**Literary Criticism Notes: Section One**

**Plato:** An ancient Greek philosopher who was the student of Socrates and was the teacher of Aristotle. His works explore various themes including philosophy, politics, cosmology, theology etc.

Plato’s theory of Mimesis: According to Plato, art is mimetic in nature. The idea is supposed to be the original thought from which reality is born that is imitated by art. For example – the carpenter first thought of the “idea” of a chair. He then created it and gave it a physical shape and identity as a chair. It is this physical chair that the painter imitates in his painting. Thereby the painting of the chair is twice removed from the original idea of the chair that came into the carpenter’s mind.

As such, art is twice removed from reality.

**Plato on Poetry:** He considers philosophy to be superior to poetry as philosophy deals with ideas whereas poetry being an art deals with imitation and is twice removed from reality. Thereby Plato rejected Poetry declaring it to be mimetic in nature specifically in philosophical and moral grounds.

1. **Plato says that art being the imitation of the actual is removed from the Truth –** However he fails to explain that art also gives something extra that is missing in the original. Literature is never the exact representation of life. Instead, it is representation of selected parts of life (events). When the poet re-creates it in his poetry, he puts in his perspective; how he perceives it to be. This is why artistic work cannot be criticized as them not being creation. It does not take us away from truth but instead directs us to the reality of life.
2. **Plato says that art is bad because it does not inspire virtue, does not teach morality -** The function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express emotions and represent life instead of engaging with ethics or notions of morality.
3. **Plato judges from the educational, philosophical, ethical viewpoint –** Plato does not judge poetry from its own unique standpoint. Every judgement needs to have criteria to accept or reject. One cannot judge as per some other criteria. Just like one cannot say poetry is bad because it does not teach philosophy or ethics because poetry is a different subject with a different purpose and goal. To denounce poetry because it is not philosophy or ideal is clearly absurd.

**Aristotle:** He was a polymath of the Classical Period in Ancient Greece. He was Plato’s student and dealt with subjects like physics, biology, psychology, linguistics, rhetoric, politics etc. Aristotle has been called "the father of logic” "the father of biology", "the father of political science", the "father of zoology", "the father of embryology", "the father of natural law", "the father of scientific method", "the father of rhetoric", "the father of psychology", "the father of realism", and "the father of meteorology”.

**Aristotle on Tragedy:** “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the 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; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.” (Poetics, P.10)

The writer of ‘tragedy’ imitates the serious side of life while a writer of ‘comedy’ imitates the shallow and superficial side of life. The tragic section in a drama should also be a complete piece with a proper beginning, middle and end. A beginning is that before which the audience or the reader does not need to be told anything to understand the story. Next follows the middle which is between the beginning and the end. The end is where the tragedy reaches the closure. It must in no way leave the impression that even after the end the action is still to be continued, or that before the action starts certain things remain to be known.

The play must be of a suitable length (magnitude) which means that it must have only necessary duration; neither be too long to tire the audience nor be too short to be unable to represent ineffectively.

The language used should be ornamental, embellished and beautified with harmony, rhythm, song and figures of speech. In case of the manner of imitation it should be action instead of narration.

**Different Constituents of Tragedy:** According to Aristotle, tragedy can be divided into six constituent parts – Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song and Spectacle.

**The Plot: *-*** It is the most important part of a tragedy which means the arrangements of sequences or incidents as per the events.

**Characters: -** Characters are men and women who serve to advance the action of the story. Eg: hero, heroine, villain etc.

**Thought: -** Thought refers to what the characters think or feel during the development of the plot. It is expressed through their speeches and dialogues.

**Diction: -** Diction refers to the medium of language or expression through which the characters reveal their thoughts and feelings. The diction should be ‘embellished with each kind of artistic element’.

**Song: -** The song is one of these embellishments.

**Spectacle: -** The decoration of the stage is the major part of the spectacle, including scenes of physical torture, loud lamentations, colourful clothing of characters etc. The Spectacle is theatrical effect presented on the stage.

**Catharsis:** The function/aim of tragedy is to allow the feelings of pity and fear ooze out of the audience as they engage with a tragedy. The emotions of pity and fear find a full and free outlet in tragedy. Their excess is purged and one reaches a stable countenance which refers to catharsis.

**Tragic Hero:** A good and prosperous figure who falls from grace due to his own fatal flaw or misjudgment of his circumstances. He is an intermediate kind of a person, a man not preeminently virtuous and just yet whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgement. Such a plot generates pity and fear in the audience. He must:

* Be a man of eminence and status (aristocratic)
* Should not be a villain or a wicked person
* Must be a good man
* Must have a fatal flaw that results in his fall.

**Hamartia:** It refers to fatal flaw or tragic flaw. It may be moral flaw, or a technical error/ error of judgement, ignorance, or even **arrogance (called hubris in Greek).** Because of this flaw, the protagonist falls from his own status and meets his doom.

**Peripeteia:** It refers to reversal of circumstances. It is the turning point in a drama after which the plot moves steadily to its denouement. As per Aristotle in his *Poetics*, it is the shift of the tragic protagonist's fortune from good to bad, which is essential to the plot of a tragedy.

**Anagnorisis:** It refers to the change from ignorance to knowledge. The best kind of anagnorisis accompanies peripeteia. That is, a reversal of fortune effects a discovery or vice versa. For instance, Oedipus' discovery of who his mother is affects a reversal of fortune from proud king to horrible disgrace. Same is the discovery of his true lineage by Karna on the eve of the Kuruskshetra war. Both Anagnorisis and Peripeteia, together help to arouse pity and fear that is characteristic of a tragedy.

**Horace:** He was a Satirist and a Latin lyric poet during the reign of Emperor Augustus. He was the author of *Ars Poetica* and also wrote elegant hexameter verses (Satires and Epistles) and caustic iambic poetry (Epodes). His central contribution to literary theory refers to his articulation of the purpose of poetry, or literature in general: it is dulce et utile, which means sweet and useful. By this he means that Poetry should simultaneously teach and delight the reader.

According to Horace, literature serves the didactic purpose (Plato’s main concern) and also provides pleasure (Aristotle’s idea). These two goals while of opposite in nature are not incompatible and Horace asserts that poetry is a useful teaching tool because it is pleasurable in nature. This pleasure makes poetry popular and interesting; using which various lessons can be imparted and learned. Horace considers nature as the primary source and inspiration for poetry just like Plato but he also declares that poets should apart from Nature also imitate other authors and their style. He establishes a middle ground between the importance of a poet knowing a literary tradition, respecting the inherited forms and conventions, as well as crafting new works through their own creativity.

**Longinus:** He is a Rhetorician and philosophical critic. He wrote the seminal critical work *On the Sublime.* Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Longinus does not bother with whether literature is good for society or not. Instead, he focuses on the reason as to which readers read literature. The reason is apparently sublimity.

In his work, Longinus defines the sublime as a kind of loftiness and excellence in language which raises the style of the ordinary language. In literature, sublimity is “the echo of greatness of spirit,” which refers to the moral and imaginative power of the writer that seeps into their work. Through this for the first-time greatness in literature is credited to the innate qualities of the writer rather than any quality of the art. Sublime literature is also something that is extremely memorable. As such it is lofty and excellent poetic creation with power to please, persuade and move the readers through the upliftment of their souls; it does not forcefully persuade or manipulate. It is instead an aesthetic upliftment of the soul that makes the reader feel ennobled. This powerful psychological effect on the reader transports them; the reader transcends to a different realm.

Longinus also provides some more specific criteria regarding sublime literature:

a) Sublime passages stimulate grand thoughts.

b) Exalted language uses passionate and emotional language.

c) Great writers are adept at using figures (poetic devices and the like).

d) Sublime writing involves appropriate and noble diction.

e) Such passages are also majestic in their structure (grammar and composition).

Longinus also provides five sources that can lead to the goal of sublimity: great thoughts, noble diction, dignified word arrangement, strong emotions and particular figures of speech or thoughts. In this, he also mentions two problems that rise up in trying to achieve this goal - puerility (or childishness), which ends in frigidity; and false sentiment.

Puerility refers to stiff writing which is almost laboured; written by a boring, scholarly type writer who adds every last poetic device he can think of. This kind of writing is showy without being truly emotional; almost frigid. The opposite extreme is a false sentimentality that is overly emotional and melodramatic. Neither of these characteristics are identification of true sublimity.