

Aristotle's Concept of Plot and Character

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Abstract

Aristotle lists six formative elements of tragedy of these he gives the primary place of importance to the plot. Indeed he devotes a major portion of his discussion of tragedy to plot. Plot he says is the very soul of tragedy; it is the principle of tragedy. He then makes the famous statement which led to such a great deal of controversy. He declares "A tragedy is impossible without plot, but there may be one without Character". The statement has led to plenty of hostile criticism, specially from the modern critics, who consider that Aristotle is depressing the value of character to that of plot. The two elements of plot and character seem to be set against one another in sharp and impossible opposition. The confusion in the discussion of this question arises from the ambiguity in the use of the words 'plot' and character. The plot in the full sense of term is the action and includes not only the circumstances and incidents which form the main part of plot as popularly thought, but also character in the full dramatic sense of 'character producing action'.

Key words: Tragedy, plot, character, action, incidents, dramatic.

Aristotle regards tragedy as made up of six elements of these elements he considers the plot as the most important. Indeed he devotes a major portion of his discussion of tragedy to plot. Plot says Aristotle "is the first principle, the primary thing and the soul of tragedy" He then makes the controversial (topic of debate) statement which has a great deal of criticism. He declares "a tragedy is impossible without plot but there may be one without character"

Critics, especially modern critic, have been greatly provoked by this statement. Aristotle has been accused of depressing the value of 'character' to that of plot. It becomes necessary to understand the true implication of the term of plot and character as used by Aristotle only then we can go into their relative importance.

The function of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear. The nature of plot depends upon the arousal of these two tragic feelings. Tragedy,

according to Aristotle is not an imitation of men but men in action. Action implies a process the process of change from happiness to misery. Now every action is made of a number of events, situations and incidents plot is the organization of such events situations and incidents. This makes Aristotle to define two types of plots. He uses the term (a) simple plots (b) complex plots. In simple plots, the fortune of the hero moves only in one direction ending in catastrophe. In complex type of plots there are elements of 'peripety and anagnorisis'. A good plot has either of the two element or both. Aristotle quotes the example of 'Oedipus' again and again. The two Shakespeare's tragedies- 'King Lear' and 'Othello' are classical examples of the reversal of fortune and discovery of truth.

The Greek word for the poet is maker. The poet is the maker because he makes plots. The poet or the dramatist subjects his plot to a process of selection and re-ordering of the

material. Aristotle lays down that the plot must be 'a complete whole'. It means that a plot must have a beginning, middle and an end. It implies a logical connection of the various events situations and incidents. Aristotle compares a plot to a living organism. It means that nothing can be added or taken away from it. The incidents chosen must be serious and not trivial. They should be such as to arouse the feelings of pity and fear. A good plot follows the principle of the laws of probability and necessity. A tragedy does not deal with what actually happened but what might happen. Humphrey House makes it clear that plot is not a story but is governed by the law of cause and effect. The Shakespearean tragic heroes suffer from 'hamartia' or tragic flaw which is ultimately responsible for their downfall.

'Character', according to Aristotle, is a habit of mind which is revealed only through speech and action. Aristotle uses the term 'Character' in this sense when he says that tragedy is possible without character in this sense when he says that tragedy is possible without character. He means to say that tragedy is possible even when the character do not reveal themselves. In Greek tragedy, we find the protagonist victim of cruel fate. Hardy's tragic characters also suffer for no fault of theirs. In Greek tragedy, they are puppets in the hands of malignant Fate. Character says Aristotle is made up of two elements. The words he uses are- ethos and 'dionia'. 'Ethos' is the intellectual element. Both these elements determine the cause as well as the quality of action. They reveal themselves in speech and action of the character. It is important to know Aristotle does not consider the term action as wholly external. It is a mental process which is

revealed in outward action. The plot, therefore, contains the 'Kernel' of action which is the business of tragedy to represent.

Some of the modern critics have challenged the theory of the primary importance of plot as put forward by Aristotle. They argue that plot is merely external framework devised to illustrate the working of character. The character of a person lies in thoughts before action. Events have no meaning if they do not proceed from the thoughts of the character. Now this confusion arises because of the advancement of the science of human psychology. The modern literature has become psychology analytical. T.S Eliot uses the X-ray techniques to lay bare the inner self of prufrock.

The modern drama has suffered because of the interest in the inner working of the mind of the protagonist. The plays of G.B Shaw are like drawing debates. It was Shakespeare how draw a balance between plot and character. The characters like King Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello are immortal. But their tragedies have powerful plots. Thus we see that Aristotle's Statement has been misunderstood. Too much emphasis on character can make a drama into lyric but not a successful play.

Conclusion

Drama demands a balance between plot and character. Drama is a representation of a complete and typical action, whose lines converge on a determined end, which evolves out of human will in such a manner that action and character are each in turn the outcome of the other. Drama requires a fusion of the two elements, plot and character. When Aristotle says that a tragedy can be possible without character, but not without plot, it is to be noted that he is not saying that a tragedy without

character is the ideal type. Indeed, he says that a poet should utilize all the formative elements of tragedy to produce an ideal tragedy. He is merely talking of possibility of drama with, or without, one or the other element. The characters cannot act without reference to the situation in which they are placed. Thus the situation influences their very feelings, the very motives that spring them to action. In this sense plot becomes fundamental to drama. A

passive character will produce no action and as such has no place in drama.

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