Aristotle: The Poetics (a quick reference)

“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions... Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.”

The treatise we call the Poetics was composed at least 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, considering it the perfect tragedy, and not surprisingly, his analysis fits that play most perfectly. This quick reference to the Poetics therefore uses this play to illustrate the following major parts of Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy as a literary genre.

History’s in the Past. Tragedy is Universal.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is the “imitation of an action” (mimesis) according to “the law of probability or necessity.” He indicates that the medium of tragedy “shows” rather than “tells.” According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because history simply relates what has happened while tragedy dramatizes what may happen and “what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.” In other words, history deals with the particular, tragedy with the universal. Events that have happened in the past may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. Therefore, they have little relevance for others. Tragedy, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what may happen at any time or place because that is the way the world operates. Tragedy therefore arouses not only pity but also fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain.

Plot: The First Principle

Plot is the “first principle,” the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents:” i.e., not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist. Plots that meet this criterion will have the following qualities:

- The plot must be “a whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are downplayed but its effects are stressed). The middle, or climax, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it (i.e., its causes and effects are stressed). The end, or resolution, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are stressed but its effects downplayed); the end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment. Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the “tying up” (desis), or complication/conflict. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the “unravelling” (lulis), or dénouement.

- The plot must be “complete,” having “unity of action.” By this Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention, no deus ex machina. According to Aristotle, the worst kinds of plots are “episodic,” in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence; the only thing that ties together the events in such a plot is the fact that they happen to the same person. Playwrights should exclude coincidences from their plots; if some coincidence is required, it should “have an air of design,” or seem to have a fated connection to the events of the play. Similarly, the poet should exclude the irrational or at least keep it “outside the scope of the tragedy.” While the poet cannot change the myths that are the basis of his plots, he “ought to show invention of his own and skillfully handle the traditional materials” to create unity of action in his plot.

- The plot must be “of a certain magnitude,” both quantitatively (length, complexity) and qualitatively (“seriousness” and universal significance). Aristotle argues that plots should not be too brief; the more incidents and themes that the playwright can bring together in an organic unity, the greater the artistic value and richness of the play. Also, the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the better the play will be.

- The plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (catastrophe). Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” (peripeteia) and “recognition” (anagnorisis) connected with the catastrophe. Both peripeteia and anagnorisis turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a peripeteia occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended to produce, while an anagnorisis “is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.” He argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the peripeteia leads directly to the anagnorisis); this in turns creates the catastrophe, leading to the final “scene of suffering.”

Character: The Second Principle

Character has the second place in importance. In a perfect tragedy, character will support plot—the personal motivations will be
intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions producing pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change “should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character.” Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.” The term Aristotle uses here, *hamartia*, often translated “tragic flaw,” has been the subject of much debate. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to “mistake” than to “flaw,” it is best interpreted in the context of what Aristotle has to say about plot and “the law or probability or necessity.” In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak (which is a much more modern evolution of the concept of *hamartia* and tragic flaw), but because he does not know enough. The role of the *hamartia* in tragedy comes not from its moral status but from the inevitability of its consequences. Hence the *peripeteia* is really one or more self-destructive actions taken in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended (often termed tragic irony), and the *anagnorisis* is the gaining of the essential knowledge that was previously lacking

Characters in tragedy should:

- Be “good or fine.” Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: “Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless.”

- Possess “fitness of character.” (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.

- Be “true to life.” (realistic)

- Show “consistency” (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.

- Be “necessary or probable.” Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.

- Be “true to life and yet more beautiful” (idealized, ennobled).

**Thought: The Third Principle**

Thought is third in importance, and is found “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.” Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character. However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the themes of a play.

**Diction: The Fourth Principle**

Diction (word choice) is fourth, and is “the expression of the meaning in words” which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. In this category, Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: “But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; . . . it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances”

**Song: The Fifth Principle**

Song, or melody, is fifth, and is the musical element of the chorus. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be “mere interludes,” but should contribute to the unity of the plot.

**Spectacle: The Sixth Principle**

Spectacle is last, for it is least connected with literature; “the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.” Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of spectacle, he argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle “create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous.”

**Katharsis: The End of the Tragedy**

The end of the tragedy is a *katharsis* (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. *Katharsis* is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means “purging,” and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. Aristotle also talks of the “pleasure” that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art.
Unity of Action:

Each of the incidents in this play is part of a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain. The plague in Thebes prompts Oedipus to send Creon to consult the oracle of Delphi; the oracle’s reply that the murderer of Laius must be banished from Thebes prompts Oedipus to pronounce a solemn curse on the murderer and to send for Teiresias. Teresias states that Oedipus is the murderer, but since the king knows himself to be innocent (or thinks he knows), he accuses Creon of plotting with Teiresias against him. The quarrel of Oedipus and Creon brings Jocasta from the house; seeking to calm down her husband and prove that oracles cannot be trusted, she tells again of how Laius died. When she mentions that he was killed “at a place where three roads meet,” Oedipus suddenly begins to suspect that he may indeed have killed the king without knowing whom he was. To settle the matter, they send for the Herdsman who is the only survivor of that attack. Meanwhile a messenger arrives from Corinth to inform Oedipus that his supposed father, King Polybus of Corinth, has died. When Oedipus rejoices that he did not kill his father as the oracle had prophesied but is still worried that he may marry his mother, the Messenger, seeking to relieve him of this fear, innocently tells him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents.

The arrival of the Messenger is the only action in the play that is not directly caused by a previous action. However, this is a perfect example of Aristotle’s contention that if coincidences cannot be avoided, they should have “an air of design,” for this messenger seems brought by fate, since he is the missing link in Oedipus’ story, the very man who received Oedipus as a baby from the Herdsman. Thus, when the Herdsman arrives and they tell their respective stories, the whole truth emerges. This is the climax, or turning point, of the plot—the truth about Oedipus leads directly to the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus’ self-blinding and request to be exiled. The departure of Oedipus from Thebes will lift the plague, thus resolving the problem that started off the chain of events and concluding the plot.

This plot is also a perfect example of the exclusion of the irrational and the skillful handling of traditional elements of the myth on which the play is based. Sophocles does not dramatize any of the admittedly irrational parts of the myth (e.g., why did Laius and Jocasta not kill the baby outright? If Oedipus was afraid of marrying his mother, why did he marry a woman old enough to be his
mother? etc.). Instead, in a brilliant move, he constructs the play as an investigation of the past. The tremendous sense of inevitability and fate in this play stems from the fact that all the irrational things have already been done; they are unalterable. Once Oedipus begins to investigate the murder of Laius, the whole truth about the past is bound to emerge; as he himself says, “O, O, O, they will all come, / all come out clearly!” (Episode 4)

**Complex Plot:**
The *peripeteia* of the play is the Messenger’s reversal of intention; in seeking to help Oedipus by telling him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents, he instead creates the opposite effect, providing the crucial piece of information that will reveal that Oedipus has indeed killed his father and married his mother. As Aristotle recommends, this is directly connected to the *anagnorisis*, for the Messenger and Herdsman piece together the whole story of Oedipus, enabling him to “recognize” his true identity, to gain the essential knowledge he has lacked. The *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* directly cause Oedipus’ *catastrophe*, or change of fortune from good to bad, and lead to the emotional “scenes of suffering” with Creon and his children. In a sense, each of Oedipus’ actions can be considered a reversal of intention, and each gives him a little more knowledge of the dreadful truth that will lead to his downfall.

**Role of the Hamartia:**
The play offers a perfect illustration of the nature of the *hamartia* as “mistake” or error rather than flaw. Oedipus directly causes his own downfall not because he is evil, or proud, or weak, but simply because he does not know who he is. If he really wanted to avoid the oracle, leaving Corinth was a mistake, killing an unknown older aristocrat was a mistake, and marrying an older queen was a mistake. Seeking to uncover the past, cursing the murderer of Laius, sending for the Herdsman—each of the actions that he pursued so vigorously and for such good reasons led to his doom. Oedipus is not morally guilty, but he is radically ignorant, and Sophocles does not present him as a unique case but rather as a paradigm of the human condition, as “a man like ourselves.” In the words of the Chorus:

What man, what man on earth wins more
of happiness than a seeming
and after that turning away?
Oedipus, you are my pattern of this,
Oedipus, you and your fate! (Stasimone 5)

**Hubris?**
While Oedipus is certainly hubristic throughout the play—not listening to Teiresias, touting his own fame, refusing to even consider the possibility that someone else may be right (and that he may be wrong)—is hubris truly his *hamartia* or tragic flaw? As mentioned, a close reading of Aristotle suggests that even the concept of a *tragic flaw* is a misinterpretation and that *tragic mistake* is closer to Aristotle’s intent. However, it is unarguable that this modern understanding of a *tragic flaw*, or error in character, has become the popular definition for *hamartia*. While this definition still applies to the play, Oedipus’ “tragic mistake” is much more appropriate than the modern usage. Nonetheless, hubris still matters. His ego, attitude, and behavior throughout the entire investigation certainly forces the audience to be critical of Oedipus’ actions—thus forcing a viewer/reader to draw comparisons to his or her own lives and daily interactions…in the end, though, does it matter? Would things still turn out the same if Oedipus happened to be the most humble man in Thebes?

**Patterns of Imagery/Motifs:**
Just as Aristotle likes, the metaphoric patterns of this play support the plot. The major patterns of imagery—sickness and pollution, the ship of state, blindness vs. sight, light vs. darkness—illuminate the action, themes, and characters.