

**Lecture Notes
Literary Criticism
Department of English Language and Literature
2020-2021
Fourth Year
Evening Studies**

Classical criticism (Plato, Aristotle, Horace & Longinus):

Literary criticism is thought to have existed as long as literature. In the 4th century BC, Plato and Aristotle were the critics who gave guidelines of good literature without themselves being creative writers. Plato's attacks on poetry as imitative, secondary and false were formative as well. Aristotle wrote the *Poetics*, which developed for the first time the concepts of mimesis and catharsis.

Plato (427-347 BC)

Plato was the first ancient philosopher who had given a systematic shape to criticism. Plato's ideas are expressed in several books, chief among them being the *Dialogues*, *Ion*, *Crito* and *The Republic*.

Theory of Forms (also called **the Realm of Ideas or Realm of Ideals**)

Plato's philosophy asserts that there are **two realms: the physical realm and the spiritual realm**. The spiritual realm exists beyond the physical realm. Plato's Theory of Forms asserts that the physical realm is only a shadow, or replica or image of the true reality of the Realm of Forms.

Plato's Attack on Poetry

Plato is famous for having banished poetry and poets from the ideal city of *The Republic*. In his opinion, **poetry or art in general is a copy of a copy**. It is **twice removed from reality**. The creations of poets and artists, being mere **copies of copies of 'ideal' reality**, are **distortions of truth, valueless and indeed potentially misleading**. The example he actually uses is of a bed: God created the 'idea' of the bed; the carpenter creates an actual bed from his imperfect perception of the 'idea'; the poet or artist only produces a superficial imitation (mimesis) of the carpenter's bed. For Plato, **the highest truth is strict, mathematical, intellectual; poetry does not deal in such truth** and may distract us from truth. For Plato, poets depend on inspiration, which is a form of madness instead of reason and knowledge. Plato suggests that poets are liars.

In Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for example, the gods lie and cheat and are one of the main causes of suffering among humans. Even the mortals (human beings) in these works steal, complain and hate each other. Such writings, argues Plato, set a bad example for Greek citizens and may lead people down paths of wickedness and immorality.

Aristotle (384-322 BC)

He was Plato's pupil. He rejected some of Plato's beliefs about the nature of reality because he was more concerned with the physical world. Applying his scientific methods of investigation to the study of literature, Aristotle answers Plato's accusations against poetry in a series of lectures known as the *Poetics*.

Poetry versus History in Aristotle:

Aristotle compares a poet to a historian in terms of the truth each tries to convey in his writing. While history records actual, particular facts, poetry is concerned with **universal truths**, by imaginatively, speculating on the possibilities of human experience. Poets deal in a different kind of truth, not factual, technical or historical truth, but ‘**universal truth**’, something superior and better. Poetry expresses the universal, history the particular. Therefore, poetry is more philosophical than and **superior to history**.

The Nature of Poetry concept of *Mimesis* (imitation):

Aristotle agrees with Plato that all arts are imitations. But unlike Plato, Aristotle **does not** consider the poet’s imitations of life as being twice removed from reality. Poetry reveals **universal truths**. The act of imitation itself, according to Aristotle, gives us pleasure.

Tragedy and Comedy

Aristotle defines tragedy as ‘dramatic’ poetry which portrays noble men performing noble deeds expressed in a high artistic language; it represents men in action instead of narrating (as in the epic form), and through **pity and fear**, it causes the proper *catharsis* (or purgation of these emotions). Art possesses form – that is, tragedy has a defining beginning, a middle and an end. A tragedy is therefore an organic whole.

Comedy, writes Aristotle, is an imitation of the actions of the base or inferior men. It is characterised by the ridiculous. Comedy is inferior to tragedy.