

Role of A Critic and Views of Aristotle

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Abstract:

Criticism, derived from a Greek word, means to judge a literary writing. Criticism is, as thought by most of the people, not always negative. It can be negative, positive or balanced. The role of a critic is to share his or her views on a particular work of art. Aristotle is a well known critic. His Poetics is one of the best books of criticism in which he communicates his views on tragedy. The primary motive of this paper is to understand the exact meaning of criticism and the role of a critic in defining a piece of art. This paper also throws light on Aristotle's opinions about tragedy.

Keywords: *Criticism, Aristotle, Tragedy, Catharsis.*

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Introduction

The word ‘criticism’ is derived from the Greek word ‘krinei’ which means ‘to judge’, and the term ‘kritikos’ means ‘a judge of literature’. The Greek term originated as early as in the fourth century. The term criticism, as applied to the study and analysis of a body of literary writing, developed only in the 17th century in Europe, and later, became a term used in common parlance accepted as being authoritative. This wide and general use of the term ‘criticism’, meaning criticism encompasses three distinguishable fields of inquiry- literary history, literary theory and literary criticism retaining the original Greek sense. Literary history, also called history of literature, treats the whole body of works as a process governed historically by time. It treats works as an integral part of a historical process. Literary theory lays down principles of literature, its categories and criteria and describes the features and forms that make up a literary work. It is a systematic account of the nature of literature. Literary criticism deals with the understanding and appreciation of specific works and authors. It has generally been the practice to use this term to include all literary theory. In more recent times, however scholars and aestheticians are uneasy with the use of this term, and its implications. This conventional use of the term restricts itself and does not allow for extension. It does not accommodate, for instance, considerations of aesthetic, intellectual and political implications that are as important as the formal elements of a work.

A critic is a professional who communicates his or her opinions and assessments of work of art. Critical judgements, whether derived from critical thinking or not, may be positive, negative, or balanced, weighing a combination of factors both for and against.

Formally, the word is applied to persons who is publically accepted and, to a significant degree, followed because of the quality of their assessments or their reputation. The role of a critic is to cover a field. This does not mean simply pandering to popular taste. It means doing one’s best to convey a sense of what is going on in a given discipline by writing about every possible side of it.

A critic defines the over-looking role and influence of literature. A critic is not merely a translator of old, crystallized, and hermetic worlds into a contemporary-criticism instead should be a part of Foucault’s archive, which Edward Said calls a “text’s social discursive presence in the world.” The author and critic are not so different in their pursuits. They simply proffer different manners of expressing and playing with ideas about life and existence, different circumstances with which humanity is forced to grapple. The author creates a perceived scenario with which to play out his or her views or ideas about life while the critic responds to those ideas

and compares them with others in shorter, explicit format. The critic then takes these proposed scenarios and analyzes them in accordance to his or her view their efficacy and adequacy. This analysis sparks more proposed scenario that are forever in dialogue with each other.

Aristotle was one of the first thinkers to produce a work of literary criticism. The *Poetics* is his work which has influenced theorising about literature ever since it was written. His philosophical thinking diverged crucially from that of Plato. Where Plato's doctrines of universal forms primary significance on to the eternal, of which the natural is but a reflection or copy, Aristotle's thinking concentrates on the reality to be discerned in individual things. He sees a coming together in them of matter and universal form, where Plato's thinking is poetic to the extent that his idealistic flights verge on mysticism. Aristotle's bent is scientific, and he endows natural phenomenon with a validity that Plato transferred to the timeless.

Plato was concerned with the theory of education and curricular impact of imaginative literature on growing minds. Aristotle was concerned to analyze the nature of imaginative literature on growing mind. He was concerned to analyze the nature of imaginative literature in itself, and not as an educational tool.

The *Poetics* defines poetry and drama as 'modes of imitation', as are music and dancing. So far so good, but Aristotle quickly goes on to make a very dubious distinction. Characters and their actions will be either good or bad, either superior to ourselves or worse than ourselves and this is what distinguishes tragedy for comedy. But Aristotle does not proceed to express a theory of moral value on this basis. He is careful to explain that in comedy the imitation of men worse than ourselves does not mean 'as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous'. And the Ridiculous may be defined as 'a mistake of deformity not productive of pain or harm to others'. Aristotle allows an aesthetic value even in descriptions of what is unpleasant, such as a decaying corpse, because the informative accuracy of the account may give satisfaction.

A more lastingly influential element in the early pages of *The Poetics* is the distinction between the three modes of literary representation. The first is the blend of the narrative and dialogue whereby the poet alternates between the speaking in his own voice and speaking in the voice of his characters. This is what is found in Homer. The second mode of literary representation is that of sustained utterance by the single voice of the poet. The third mode is that which is used in drama, where the poet distributes all his utterance through the voices of his characters.

After some considerations of the origins of poetry and literary forms, Aristotle turns to make systematic investigation of tragedy. A tragedy, then is the

imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

Aristotle explains that in focussing upon tragedy, what he has to say will apply to epic too, because whatever is found in epic can be found also in tragedy, though the converse is not true. He goes on to spell out six formatives of tragedy: Spectacle (the appearance of the actors); Diction (the verse they speak); Melody (the chanting of the verse); Characters (the personalities of the dramatis personae); Thought (reasoning and the motivation which determine their actions); and Plot (the combination of incidents).

Aristotle's emphasis on plot is crucial. Aristotle says that plot is the most important out of all six formative elements of tragedy. He regards the 'Peripeties' (sudden reversals of fortune) and Discoveries as the most powerful of the various elements in a drama which fascinate the spectator. Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action. Character comes second in importance. Thought is third, fourth is diction, and fifth is melody. Spectacle is the least important element of all because 'tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors.'

Two of the Aristotle's terms require special emphasis. One is 'mimesis' which is translated as 'imitation' and the second is 'catharsis' which is translated as purgation. It is evident from Aristotle's attention to plotting that he does not by 'mimesis' mean that art should be a 'literal' or 'photographic' representation of reality. Material from life has to be selected and carefully organized. With this proviso, it is obvious that imaginative literature will inevitably be imitative of life.

Aristotle's term 'catharsis' has become as much a part of critical vocabulary as has 'mimesis'. A catharsis is a purgation. Aristotle's term catharsis appears to be regarded it as a beneficial effect of tragedy that the emotions of pity and fear are aroused, expressed, and yet contained in such a way that the spectator is left in a more balanced and disciplined emotional state as a result of the experience.

The central bulk of *The Poetics* concentrates on plot. Aristotle emphasis makes selection and organization of material crucial in work of art. A plot must have a beginning, a middle and an end. That is to say, a haphazard or arbitrary arrangement of incidents will not do. His definition of a good plot is that:

"The story must represent one action, a complete whole with its several incidents so closely connected that the withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole."

Aristotle's insistence that poetry is more philosophic than factual history, involves rather what is universal than what is particular shows him diverging crucially

from Plato. For Plato, the derivation of literature from life put it at one remove further from universal truth than itself. For Aristotle, the freeing of literature from slavish adherence to the particulars of life lived gives it a greater accessibility to the universal truth.

Aristotle throws out a theory about tragic hero, a man who is neither exalted above us by his virtue nor given vice and depravity, but of such moderate moral quality that we can sympathise with him. And he comes to grief, not by any act of undiluted wickedness, but as a result of some flaw in his nature and error of judgement which he calls 'hamartia'.

There is a good deal in Aristotle's Poetics which must strike the modern reader as simply formulated common sense. There is also a good deal that would have been relevant to the contemporary students of Sophocles and Homer, and seems remote from the practice of modern European literature. Yet there remains an extraordinary substratum of critical analysis which has usefully survived his age and he bequeathed a valuable critical currency to his successors.

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