**Plato and Aristotle**

As a moralist, Plato disapproves of poetry because it is immoral, as a philosopher he disapproves of it because it is based in falsehood. He is of the view that philosophy is better than poetry because philosopher deals with idea / truth, whereas poet deals with what appears to him / illusion.

**What does Plato say about poets?**

In this ideal state, the poet has been banished. Plato believed that the issue with poetry and the poets was 'Mimesis' or imitation. Art, in this case, imitates life. Plato's theory of forms then means that the arts only take us further away from the forms as oppose to closer to them.

**What was Plato's view on imitation and poetry?**

In his theory of Mimesis, Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. He believed that 'idea' is the ultimate reality. Art imitates idea and so it is imitation of reality. He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair.

**Why did Plato banish poets?**

Plato is famous for having banished poetry and poets from the ideal city of the Republic. ... He banished them because they produced the wrong sort of poetry.

**What are Plato's charges against poetry?**

He confused aesthetics with morality and ultimately concluded poetry as immoral and imitative in nature. Plato's charges against poetry: Poet's inspiration- The poet writes not because he has thought long over but because he is inspired. Its spontaneous overflow or sudden outpouring of the soul.

**What is his Theory of Mimesis?**

In his theory of mimesis, Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. He believed that ‘idea’ is ultimate reality. Art imitates idea and so it is imitation of reality. He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair. The idea of ‘chair’ first came in the mind of carpenter. He gave physical shape to his idea and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, painter’s chair is twice removed from reality. Hence, he believed that art is twice removed from reality. He gives first importance to philosophy as philosophy deals with idea. Whereas poetry deals with illusion – things which are twice removed form reality. So to Plato, philosophy is better than poetry. This view of mimesis is pretty deflationary, for it implies that mimetic art--drama, fiction, representational painting-- does not itself have an important role to play in increasing our understanding of human beings and the human world. This implication would not be rejected by every lover--or indeed every creator--of imaginative literature. Ironically it was Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, who was the first theorist to defend literature and poetry in his writing Poetics against Plato’s objection and his theory of mimesis.

Choose the right option:

1. Plato wrote his treatise in form of:

a. Dialogues

b. Paragraphs

c. Poetry

d. Story telling

2. On which three grounds did Plato objected to poetry?

a. Educational, philosophical and moral.

b. Sexuality, morality and philosophical.

c. Educational, obscenity and sexuality.

**How did Aristotle reply to Plato’s Objection?**

Aristotle replied to the charges made by his Guru Plato against Poetry in particular and art in general. He replied to them one by one in defense of poetry.

1. Plato says that art being the imitation of the actual is removed from truth. It only gives the likeness of a thing in concrete, and the likeness is always less than real. But Plato fails to understand that art also give something more which is absent in the actual. The artist does not simply reflect the real in the manner of a mirror. Art is not slavish imitation of reality. Literature is not the photographic reproduction of life in all its totality. It is the representation of selected events and characters necessary in a coherent action for the realization of artist’s purpose. He even exalts, idealizes and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. These elements, present in art, are absent in the raw and rough real. R.A.Scott-James rightly observes: “But though he (Poet) creates something less than that reality, he also creates something more. He puts an idea into it. He put his perception into it. He gives us his intuition of certain distinctive and essential qualities.”

This ‘more’, this intuition and perception is the aim of the artist. Artistic creation cannot be fairly criticized on the ground that it is not the creation in concrete terms of things and beings. Thus considered it does not take us away form the Truth, but leads us to the essential reality of life.

2. Plato again says that art is bad because it does not inspire virtue, does not teach morality. But is teaching the function of the art? Is it the aim of the artist? The function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express emotions and represent life. It should ever be confused with the function of ethics which is simply to teach morality. If an artist succeeds in pleasing us in aesthetic sense, he is a good artist. If he fails in doing so, he is a bad artist. There is no other criterion to judge his worth. R.A.Scott-James observes: “Morality teaches. Art does not attempt to teach. It merely asserts it is thus or thus that life is perceived to be. That is my bit of reality, says the artist. Take it or leave it – draw any lessons you like from it – that is my account of things as they are – if it has any value to you as evidence or teaching, use it, but that is not my business: I have given you my rendering, my account, my vision, my dream, my illusion – call it what you will. If there is any lesson in it, it is yours to draw, not mine to preach.” Similarly, Plato’s charge that needless lamentations and ecstasies at the imaginary events of sorrow and happiness encourages weaker part of soul and numbs faculty of reason. This charge is defended by Aristotle in his Theory of Catharsis. David Daiches summarizes Aristotle’s views in reply to Plato’s charges in brief: “Tragedy (Art) gives new knowledge, yields aesthetic satisfaction and produces a better state of mind.”

3. Plato judges poetry now from the educational standpoint, now from the philosophical one and then from the ethical one. But he does not care to consider it from its own unique standpoint. He does not define its aims. He forgets that every thing should be judged in terms of its own aims and objective its own criteria of merit and demerit. We cannot fairly maintain that music is bad because it does not paint, or that painting is bad because it does not sing. Similarly, we cannot say that poetry is bad because it does not teach philosophy of ethics. If poetry, philosophy and ethics had identical function, how could they be different subjects? To denounce poetry because it is not philosophy or ideal is clearly absurd.

Aristotle agrees with Plato in calling the poet an imitator and creative art, imitation. He imitates one of the three objects – things as they were/are, things as they are said/thought to be or things as they ought to be. In other words, he imitates what is past or present, what is commonly believed and what is ideal. Aristotle believes that there is natural pleasure in imitation which is in-born instinct in men. It is this pleasure in imitation that enables the child to learn his earliest lessons in speech and conduct from those around him, because there is a pleasure in doing so. In a grown up child – a poet, there is another instinct, helping him to make him a poet – the instinct for harmony and rhythm.

He does not agree with his teacher in – ‘poet’s imitation is twice removed form reality and hence unreal/illusion of truth. To prove his point he compares poetry with history. The poet and the historian differ not by their medium, but the true difference is that the historian relates ‘what has happened?, the poet, what may/ought to have happened?- the ideal. Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and a higher thing the history, which expresses the particular, while poetry tends to express the universal. Therefore, the picture of poetry pleases all and at all times.

Aristotle does not agree with Plato in function of poetry to make people weaker and emotional/too sentimental. For him, catharsis is ennobling and humbles human being.

So far as moral nature of poetry is concerned, Aristotle believed that the end of poetry is to please; however, teaching may be given. Such pleasing is superior to the other pleasure because it teaches civic morality. So all good literature gives pleasure, which is not divorced from moral lessons.

• Choose the right option:

1. Aristotle’s well-known treatises are:

a. Dialogues.

b. Poetics and Rhetoric.

c. Poetry and drama.

d. Tragedy and epic.

**What is his definition of Tragedy?**

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.

**Explanation of the definition:**

The definition is compact. Every word of it is pregnant with meaning. Each word from it can be elaborated into a separate essay.

All art is representation (imitation) of life, but none can represent life in its totality. Therefore, an artist has to be selective in representation. He must aim at representing or imitating an aspect of life or a fragment of life.

Action comprises of all human activities including deeds, thoughts and feelings. (so, soliloquies, chorus etc is also Action)

The writer of ‘tragedy’ seeks to imitate the serious side of life just as a writer of ‘comedy’ seeks to imitate only the shallow and superficial side. The tragic section presented on the stage in a drama should be complete or self contained with a beginning, middle and an end. A beginning is that before which the audience or the reader does not need to be told anything to understand the story. If something more is required to understand the story than the beginning gives, it is unsatisfactory. From it follow the middle. In their turn the events from the middle lead to the end. Thus the story becomes a compact & self sufficient one. It must not leave the impression that even after the end the action continues, or that before the action starts certain things remain to be known.

It must have close-knit unit with nothing that is superfluous or unnecessary. Every episode, every character and a dialogue in the play must carry step by step the action that is set into motion to its logical dénouement. It must give the impression of wholeness at the end.

The play must have, then, a definite magnitude, a proper size or a reasonable length such as the mind may comprehend fully. That is to say that it must have only necessary duration, not longer than about three hours, or shorter than that. Longer duration may tire our patience and shorter one make effective representation impossible. Besides, a drama continuing for hours – indefinitely may fail to keep the various parts of it together into unity and wholeness in the spectator’s mind. The reasonable duration enables the spectator to view the drama as a whole, to remember its various episodes and to maintain interest. The language employed here should be duly embellished and beautified with various artistic ornaments (rhythm, harmony, song) and figures of speech. The language of our daily affairs is not useful here because tragedy has to present a heightened picture of life’s serious side, and that is possible only if elevated language of poetry is used. According to need, the writer makes use of songs, poetry, poetic dialogue, simple conversation etc is various parts of the play.

Its manner of imitation should be action, not narration as in epic, for it is meant to be a dramatic representation, not a mere story-telling.

Then, for the function/aim of tragedy is to shake up in the soul the impulses of pity and fear, to achieve what he calls Catharsis. The emotions of pity and fear find a full and free out-let in tragedy. Their excess is purged and we are lifted out of our selves and emerged nobler than before.

• Complete the following sentence by choosing the right option:

1. Tragedy is an imitation of …

a. an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.

b. several kinds being found in separate parts of the play.

c. in the form of action, not of narrative.

d. through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.

• Choose the right option:

2. Which of the following lines of the definition of tragedy deals with the function of tragedy?

a. an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude

b. several kinds being found in separate parts of the play.

c. in the form of action, not of narrative.

d. through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.

• Fill in the blanks:

3. Aristotle classifies various forms of art with the help of \_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_ of their imitation of life.

a. Words, colours and music.

b. Serious, comic and real aspect of life.

c. Object, medium and manner.

d. Action, narration and recitation.

**Aristotle’s Theory of Catharsis**

As discussed in the explanation of the definition of tragedy (1.5.2), theory of Catharsis emerges as the function of tragedy. The last line of the definition -‘through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these and similar emotions’- substantiates the theory of Catharsis. His theory of Catharsis consists in the purgation or purification of the excessive emotions of pity and fear. Witnessing the tragedy and suffering of the protagonist on the stage, such emotions and feelings of the audience is purged. The purgation of such emotions and feelings make them relieved and they emerge better human beings than they were. Thus, Aristotle’s theory of Catharsis has moral and ennobling function.

**Poetics Summary**

In Poetics, Aristotle discusses poetry—both in general and in particular—and he also considers the effects of poetry on those who consume it and the proper way in which to construct a poetic plot for maximum effect. He explores each component part of poetry separately and addresses any questions that come up in the process. Aristotle starts with the principles of poetry, which he says is only “natural.” He enumerates the different types poetry: epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and music by pipe or lyre. Additionally, he claims that all poetry is a form of imitation that only differs in three ways: its medium, its object, and/or its mode of imitation. The medium of imitation depends on the kind of art (a painter or a sculptor uses color or shape as a medium), whereas a poet uses the medium of rhythm, language, and melody—each of which can be used alone or together to create some desired effect. The object is the thing that is imitated in a work of art—in this case, in a poem. Objects, which include people, things, and events, can be either admirable or inferior, meaning that objects are either morally good or morally bad. Lastly, an object’s mode of imitation is the way in which an object is imitated. In epic poetry, an object is imitated through narration; however, in tragedy, an object is imitated via actors on a stage.

Aristotle argues that human beings have a natural proclivity for imitation, and since humans learn lessons through imitation from a young age, he maintains that people have a strong tendency to imitate people and things. Furthermore, people take pleasure in viewing distressing images from a safe distance, such as a stage. The pleasure people feel in viewing an imitation is in large part due to understanding. A person views an imitation, recognizes the thing being imitated, and finds pleasure in this understanding. Aristotle further argues that human begins also have a natural proclivity for rhythm and melody, so it is no wonder they tend to create imitations like poetry, which relies on language that has both rhythm and melody. Tragedy was born from dithyrambic poetry, which incorporates both poetry and dance. From there, tragedy evolved into what it is in Aristotle’s time—which he refers to as tragedy’s “natural state.”

**Poetics**

Comedy imitates inferior people, Aristotle claims, but such characters are not inferior in every way. Characters in comedy are guilty of “laughable errors”; however, such errors do not elicit painful emotions in the audience. A comedy does not imitate pain, and it should not provoke these emotions in others. Conversely, tragedy and epic poetry imitate admirable people, but epic uses only verse and is in narrative form. Plainly put, an epic does not involve song, and it is usually told through the lens of a single character narration. Epics are usually long, whereas a tragedy is often restricted to the events of a single day. Those who have a firm understanding of tragedy will also have a firm understanding of epic, as everything present is epic is also present in tragedy. However, all that is present in a tragedy cannot be found in an epic poem.

A tragedy is an imitation of an admirable action that has unity and magnitude. Tragedy is written in language that has rhythm and melody, and it is performed by actors, not by narration. Most importantly, tragedy purifies the audience by producing in them the emotions of fear and pity in a process known as catharsis. A tragedy has six components—plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and lyric poetry—and these components determine a tragedy’s quality. Plot, however, is the most important component part of tragedy. Tragedy imitates actions, not people, and these actions are the events that make up the plot. Plus, the most effective way in which a tragedy produces catharsis is through recognition and reversal, which are both part of the plot. A tragedy must be “whole,” and it must have a definite beginning, middle, and end. A tragedy must have magnitude, meaning it must produce astonishment in the audience, but its imitation cannot be arbitrary. If the action being imitated in a tragedy is too big or too small, the entire plot cannot be appreciated at once, and unity is forfeited. An imitation has unity if it represents a complete action, and the same goes for plot—a plot is only unified if it imitates a complete action.

Poetry does not imitate “what has happened,” Aristotle argues, it imitates “what would happen,” as long as it is probable or necessary. Historians and poets are not different because one writes in prose and one in verse; they are different because the former writes what has happened, while the latter writes what would happen. Even if all historian wrote in poetic verse, their writing would still not be considered poetry. It is a poet’s job to make plots, and those plots can include the sort of thing that has happened, since the sort of thing that has happened is likely to happen again. It is not enough for a tragedy to simply imitate a whole action—the imitation must also provoke in the audience the emotions needed for catharsis, and catharsis is most effectively produced through events that are unexpected.

Every tragic plot involves a change of fortune, and such plots can be either complex (in which a change of fortune involves recognition, reversal, or both) or simple (in which a change of fortune does not involve recognition or reversal). A reversal “is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed,” which, of course, occurs because of “necessity or probability”—that is, in a way that seems likely and that follows logically from the story’s previous events. Recognition “is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of the people marked out for good or bad fortune.” The best plot, according to Aristotle, is one in which recognition and reversal occur at the same time, as they do in Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex. Recognition combined with reversal involves fear and pity, which are the very foundation of tragedy, and either good fortune or bad fortune will be the outcome of such a combination. Tragedies that involve human suffering, such as in war, are also effective in bringing about catharsis.

The best tragedies, according to Aristotle, are those with complex plots. A good tragedy should not depict an overly moral character undergoing a change in fortune from good to bad, as this upsets audiences and does not inspire fear and pity. Similarly, an overly wicked character should not undergo a change of fortune from bad to good, as such a change isn’t tragic and will not inspire fear or pity either. Still, a good tragedy does include a change in fortune from good to bad, as such plots are more tragic than plots that end in good fortune and will therefore elicit more fear and pity. Tragedy includes acts that are “terrible or pitiable,” and these acts can occur between people of a close relationship (like family members), between enemies, or between neutrals. There is maximum fear and pity in “terrible or pitiable acts” between close characters, such as the murder of one’s father or son.

Aristotle next considers characters within tragedy: he defines four things that go into the construction of a character. The first is goodness, or the moral essence of a character’s actions and disposition. A character’s imitation must also be appropriate, and it must have likeness, or similarity. Lastly, a character must be consistent, and if it is necessary or probable that a character behave in an inconsistent way, they should be “consistently inconsistent.” Poets should always visualize a plot as they construct it so that they can spot inconsistencies and inappropriateness. A tragedy must also have complication and resolution, and both complication and resolution should be constructed with equal care and attention. A tragedy includes reasoning and diction, which can be broken down further into several of its own component parts, including nouns, verbs, and utterances. Clarity is most important in diction, as long as there isn’t “loss of dignity.” Clear diction includes standard words in common usage; however, using only common words in a poem is unoriginal and inartistic and leads to a “loss of dignity.” Thus, a balance must be struck between standard words in common usage and “exotic expressions,” which are coined by the poet or are otherwise non-standard. Good poetry uses all forms of diction, especially metaphor and uncommon words.

According to Aristotle, objections to poetry usually involve one of the following: a poem is impossible, irrational, harmful, contradictory, or incorrect. Often, that which seems impossible or irrational isn’t as impossible as it may seem, especially since it is paradoxically likely for unlikely things to happen. Furthermore, that which seems contradictory or incorrect might be an imitation of an object as it should be or as it is thought to be, not as it actually is. In other words, Aristotle easily dismisses each of the usual objections to poetry. People might ask if tragedy is superior to epic, and Aristotle maintains that tragedy is absolutely superior. An epic poem lacks spectacle and lyric poetry, which are a “source of intense pleasure,” and a tragedy is shorter. Aristotle argues that “what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being extended in time.” For instance, if Sophocles’s **Oedipus Rex** were as long as Homer**’s Iliad**, it would be much less impactful. Lastly, since an epic is so much longer than a tragedy, unity in an epic can be difficult to achieve. Because of this, Aristotle considers tragedy superior; however, he argues that it is fear and pity, and the subsequent catharsis, that really make tragedy superior to epic poetry.

**Plot Overview**

Aristotle proposes to discuss poetry, which he defines as a means of mimesis, or imitation, by means of language, rhythm, and harmony. As creatures who thrive on imitation, we are naturally drawn to poetry.

In particular, Aristotle focuses his discussion on tragedy, which uses dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and deals with agents who are better than us ourselves. Tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to effect a katharsis (catharsis) of these emotions. Aristotle divides tragedy into six different parts, ranking them in order from most important to least important as follows: **(1) mythos, or plot, (2) character, (3) thought, (4) diction, (5) melody, and (6) spectacle.**

The first essential to creating a good tragedy is that it should maintain unity of plot. This means that the plot must move from beginning to end according to a tightly organized sequence of necessary or probable events. The beginning should not necessarily follow from any earlier events, and the end should tie up all loose ends and not produce any necessary consequences. The plot can also be enhanced by an intelligent use of peripeteia, or reversal, and anagnorisis, or recognition. These elements work best when they are made an integral part of the plot.

A plot should consist of a hero going from happiness to misery. The hero should be portrayed consistently and in a good light, though the poet should also remain true to what we know of the character. The misery should be the result of some hamartia, or error, on the part of the hero. A tragic plot must always involve some sort of tragic deed, which can be done or left undone, and this deed can be approached either with full knowledge or in ignorance.

Aristotle discusses thought and diction and then moves on to address epic poetry. Epic poetry is similar to tragedy in many ways, though it is generally longer, more fantastic, and deals with a greater scope of action. After addressing some problems of criticism, Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to epic poetry.

**Important Terms**

**Mimesis**

Mimesis is the act of creating in someone's mind, through artistic representation, an idea or ideas that the person will associate with past experience. Roughly translatable as "imitation," mimesis in poetry is the act of telling stories that are set in the real world. The events in the story need not have taken place, but the telling of the story will help the listener or viewer to imagine the events taking place in the real world.

**Hamartia**

This word translates almost directly as "error," though it is often rendered more elaborately as "tragic flaw." Tragedy, according to Aristotle, involves the downfall of a hero, and this downfall is effected by some error on the part of the hero. This error need not be an overarching moral failing: it could be a simple matter of not knowing something or forgetting something.

**Anagnorisis**

This word translates as "recognition" or "discovery." In tragedy, it describes the moment where the hero, or some other character, passes from ignorance to knowledge. This could be a recognition of a long lost friend or family member, or it could be a sudden recognition of some fact about oneself, as is the case with Oedipus. Anagnorisis often occurs at the climax of a tragedy in tandem with peripeteia.

**Mythos/plot**

When dealing with tragedy, this word is usually translated as "plot," but unlike "plot," mythos can be applied to all works of art. Not so much a matter of what happens and in what order, mythos deals with how the elements of a tragedy (or a painting, sculpture, etc.) come together to form a coherent and unified whole. The overall message or impression that we come away with is what is conveyed to us by the mythos of a piece.

**Katharsis**

This word was normally used in ancient Greece by doctors to mean "purgation" or by priests to mean "purification." In the context of tragedy, Aristotle uses it to talk about a purgation or purification of emotions. Presumably, this means that katharsis is a release of built up emotional energy, much like a good cry. After katharsis, we reach a more stable and neutral emotional state.

**Peripeteia**

A reversal, either from good to bad or bad to good. Peripeteia often occurs at the climax of a story, often prompted by anagnorisis. Indeed, we might say that the peripeteiais the climax of a story: it is the turning point in the action, where things begin to move toward a conclusion.

**Lusis**

Literally "untying," the lusis is all the action in a tragedy from the climax onward. All the plot threads that have been woven together in the desis are slowly unraveled until we reach the conclusion of the play.

**Desis**

Literally "tying," the desis is all the action in a tragedy leading up to the climax. Plot threads are craftily woven together to form a more and more complex mess. At the peripeteia, or turning point, these plot threads begin to unravel in what is called the lusis, or denouement.