve adversity, and we feel fear when a man is like us.** The fate, then, of the utterly bad man will not excite pity or fear.

We are left with the man who is intermediate between those we have mentioned. He is such a one as is not preeminent in virtue and righteousness; who falls into adversity not because of vice and villainy but because of some fault in character or judgement; and who is one of those who are in high repute and in great prosperity, such as Oedipus and Thyestes and the leading men of such families. The good plot should, of course, have a single rather than a double issue, as some say, meaning that **the play ends in opposite ways for the good and bad characters.** A single issue should be a change not from adversity to prosperity but from prosperity to adversity, brought on not by villainy but by a great fault in a man who is such as we have described or who is rather superior to us than inferior.¹⁴

¹³ pp.29 – 30. Bywater (online): ““Yet there are many dramatists who, after a good Complication, fail in the Denouement. But it is necessary for both points of construction to be always duly mastered.” Mackendrick: “If you've got a Beginning, but you don't yet have an end, then you're mistaken. You don't have the right Beginning.”

¹⁴ pp.31 – 2.

Tragic acts

Although it is possible to arouse pity and fear by the spectacular effects of the stage, the superior method and the mark of the better poetry is to do so by the **arrangement of the incidents**. Indeed the plot should be so constructed that **even a man who does not see the play but is only told that the incidents have occurred will be shaken with fear** and will be moved to pity by the events.¹⁵ Anyone who is told the story of Oedipus will react in this way. On the other hand, to contrive this by **spectacular effects** is inartistic in the playwright, and its success depends upon the producer's resources; and to produce by these means a scene which does not excite fear but is simply prodigious is completely alien to tragedy.

As the poet should use the art of representation to provide the pleasure which results from feeling pity and fear, and as the incidents should obviously contain the qualities which inspire pity and fear, let us now take up the question: what sort of occurrences seem to be fearful, or what sort of occurrences seem to be pitiable? Such acts must take place either between persons related by blood or friendship, or between enemies, or between persons who are neither related nor enemies. Suppose an enemy acts so towards an enemy, there is nothing pitiable either in the act or in the intention, apart from the actual calamity. Nor is there, if the parties are neither enemies nor related. But when calamities occur between **related persons**, for instance if brother kills brother, or son father, or mother son, or son mother in fact or in intention or commits some comparable act – that is the situation which we want.

We must now state more clearly what we mean by a “skillful” treatment of the incidents in a situation of this kind. The action may be developed in the manner of the early dramatists, the participants acting consciously and deliberately just as in Euripides' play Medea kills her children. Or they may act **without realising the horror of the act and then discover the relationship afterwards**, as Oedipus does in Sophocles' play. In this case, it is true, the act lies outside the play, but the act may occur in the course of the tragedy. [...] Or – and this is the third possibility – **one may intend to perpetrate some irreparable act in ignorance and discover the truth before one acts**. There is no other possibility; for they must either act or not act, either knowing or not knowing. Of these possibilities the least effective is to intend in knowledge and not to act; this is shocking and not tragical, since there is no calamity... Next worst is to intend in knowledge and to act. **It is more effective to act in ignorance and after the act to discover the truth**; for the shocking quality is absent, and the discovery is striking. This last course is best. I mean as it is in *Cresphontes*, when Merope intends to kill her son, and does not kill him but

¹⁵ Grube (p.26): “Fear and pity can be caused by the spectacle or by the plot structure itself. The latter way is better and argues a better poet.” Heath (p.22): “The plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens; this is how someone would react on hearing the plot of the *Oedipus*.”

discovers the truth, and in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, when the same happens between sister and brother, and in *Helle*, when the son intends to hand over his mother and then discovers the truth.

For this reason, as we said above, **tragedies are written about only a few families...** [Playwrights] are obliged to turn to those families in which such calamities have occurred.¹⁶

Avoiding too many stories

You must remember, as we have often said, not to make a tragedy from an epic unit; by which I mean **a unit composed of many stories**; one should not, for instance, make a tragedy from the whole story of the *Iliad*. Within the length of an epic the parts receive their proper proportion, but in a play they far exceed our powers of comprehension.¹⁷

Plot in epic poetry

In epic, as in tragedy, the plot must be constructed in dramatic form. The plot should be concerned with a single action, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, a middle and an end, designed like a single and complete living organism to create its own form of pleasure. Now a plot does not, as some suppose, have unity when it concerns one person. For many, indeed innumerable things happen to an individual, and yet some of them do not constitute any unity at all; and an individual makes many acts, but they do not constitute any single action.

Consequently, all those poets seem to be at fault who have written a *Heracleid* or a *Theseid* or any such poem, thinking that, because Heracles was one man, the plot should have unity. Pre-eminent in all respects, Homer seems to have seen this point clearly in the light of his genius or of his artistic skill; for in writing the *Odyssey* he did not write everything that happened to Odysseus, the wounding on Parnassus, for instance, and the feigned madness during the gathering of the expedition (**neither being a necessary or probable consequence of this other**), but he constructed the *Odyssey* round a **single action** in our sense of the term, and likewise the *Iliad*.¹⁸

Episodes and length in epic poetry

It should be possible to see the beginning and the end in one view.

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¹⁶ pp.33 – 4.

¹⁷ p.37.

¹⁸ p.38.

A modern equivalent of the term “diction” is probably “performance,” the reason being that in the days when Aristotle was writing, drama was more declamatory and probably depended much more on the skill of the actor in elocution than subtleties of acting. “Song” is perhaps the musical score that accompanies a film, or maybe the ‘musicality’ in the actor’s delivery of the texts written in poetic language. Aristotle calls it “the greatest of the sweeteners.”¹⁹ “Thought” seems to be some kind of thematic statement, because when a character enunciates a general truth then the character may be speaking for the author and making a point about the theme of the play.

For the narrow purposes of our discussion of classic and traditional structure in our classroom narrative/dramatic work, I suggest you reduce his six hierarchical parts to three:

Theme

An abstract or generalised description of the concepts of the story. In a way, the “point” that you are trying to make with the story, its message or moral. In one way or another, it is the meaning of the story that you carry away when the story is told. In modern parlance, we sometimes use the word to describe not only the topic or general subject but frequently the meaning or moral of the story, as in a fable where a tag is added that suggests the conclusion that the reader is invited to draw from the way the tale is resolved.

This may be easiest to explain by providing examples. We say that the theme of *Othello* is Jealousy, and of *Macbeth* Ambition. The theme of *On the Waterfront* is the Struggle of One Man to Discover His Moral Identity in a Fight Against Corruption. These are, in a way, fables about our contemporary world. The theme, I suggest, is likely to be the *meaning* of the events of the story expressed – or just as often left unexpressed but nevertheless explicit – with which the dramatist wants to leave us. It needn’t, of course, be moral in the sense that it is uplifting. It has been said that *The Godfather* is really a metaphor for capitalist America. If so, its moral is an exceedingly savage one, a true tragedy in the classic tradition. A film that explores what many might consider immoral motives and attitudes, like any crime story, is still dealing with moralities, though in a playful or perverse fashion.

Translated like this, Aristotle is suggesting that the plot, meaning the narrative sequence of events, is – or should be – a working-out and reflection of the social or moral conflicts that are inherent in the theme. This is why character, for example Oedipus’ tendency to an arrogance that prevents him from humility towards the Gods, or Othello’s moral weaknesses of gullibility and jealousy, or the punchy demoralised Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*, are all aspects of personality which, quite literally, personify concepts of the theme. Worth noting too is that to act out these conflicts it is often essential to create an antagonist (or foil character), a figure that personifies opposing elements. These individuals should have moral qualities that can be contrasted to those of the protagonist. For example:

¹⁹ p.19.

Creon, in *Oedipus Rex*, who is a foil for the King, Macduff is Macbeth without Macbeth's character flaw of ambition, Iago is a devious and cunning character in contrast with the naïve and innocent Othello, and Father Barry and Johnny Friendly in *On the Waterfront* who are both personifications of the interior conflict taking place within Terry Malloy.

In *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy and Edie play a scene on the roof, just before Terry goes down to confront the crooked waterfront trade union leaders. In the scene he enumerates the general truth of the situation, the need for a man to stand up for his rights. This is the theme of the film. In *The Third Man*, the scene between Harry Lime and Holly Martins on the Ferris wheel is one in which Lime talks of his cynicism, explaining himself and his corruption when challenged by his old school friend. It is a thematic scene.

Plot

The events of the narrative, the combination of things done in the story, the arrangement of the incidents, the sequence of scenes in which the action unfolds and which establishes suspense and expectation, usually on the spine of cause-and-effect (because each action produces a reaction). The tension is likely to be a rising line, though not always a steady progression, since a relaxation of tension is often valuable before a crisis.

Character(s)

Note the plural. It is more truly character-in-action, which means the interaction/interplay of more than one character. Characters are the agents whose clashes are needed to illustrate the conflict inherent in the theme. Aristotle's point is that action requires characters in order to act out the thematic conflict.

It is important to understand that theme, plot and character are inseparable. The terms are useful only as three ways of looking at a work from three points of view. A dramatic work may be strong in one aspect and weaker in others, but it is rare that all three are not present and vigorously contributing to the impact of the subject.

A problem clearly lies in our interpretation of exactly what Aristotle means. Many of the terms he uses may have meant to the Greeks of the 5th century things that they do not mean to us. To the Greeks of Aristotle's day, the dramatic theatre served a very different kind of social purpose than the stage or the cinema does in our times, where it is to a great extent no more than popular entertainment. "Fable," as we use the word today, is likely to mean a parable, a story invented as an illustration of a moral. But for Aristotle it seems to have meant something more like a myth. Plot for us is more or less what Aristotle wrote about: the events of the narrative, the arrangement of the incidents. This is why Aristotle can equate the fable and the plot.

Let me also say something here about the notion of the three “unities,” namely unity of place, unity of time and unity of action. Though attributed to him, it was not Aristotle who first proposed this formulation. As John Howard Lawson has explained, it was Lodovico Castelvetro, an Italian critic writing in 1570, who first wrote of the idea of the three unities, which suggested that the action of a play should take place between sun-up and sun-down of a single day, and that the events should take place in a single setting, for example the exterior of the king’s palace. (One reason why Aristotle is named as the author of these ideas is perhaps because, in the earliest plays, the Greeks staged their plays in the open air arenas that were built in gullies of a hillside and the performances started in the mornings and went on till the light faded.)

Escape from these archaic formulas began in the days of the Elizabethan theatre. The plays of Shakespeare, for instance, were staged in daylight, but it was quite common practice to invite the audiences of the Globe Theatre to pretend that the action was taking place at night or in some remote location. On occasion, Shakespeare also foreshadowed cinematic technique by cross-cutting scenes of simultaneous action in different environments. (Similarly, the device of the flashback in film abandons linear time progression.) Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there are advantages to the impact and tension of a story in which place and time are condensed. Modern dramatists talk of the value of the “closed world” in which the dramatic events take place and which give unity of action to the dramatic narrative.

Of the three unities, it is the principle of a single, central action that has lasted and that I urge you to consider when thinking about your own stories in the context of this class on narrative and drama. It is Aristotle who first proposed the idea that a sense of structure gives to a dramatic work the feeling of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. All the elements of a story must be necessary. There should be no element which does not contribute effectively to the functioning of the whole. At all times ask yourself: is there any character in a story, an incident or situation which, if removed, would not seriously weaken the impact of what remains?

Drama is fiction. It involves make-believe and pretence. There is much talk of “reality” in theatre, but the word has to be in quotes, meaning not actual reality, but rather fiction convincingly believed in. Nor is it enough to present people in an interesting situation. There has to be action and reaction. Something has to happen. Implicit also in the term “action” is purpose and intention (i.e. a character makes a choice of some kind), and thus the expectation of future developments. It may seem an obvious point to make, but I promise you that the number of film school projects that concern themselves with figures whose purposes and intentions are not thought out in terms of purposeful action are many. This does not, of course, mean that the project is bad. It may be quite fascinating as a piece of cinematic art, but what it isn’t – or isn’t yet – is dramatic. Or, at least, not dramatic in the traditional Aristotelian sense.

The word “drama” is derived from the Greek word for “doing.” Plainly this involves (i) a doer and (ii) somebody to whom something is done. Drama is inseparable from action, and drama that is descriptive, reflective or simply explanative is liable to be weak and ineffective.

The particular way that an individual does something is the clearest indication of the individual’s temperament; or the way in which an individual reacts to circumstance, to what is being done to him or her. It should also be noted that an action is an activity that has some intention, some purpose, some end result. An action causes a change in the situation and advances the narrative. In this respect, an action might not even be immediately visible to the audience, but it is also intimately related to a character’s intention and the choices he or she makes. An action is significantly more than just an ongoing activity. Rather, it is something that leads to an event of some kind that in turn advances the narrative (i.e. action = activity-with-an-intention). Action in the dramatic sense presupposes some other figure who is acted-upon. A character-quality, therefore, is something that is literary and valueless to the story until it is imagined in the context of an event, an incident or situation in a crisis of the action. It is, needless to say, very much easier for a writer to describe qualities in a person and hope that the audience will see these, or that they will be appreciated just by the appearance and personality traits of the performer. Much harder is to invent incidents which dramatise the character’s intentions. The point is that character doesn’t exist until there is action. Character needs intention in order to be expressed theatrically, as distinct from just being described as a passive aspect of personality. Without the doing, characterisation is lifeless and static. Tension, the very essence of drama, requires intention.

The reason for stressing this is that many beginners, brought up in a literary tradition, are apt to conceive speech as self-expressive, giving outlet to feeling and thought without much concern to the listeners, the reactions of other characters. It is a dangerous tendency. It is noticeable that even in Shakespearean soliloquies there is more than just talk for the benefit of the talker. “To be or not to be...” is an example. It is a debate – a vigorous and potentially violent conflict – between two aspects of the character of Hamlet, a fight within himself. At issue is the decision of whether or not he will take action. It is a weak performance of this famous speech that does not give force to this powerful inner conflict which, from moment to moment, vacillates between anger at himself and the weak despair and fear that “doth make cowards of us all” when we “lose the name of action.”

Character, therefore, ought not to be conceived in the singular. For it to be dramatic, character should be thought of as struggle between characters, the action and reaction of individuals. It is the task of the dramatist to make internal struggles apparent and to externalise them, usually through the invention of some subsidiary figures who act as foils. Critics and theorists of dramatic craft will emphasise this: character has to be evident in what a person does, as well as how he or she reacts to

what others do to him or her. This is one of the basic distinctions between work we might consider as being literary and that which is what we call dramatic. A novelist can resort to descriptions of qualities that may or may not result in making events happen. The dramatist cannot.

Character is not a static aspect of personality. It cannot be separated from action because intentions, purposes and motives of a character are his or her dramatic characteristics. Simply, character is expressed through action. A “character-quality,” therefore, is something that is literary and valueless to the story until it is imagined in the context of an event, an incident or situation in a crisis of the action. It is, needless to say, very much easier for a writer to describe qualities in a character (in other words describe in the business of a screenplay or play exactly what he hopes will be achieved by the work) and hope that either the audience will see these, or that these qualities will be appreciated just by the appearance and personality traits of the performer. Much harder is to invent incidents which actually dramatise the character’s intentions. It takes more imagination to devise things happening which will produce the desired effect. “Showing” instead of “telling” requires real ingenuity and effort. I wrote above that explanations in drama are liable to be ineffective. Explanations can be dramatic as long as they are explanations that are designed to have an effect on at least one character in the story.

This is why we are apt to insist that passivity is dramatically feeble.

Does this mean that characters who are passive cannot be put into a play or a film? Obviously not. Indeed, if this were so then a majority of plays or films would not have been produced, particularly since the dilemma of perhaps a majority of the most interesting protagonists of modern times are figures who are torn by doubts and uncertainties and by the agony of inability to take action. The solution is simple. When the central figure, sometimes called the protagonist, is uncertain and weak, it is the task of the dramatic writer to sharpen and clarify those who are his or her antagonists, the figures who are created by the dramatist to personify the obstacles of the hero (or anti-hero). Negative action is still action. The desire to escape from action, even to avoid decision, is still a decision. Hence the inescapable responsibility of the dramatist to find devices which make the *agon* (the Greek word for “struggle”) visible and apparent through action.

Let’s take another look at one of the things Aristotle discusses. He suggests that “men do not act in order to represent character, but qualities of character emerge as a result of their actions.” There has been a mass of controversy over this remark by Aristotle, based in my opinion on a misunderstanding. Some have read it as meaning that Aristotle believed that plot was more important than feeling for character, that plot is what the dramatist should work out first. I don’t believe this is true, nor do I believe it is what Aristotle thought. Aristotle was not talking of dramatists who felt it necessary to write new and original story material (which wasn’t Shakespeare’s assumption either, since he tended to borrow his plots and then transform them). The point is that character – as conceived in dramatic terms –

doesn't exist until there is action. A character needs intention and the opportunity to make choices in order to be expressed dramatically, as distinct from just being described as a passive aspect of personality. Without the doing, characterisation is lifeless and static. Tension, the very essence of drama, requires intention.

In short, the aim of tragedy is the expression of the incidents and plot, and the aim is always the most important of all.

This is an interesting phrase on which Aristotle does not expand. But other critics and theorists have. William Archer, for instance, makes a point that dramatic tension is the tug of two forces pulling against each other. It is our sense of expectation as to what may – or may not – happen next, and especially at the very end, as opposed to our uncertainty about how it will happen. Archer comes very close to making this his definition of dramatic tension: “Expectation mingled with uncertainty.” Note that in *Oedipus Rex* we in the audience have a pretty sure idea that the man whom Oedipus has sworn to identify, expose and punish is Oedipus himself. Yet we are held in the grip of the tension as to just how and when and through what surprising development the dreadful truth will finally be proved to the tragic king.

[A] tragedy cannot dispense with action but it can dispense with character.

So says Aristotle. However, to speak only for myself, when a play or film “dispenses with character” or, to be more accurate, when the figures in it have no depth of character, I will admit to finding them shallow stuff. Others, including a few dramatists who would like to reject conventional and traditional concepts of drama may, ironically, find the statement supports their efforts to escape psychological characterisation in favour of figures that are generalisations or abstractions of humanity.²⁰

The plot, then, is the beginning and, as it were, the soul of tragedy.

Make up your own mind on such questions.

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²⁰ “A great deal of ink has been wasted in controversy over a remark of Aristotle's that the action or *muthos*, not the character or *êthos*, is the essential element in drama. The statement is absolutely true and wholly unimportant. A play can exist without anything that can be called character, but not without some sort of action. This is implied in the very word ‘drama,’ which means a doing, not a mere saying or existing... Action ought to exist for the sake of character: when the relation is reversed, the play may be an ingenious toy, but scarcely a vital work of art.” William Archer, *Play-Making*, pp.22 – 3.

Summary of Aristotle

All men take pleasure in representation, and the subjects of representation are men in action.

Every tragedy has six parts: plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle.

Spectacle is the least artistic because the power of the tragedy should not be dependent on staging and production. It is the skill of the carpenter that matters more than the art of the poet in gaining spectacular effects.

Men do not act in order to represent character, but qualities of character emerge as a result of their actions.

Character is that which portrays choice, indicating what sort of thing a man chooses or rejects in a situation where the course is not obvious.

The plot should be so constructed that even a man who does not see the play but is only told that the incidents have occurred will be shaken with fear and will be moved to pity by the events.

The plot should be concerned with a single action, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which of necessity does not follow something else and of its very nature must be followed by some event or happening. An end is just the opposite; of its very nature it must follow something else either inevitably or generally so, and it must not be followed by anything else. A middle is that which follows something and is succeeded by something.

A story permits a change from bad fortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to bad fortune through a sequence of events which occur in accordance with necessity or with probability.

If a scene's presence or absence makes no visible difference, it is not a part of the whole.

Plots divide into two classes, the "simple" and the "complex," just as the actions which the plots represent are immediately divisible into two such classes. By a "simple" action I mean an action which, being simple and continuous in the sense of our definition, undergoes the transition without a "reversal of fortune" or a "discovery"; and by a "complex" action I mean an action in which the transition coincides with a "discovery" or with a "reversal of fortune" or with both.

The best arrangement of the incidents is an arrangement in which the incidents occur one in consequence of another and yet are contrary to expectation.

A “reversal” is a change of the situation into the opposite. A “discovery“, as the word implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge. Reversal and discovery are the two parts of the plot which serve this purpose, and they constitute the best means of transporting the audience.

In every tragedy there is a “complication” and an “unravelling” [“the untying of the knot”]. The complication is often formed by incidents which are outside the play and by some of the incidents inside the play, and the unraveling is formed by the remainder of the play. To explain what I mean, the complication is that part of the play which extends from the beginning to the point where the transition from adversity to prosperity or from prosperity to adversity commences; and the unravelling is that part which extends from the beginning of the transition to the end of the play.

The structure of the best tragedy should be not simple but complex, and in addition it should represent events which arouse pity and fear, this being a peculiar feature of such representative art. It clearly follows from this that one should not show men of excellence passing from prosperity to adversity, since that does not excite fear and pity but disgust; nor villainous men passing from adversity to prosperity, which is the least tragical of all, since it has none of the appropriate effects, exciting neither sympathy nor pity nor fear; nor again a thoroughly bad man passing from prosperity to adversity, for although such an arrangement might satisfy our feelings, yet it would not excite pity or fear. For we feel pity when a man does not deserve adversity, and we feel fear when a man is like us. The fate, then, of the utterly bad man will not excite pity or fear.