



A Brief History of Classical Education

Dr. Matthew Post

Lesson 6: Aristotle and Classical Education

Outline:

Aristotle's *Poetics*

- The purpose of the work is not just to appreciate beautiful works of art, it is also talking about how they should be made (how to present a character, how to structure story).
- Think about poetry as being making in the broad sense.

Tragedy

- Tragedy pushes us in our understanding of the beautiful because there seems to be something ugly about tragedy. Aristotle acknowledges that tragedy includes suffering that is not entirely deserved. Why would one consider that to be beautiful?



An Evening School, Gerrit Dou, Dutch, 1655-1657

Four major misinterpretations of the tragedy:

- Tragic protagonist has hamartia, or the tragedy that eventually was deserved (Aristotle thought the tragedy is a tragedy because it is not deserved).
- Tragedy can only be of the great.
- The moment of recognition in a tragedy means recognizing one's own vice.
- Catharsis is a purging of pity and fear. We watch a tragedy and feel such intense pity and fear that these emotions are now gone.

Origins of poetry

- Human beings take pleasure in imitation.
- Pleasure in making has to do with invention, creativity, and self-expression. For Aristotle pleasure is something that you have observed, internalized, and are expressing.
- In comedy, tragedy, and epic poetry Aristotle sees poetry as an imitation of an action.
- Find the most distinctive characteristic, and that is what you imitate on stage (for example: humans acting as animals will act with the animals sound).



- It is the relationship of the part within the whole that makes an action complete.
- The ancient understanding of life was related to whatever is self-moving, this is why they thought of the planets and Cosmos as living.
- They saw themselves as inhabiting a living Cosmos.
- Their error of modernity is that we would say, once I realize that a living being is no different from a rock, maybe there is nothing special about life. The ancients would say there is something extraordinary about life, and what is most extraordinary about life is how the whole universe supports and sustains it.
- The ancients understood how easily disease and weather could destroy plants and even human communities, so when they thought about the cosmos as a harmony in spite of all of the suffering and violence.

Is there a way in which poetic work is ordered like life?

- At first a play is confusing.
- Characters come out of nowhere and we don't know what's going on.
- Soon, things should become clear and what is at stake should become obvious.
- Once you know what's at stake in the play, you still don't know how it's going to turn out.
- The problem is deepened and finally it is resolved.

Aristotle contrasts poetry, history, and philosophy.

- Between poetry and history, Aristotle says that poetry is superior to history.
- The most celebrated historians work to show the motivation of people in narrative, so Aristotle would say the historian is a poet because they are spinning a story for you as the mythologist of old did.
- Aristotle says that a persuasive impossibility is superior to a possible implausibility.
 - What would a persuasive impossibility be? A God that feels pity in a certain way. If the way that they respond to human beings is actually reflective of human experience than even though it is impossible.
- The play is presenting something that is teaching you something true about human nature and human community.

Definition of tragedy (24:00)

- The imitation of an action reveals character.
- What it is at stake in the play is what is at stake in life.
- The tragedy should produce the love of humanity.
- Speech reveals choice, which is why we do things.
- It's important that characters are consistent. They should neither be too virtuous nor too vicious.



- Each character should be good according to the kind of person they are whether a slave or woman (Aristotle).

The story

- Aristotle talks about the part within the whole.
- Because of tragedy within the story there will be a moment of recognition, reversal, and suffering.
- This brings us to pity and fear.
- Characters, who are similar to us, provoke fear.
- Aristotle says there's no problem with a person of a lower-class portraying another person as long as they are good natured, so he was tipping his hat to the fact that the hierarchical distinctions of society aren't as meaningful as we think.
- Pity comes from undeserved suffering.
- Hamartia means to miss the mark, which may be more of an everyday experience where you don't know enough to do the right thing or you can't do the right thing.

What is the recognition and reversal?

- Recognition is derived from the Greek, and literally meant the removal of ignorance. For the play this means that something about observing this guides the soul.
- In the reversal and the outcome, you recognize the consequence and are moved from a good state to a bad state.

What affect does tragedy have on the audience?

- What we see with the tragic protagonist is that they are in the same situation as we are.
- We are in a world in which we are responsible for things that we don't have all the knowledge to understand the outcome of.
- As we see these horrible things happen to Oedipus, we are actually able to feel pity and fear.
- Aristotle says this is to guide the soul to the love of humanity.
- You are not removing your pity and fear, after a long period of working together in which you have a separation into class, the play reminds you that we are all in this together and we are all at a loss before fate. The tragedy is not simply writing a play and performing a play, the product of tragedy is actually healing the fractures of the community.