

Define and explain Aristotle's conception of plot.

Plot is the most important part of a tragedy for a number of reasons. First, the result of a man's actions determines his success or failure, and hence his happiness, so it is action which is paramount - not character, which doesn't necessarily affect every action. Second, without action, there cannot be a tragedy - but there can be a tragedy without character. Thirdly, diction, song, and thought - even elegantly combined - cannot replicate the action of life without plot.

Plot, then, is the 'soul of a tragedy,' and character comes second. Rounding out his rankings: thought, meaning what a character says in a given circumstance, followed by diction, song, and spectacle.

Aristotle goes on to describe the elements of plot, which include completeness, magnitude, unity, determinate structure, and universality. Completeness refers to the necessity of a tragedy to have a beginning, middle, and end. A 'beginning' is defined as an origin, by which something naturally comes to be. An 'end,' meanwhile, follows another incident by necessity, but has nothing necessarily following it. The 'middle' follows something just as something must follow it.

'Magnitude' refers simply to length -- the tragedy must be of a 'length which can be easily embraced by the memory.' That said, Aristotle believes that the longer a tragedy, the more beautiful it can be, provided it maintains its beginning, middle, and end. And in the sequence of these three acts, the tragedy will present a change 'from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.'

'Unity' refers to the centering of all the plot's action around a common theme or idea.

'Determinate structure' refers to the fact that the plot all hinges on a sequence of causal, imitative events, so if one were to remove even one part of the plot, the entire tragedy 'will be disjointed and disturbed.' More simply, every part of a good plot is necessary.

'Universality' refers to the necessity of a given character to speak or act according to how all or most humans would react in a given situation, 'according to the law of probability or necessity.'

Aristotle ends this discussion of plot elements by pointing his out his particular disdain for 'episodic' plots - plots in which episodes succeed one another 'without probably or necessary sequence' (like a weekly sitcom, for instance). These episodic dramas stretch plot 'beyond their capacity,' and hence are inorganic.