

Background

Time chart:

- Aeschylus: 525-455
- Sophocles: 496-406
- Euripides: 486-406
- Plato: 428-348 (student of Socrates, founded the Academy)
- Aristotle: 384-322 (student of Plato, founded the Lyceum, tutor of Alexander the Great)

Aristotle's *Poetics*, perhaps the most fundamental theoretical treatise on tragedy, must however properly be understood in context: as a reply to a challenge issued by his teacher, Plato, in the *Republic*

The Nature of Tragedy

The essential question to probe is: why do we enjoy, in some sense, watching **tragedies**, that is the suffering of people onstage?

- popular use of "tragedy" as "disaster" ("the plane wreck was a tragedy"): this is very different from the technical sense of tragedy, which specifies a particular literary **genre** of drama in which people suffer
- what is different between the experience of watching tragedy and
 - watching real suffering?
 - riding a roller coaster?
 - watching a horror film?
- Fundamental to the view of tragedy in Plato and Aristotle (and indeed for me!) is the **human need for pathos ("suffering")**
 - pity (greek eleos) = compassion for the one undergoing the pathos
 - terror/fear (Greek phobos) = identification with the one undergoing the pathos
- **Pathos** (cf. "Passion" as in the "Passion of Christ"):
 - a mysteriously agreeable sadness
 - but also a vital moment in religion in art, cherished by many and feared by some as enticement to the irrationality of deep emotion
 - Chorus in Oedipus Rex: the revelation of a pathos makes one shudder and want to turn away, even as it makes one yearn to look, to feast one's eyes, and to try to understand: for abhorrence and fascination go hand in hand with the sight of the blinded Oedipus
 - Similarly, in early Christianity, Paul (Philippians 3) tells his readers to concentrate on the cross, the terrible and utterly undeserved suffering of the blameless Christ, a painful injustice ordered by God himself for us to contemplate

Plato, Poetry, and Tragedy: Plato's *Republic*

The "Ancient Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy"

- Tradition has it that Plato wrote tragedies, epigrams, and songs called dithyrambs when he was young, but burned them when he met Socrates
 - Interesting since it suggests hostility by Socrates towards poetry: the "ancient quarrel"
- Traditional versus newfangled **education** is roughly the antithesis between poetry and philosophy
 - Traditionally, students studied Homer and the other poets
 - The "new" education of Plato's Academy emphasized philosophy, rather than inspired poetry, as the correct means towards the truth
 - In Plato's view, poetry is the wrong method for trying to find the truth for any number of reasons, which he explains in his great work, the *Republic*

Background to the *Republic*

- The basic question posed is "What is justice?" or more specifically "What constitutes a just state?" To answer this, Socrates and his friends try to infer logically what would constitute the most just state, that is, what would constitute a political utopia
- In constructing the ideal Republic, Plato explores broadly the question of what is "just" and indeed what is "good", esp. what is the "good" ruler
- But "good" in Plato's terms (which is linked to what is "just") is closely allied with pure reason, and therefore the "emotional" part of the state, or of the man, must be "purified" or eliminated if the state or the person is to be as "good" as possible
- Ultimately, what is "good" is beyond this material world: for the best we can do is only a striving towards the perfect goodness that exists in the changeless, eternal world of the forms that lies beyond our material existence

Attack on Poetry

- interestingly, Plato raises the fundamental question of **whether the pleasure produced by poetry is good for us**
- In books 2 & 3, Plato finds poetry unsuitable as a vehicle for understanding, and thus as a means to approach or insure what is "good" or "just" because:
 - the poet write not through understanding or reason but by inspiration
 - poetry teaches the wrong stuff: for instance, "god" is by definition all that is "good", thus the poets clearly do NOT represent the gods as they really are (poets not only lie, says Plato, but "lie in an ugly fashion!")
 - poetry arouses emotions in a way that is not in accord with reason
 - poetry such as that in tragedy often has music, and we all know how irrationally affecting music can be: for the Greeks this was formalized in their ideas of musical modes (e.g. the "mixo-Lyidian mode", a kind of musical scale, was associated by the Greeks with lamentation and dirges, thus evoked sad emotions)
 - poetry is inappropriate in the emotions it raises: we feel empathy for Oedipus, for example, when he is inappropriately wailing in public
 - "imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought": so we want to avoid imitations of bad actions!
 - for a good man to imitate a bad action is uncomfortable, for he "despises it in his mind, unless it's just done in play": what we would abominate in ourselves, gives us pleasure through pity for what is "on stage"!
- In Book 10, Plato revisits the question of poetry in more detail, with astonishing results: for he finds poetry unacceptable altogether in his ideal Republic, and feels compelled to exclude poetry altogether
 - Poetry, as an imitation of a material world that already imitates the "really real", is at a second remove from the truth
 - poetry doesn't teach us anything: no one is better governed, or knows more about generalship, because of Homer: Homer conveys no practical or theoretical information
 - poetry is ignorant about the thing described (does the painter or smithy know the proper quality of reins and bits for horses?)
 - poetry is not only ignorant, but **dangerous, because the spell of the rhythm and song** is so convincing that this description, which in fact holds no truth but is simply an ignorant representation, seems like the truth itself
 - poetry is ignorant and dangerous **to the soul**, since it produces the wrong emotions, and interferes with the striving towards pure reason that is the proper conduct of the "good" soul
 - For Plato, the experience of pity is directly pleasurable, and inappropriately so in the context of tragedy
 - poetry "waters and fosters these passions when
- In sum, Plato's 4 arguments are:
 1. Poets compose under inspiration, not by using reason
 2. Poetry is ignorant about what it teaches, and thus teaches the wrong things
 3. Poetry is a mimesis (imitation), at 2 removes from the "really real" (that is, from the world of the Forms)
 4. Poetry encourages the wrong emotions in the audience
- Poetry is tossed out of the Republic, but with a challenge
 - Plato has now raised clearly the question of why representations of people suffering is a pleasurable experience
 - Moreover, he has clearly linked this to the irrational side of one's being, thus setting it in the context of the "ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy"
 - Since the irrational cannot be allowed into his utopian, philosophy-ruled state, Plato tosses poetry (esp. tragedy) out of the Republic
 - But at the same time, Plato issues a challenge to those who would care to make an argument to find a rightful place for poetry in the philosophical utopian state (pp. 832f)
 - "And we would allow [poetry's] advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without meter, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man. And we shall listen benevolently, for it will be clear gain for us if it can be shown that she bestows not only pleasure but a benefit."
- **Aristotle**, Plato's most famous student, now takes up this challenge, point by point!

Aristotle on tragedy: Aristotle's *Poetics*

Aristotle's answers to Plato's 4 principal arguments against tragedy:

(1) Poetry is a **skill, with rational rules** (like shipbuilding or any other skill), and not really a process of inspiration

- The principles of poetic composition, set forth in detail in the *Poetics*, demonstrates that poetry is not simply inspired, but is a skill which can be learned, and has rules comprehensible by reason

(2+3) Poetry represents reality in a useful way from which we can learn: poetry represents universals (as opposed to history, which represents particulars); poetry represents the actions of good men [see handout, passage #2]

- Note how powerful an argument this is against Plato's objection that poetry does not teach practical wisdom, and that, since the poet does not understand horse bits and reins, he is two removes from the truth
- Instead, for Aristotle, the poet is the one who approaches the truth more directly by focusing on what is universal (rather than what is incidental or "particular") about human experience

(4) Poetry arouses the emotions in such a way as to increase our ability to control them: **catharsis**

- Controversy over what is intended by catharsis, which in Greek means a "purification"
 - Old view: Bernays (Freud's uncle): catharsis is a process of psychological healing: we all have build-ups of undesirable emotions like pity and terror, which can be aroused and then released by watching tragedy
 - New view: Janko and others (including me!): catharsis is a process whereby you learn to control your emotions, thus "purifying" the soul of bad emotions in the same way that (in Plato and Aristotle) the good soul is "purified" of evil (that is, the good learns to keep evil under control)
 - Nichomachean Ethics: moderation (sophrosyne!) in all things: thus fear, for example, if we have too much of it we're cowards and if we have too little of it we're fools
 - tragedy provides a venue wherein people can experience in a controlled way potentially overwhelming emotions, and learn thereby to gain better control over these emotions
 - essentially like homoeopathic medicine (which ruled in antiquity): in ancient medicine, for example, you pile on blankets to reduce a fever

(2+3, revisited) A good man is represented, but one who commits an error

- **hamartia** = "error, mistake" NOT "character flaw"
 - the Greek does not mean this, and the context in any case is the plot: of the good man who undergoes a change of fortune *not because of vice or wickedness* but because of some error he has committed
 - Note that there is nothing in the *Poetics* about hybris: thus the High School English Teacher's version of tragedy, that of a hero who because of hybris and a "character flaw" (his "tragic flaw" as it's sometimes termed) suffers a reversal is a strange grab-bag of stuff from Aristotle, a couple of plays of Sophocles, and thin air!
- Note **how poorly this idea -- of a "good man" (hero) who makes a "big mistake" -- describes the tragedies we have read!**
 - What is particularly good about many of these characters?
 - For those that are good men, is it really helpful to say that the downfall is occasioned by a "great error"?
- But **Aristotle, as we now see, makes this argument in this way because it is an essential part of his rebuttal to Plato**: if we are not sympathizing with good men, then clearly the experience of watching a tragedy *cannot* be allowed into the ideal state

Terms to know:

- pathos
- catharsis
- hamartia