

The Early Origins of Literary Theory: Plato and Aristotle

While literary theory, as a school of thought or mode of literary criticism, is very much a product of the mid- to late- 20th century academic world, the first recorded “theories” of literature extend back to the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle is widely considered to be the Western world’s first true literary theorist. While Plato (who was Aristotle’s teacher) was among the first intellectuals to give careful consideration to the role and function of literature in society, Aristotle presented the first fully developed theory as to how literary art can and should function within society.

Plato (429-347 BCE)

While Aristotle gave careful consideration to the function and roles of literature in his *Poetics*, his teacher Plato also offered an extended critique and definition of the role of literature in society in his dialogues *The Republic* and *The Symposium*. In *The Republic*, Plato offers a rather pointed and stark critique of literature’s role and purpose in society. Plato believed that literature—specifically drama and poetry—were dangerous to the stability of what he envisioned to be an ideal republic or city state. He argued that the arts served to shape character and that an ideal society must itself train and educate its citizens, hence the arts must be strictly censored. Furthermore, Plato argued that an artistic work is always a copy of a copy, hence an artistic work always imitates something real, and all things which are real are an imitation of a universal concept or idea (what Plato called “the really real”), thus all works of art are copies of copies and not fully true or real. Coupled with the ability of an artistic work to stir emotions and inspire action, the illusionary nature of art made such dangerous to society in Plato’s view. On the other hand, in his dialogues *Ion* and *The Symposium*, Plato speculated that artists make better copies of that which is true rather than which can be discovered in reality; hence, the artist can be understood as something like a prophet or visionary.

Plato’s theory of art as imitation of truth had a tremendous influence upon early literary critics and theorists during the Renaissance and 19th century, many of whom often speculated as to the role and function of art as imitation of reality. While modern and contemporary literary theorists tend not to accept Plato’s notion of art as being a dangerous social force, in fact, most literary theorists take exactly the opposite perspective of Plato, especially in the case of Marxist and new historicist theorists. Most literary theorists argue that literature is in fact a liberating force; Plato has had a tremendous impact on the development of literary theory. In fact, many contemporary literary theorists argue that Plato’s theory of art as imitation served to first introduce a theory of literature to the Western world. The most lasting and potent aspect of Plato’s theory, surely, is his “Allegory of the Cave” from Book VII of *The Republic*. In this



allegorical vision, Plato offers an image of chained prisoners facing a wall within a dark cave. Behind the prisoners are a high wall and a fire, and between the wall and the fire is a group of actors holding stick puppets. The prisoners can only see the shadows cast by the puppets, which they will understand to be their entire world or reality. If the prisoners are ever released, Plato argued, they would stumble about, be blinded by the fire, and eventually realize that the puppets are only shadows of a far greater reality. Once released, the prisoners will then come to see reality for what it truly is and will realize that the shadows they had seen before were mere copies of reality itself. For Plato, those shadows represented images of truth (or symbols of a greater reality) and served, also, as illusionary representations of truth. Plato's allegory has served, then, to represent humanity's inability to see larger truths. While Plato was contending that art served, in essence, to block humans from seeing and understanding larger truths, some literary theorists feel that literary theory offers a method through which people can begin to comprehend greater truths by revealing to them the hidden machinations of reality which they are blind to.

Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE)

In his *Poetics* (335 BCE)—of which two parts were composed and only the first of which survives—Aristotle offered the world's first recorded definition and theory of poetry and drama. Here, Aristotle considers the “first principles” of “poetry,” which he defines mainly as drama in terms of this argument. A work of tragedy, according to Aristotle, should consist of the following elements: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Aristotle argued that the plot of a tragedy should be logical and flow in a reasonable and realistic manner. These logical plot movements will come as a surprise to readers but make complete sense to the audience afterward. Ideally, a tragic plot should be complicated and involve the protagonist moving from good fortune to disaster and then to death, with the protagonist realizing along the way the cause of his misery in order to be released from such. A tragic protagonist, Aristotle argued, should be moral and inherently good, act appropriate to his circumstances, and be consistent and realistic in his actions. A character's thoughts should also be spoken and delivered clearly to the audience through the use of clear and proper diction. The melody of the tragedy should be delivered by a chorus who is part of the action of the play. The spectacle of the play—i.e. the costumes and setting—is considered by Aristotle to be of little importance and cannot make up for poor acting or an illogical plot. While Aristotle's ideas might not seem remarkable or revolutionary now, he nevertheless was the first intellectual to develop a true theory of what tragic drama was and how it should and



could operate. Aristotle's *Poetics* should be understood not as a strict set of theories for interpreting literature but, instead, as the first systematic critical approach to understanding how a piece of literature can and should operate.

Application to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Hamlet does not respond, directly, to either Plato or Aristotle's notions or theories of literature. In fact, it is not known for certain whether Shakespeare himself read either Plato or Aristotle, though today most scholars consider it to be likely that he was at least familiar with the basic ideas of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Plato would certainly have viewed *Hamlet* as a fairly dangerous work of literature, especially given that its protagonist so flagrantly challenges state authority. A theorist—of whom there are probably very few today—who might accept Plato's notion of art as being dangerous would point to *Hamlet* as a text which might inspire social and political revolts against political rule. A theorist operating within Plato's notions of artistic power might also point to the character of Hamlet as being a perfected, artistic copy of a real human being. Critics have long celebrated Hamlet for being, in essence, among the most complex and realistic characters in all of Western literature. While Hamlet is certainly not an ideal human being—he is, after all, confused, doubtful, angry, and irrational throughout the play—he is as close to a perfect copy of a real, thinking human being as literature has ever seen. Thus, in Plato's terms, *Hamlet* is a superior work of art. Furthermore, a Plato-minded theorist would see *Hamlet* as providing an accurate imitation of various human psychologies. From Hamlet's tortured intellectual questioning and doubt, to Ophelia's grief and confusion, to Claudius's guilt and hunger for self-preservation, a Plato-minded theorist would argue that *Hamlet* provides a decidedly true and realistic vision of human behavior and psychology and serves, then, to reveal deeper psychological truths to those who read or view it.

Aristotle, however, would probably have been troubled by Hamlet's lack of conformity to the standards of ancient drama but would have realized that *Hamlet* fits in with his definition of an ideal tragic drama. A theorist exploring the structure of tragic drama through the critical perspective of Aristotle would argue that the play functions, in large part, as an ideal tragic drama. In fact, *Hamlet* fits quite closely in line with Aristotle's principles of tragic drama. Not only does Hamlet follow Aristotle's notion of a tragic plot being ultimately logical, but Hamlet himself behaves in what the audience comes to realize is, indeed, a logical manner given his circumstances. His diction, which moves back and forth from being intellectual to witty to jocular to melancholy, is always appropriate to his emotional and intellectual state of mind. Furthermore, the text of *Hamlet* places far more emphasis on plot and thought than mere theatrical spectacle. Hamlet is, inherently, a good and moral person, though he does not always act in what appears to be a good manner. While Aristotle might have been troubled by Hamlet's



violent actions throughout the play, he very well might have come to recognize Hamlet's commitment to ultimate goodness and morality. A theorist reading Hamlet through the perspective of Aristotle would also appreciate the manner in which Hamlet moves from good fortune to disaster and ultimate self-realization, just as Aristotle argued that an ideal tragic character should. A theorist reading *Hamlet* while concentrating on Aristotle's theories of proper drama might argue that Hamlet, while violating and subverting some of the basic principles of Aristotle's theory of tragic drama (for the play lacks a chorus and its supernatural elements render it unrealistic), in fact ultimately operates in a fairly close relation to Aristotle's theories.

Study Questions:

1. What is the difference between Aristotle and Plato's conceptions of literature and art?
2. Why did Plato feel literature and art to be a dangerous social and political force?
3. How did Aristotle help to create the field of literary theory?
4. How did Aristotle conceptualize the proper form of tragedy?

