

CRITICAL AWARENESS

AN APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY

Critical Awareness: An Approach to Literary Criticism and Theory is a study guide to revisit the basic tenets of Literary Criticism and Theory. It is a re-studying and analysis of Classical Literary Criticism and Modern Literary Theories by some of our contemporary literary scholars, who have, through their understanding, redefined and simplified the basic elements of Criticism and Theory in Literature.

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ANTHOLOGY AND REFERENCE BOOK OF
RESEARCH ARTICLES ON LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

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SCAN TO VIEW
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White Falcon
Publishing

ISBN: 978-81-991479-8-0



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₹399

LITERARY THEORY

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H.M. Arif, Arshi Khan, Mursalin Jahan, Zeba Rizvi



Published by White Falcon Publishing
Chandigarh, India

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First Edition, 2025

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Cover design by White Falcon Publishing, 2025

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ISBN - 978-81-991479-8-0

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Revisiting Tragic Art: An Aristotelian Framework for Literary Criticism

Dr. Zeba Rizvi

ABSTRACT

Literary criticism, at its core, seeks to interpret, evaluate, and understand texts through various theoretical lenses. Among the earliest the most influential frameworks comes from Aristotle, whose *Poetics* laid the foundation for dramatic theory and literary analysis, particularly in the context of tragedy. Aristotle's key concepts—**mimesis**, **catharsis**, **hamartia**, **anagnorisis**, and **peripeteia**—not only provide a structure for evaluating ancient Greek drama but also offer timeless tools for analyzing modern narratives. This paper explores how Aristotle's theory of tragedy informs contemporary literary criticism and how these classical principles remain vital in assessing the thematic and structural integrity of literary texts.

Key words: *Poetics*, Literary analysis, Contemporary literary criticism, Structural Integrity.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle evaluates tragedy in comparison to other metrical genres such as comedy and epic. He asserts that, akin to all poetic forms, tragedy is a mode of imitation (*mimesis*), yet it distinguishes itself through its grave intent and preference for dramatic enactment over narrative exposition. He emphasizes that poetic imitation envisions reality not as it is, but as it could ideally be depicting universals and ideals thereby rendering poetry a more elevated and philosophical medium than history, which merely documents actual events.

Aristotle contends that the ultimate objective of tragedy is to induce a “catharsis” in the audience an emotional purgation through eliciting feelings of pity and fear, thereby leaving spectators emotionally cleansed and intellectually enriched, with an enhanced perception of divine and human affairs. This purgative effect is catalyzed through the audience's engagement with the protagonist's significant and often catastrophic reversal of fortune. While Aristotle acknowledges that not all tragic endings are sorrowful—as in *Oedipus at Colonus*—he maintains that the most impactful tragedies involve misfortune.

Aristotle delineates six essential components of tragedy: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (visual elements), and song (musical accompaniment)—with the first two deemed

most fundamental. The bulk of the *Poetics* is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of these components, particularly the plot, which he proclaims as the core or “soul” of tragedy. He maintains that tragedy is a representation not of individuals, but of actions and life’s dynamic experiences, namely joy and suffering. While character reveals personal traits, it is through actions that one achieves either happiness or misery; hence, plot supersedes character in importance. A tragedy devoid of plot is unimaginable, whereas one without intricate characters can still exist. He further outlines the architecture of an exemplary tragic plot. It must possess unity and completeness, with a coherent beginning, middle, and end, and should be of a suitable length to enable both clarity and comprehensibility for the audience. A well-constructed plot adheres to a singular thematic focus, ensuring that all its elements are causally interconnected to portray the protagonist’s transformation credibly and with logical necessity.

Regarding the tragic protagonist, Aristotle provides limited discussion, largely because the events portrayed in tragedy are typically shaped by forces beyond the hero’s volition and often transcend individual character. The emphasis lies on depicting existential or universal truths, not psychological depth. This marks a notable divergence from modern dramatic traditions, which often delve deeply into personal motives and internal conflicts. For tragedy to fulfill its purpose of evoking pity and fear, the protagonist must be relatable, experiencing misfortune that is not wholly deserved. Pity arises from unearned suffering, while fear stems from witnessing a fate befalling someone essentially similar to ourselves. Moreover, the protagonist must not violate the audience’s moral expectations and should be portrayed as a credible and consistent figure—realistic in behavior and ethically recognizable.

The notion of *hamartia*—commonly mistranslated as “tragic flaw”—has often been misinterpreted. Rather than a fixed moral defect leading inevitably to ruin, *hamartia* might be better understood as a lapse in judgment or ignorance, serving as a plot device that initiates the tragic chain of events. Overemphasizing this concept risks reducing tragedy to simplistic character fault, thus overlooking the philosophical dimensions embedded in the cosmic and moral order that underpins the narrative. The hero’s downfall, while precipitated by a human misstep, is often portrayed as an outcome of fate or divine design, rather than personal failing alone.

The remaining sections of the *Poetics* address additional components of tragedy and explore various stylistic and structural techniques. Two pivotal plot elements linked to *hamartia* are reversal (*peripeteia*)—a sudden shift from expected outcomes to unforeseen consequences, as exemplified by Oedipus’ inquiry leading to his downfall—and **recognition** (*anagnorisis*)—the protagonist’s realization of a profound truth, such as uncovering hidden identities or his own culpability. This moment of revelation intensifies emotional impact, fulfilling the cathartic function.

Nevertheless, the *Poetics* remains the most authoritative ancient critique of Greek drama from a near-contemporary source. It offers rich insights into the genesis, techniques, and objectives of tragedy and reveals how ancient Greeks might have engaged with their