**ARISTOTLE**

**POETICS**

Like many important documents in the history of philosophy and literary theory, Aristotle's Poetics, composed around 330 BCE, was most likely preserved in the form of students' lecture notes. This brief text, through its various interpretations and applications from the Renaissance onward, has had a profound impact on Western aesthetic philosophy and artistic production.

The Poetics is in part Aristotle's response to his teacher, Plato, who argues in The Republic that poetry is representation of mere appearances and is thus misleading and morally suspect. Aristotle's approach to the phenomenon of poetry is quite different from Plato's. Fascinated by the intellectual challenge of forming categories and organizing them into coherent systems, Aristotle approaches literary texts as a natural scientist, carefully accounting for the features of each "species" of text. Rather than concluding that poets should be banished from the perfect society, as does Plato, Aristotle attempts to describe the social function, and the ethical utility, of art.

It is important to remember that Aristotle, and the Greek world as a whole, viewed art as essentially representational. Although we certainly have examples of Greek patterns and decorations that are "abstract," nothing indicates that the Greeks recognized such a category as "abstract art."

One of the most difficult concepts introduced in the Poetics is catharsis, a word which has come into everyday language even though scholars are still debating its actual meaning in Aristotle's text. Catharsis is most often defined as the "purging" of the emotions of pity and fear that occurs when we watch a tragedy. What is actually involved in this purging is not clear. It is not as simple as getting an object lesson in how to behave; the tragic event does not "teach us a lesson" as do certain public-information campaigns on drunk driving or drug abuse. Hans-Georg Gadamer's attempt to describe catharsis in his study Truth and Method can serve both as a working definition and an introduction into the problem of establishing any determinate definition of this elusive concept:

What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself [or herself] and his [or her] finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance. . . .To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he [or she], like everyone else, lives. (132)

The practical and formal concerns that occupy Aristotle in the Poetics need to be understood in relation to a larger concern with the psychological and social purpose of literature. Criticism, according to Aristotle, should not be simply the application of unexamined aesthetic principles, but should pay careful attention to the overall function of a any feature of a work of art in its context within the work, and should never lose sight of the function of the work of art in its social context.

The guide provided here takes you through each of the twenty-six books of the Poetics and attempts to give a summary of Aristotle's arguments. This resource should not be used as a substitute for a careful reading of Aristotle's text, but might help you to review and clarify your understanding of the terms, concepts, categories, and interrelationships that Aristotle introduces.