MODIFICATIONS TO ARISTOTLE'S POETICS
How a theory based on multi-source indiscrete emotions clarifies the narrative arts.

by E. Garrett Ennis

The *Poetics* is one of the oldest known works on literature as an art form. The approach it uses is also a logical, emotion-based one, that treats the field as something that, if not totally scientific, is understandable. Nonetheless, the approach used in Aristotle's *Poetics* was never fully adopted in the study of literature or art as a whole, and apparently to many, it's considered to be "limiting," or otherwise incomplete.

In my own work on it, I've found specific reasons that the otherwise-sensible study of storytelling has led to so many dead-ends. And even moreso, these reasons can be extended to understand the overwhelming frustration with attempted theories of theater, movies, books and other forms of narrative art, and create something that is much more understandable and satisfying for future work.

The key idea here is that entertainment is judged by the amount of emotion it produces in the viewer, and the feelings in question can actually come from multiple sources in and *around* the entertaining thing. I've taken to calling it emotional indiscretion, and I've discussed this theory in various forms in my own work, and my ideas have also been discussed in many publications, books, sites, and international newspapers. But I'd like to use this document specifically to go into far greater technical detail about the specific parts of emotional indiscretion and how it functions.

Also, we will use Aristotle's *Poetics* as the text to comment on (specifically the 1974 translation by S.H. Butcher that is freely available on Project Gutenberg's website), but the role of the *Poetics* here is mainly to represent a much larger concept of literary theory. Mainly the attempt to study and understand entertainment *purely by viewing and analyzing the work itself.* In other words, what appears on the page, stage or screen.

This approach, while sensible on the surface, is actually the source of the gaps and contradictions that have made this field of study so difficult, so much so that clear answers have never emerged, despite billion dollar industries being built that ride on understanding and executing these types of stories, and studies being conducted by extraordinarily talented people and institutions, over the course of many years, or even centuries.

In this document, we're going to reproduce key parts of the text of the Poetics, and comment to point out these gaps, as well as how an indiscretion-based theory fills them in. I should note also that since literally thousands of years have passed since the writing of this document, (and I've studied the field for a huge portion of my own life), I could swamp the document in multiple small points and clarifications of the normal, page-stage-and-screen based theory itself. But the point here is not to nitpick something very old or get lost in details, but instead to illustrate the significance of the emotional indiscretion concept, as well as the conceptual shift that it represents in this area of human studies.

I

I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into

whatever else falls within the same inquiry. Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first.

Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic: poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one: another in three respects,—the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct.

For as there are persons who, by conscious art or mere habit, imitate and represent various objects through the medium of colour and form, or again by the voice; so in the arts above mentioned, taken as a whole, the imitation is produced by rhythm, language, or 'harmony,' either singly or combined.

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Here, in the introduction, the storytelling arts (and other forms of art) are referred to as "modes of imitation." We'll focus, of course, on the story-based arts. It's certainly true that stories almost always have elements that are similar to reality, but there are many problems that occur when we use this as the key part of their definition.

      For example, why do we not watch documentaries, or *security-camera footage*, instead of films or plays? Or, in Ancient Times, why did people prefer fictional work to court transcripts, or simply observing other people? And our favorite works, while they are often *realistic*, are not judged solely *by their level of realism*. Many of the most successful stories of all-time, like *Star Wars* now, or *the Odyssey* in Ancient Greece, depict magical powers, Gods and monsters, or fantastical events that are quite unrealistic, and these unrealistic parts are key to their appeal.

      The answer in this case is to refer to these arts as means of *emotional stimulation*, and not just imitation of reality. Imitation of reality is a useful part of this process, since real situations most easily stimulate the brain's emotions, but most real situations don't contain enough emotional simulation to make us happy. *This* is why we don't only watch documentaries, or security-camera footage, or read court transcripts. We only do when those things *happen* to have documented an emotionally-stimulating event.

      Sections II and III deal with who should be labeled as a "poet," ways of distinguishing different types of art, and who invented various genres of drama, there many unlisted genres of stories and more accurate methods of classifying them, mainly due to the types of emotion they generate, but those are the type of details that aren't the purpose of this document, we'll pass over these sections from now on.

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IV

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause.

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Here, Aristotle (or the original author whose work is attributed to Aristotle, but we'll say Aristotle for convenience) first touches on the idea of emotional pleasure as the purpose of

stories. He also appears aware that believable stories ("reproduced with minute fidelity") tend to produce more pleasure in us. He also accurately states not only that we get a specific pleasure from learning, but that that learning may relate to the viewer's personal experiences in the world itself. And likewise, that viewers who may not share those personal experiences will not draw the same pleasure.

However, there are a few key steps here that Aristotle does not take. As we said, he does not recognize that the pleasure itself is the purpose of the artistic work, and also, he appears to discard the idea of outside experiences being key to the pleasure produced by a work, and focuses instead on how viewers who don't share the key outside experiences may draw pleasure from other internal aspects of the play itself, such as how it is executed, colors on stage, and so on.

This realization, about the incredible influence that outside knowledge has on our experience when reading or watching a story, is a sort-of self-burning bridge. I did not realize it myself until a decade into studying this topic, but once I did, it clarified and explained so many things that I can't figure out how I thought about certain things before. Likewise, I'm not entirely sure how this leap may not have occurred to Aristotle or anyone else, but part of it might be that he wasn't fully focused on the emotional-stimulation as the pure cause of a story's effect.

Having said that, it wouldn't be difficult at all for anyone who views writing along the lines described in this section to be able to see how the effect of outside experiences goes much further than just recognizing a metaphor in a story, but it seems clear that while writing this, Aristotle wasn't aware of the full extent of the phenomenon, which creates the deeper flaws we'll go into as the document continues.

The rest of section IV talks about various individual writers of Aristotle's time, and the method by which he believes these styles found their form. The process described remains true today, as stories evolve through quality being produced through skill or luck, and the good ones being retold and eventually imitated until their best parts become conventions, though people can rarely say *why* these conventions work.

V

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type, not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.

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Epic poetry agrees with Tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that Epic poetry admits but one kind of metre, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit; whereas the Epic action has no limits of time.

My previous papers on humor addressed why comedy must not be painful or destructive. The reflex action of laughing out loud can be very dangerous if a person is being hunted or otherwise needs to stay quiet, so our laugh reflex "turns off" when we feel anxiety (and not coincidentally, some anxiety-lowering medications are also referred to as "laughing gas").

But more importantly, this section is the first reference to one of Aristotle's "three unities," the unity of time, which he states is necessary for an effective story. Needless to say,

this is an intelligent observation that was especially impressive given the time in which it was made, but yet is clearly inconsistent with what we can see, since there are many stories with fractured timelines that people know and love.

There are actually two purposes that a coherent time frame serves. One is to allow the audience to understand where they are and what's going on at any given point in the story, which helps their brain to "suspend disbelief," in other words process the situation as though it was real and feel a genuine emotional reaction. The other is to *match* the sequence of events to the way that the brain processes a situation, in terms of beginning at a small emotional level and building in interest as more information is revealed, leading to a moment of high tension and emotional payoff.

These two purposes, of course, serve to generate good emotions from the viewer. But the *good emotions* are the point, not the unified time. And once we see that, we can then understand how fractured timelines can *violate* the concept of unity of time, but still make for great stories, because they generate the same good emotions in other ways.

In the first case, other measures can be taken to let the audience understand what's going on. The most simple of these are chapter headings in books, which are easily reproduced as title cards in non-chronological movies like "Reservoir Dogs." Also, these stories, when done well, provide their own alternate method of organizing the presentation of the ideas, such as having a section focusing on each individual character in "Reservoir Dogs."

For the second benefit, matching the audience's natural way of getting interested in and enjoying a situation, non-chronological stories can still show the key events that do that for the audience, even if those events do not occur in the story world in the actual order they are shown to the audience. "Pulp Fiction," for example, begins with a low-energy conversation that matches the audience's low-energy at the beginning of a story (starting at too high an energy level will exhaust the audience early), and then leads into the two characters pulling guns and deciding to rob the restaurant they're in. This does not actually happen in the story's timeline until later, but the pulling of the guns makes us wonder what happens next and triggers our interest, which is what is supposed to happen early in a story anyway.

So in both of these cases, we see another method of describing the essential aspect of the story, that being generally, coherency and generating the right feelings for the audience at the right time, that goes more to the core cause, and as a result also accounts for various examples that seem to contradict the previous version.

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VI

Of the poetry which imitates in hexameter verse, and of Comedy, we will speak hereafter. Let us now discuss Tragedy, resuming its formal definition, as resulting from what has been already said.

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Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. Two of the parts constitute the medium of imitation, one the manner, and three the objects of imitation. And these complete the list.

...

The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in general this is often true. It is the same in painting; and here lies the difference between Zeuxis and Polygnotus. Polygnotus delineates character well: the style of Zeuxis is devoid of ethical quality. Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents.

It's not always clear when Aristotle (or the translator) is using the word "quality" to refer to whether or not a story is good, or whether or not the story has the traits that he considers necessary to put it in the category of "tragedy," or whatever genre or area of storytelling he may be talking about. But we can still gather from the context that Aristotle is commenting on both the *traits* of the genres of story, and how those traits *contribute* to making a good story.

In this case, he focuses on the role that plot plays in the success of a tragedy. Plot, of course, is important in all genres of storytelling. But it seems important here to point out that there are, in fact, books and movies and plays that fail on the plot level, usually by having no plot (a common novice mistake) or a confusing one (a common professional mistake), but which nonetheless are profitable and/or have good reviews. Given how fundamental plot is to the experience of reading a story, it's important to understand how to modify this rule of "have a good plot" to solve this contradiction.

A plot in a story serves to make the audience want to pay attention to what they're seeing. We have an instinct in our brain that makes us want to watch situations where people are trying to achieve a goal ("Destroy all monsters"), or there is something we are curious about ("What is the Matrix?"), or there are potential good or bad results that we may have to deal with ("There's a bomb on a bus..."). These things make our brain generate dopamine, which causes us to enjoy paying attention to the thing in question. In other circumstances, like when a work project starts to come together, we can feel dopamine as well (it's often called "flow"), and the result is the same.

But the point of the plot in the story is to *generate* this interested reaction, and *not* just to have the goal, question or source of tension. A story can have a clear goal, question, or source of tension, and still fail if those don't generate interest. But, *likewise,* a story can NOT have a clear goal, question, or source of tension and still *succeed*. If the audience has that interested reaction *in some way* while they're watching. The key to this, is that that interested reaction can be generated from *anything the viewers have in their minds while they're watching the story*. Which includes things they are collectively aware of *about* the story's creation or the *author or performers themselves.*

So, for a quick example, we can use the movie "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice." The movie was set-up to not only have the two titular characters fight, but to also include a "Death of Superman" story, the villains Lex Luthor *and* Doomsday, a continuation of the plot of the previous film "Man of Steel," *and* an introduction of the superhero Wonder Woman in order to set-up a sequel featuring the Justice League superhero team.

Needless to say, the resulting movie is overloaded with plotlines. It was also shepherded by a director who was not a professional writer, and went through rewrites before filming. As such, it is *very* confusing, to the point of being almost incoherent at times. The movie's plot does not succeed at all.

But nonetheless, I *enjoyed* watching it. This is because I was *interested* in seeing how the introduction of Wonder Woman would be handled. So I had the necessary pleasure chemical, which is normally generated by a story's plot, flowing in my head throughout the movie. This outside curiosity, "when will Wonder Woman show up? How will she look?" functions precisely the same as if I as a viewer was wondering who committed the murder in a mystery film. Our brains do not divide fiction and reality, they simply generate the chemicals in response to what they see, and we feel as though all come from the story we are watching.

This inability to separate our feelings is why I refer to this as *emotional indiscretion,*

after the concept of *dietary indiscretion* in some animals, which occur when they will eat any small object without regard to whether or not it is something they are supposed to be consuming.

But to continue with how it functions here, besides outside questions, outside sources of tension, like movies that may attack a public figure the audience knows ("Citizen Kane" may be an example), or outside goals, like a group of friends and family reading an amateur writer's first work and rooting for them to succeed, function the same way.

So here, we see that the actual dictate for a story should *not* be the quality of its plot. It's certainly good to study that as a writer, but when we look at the *actual* causes of success, we must say, much more accurately, *that there must be a goal, question, or source of tension in the audience's mind either* from *the story or* surrounding *it, in the real world.*

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IX

Of all plots and actions the epeisodic are the worst. I call a plot 'epeisodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets, to please the players; for, as they write show pieces for competition, they stretch the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity.

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Here we touch on another aspect of what Aristotle calls "plot unity." Namely, the idea that plots should all be joined by a likely sequence of events, or a sequence of events that are each necessary to show to tell the story. In most cases, this is quite true. However, we come again to the non-linear plots which seemingly violate this idea. And another aspect of how they work, which also comes from indiscretion.

Episodic plots don't have a single consistent plot element in them that keeps the audience's interest from one scene to the next. They tend to also, as a result, lack the ability to build tension inside us over the long term, which is normally released at the end of the film to give us a powerful feeling of satisfaction. And quite a few movies (and books and plays) have suffered from this problem. However, we can again go back to "Pulp Fiction," which had a largely episodic plot, but was one of the most successful movies ever made.

There *is* in fact an overall plot device to "Pulp Fiction," that holds the audience's interest from one scene to the next, and it is a mystery. *Where is Quentin Tarantino going with this story?* People who knew of Quentin Tarantino's earlier work, or, slightly later, of "Pulp Fiction's" reputation, watched waiting to see how Tarantino would bring the story together. This includes him setting out the various pieces in the same way an architect would, before bringing them together into a house over time, at which point we can marvel over how everything fit. It helps even more that had a huge respect for Tarantino's original style and talent, all traits that make us further interested in a main character.

Thus, here, to achieve an actual applicable rule, that avoids these inconsistencies, we must amend Aristotle's rule, if we were to state in his words, to say that a dramatic work will fail if there is no probable or necessary sequence inherent to *either* the plot *or* the situation in which the audience is watching.

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But again, Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will thee be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design. We may instance the statue of Mitys at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while he was a spectator at a festival, and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to mere chance. Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best.

Here, Aristotle touches briefly on how tragedy functions on the audience's emotions. He states that tragedy works best when it functions as cause and effect. This is *absolutely* true and even today, many writers do a poor job of making a tragic result in a story follow properly from immoral actions. I suspect that this is because they aren't really aware of how tragedy works for an audience as why, and it's fairly amazing that Aristotle noticed this himself thousands of years ago. But, we can take this opportunity to state exactly why that is, and use this as another opportunity to hopefully clarify and extend on what's stated.

In the above paragraph, Aristotle states that tragedy shows events inspiring fear or pity, and he states later that this creates what he calls *catharsis* for the audience. This can be, for a general list, facing our fears (*purgation)*, releasing pent-up hostility *(purification),* wanting to see something bad happen to a bad person (*tragic pleasure,* which is often misunderstood to be a desire to see bad things happen to people in general)*,* or in making us appreciate what we ourselves have (*tragic wonder),* or feeling comfort in seeing that others suffer the same pain we do (*pity*).

Many of these are fairly self-explanatory, but in the case of tragic pleasure, proper cause-and-effect is crucial. As we stated, for a tragic story to work properly in-and-of-itself, it is not enough to have a bad thing happen to a person, the bad thing must happen to a *bad person.* And even then, it works best when the *thing that makes the person bad* is what directly *causes* the bad result.

So, for example, we draw some pleasure from seeing an arrogant character lose at the end of a story. But, we will draw *even more pleasure* if the character loses *because* of his arrogance. He should not just have the wheels fall off his car at the end of the race, the wheels should fall off *because he was too cocky to check them* (and of course, it would have to be believable that the wheels might fall off in the first place). And likewise for various other bad traits.

This is pleasurable to us because it confirms our belief that humility is good, *and* that the arrogant person *was never actually better than we are*. Or, likewise, that the invincible menace was never actually unbeatable, or that ghosts aren't real (as seen on "Scooby-Doo"). We get a pleasure chemical released in our brain when our mental model is reinforced, and that is exactly what is triggered.

However, if you noticed, we used a very specific phrase above, when we said that this was what was necessary for a tragic story to work properly *in-and-of-itself.* And, as you might guess, we thus come to the multi-dimensional aspect that indiscretion introduces. Because that pleasure chemical is released *whenever* something we want to believe is confirmed. And there are *many* beliefs that an audience member has, which can be confirmed or denied in different ways in the course of reading a book or watching a play or movie. And this can lead to tragic stories that consist of awful things happening to good people, *violating* the very technique we just discussed, which nonetheless are successful.

Here's how that works. When we're young, it's important to us to establish our maturity. To be "big boys" or "big girls," when we're toddlers, to wear make-up or play with more

dangerous things and so on. When we're adolescent, that translates to a need to distance ourselves from things we feel are childish. This includes safe, bright, cartoonish entertainment, with clear morals and happy endings. As a result, watching a story with a dark tone and depressing ending, often makes these teenaged viewers feel more mature. This, as a result, confirms that belief that they have about themselves, and thus, *releases the same pleasure chemical* as a happy ending does for most other viewers. This is why "grittiness" is a popular style for adolescent comic book readers. But younger children, who are easily frightened by dark tones, and adults who already feel mature, don't get that same pleasure, and thus "gritty" films only have a limited audience.

To go a bit further, we can look briefly on where these gritty stories come from on the writer's side. New writers draw great pride in completing their first work. It confirms their belief that they are writers, can work hard, and many other things. So they have that same pleasure chemical flowing in their brains throughout the process of writing their first work.

As a result, they *don't need* the plot of their first story to create a feeling of happiness in them. So they instead opt for what feels *different* from what they normally read, which most clearly to them, is to write a story that is utterly depressing. This is so consistent that as a book reader (a job I used to have full-time), you come to expect the graphic murder of at least one infant in every first-time writer's novel. And likewise, newer and younger comic book writers are often the ones who produce the "gritty" stories that adolescents enjoy so much, and DC Comics, when handing their comic franchises to a filmmaker who hadn't produced many comic stories before, found them coming out extremely dark.

With that in mind, we can amend the concept of tragedy and its value in a story, replacing the requirement of tragic flaws and cause and effect with a more general rule that removes these inconsistencies. Namely, that the story or situation around it must *confirm* something the audience wants to be true. It may be that people who have good traits tend to get rewarded in the end, which is the most common in the history of storytelling, but it *may also be* that the audience themselves are smart, mature or popular people. Or other things.

IX - XI

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the Oedipus. There are indeed other forms. Even inanimate things of the most trivial kind may in a sense be objects of recognition. Again, we may recognise or discover whether a person has done a thing or not. But the recognition which is most intimately connected with the plot and action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons. This recognition, combined, with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents.

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Two parts, then, of the Plot—Reversal of the Situation and Recognition—turn upon surprises.

In this section, Aristotle discusses the value of surprise. It is certainly true that a plot that leads the audience to believe one thing and then shows them something different (but still logical) will produce a pleasurable feeling, as the brain gets a momentary rush of energy (likely a quick release of adrenaline) to quickly react to and understand the new thing.

But naturally, we must wonder about how stories that do not reverse on their own logic can nonetheless generate surprise. Or, in fact, how stories can generate that same beneficial reaction by STICKING to their own logic.

One example might be "The Mist," a film by Frank Darabont adapted from a novel by Stephen King. In "The Mist," people in a grocery store find that a strange cloud seems to have enveloped the world outside them. And anyone who attempts to leave is quickly heard screaming and then apparently dies. In the end (and of course, this is spoiling the surprise of the movie), the people manage to pile themselves into a car and drive out into the mist, trying to get back into the world. But they find only more mist and dead people, until they eventually shoot themselves. We see later, as the story ends, that rescue workers arrived, clearing the mist, but only to find their dead bodies in the car.

"The Mist" was actually a well-received film. As we discussed, a depressing ending can make the audience feel good by making them feel more mature for having watched it, but the ending here has another effect. It was *surprising*. I gasped at it, and according to the reviews, others felt the same way. But given Aristotle's dictum, this *should not be the case*, after all, in the above model, surprise comes from a *reversal of the story's situation*. But we are led to believe from the earliest parts of the movie that the mist has enveloped the whole world. And anyone who goes into it dies. Thus, the heroes entering the mist, finding nothing, and dying is not a reversal of the situation, it's a *perfect continuation* of it. It's *exactly* what we've seen throughout the movie's plot, and it's realistic, given that no one is surprised when people trapped in hopeless situations don't make it out in real life. So *how could it produce surprise?*

By now, the answer is probably clear. The situation *within* a plot is not the only logical course of events that an audience is following. There is also the situation of *watching the actions of the plot's creator,* (the author, playwright, director and so on), as they perform a service for us, and reacting to that as well. Thus, we develop expectations about *that situation as well*, and violations of *that course of events* can produce surprise just as easily. Thus, here, we expect through years of experience that a studio movie will have a happy ending, since it is the most common way to give us the positive emotional effect for which we're paying. And as a result, when a movie like "The Mist" gives us a *tragic* ending, we have the same surprise, and though they may not have enjoyed the sad aspect of it, people still reacted positively to that surprise, in the same way they would a surprise ending in the actual plot.

So, to amend the above, we must say that the technique of *reversal*, or *surprise,* depends not on a reversal in the plot itself. But a reversal of the audience's expectations of either the course of events in the story or the course of events they experience when viewing stories in general. Which can lead to a number of expectations and a number of possible reversals, and which all will generate the same pleasure and successful result.

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XIII

The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse. The practice of the stage bears out our view. At first the poets recounted any legend that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses, on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction.

In this section and the ones that immediately follow it, Aristotle writes, in his own terms, about the necessary traits for a good main character in tragedy as he sees it. Essentially, he says that the character should not be an inherently bad person, since the audience would only be happy to see them fail would then produce joy instead of sympathy at seeing another person share their pain. But they should not be too perfect either, or the audience will not identify with them and not feel threatened by what threatens the main character (which generates tension and adrenaline for them).

Instead, Aristotle states, a good tragic main character must be a *decent* person who makes a single mistake or has a single great weakness. So we identify with them, and feel emotional release at seeing them feel the same pain we do for their honest mistake. There are many successful stories that have sad endings, as we've discussed, but here, we can talk about how the method of producing this powerful emotional effect has been achieved without the recommended method.

The best example I can think of for this is the novel, "A Confederacy of Dunces." The main character is hardly an everyman, he is anti-social, unmotivated, and quite arrogant. On top of that, the novel is very much a comedy. Yet and still, the success of the novel is far beyond what you'd normally expect for its genre. In fact, it won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and was considered the first comedy to do so. But in fact, the great effect of the novel is actually akin to one of Aristotle's Tragedies.

This is because the author, John Kennedy Toole, was a struggling writer who committed suicide 11 years before it was published. That story, of a talented artist who is unappreciated, and gives up on life too early, is a *perfect* tragic set-up. In fact, the wikipedia article on Toole himself is far longer than the article on the book. There are, of course, far more people who feel like they do not get their due in life, and who benefit from the belief that if they give up, they will miss the payoff that is just around the corner, than there are people who would identify with the novel's protagonist.

But, as a consequence of the way our brains work, there is no difference between the emotional release we feel when *reading* Toole's work and imagining and identifying with his loneliness and pain, and confirming that it is indeed clever and worthy of being seen, and the emotional release we would feel if *the novel itself* presented the same story.

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XV

In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good. Now any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character: the character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class.

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Thirdly, character must be true to life: for this is a distinct thing from goodness and propriety, as here described. The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent.

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For this part, we have to make a more general change to Aristotle's rules, which applies to

that specific passage of "The Poetics" and others that take the same form. Instead of stating that the *character* in the literary work must have these identifiable traits, or as in the previous passage, have a single error or flaw that causes their mistake in order to produce the emotional effect of tragedy, we must say instead that either the character in the literary work, or *someone associated with the work* in the real world, must display those traits.

This is actually true of the way audiences take in stories in general, which means that we need to alter the way we look at the concept of protagonists as a whole in stories. As best as I can tell, the best and clearest way to view the way audience's *really* process movies, books, or plays is that they are actually following the stories of *three heroes* while they are watching. The fictional story of the hero they are watching, the story of what the *creator* is doing in the real world, and their own personal story, in terms of what the movie, book or play they are watching is doing for them.

To give a brief example of this, let's take Robert Rodriguez's famous indie film "El Mariachi." "El Mariachi" was shot on an amazingly low $7,000 budget, but looks much more expensive, and launched his career. However, initially, when he showed the film to movie executives, he didn't tell them how much it cost, and they ignored him. It wasn't until later, once the budget and the story of how he made it was well-known, that one of those same executives told him "how much heat" they had taken for being "the guy who passed on 'El Mariachi.'"

This is because the movie, viewed in a vacuum, is a straightforward low-budget story of a guitar player who fights a drug lord after accidentally stealing his guitar case full of weapons. It's not particularly unique, profound or memorable. However, the story of grit, overcoming odds, and shocking talent that was Robert Rodriguez's shooting of the film *was* unique*,* profound and memorable. Very much so. And everyone who watched it with that knowledge had a completely different feeling of quality when they saw the film then the original executives did.

But likewise, "El Mariachi" is a special film to me, not *just* because of Robert Rodriguez's story, but because of *my own*. It inspired me to start studying screenwriting and storytelling, and showed me that you don't need huge amounts of money or high-powered connections to be successful. Thus, while the main story of the film is unremarkable, the story of the creator, and the story of *me,* are both powerful, and the two combined make it a standout film in my memory. Note also, that if the film *itself* was remarkable, it would be on an absolute peak level for me, of the type that causes people to watch movies hundreds of times, attend conventions, stalk the filmmakers and so on. But since it wasn't, it's merely one of which I'm very fond.

Now of course, we generally like ourselves, so we don't apply heroic traits to our own personal story as a protagonist in the same way. But having discussed this concept, we can see that in actuality, *all rules* that Aristotle, or in fact anyone who studies writing, proposes for a good protagonist, can function just as well if they exist in the film's creator and can also *harm* the story in the viewer's eyes, if the creator has the same traits that would find unlikable or bad in a protagonist.

As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable. Thus a person of a given character should speak or act in a given way, by the rule either of necessity or of probability; just as this event should follow that by necessary or probable sequence. It is therefore evident that the unravelling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the

'Deus ex Machina'—as in the Medea, or in the Return of the Greeks in the Iliad. The 'Deus ex Machina' should be employed only for events external to the drama,—for antecedent or subsequent events, which lie beyond the range of human knowledge, and which require to be reported or foretold; for to the gods we ascribe the power of seeing all things. Within the action there must be nothing irrational.

Here, we revisit the previous rule about plot construction, that events in the story must be what is needed to communicate what's going on or what would make sense, so we can believe and thus emotionally react to what we're seeing. He mentions also that some things should be "external to the drama," but of course he means things in the story's world that we don't actually see played out in its telling, like the origin of the Joker in "The Dark Knight."

Regardless, we can use this opportunity to point out another example of how this method of plot and character can be unpredictable. "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" has a very confusing plot, that features Deus Ex Machina, when basically, two side characters reveal themselves to be space aliens and rescue the heroes from certain doom. "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" was reviewed very poorly when it was first released, and things like this were the reason why. And it did, among other things, violate Aristotle's dictum, having events that were necessary to resolve the plot, but by no means probable.

However, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" has gone on to become a very popular film among a small audience. By traditional measures, there's no way to explain this. However, people started to watch the movie differently. They began treating it as a sort-of group activity, wearing costumes, bringing props, and, most importantly, *talking back to the screen* at key points. Like, for example, saying, "What's white and sells hamburgers?" directly before Brad talks about stopping at the castle they passed.

We've spoken already about how the tension and intellectual involvement created by an activity like this can fill-in for a confusing of the plot, but here, we see specifically as well how believability relates to this. The Deus Ex Machina in the Rocky Horror Picture Show's ending does and did harm its effect as a story, but yet ultimately it performed better in terms of building an audience then most other movies that have proper endings according to Aristotle's recommendation.

This is because the emotions created by associated events tend to be *stronger* than ones created by the story itself. For one, because there are more outside things happening, often on a longer and larger scale than the movie we are watching, but also because believability in real world events is always perfect. Whereas fictional stories often struggle to achieve it, and can almost never capture it to the level of actual reality.

So, the tension and interest created in the audience by the challenge to say the right lines before the key points in the movie, is actually a much more robust interest than what normal movies can actually generate. And likewise, though the villain of the story represents the audience more than the heroes ("The Rocky Horror Picture Show" became a cult favorite in the LGBT community, and the heroes are normal straight people, while the villain is an LGBT person), the emotional confirmation lost by having a villain who they don't enjoy watching lose, is overpowered by the stronger emotional confirmation of participating in a group event with so many other movie watchers who enjoy the same things and are in the same community.

So, to resolve this inconsistency, we have to adjust Aristotle's recommendation about plot and character functioning to fit with the way we've changed other things so far. The source of the audience's interest and emotional confirmation be it from the real world or the story itself, *must* be something that is logical and believable. But if it comes from the real

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world, the plot itself does not necessarily have to be.

Let me underline here, though, that these are not just casual recommendations, or a general description of how to have a good time at the theater, which doesn't relate to the notion of how to create a good work of storytelling. What we are describing here, these modifications to these general rules, are *necessary* changes to the existing guidelines of storytelling *themselves*. The techniques and ideas that have been developed over time, and are generally used to evaluate and learn to write books, plays and movies, *do not properly function* without this understanding. They run into the contradictions we are talking about above, and will produce confusion without these modifications.

This is why writers have traditionally driven each other crazy by contradicting each other's notions about how to tell a good story by pointing out these successful works that don't fit. And thus, why the popular saying "there are no rules in writing, but you break them at your peril," was created. These changes allow us to see more precisely how these traditional rules, which clearly have some application but frequently fail, actually work, and to develop a stronger version of them that actually do lead to consistent failure when they aren't followed.

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XVI

...of all recognitions, the best is that which arises from the incidents themselves, where the startling discovery is made by natural means. Such is that in the Oedipus of Sophocles, and in the Iphigenia; for it was natural that Iphigenia should wish to dispatch a letter. These recognitions alone dispense with the artificial aid of tokens or amulets. Next come the recognitions by process of reasoning.

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In this part of section 16, Aristotle has been describing the pleasure that comes from making a key realization. In other words, the joy we feel when our brain draws a new and valid connection in what it sees. He mentions, in his own words, that this is often done poorly in dramatic works, by the author having some obvious symbol indicate what is important, or by having the characters make a realization, but that the most effective method is when everything plays out in a believable manner, and the audience can see the connection themselves, by "process of reasoning."

This feeling is the most powerful pleasure that a person can naturally have from observing other events without physically participating themselves, and thus it generally is the greatest height that a dramatic work can achieve. If you've ever heard someone talk about seeing the world in a different way, achieving enlightenment, having a "eureka moment," or similar things, this is what they are referencing.

However, there is an entire class of movies that has a divisive effect on audiences, precisely because this actually can work in a manner differently than what Aristotle describes. Naturally, the assumption he makes is that the "recognition" (to use his term) must arise from the events themselves. However, if you attend a film festival, you'll see a ton of movies that seem very arrogant, don't connect to most audiences and make no sense, but which have a very devoted group of fans who love to over-analyze them. One example being filmmakers and art-house fans who invented what they called the "Auteur Theory," in the 1950's, where they analyzed every movie in terms of what it revealed about the filmmaker's psyche, and searched it for hidden meanings.

The "Auteur Theory" was very popular among film students and certain others, but added basically nothing to mainstream filmmaking. This is because it involved a perspective on movies that falls outside of the normal model, which is the awareness of the *filmmaker themselves* while viewing the film. When normal audiences view most movies, they tend to know very little about the filmmaker, and thus don't think about anything except what's in front of them (unless it is specifically exposed to them through the media or a popular story).

However, film students are involved in figuring out how to make movies, and studying the filmmaker's decisions. In doing so, they draw connections between what they see on the screen and what they believe the filmmaker intended. And if you might notice, this is the *same form* that Aristotle describes for generating the pleasure of recognition, except that it comes from the combination of real-world people and incidents (the filmmaker making a movie) and what the viewers see on-screen, such as the idea that the Mother obsession in Hitchcock's "Psycho" was a sign of his own problems with his parents. And in fact, this recognition does *not even require* that the plot incidents themselves make sense or be well-executed.

As a result, these film students and connoisseurs draw the powerful pleasure that Aristotle describes as "recognition" while viewing these films, by playing this game of connection between filmmaker and what they see, and normal audiences get nothing of the sort. And in fact, when the filmmakers *themselves* are deliberately putting across these symbols and clues, without thought to the normal plot, they end up creating what we describe as "pretentious" cinema. Loved by a few, but creating confusion in most.

Perhaps also, we can see that this disagreement is a natural result of *separate and totally valid emotional* experiences between the art-house fans and normal movie goers, and *not,* as we may often assume or say, from foolishness by either group. This by itself might have a significant effect on how we think about and discuss our various opinions as fans of books, movies, theater, or other things.

XVII

In constructing the plot and working it out with the proper diction, the poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will discover what is in keeping with it, and be most unlikely to overlook inconsistencies. The need of such a rule is shown by the fault found in Carcinus. Amphiaraus was on his way from the temple. This fact escaped the observation of one who did not see the situation. On the stage, however, the piece failed, the audience being offended at the oversight.

Here, Aristotle describes what was apparently a classically-known blunder in the theater of his time, when a playwright made a mistake by using a door that the audience was previously led to believe was a temple as a place for a previously-dead character to emerge, which (according to an analyst named J.R. Green) led to anger due to being illogical and possibly an insult to their beliefs. Aristotle does not name the play, and it doesn't seem to be clear in history exactly what the mistake was, but it can still bring up some useful points.

For one, there are, as stated, confusing stories that nonetheless succeed for other reasons. But there are also errors in storytelling that come from insufficient explanation, which is what Aristotle seems to be describing here, since the play did not give the audience an

indication that the door previously used for the temple was now supposed to represent a tomb.

We actually can see something similar with the "Lord of the Rings" films, which were adapted by Peter Jackson. They were *extraordinarily* successful. But I found the story pretty confusing. Obviously, they were trying to take an evil ring to a volcano and destroy it. But the large number of characters, battles, kings, and villains is extremely hard to follow in the movie, and as a result, I just sat and kind of vaguely stared at the screen. When I mentioned this to the person who watched one of them with me on the way out of the theater, they replied "oh, I thought it was only me."

Nonetheless, the Lord of the Rings films were *extremely* highly-rated by critics and on sites like the Internet Movie Database. They also won a large number of Academy Awards, and grossed over a billion dollars. From one perspective, you could say that no one understood the movie and everyone was just pretending they were great, or that people were rating the beautiful and innovative *visuals* over the coherence of the story. And likewise, I'm sure there are many people who would frustratedly blame me and the people who didn't follow the movie for not paying attention.

But actually, I think there's something else at play. The "Lord of the Rings" films were based on the books. And many people who watched the movies and loved them, were already familiar with the books, which give you as much time as you need to grasp what's going on before you turn the page. As a result, those people *didn't need* to follow the plot as it was presented in the movies for them to understand what was going on.

Furthermore, Peter Jackson, the director, was obviously very familiar with the books while he was writing and directing the films. This means that he was actually *greatly disadvantaged* judging whether or not the plot of the films themselves would come across to an audience who didn't know the books. This was no problem with most viewers who were also familiar with the books, but created a problem with people who weren't.

Obviously, this jibes quite well with Aristotle's recommendation that the playwright visualize what will be in front of the audience while putting together their story. But we can also add that the playwright must be aware not only of what the audience will know, but what *he or she* knows in the process of writing, which effects their ability to judge what they are writing.

The example we use here is very straightforward, deliberately so since we are introducing it, but *many* other feelings writers and filmmakers can have will also throw off their ability to judge the effectiveness of their story, including if they are, for example, frightened by things that the audience won't share, such as a fear of a childhood teacher that may look like the villain. This goes much deeper but that is likely enough for now. I'd also like to add that the idea of indiscrete emotional processing occurring in both viewing *and creating* suggests Aristotle's recommendation here in a natural and logical way.

XVIII

The poet should endeavour, if possible, to combine all poetic elements; or failing that, the greatest number and those the most important; the more so, in face of the cavilling criticism of the day. For whereas there have hitherto been good poets, each in his own branch, the critics now expect one man to surpass all others in their several lines of excellence.

In this part, Aristotle takes a moment away from recommending dramatic techniques to recommend that specific choices be made by the writer in order to please critics who look for certain amounts of ability or ambition in a writer. This is, of course, true, and I'm sure almost any writer could tell you that a writer's personal reputation is important when it comes to critics, and to the success and prospects of their work.

But it's also clear here that Aristotle, and perhaps others, do not make the leap from recognizing more exactly how a writer's reputation seems to bias the reviews and sales of their work. They don't seem to make the step to seeing that the *inability to distinguish feelings* about each is the *cause of it,* and thus to starting to investigate all the ways that can work, which leads to some of the ideas we've been discussing. It seems like a pretty simple insight once it's said, but I found a few reasons why it might not have happened.

First, you have to realize that these things are about the emotions they generate in the viewer, and then you have to study those emotions hard enough to recognize when a dramatic work is in the proper form to *cause* those emotions in the viewer, and thus *should* be successful. Very few writers actually do these things, and even if you do, there are steps beyond that. Aristotle, after all, *did* study things in this way, and as far as I can tell, knew more than enough that he should've been able to determine that certain works fulfilled his guidelines and should've succeeded.

However, even if you do that, the next step is to then see that many works *should* succeed by these guidelines and don't, and likewise, how many works should *not* succeed but still somehow do. From our modern perspective, with the internet, box office grosses, and so on, this is easy to see. But not as much from Aristotle's. And on top of that, Aristotle was studying a group of works that were all presented in a similar context. He was analyzing plays shown to similar audiences, on the same stages, with similar amounts of knowledge about the playwright, and perhaps most importantly, similar *notoriety.*

Consider it this way. If someone studies boat-racing, but they only look at races that happen on a peaceful lake, with consistent wind, and the same types of boat, they will end up constructing a tidy book that lists certain fundamentals of how to row, or construct a sail, or keep the boat clean, and those fundamentals will work. In that context. But if you extend the boat race to an ocean, and allow all different types of watercraft, different headwinds, and different tides, boat-racing suddenly becomes much more complex, and boats with perfectly constructed sails, for one example, will lose to other boats with worse sails that happened to be in the proper wind. Likewise, a boat with a flawless rowing team, according to the traditional theory, could lose badly to one with an amateur rowing team that happened to be in a favorable tide.

This is the difference between the entertainment world that we can see now and the one that Aristotle was likely studying. As a result, he probably saw a much more direct connection between his theories and the results of the play, and things like the reputation of the writer, while something he could pick up on, were far less effective in changing results than a properly written story. He didn't know the extent of the fringe because the fringe was relatively small and meaningless.

But what's interesting about that, is that we can see similar results today, when works are compared that also exist in similar contexts of outside emotional situations. Wide-release movies, that are heavily advertised, with actors and filmmakers who tell the world how great and brilliant they are, are compared almost entirely based on the actual quality of the films.

The outside emotions generated by the huge reputation and marketing associated with these stories cancels out, and places a huge focus on that actual quality as the tie-breaker. But outside of that context those outside emotions cause *huge* warping effects on how people perceive books and movies they consume. And in fact, the *lack* of outside reputation and emotion does too, in a way that is enough for its own discussion later.

But if you are already known and successful, you are in what might be called the "eye of the storm," where many outside factors are working in your favor and evening you up with your competitors, and merit alone seems to be the primary determinant. This could even have been true of Aristotle himself, given that he had a relatively large reputation of his own in ancient times, which effected the uptake of his theories and thus shielded him from some of the chaos that may have given him a stronger hint about the these things.

There is of course, even more to it than that. The instinct, which mashes together these experiences in order to give us the general feeling that we use to judge a dramatic work, is completely silent. It doesn't *tell us* what made us feel interested while we were watching a story, regardless of whether it was a skillfully executed plot or, for one example, curiosity about whether the lead actor was going to forget his lines. And on top of that, we cannot separate these causes in our own brain.

Just like we can't "unsee" certain ugly things that may end up on our computer screens and have to simply avoid clicking those websites in the first place, we cannot "unknow" outside events when judging movies. Even if we're aware of them, we *can only guess* what we would've felt otherwise. This is, for another example, why spoilers ruin stories for us.

Beyond that, things are even further clouded by the fact that the huge amount of uncertainty this phenomenon creates in predicting entertainment is hidden by people pretending after the fact that they knew what was going to happen. People like to stretch the truth and present themselves in a better light, and one very handy way to do it is to claim that you *knew* a certain movie would be a hit, or a certain actress would be a star as soon as you laid eyes on her. In some cases, the person may indeed have liked the actress or script when they saw it, but the times they liked something that turned out to fail are not going to be mentioned. So we get a large number of interviews from creative people that imply that certain work is and was great and succeeded because it was great, and everyone *knew* it would be great beforehand, that simply gives a horribly false impression.

Lastly, after Aristotle's time, there are many other people who have been able to view entertainment from the much larger lens of modern media, and thus also able to see all these results that violate the idea that fulfilling our artistic fundamentals should make something successful. People who view these things honestly have thus coined phrases like, "In Hollywood, nobody knows anything," which is from William Goldman's "Adventures in the Screen Trade."

The phrase became famous, which means that many other people identified with it, but also that very few people would acknowledge that confusion out loud. There are many opportunities to simply hand-wave away this confusion by blaming people for being childish, random, not sharing the "great taste" of oneself, and so on. These save our ego from the pain of reconsidering our ideas, but also likely helped conceal this concept for a very long time. Let's move on.

XIX

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Here in part 19, as well as parts 20 and 21, Aristotle touches on the specifics of dialogue in plays. He doesn't see much of it as different from the other requirements he has mentioned, but he does point out that things should be shown to the audience instead of explained verbally.

This is absolutely true, and has held as a guideline for as long as people have been performing. With the exception, probably clear by this point, that the quality of dialogue in a dramatic work is largely effected by what the writer is able to show. If the proper scenes are set-up to demonstrate the key points to the audience, the dialogue does not bare any weight for communicating the plot, and characters are free to talk around what they are doing, in the same way that we do in real life (how often do you discuss *driving* or where you need to go while you're in the car with someone else).

This same phenomenon comes into play when certain actors are chosen to appear in plays or movies. Actors are often chosen because their micro-expressions, tiny aspects of how they present themselves and move, help to make certain roles they play more believable Jeff Goldblum, for example, played many fast-talking scientists, Arnold Schwarzenegger played barbarians and expressionless machines, and pop stars often debut in movies as characters who are also singers because their natural mannerisms will help make-up for their lack of experience.

However, that same boost from an actor's natural mannerisms can also come from their known life story. Sylvester Stallone, an unknown actor playing his first major role in a film he wrote, was nominated for multiple Academy Awards for playing an unknown boxer getting his first shot at a World Championship. The aligning of those stories was no coincidence, as Stallone's real situation boosted the emotional appeal of the movie itself.

But on top of that, the knowledge of his life situation also effected *how the dialogue* in the movie could be written. As we said, no one needs to say something if the audience has been shown it already in the movie. And likewise, it doesn't have to be *shown* to the audience if they know it already from the real world. So, no one had to *tell* Rocky Balboa that he was a "nobody" as a boxer, the movie itself was able to simply present Rocky as he was and follow him believably in his daily life, safe in the knowledge that the audience already knew and felt that Rocky was an underdog without anything else having to be said. This boost in the quality of the dialogue, and efficiency of the film, was generated by the outside events.

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In this section, Aristotle gives an opinion that metaphors and the occasional fancy word are beneficial to a story by giving it a style that raises it above what the audience normally hears. He adds though, that it must partially match normal words and phrases so that the audience can still know what it means, and that critics who mock writers for using overly fancy words are incorrect, since those words can be part of otherwise clear writing and thus improve the piece. As a result, Aristotle is implying that a play's quality has an objective truth to it, which can be misjudged by critics.

This is actually a classic question in analyzing art. Whether it is "subjective" (dependent on the audience member's personal opinion without predictability), or "objective" (dependent on what is actually on-screen and coming out of the speakers, with perfect predictability). It comes up most often as a form of haphazard defense when people normally try to describe guidelines for good writing to other writers who have violated those guidelines.

The knee-jerk response they will give is "it's all subjective," said in one way or another. But, of course, "pure subjectivity" would mean that someone could not predict *at all* whether a given person would like or dislike a movie, *no matter what* is in it. But yet, I've never seen anyone who would claim that 2-hours of ear-splitting noise and static would rate higher with an audience than "Batman Begins." So the idea that a movie is "all subjective" is flatly wrong. There are, in fact, common elements to movies and art that make some more successful than others with essentially any audience. This is what my work, and the entire business of art and entertainment, depends on to function.

Aristotle, on the other hand, is on the opposite end of the spectrum. His theory says essentially nothing about the opinion of individual audience members, and here we see that he even goes so far as to dismiss the opinions of some (in this case, critics), as being incorrect. I believe Aristotle's is far *closer* to what seems to be true, but his stance seems to have problems as well. After all, it suggests that one could predict with near-perfect accuracy whether an audience member will like a movie, without knowing anything about an audience member.

However, I've never seen anyone who claims that a children's cartoon would not be more successful if shown to an audience of 3-year-olds than if it were shown to an audience of 60-year-olds. And you cannot claim that the children's opinion is somehow "wrong" either way, because you would then not be able to explain why those animated films are *extremely* successful with children, while, say, "The Godfather" fails miserably with them, despite the fact that "The Godfather" fits Aristotle's recommendations extremely well. This means that any theory that discounts who will be viewing the work must be not completely correct.

So, when both these problems are taken into account, we can see that the references to "subjectivity" by some people are actually attempts to deflect criticism of their own work, which don't stand up to investigation. But the "subjectivity" claim survives because the Aristotelian approach runs into so many errors, particularly the ones we've been describing in this document. These people are vaguely aware that the Aristotelian "rules" can be dismissed with examples, without understanding why. Likewise, people on the other end are aware that

there are some consistent things that dictate a story's success, without being able to fully nail down what they are.

The truth seems to be that the quality of a dramatic work itself, absolutely *does* matter to its success, the person viewing the work *does* matter as well. But, as we've established here, the *context* in which a work is viewed is a third leg of the stool that *must* also be taken into account. But once it is done, it becomes possible to have a *truly* solid theory.

The human mind processes *three sets of events* when it is taking in a fictional work. The fictional story, the story of a creator presenting their work to the world, *and* their own personal story, what that creative work means *to them* personally. A child will enjoy an animated film with clear, brightly-lit environments and happy faces because they are small and easily frightened, and need an uncommonly safe environment so that they *personally* can feel comfortable watching. A man will rate a movie higher if the success of that film confirms something he wants to be true about himself or people like him (such as if the protagonist looks like him, and people still wanted to see the movie). And of course, people will tend to rate a movie higher if the film itself has a good story. But each of these sets of events seems to contribute about one-third of the emotional reaction that people have.

When this is taken into account, and we apply the guidelines for a good story to *all three* stories, the fictional, factual and personal story that are entering the head of an audience member, we start to get very consistent results. The endless back-and-forth about the need to study and work in certain ways, and obvious flaws in the results of that study, start to lose its ground, and we can see a real, consistent set of ideas start to take shape. But in *three-dimensions*. Which leads us to many more things.

XXIII

As to that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single metre, the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it. It will differ in structure from historical compositions, which of necessity present not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the events may be.

Here, Aristotle restates some of the fundamental aspects which apply to dramatic works, pointing out how they relate to shorter stories. But in the process, he restates the fundamental idea that is completely correct, but, viewed differently, gives way to a more thorough model of drama and art as a whole. The key point being when he says that a dramatic work "resembles a living organism in all its unity, and produces the pleasure proper to it."

People often misunderstand the idea that a dramatic work should produce "pleasure," thinking that it means that only happy, tapdancing, childish work is dramatically appropriate. This is not at all how the human mind works or what produces pleasure.

In reality, our brain gives us pleasurable feelings for not just simple, positive things like butterflies or hugs, but also for validating our mental model, which can include not only good events but also sad events that we predicted coming or which validate our own sad experiences. As well as seeing things that improve the connections in our minds, increase our status or decrease the status of people who display anti-social or bad traits, and for seeing

things that can potentially benefit our understanding, including competition, role models, and many other possibilities. Aristotle was well-aware of this in stating that work should be judged by the "pleasure" produced, since he goes into these types of pleasure in this document. And on top of that, he was aware of these things thousands of years before people today who try to dismiss his conclusions using this invalid caricature of them.

But, as correct as Aristotle's general idea was, he naturally wasn't aware of *how* that pleasurable feeling is produced in our brains. He can't be blamed for this at all, as neuroscience was essentially non-existent in his time (and even today it is extremely inexact). But it still gives us an outline of how these things work which is very important here. Specifically, the "pleasurable feelings" that we get from a dramatic work come from the release of various chemicals in the brain.

They appear to be dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, low cortisol, adrenaline, endorphins, and perhaps others. The key though, is that we only have a *limited* number of them to reflect a *large* number of situations. And this it the key reason that the results of our pleasure-based experiences, including watching plays, movies, art or entertainment, depend on a mashed-up combination of these various things we sense while watching. But moreso, we can actually *map* which parts of an experience trigger which types of pleasure in our brain, and thus, we can know *which things* outside a dramatic work are akin to the different parts *inside* the work itself, and which thus can replace that aspect of the work, if it's missing or poorly-executed by the writer themselves.

This matches generally with some of the things we've talked about, such as being curious about where the writer is going with a story as a replacement for the story having a unity of action, causing seemingly disjointed stories to perform as though they followed Aristotle's recommendation. But it goes far beyond that.

Because the feeling of interest in a story is caused by dopamine, and there are *several things* which can cause dopamine to flow in the brain. Not just curiosity about what a writer may be doing, but also an interest in a person due to them having outstanding personal traits, which is what makes us feel starstruck. A main character in a story can make us interested if they have huge muscles or a great brain, but the same is true if the *creator* of the story has great personal traits, and we as the audience are aware of it.

While there are a lot of new elements introduced by this, they *are* in fact understandable, and can be listed. I've gone to the trouble of constructing a hierarchy that lists the various parts of the experience of following a story, and then lists things that fulfill those inside and outside a dramatic work, which makes for an useful overall guide to judging the success of a work, both in looking at the work itself, and understanding how outside things can bolster or substitute those elements in that work or others.

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<p style="text-align:center">*XXIV*</p>

In Tragedy we cannot imitate several lines of actions carried on at one and the same time; we must confine ourselves to the action on the stage and the part taken by the players. But in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. The Epic has here an advantage, and one that conduces to grandeur of effect...

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Earlier, we talked about how the power of reputation and large-scale marketing contributes to

the way people judge large-scale work. This relates more directly to what Aristotle is talking about here. Aristotle is well-aware of the fact that the number of people effected by an event plays a role in how emotionally-powerful we find that event to be, but it also plays a key part in how we judge writing and other artistic work from known and unknown creators.

Like we said, among works that all have been shown to large numbers of people and have had a marketing push behind them, people don't notice the emotional reaction they have to that feeling of importance and "break the tie" between them by judging which work seems better in and of itself, creating the "illusion of meritocracy" in making a work successful. But before, we mentioned the lack of outside reputation having a profound effect, we can talk about that now.

A great example is Vincent Van Gogh. Today, he's considered the perfect example of unrewarded genius. A painter who knew very little success during his life, was depressed and emotionally-disturbed, and ultimately shot himself. But some years afterward, his work became very famous, to the point that one of his paintings sold for over $80 million at an auction in 2017. In a merit-based theory of art, one similar to the assumptions made by the Poetics, which have trickled down to countless other views over the centuries, this is actually a major problem. How could an artist who we now judge to be as talented as Van Gogh have known no success during his life?

The traditional answer is to blame the audience. To say they lack the ability to recognize great art when they see it. This also has the aforementioned side effect of saving our egos from the pain of failed predictions. But that runs into several more problems, such as asking why the public, who had already idolized the work of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt and others, suddenly became fools when it was time to judge Van Gogh? A possible response is to say that Van Gogh's style was different than those artists, and while we can probably find several famous artists at the time whose work was not that different from Van Gogh's, we don't need to, because there's another bit of information that is far more powerful. *Van Gogh did not like his own work*.

"Starry Night," long considered to be Van Gogh's greatest masterpiece, was *bad* according to the man himself. When he sent the painting along with several others, to his brother, he barely mentioned it in his accompanying letter, referring to it only as one of several paintings that "said nothing to him," and later directly calling it a "failure."

Now, if the question is about *taste*, the public having no ability or experience to recognize a great painting when they saw it, *why did Van Gogh agree with the public?* If anyone had the artistic talent and vision to recognize great work, shouldn't it have been Van Gogh *himself?* Maybe it's just a fluke? He painted it in a frenzy, and then didn't properly appreciate his achievement? Unfortunately though, this is a pattern among creative people we idolize today. Franz Kafka wanted his books, which we now call literary genius, burned after he died. But perhaps Van Gogh *and* Kafka were both in some state of depression, and thus couldn't judge their own brilliance properly?

This explanation struggles as well, because Leonardo Da Vinci also *didn't like the "Mona Lisa."* Da Vinci was a busy and relatively successful painter and inventor with influential supporters, who had been hired on commission to do the portrait. Nonetheless, when he finished it, he left it in the back of his studio, never turned it in, and there's no record of him ever making any special mention of it to his friends or associates.

Depression, public foolishness, or many other ad hoc explanations don't seem to explain this tendency of great artists to have the same shrugging opinions of their work as the public did when they were alive. But the concept we have been discussing handles it very

well. The feeling of *epic effect*, of strong reputation, that Aristotle is describing in the above passage applies just as much to epic effect in the real world, when we look at a work that is known to have it. We are so used to it, in fact, that a work that has no reputation tends to be severely emotionally-lacking for us. This is why so many artists have found their own work to be unexciting in so many cases.

And likewise, when those works do cross over to being publicly displayed, or they excite a particular person who does that for them, it happens because some *other* event triggers that same necessary emotional boost for them. Such as an art director liking a painting because it may remind him of the hills where he played as a boy.

Likewise, artists have strong emotional reactions to their own work when it has these types of emotional boosts, which can lead to some potentially very interesting ideas about why artists and writers consistently make certain odd decisions with their work at different points in their life and career, including why new writers have a strange but consistent tendency to kill dogs and babies in their stories, which is probably too much of a tangent to go into now.

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XXV

...there are five sources from which critical objections are drawn. Things are censured either as impossible, or irrational, or morally hurtful, or contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness. The answers should be sought under the twelve heads above mentioned.

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Here, Aristotle touches on a general list of critiques that people make against dramatic works. Each of these are quite valid, but they let us show an additional dimension to how these critiques work. The terms he uses correspond to various things that we use today, that works are not believable, that the plots don't make sense, that they are morally wrong, or that certain aspects of the plot don't deliver on being exciting, funny, romantic or whatever else is necessary.
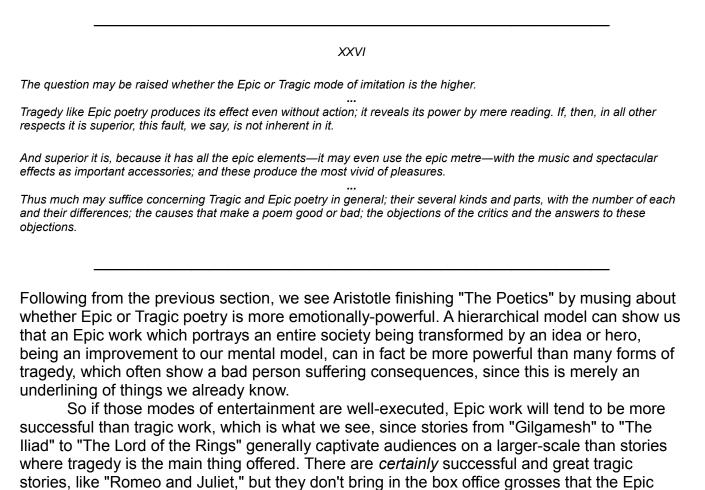
The key is though, that some of these things are more important to the effect of a dramatic work than others. Believability and logic are necessary to connect to a work in the first place. Moral correctness, alongside a properly executed plot, are necessary to *care* about the work and draw pleasure from its ending (to reiterate, even a tragedy can provide this pleasure if it happens to a bad person, or to someone we identify with that thus makes us feel like the pain in our own lives is shared by others), *after* we are able to connect to it.

There are many things we believe, after all, that we don't care about, like that our neighbor is sleeping in their bed at night. Once those are in place, we then need to worry about how well executed more specific parts of the story are, like how well they show societal change, how enlightening their moral lessons may be, and after that, whether or not their well-done temporary pleasures, like excitement or humor, are well-executed.

Some stories like "Star Wars," may be notorious for having dialogue that the audience doesn't enjoy, or a romance that falls flat because they are not consummated in the first film, and the key characters turn out to be related in subsequent films. But nonetheless, the success of "Star Wars" cannot be questioned.

This is because, in a very general sense, "Star Wars" delivers far more on the scale

and wonder of the world it creates, the moral satisfaction of various elements (like Han Solo's personal turnaround at the end of the movie), any many other things. Thus, a model that reflects the various criteria that Aristotle lists must also represent those things in proportion to how effective they are. I prefer a hierarchy, in the form of a pyramid, but some ranking is essentially required.

Following from the previous section, we see Aristotle finishing "The Poetics" by musing about whether Epic or Tragic poetry is more emotionally-powerful. A hierarchical model can show us that an Epic work which portrays an entire society being transformed by an idea or hero, being an improvement to our mental model, can in fact be more powerful than many forms of tragedy, which often show a bad person suffering consequences, since this is merely an underlining of things we already know.

So if those modes of entertainment are well-executed, Epic work will tend to be more successful than tragic work, which is what we see, since stories from "Gilgamesh" to "The Iliad" to "The Lord of the Rings" generally captivate audiences on a larger-scale than stories where tragedy is the main thing offered. There are *certainly* successful and great tragic stories, like "Romeo and Juliet," but they don't bring in the box office grosses that the Epic films do.

However, there is another aspect to this hierarchy concept. In the last paragraph above, where he mentions that music is an important accessory to the pleasure of the dramatic work. It is actually similar to section 25, where he likens the choices of imitation a poet must make to those of a painter. Because these hint at a deeper idea. Other forms of art also play on the same basic pleasure chemicals as storytelling. This means that the same indiscretion-based results can be applied to their fundamentals.

Let's demonstrate with one fast example. I have not spent a lot of time on music, but let's say for the sake of argument that the repetitive structure of a song, where it loops back to a chorus, produces a feeling of confirmation in the listener, which in this case is oxytocin. Naturally, it's part of basic songwriting theory that music *should* have a structure like this, and most successful songs do have a chorus or repeating structure of some type.

But *some don't.* One specific example is jazz music, which is known for being very free flowing. Nonetheless, jazz music is a very widespread genre. Not as well-known on the pop

charts, but certainly with its own audience. How can this be if jazz music violates such a fundamental aspect of songwriting theory? Well, it actually turns out that jazz music is most commonly performed as part of an improvisational group. Jazz musicians play together, and essentially *make up the song as they go.* Feelings of status, group belonging, *also give us the feeling of confirmation*. So as a result, the experience of participating in a jazz band, or watching the jazz band perform for us in a private club, produces the feeling of oxytocin *that is not provided by the informal structure of the music.*

Let's take that a step further, though. If that is the case, if a feeling of belonging and safety can make-up for a lack of structure in the music, it would have to go the other way as well. A well-structured song being able to make-up for a *lack of stable feeling* in a moment of one's life. Well, we can see that. My favorite example is from the Discovery channel documentary, "Life of Ludwig Van Beethoven," at about the 19-minute mark, from Kurt Masur, the music director of the New York Philharmonic. He states that "[Beethoven's] first and second symphony, they are so heavenly, and so wonderful, that you just feel you are safe. That you are living a peaceful life."

Likewise, in an interview on the show "Loose Women," the pop musician Nelly Furtado talked about using songs to get through a tough time in her life. She said, "I thought to myself 'I'm so lucky that I can write songs because I can soothe myself with them.' But then a friend told me that what they do is find a song they connect with, and that's how it helps them." So in both cases we can see how the feeling of confirmation (specifically oxytocin) released by the structure of a song substitutes for a lack of stability in life, and likewise, how a stable life situation substitutes for a lack of structure in an entire genre of music.

It appears that the same can be done for every form of art. Not just storytelling, and music, but painting, as we've discussed with Van Gogh, and even games. Each one a fundamental modification to the theory of each, which is *necessary* to be able to fully understand their results. "Non-Euclidean geometry," where spaces can be curved, turned out to be crucial to modern astrophysics and our modern understanding of gravity. And while I don't wish to suggest lofty things, this "Non-Aristotelian" approach could likely turn out to be very significant to the study of art as well.

But while it is a departure from Aristotle's method of thinking, I am certain that, had enough data about entertainment, and information about the brain been available in Aristotle's time, he would have been able to discover this phenomenon as well. I'd be fascinated to hear his thoughts on it, and where he would've taken it, since it very likely will lead to many new things in the future.

If you'd like to hear more about emotional indiscretion, as I've introduced in this document, you can check out my video work at youtube.com/StoryBrain, where I have an entire playlist of theories and content I've made about the idea, and I can be contacted with any questions at twitter.com/StoryBrain1. I also will be publishing more on this, detailing the hierarchies that I've referenced, and other related ideas in some upcoming books and other articles. Thank you for reading.

-Garrett