

## Chapter 1

Aristotle introduces the question "What are the elements of a good poem?" He proposes to inquire into at least two of these elements: plot structure and the number and type of parts that make up a poem. **He offers five general categories to be discussed: epic poetry, tragedy, dithyrambic poetry, comedy, and music.** All five of these categories share the trait of imitation, and each uses different tools to mimic reality. **There are three main ways that each category differs in regard to imitation: the medium of imitation, the things being imitated (objects of imitation), and the way (manner) those things are imitated.** Imitation is expressed through means of harmony, rhythm, language, and poetic meter. **Dithyrambic poetry (a Greek hymn usually expressed through song and dance), tragedy, and comedy each incorporate these means of imitation.**

## Chapter 2

**The object that art aims to imitate is humans in action. There are three ways humans may be portrayed: as better than they are in reality, as worse, or as they actually are.** Aristotle explains that Homer and Polygnotus both represent people as better than they really are, Hegemon and Pauson portray their characters as less good, and Dionysius and Cleophon draw their characters in the middle. **He argues that this division illustrates the difference between tragedy and comedy: tragedy portrays people as better than in reality, and comedy portrays them as worse.**

## Chapter 3

**The third type of imitation is the manner in which things are imitated. For example, a poet may choose to narrate, using their own voice, or may take on a particular personality in their narration, or exist only as a neutral observer. The word *drama* is often associated with these types of poetry because their focus is on people in action.**

## Chapter 4

**Poetry springs from two deep human instincts: the instinct for imitation and the instinct for harmony and rhythm (including poetic meter). Then poetry splits in two different directions. These can be described as poetry written about noble and good characters and poetry written about more flawed characters. This is how the distinction between tragedy and comedy is created.** According to Aristotle, Homer is the first poet to compose satirical poetry and create the basis for comedy.

**Aristotle describes tragedy as developing slowly and through many stages. Dialogue gains greater importance, the number of actors gradually increases, sets are introduced, meter changes from trochaic (syllabic pattern of stressed unstressed) to iambic (unstressed stressed), which is considered a more natural speaking pattern. He references Aeschylus as being responsible for incorporating a second actor and reducing the prominence of the chorus, and Sophocles he gives credit for adding yet a third actor and developing the stage scenery.**

## **Chapter 5**

**Comedy can be described as an imitation of something that is imperfect or ugly in a way that does not communicate or create pain. Unlike tragedy, comedy did not pass through the same extended period of development and originated in Sicily.**

**Epic poetry and tragedy both deal with characters on a higher moral level. Epic poetry can be distinguished from tragedy by its restriction to a single kind of meter and its longer length.**

## **Chapter 6**

**Aristotle sets aside the subjects of comedy and epic poetry and introduces tragedy as the topic of the following chapter. He defines tragedy as poetry that concerns serious actions of a certain gravity, uses language that incorporates harmony, rhythm, and song, and is performed by actors. Tragedy consists of six main elements: character, plot, diction, thought, spectacle (acting), and song. Aristotle argues that plot is central to tragedy, while character development is secondary. "Thought" seems to indicate the intellectual aspects of the work, and diction the order and meaning of words. Spectacle, or the actors and acting, has the power to incite emotion, but Aristotle considers it the least important of the six elements of tragedy.**

## **Chapter 7**

**Chapter 7 focuses primarily on the structure of tragic plot. The plot must have a beginning, middle, and end, each part naturally causing or following the previous. Aristotle suggests that a plot gains adequate gravity through length. He argues that a small thing (or short plot) is not notable, but something that is too large to see the shape of is also problematic. The plot of a tragedy should be long but have a clear shape and a sense of wholeness.**

## **Chapter 8**

**The tragic plot must be built around a single main action. In regard to the protagonist of the story, only the character's actions that are relevant to the main thread of the plot should be included. If actions or events do not make an impact by their inclusion or exclusion from the plot, then those actions are unnecessary.**

## **Chapter 9**

**The chapter opens with the argument that the poet's job is to write about what may happen, as opposed to what has happened already. While comedy might invent characters as well as plot, tragedy usually uses the names of real people to give credibility and weight to the story. Aristotle emphasizes the creation of plot over the use of language, as the poet's job is to imitate action. The poet and the historian have distinctly different jobs: the poet writes about the universal, and the historian's focus is the specific. Aristotle also insists that plots should not be episodic, as episodes are not connected by organic cause and effect. Plots should evoke surprise and emotion in the reader, and those feelings are stronger when events have clear cause and effect instead of being the result of chance.**

## **Chapter 10**

**Plots can be organized into two types: simple and complex. A simple plot is defined as a plot in which "the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition."**

**A complex plot uses the situational tools of "reversal" and/or "recognition." These situations should be natural and logical effects of the preceding situation.**

## **Chapter 11**

**Chapter 11 defines the previously mentioned concepts of "reversal of situation" and "recognition." Reversal of situation is a device wherein the plot flips around to the opposite of its initial trajectory. Recognition occurs when the central characters experience a reversal in knowledge or emotion—for instance, when the protagonist experiences a shift from hate to love. Combined, reversal and recognition usually inspire pity or fear in the audience and are based on the idea of surprise.**

**Aristotle briefly mentions a third part of the plot, which he calls "the Scene of Suffering." This is a scene that portrays destruction or pain, such as a scene of physical violence or death.**

## **Chapter 12**

**Chapter 12 introduces the tangible parts a tragedy may be divided into. Aristotle outlines these parts as prologue, episode, exode, and choric song.**

## **Chapter 13**

**In this chapter Aristotle lays out the aims of a tragic poet and what the poet should avoid. A tragedy should follow the complex plot structure instead of the simple and should prompt pity and fear in the audience. It should avoid overly simplistic movement such as the complete downfall of the antagonist, because this type of plot does not evoke emotion in the audience.** Aristotle proposes that a true tragedy involves a character who is brought from good to bad fortune not through evil or immorality in themselves, but through human error. He outlines a few of the major tragic characters, such as Oedipus and Telephus, and explains that most of the best tragedies are written about them.

## **Chapter 14**

**While pity and fear can be created through the acting and production of a tragedy, Aristotle argues that a good poet can create those feelings through the construction of the plot. He then details the types of actions or situations that cause people to experience feelings of fear or pity. These feelings are created, he claims, when a tragic accident happens to people who have a close relationship—such as a family member killing another family member. When such a situation is set up with "skillful handling," it should incite strong feelings of horror and sympathy in the audience. To handle the tragic situation skillfully, the action may be done with conscious understanding of the relationship between the characters (a mother knowingly murdering her children). There is also the option that the action may be committed without knowledge of the relationship, with understanding dawning after the deed is done (Oedipus unknowingly murdering his father).**

## **Chapter 15**

**The topic of Chapter 15 is the tragic character. Aristotle argues that speech or action that can be qualified as "good" is relative to class and propriety. In order to be more true to real life, "good" actions should be assigned to characters in which they would be believable. Characters must be both believable and consistent. However, Aristotle follows this argument by insisting that the poet, in writing the character, should mimic a portrait artist by elevating the character somehow. For instance, if the poet is writing a character with flaws, the poet should preserve the type of character while still painting the individual as more than a common person.**

### **Chapter 16**

**This chapter details the types of recognition, which is a plot device briefly explained in previous chapters. Aristotle poses that "recognition through signs" is the least skillful of the various forms. He explains this form as a situation in which a sign or symbol, such as a particular weapon or birthmark, reveal information about a character and cause the recognition. Aristotle argues that recognition in the form of a character revealing information because the poet needs it revealed, and not as a natural progression of the plot, is also artless. A third kind of recognition occurs when an object or experience wakes a feeling in the character. The fourth type of recognition comes about through a process of reasoning. The best type of recognition, Aristotle insists, is the realization that occurs through the natural development of events within the plot.**

### **Chapter 17**

Aristotle discusses the importance of working out the technical details of the acting and setting of any play very carefully. It is the job of the poet, he explains, to make sure that the whole setting is clear and can be seen in its entirety by the audience. The poet must also pay attention to the gestures of the characters and make sure that the emotions the actors portray are natural and realistic.

The second part of the chapter describes how the poet should approach the creation of the plot. A general outline should be made first, and then the details filled in afterward. After the outline, what is filled in is called the "episodes," or the actual detailed scenes of the play.

### **Chapter 18**

**According to Aristotle, the overall structure of a tragedy can be classified as the complication and the unravelling. The complication is everything leading up to the climax, whereas the unravelling, or denouement, is the rest.**

**He then goes on to delineate the four types of tragedy: the complex, the pathetic, the ethical, and the simple. The complex, as discussed in previous chapters, uses both the reversal and recognition plot devices. In the pathetic the motive is passion, and in the ethical the motive is correspondingly ethical. The simple type uses only one of the two plot devices.**

**Aristotle tells the reader that the poet should not try to make an epic poem into a tragedy. An epic poem has multiple parts, whereas a tragedy focuses on one plot thread. Aristotle gives the example of how an unsuccessful tragedy might try to tell the entire story of the entire Iliad, as opposed to just the Fall of Troy.**

**Aristotle briefly touches on the subject of the chorus, mentioning that it should be thought of as an actor in the play, integral to the plot, and not as unrelated interludes.**

### **Chapter 19**

**Chapter 19 expounds on two of the six parts of tragedy: diction and thought. Thought encompasses the areas of proof and refutation, the inspiring of different emotions, and the suggestion of importance. Thought pertains mostly to speech and not the parts of the plot conveyed through action or other means.**

**Diction is the breakdown of how speech is delivered. Aristotle gives examples such as command, prayer, statement, threat, and question to illustrate how diction is employed.**

### **Chapter 20**

**This chapter is likely an aside and focuses primarily on the basic elements of language. Aristotle begins with the concept of a letter, which he defines as a single sound grouped with other sounds to form syllables and words. He explains syllables as consonants, or mutes, grouped with a vowel to form a single sound. The chapter continues to describe connecting words, verbs, and nouns. Sentences and phrases are explained as groups of words that contain significant meaning.**

### **Chapter 21**

Aristotle delves deeper into the significance of words. He postulates that all words can fall into the following categories: current, strange, metaphorical, ornamental, or newly coined or altered. Current words refer to terms in popular usage, whereas strange words are words used in other countries and languages. Metaphor seems to encompass the use of an "alien term" to describe something outside the term's normal range of meaning, as well as the use of analogy and hyperbole. The description of ornamental words is missing from the chapter. Newly coined and altered words are words changed or put into use by the poet when they are not also in general usage. The chapter includes an aside at the end that details the masculine, feminine, and neuter gender of Greek nouns.

## **Chapter 22**

**In Chapter 22, Aristotle describes the importance of using the correct amount of metaphorical language and strange/altered words in poetry. Use too much metaphor, and the meaning becomes an overly complex riddle. Use too many strange or altered terms, and the poem becomes indecipherable jargon. In both cases, the text will become ridiculous, and the interesting language will lose any effect. However, moderate use of these two types of language is necessary for elevating a poem above the mundane.**

## **Chapter 23**

**The topic shifts away from the tragic to epic poetry in this chapter. According to Aristotle, epic poetry should follow the same dramatic principles as tragedy. More specifically, it should be constructed of a beginning, middle, and end, and the plot must be unified. Epic poetry differs from historical writing in that the focus of epic poetry is the single action, whereas historical writing deals with one time period.**

**Aristotle illustrates the structure of an epic poem through Homer's handling of the war of Troy. Homer writes about the war within certain parameters, and he does not try to encompass the entire war in his epic. Rather, he chooses a single part of the war and writes about multiple episodes that take place within that part.**

## **Chapter 24**

**Epic poetry is similar to tragedy in its requirements of situation reversal, recognitions, and a need for general unity of plot. It does not, however, incorporate song and acting or performance.**

**Epic poetry is also set apart from tragedy in its length and scale, which is much longer and broader. It is possible for epic poems to take on events of a much larger scale over a longer timespan because they do not have to be conveyed by actors on a stage within a certain timeframe.**

**Epic poetry also uses heroic meter, whereas tragedy can use a variety of meters and aims for a naturalness of speaking. Additionally, Aristotle introduces the idea that epic poetry employs the irrational with good effect. Tragedies, he argues, deal with the wonderful but should leave out the irrational.**

### **Chapter 25**

Aristotle presents the issue of critical objection in poetry. As discussed earlier in the text, Aristotle returns to the idea that the poet's job is to imitate either things as they are said to be, things as they should be, or things as they were or are.

As such, he argues, poetry can express two main faults: faults in the very essence of poetry and accidental faults. If the problem is in the fact that the poet imitated something that lacked substance, then the error lies in the poetry itself. If the poet makes the wrong decision, this is the time for criticism and feedback. However, even if the poet makes a mistake or describes the impossible, Aristotle seems to argue that the quality of art is more important than correctness of the subject matter.

This topic takes Aristotle back to the concepts of language and the poet's use of metaphor to describe things in one of the three above-mentioned types of imitation. Pertinent usage of language, Aristotle seems to say, can help the writer avoid rudimentary errors in the poem.

### **Chapter 26**

Aristotle opens this chapter with the question of whether the epic poem or tragedy is considered the higher art form. He compares the two forms in terms of level of refinement and the audience's ability to discern. He posits that, if refinement makes one art form higher than the other, tragedy's reliance on extra embellishment through acting makes it the less advanced of the two forms. Epic poetry, by contrast, uses more subtle techniques to engage an audience with a refined palate.

However, Aristotle reminds the reader that tragedy should also have a strong enough plot to be conveyed through reading alone. Thus, the flaw that makes it a lower art form than epic poetry is not actually inherent in the tragic form at all.

At this point in the chapter, Aristotle reverses stances on which art form is the higher. He argues that tragedy does everything that epic poetry is capable of, but within a narrow and more focused scope. In addition, because of its much wider scope, epic poetry cannot have the same unity of plot as the tragedy is capable of.

Aristotle concludes *Poetics* with the assertion that the tragic form is, in fact, superior to the epic poem and recaps a list of some of the main topics of the treatise.



