Aristotle's *Poetics*: Comparative Offerings to Homiletical Theory and Practice

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Abstract: Aristotle's mimetic understanding of plot as representational of reality invites preachers to examine how a sermon might also mediate the story of God with the everyday lives of congregants. *Mimetic* approaches to art emerging from antiquity provide critical insights for analyzing the poet's work, but also constructive guidance for training, crafting, and producing new pieces.[1] Subsequently, I have assigned *Poetics* the past three years asking students to reflect on the implications Aristotle's work has for preaching. A fresh reading of *Poetics* enables students to discover narrative patterns that enhance their plotting of sermons. The essay looks at *Poetics* through the lens of homiletics asking, "What is its relevance to the craft in contemporary times?" The essay does not explicate the translation, exegetical, or even historical context of Aristotle's fragmentary and incomplete description of the emerging field of the Greek tragedy. While there is a long and complex discussion of *Poetics* in the dramatic fields, the following essay is not intended to comment on that discussion.

Poetics. Much can be learned from a title. The word ποιητικός means "things that are created, crafted, or made." The poetic arts are not copies but are creative acts of translating realities into other mediums. When using words as the medium, by an act of the imagination, the maker of the art is rendering realities (or as defined below as "action") into language.

Aristotle's *Poetics* primarily talks about how the Greek tragedy represents the dramatic field at its height.[2] He believed analysis of an art in its "purest" form would lead to a better understanding of the larger field.[3] While Aristotle talks about other dramatic works like comedies and epics, his work is fragmentary and only supplements what he says about tragedy.[4]

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[1] *Mimetic* approaches are not the only options available. Literary criticism also offers rhetorical approaches that emphasize the intent of the art in relationship with the effect art has on the audience (delight, teach, persuade), expressive approaches that focus on the relationship of the artist's sensibilities and the art, and formal approaches that key on the internal aesthetics of the art. The art of writing sermons flourishes when preachers draw from the diversity of this rich tradition.

[2] *Poetics* was written in a specific cultural and historical context. While maybe the first, it is not the last word on drama or completely transferable to other contexts. If that is true of drama and the modern screenplay, how much more so are the limitations of applying it to homiletics? The rationale for applying *Poetics* to homiletics is given below. And my purposes are only suggestive as a pedagogical beginning point for the field.

[3] According to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics,* objects are analyzed according to four causes: (1) shape or formal cause, (2) composition or material cause, (3) manner of construction or efficient cause, and (4) purpose or final cause. *Poetics* analyzes the Greek tragedy through this four-cause method. In the above paper, I only identify the final cause.

[4] While Aristotle indicates he plans to say more about other fields, he does not. When Aristotle talks about epic, he explicitly says it will follow many of the same rules as for a tragedy (the difference about multiple actions will be discussed below). *As to that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single meter, the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its*

Additionally, he explicitly connects what he says about tragedy to include other artist like painters, musicians, sculptors, and dancers. In this essay I include preachers (*Poetics* I.4-5, II.3).[5]

Aristotle focuses primarily on the work of the playwright,[6] which he calls the poet or the "maker" of art (*Poetics* I.6-7). As a poet, the sermon script and its performance on Sunday represents the preacher's art. Aristotle emphasizes the making of the play, the creative labor of plot making, more than the play itself. More than half of *Poetics* is devoted to plot. Therefore, as a suggestive homiletic, my analysis is delimited to a discussion of plot and sermon writing.

The arts are distinguished in three ways (*Poetics* I.3): according to the action (*πράξις*) or life of the object imitated (plot, character, and thought); according to the medium employed (diction and song; the poet's words, the sculptor's stone, the preacher's words); and according to the manner or convention the art is displayed (spectacle, stage production, what actors say or do on a stage). Let's examine the first of these more closely.

The arts these poets make, by definition, represent an object by imitating the life and action of an object.[7] The arts are representations of the countless forms the world and human life may take. Aristotle defines representation of an object with the word "imitation" or "μίμησις" (*Poetics* I.1). Aristotle emphasizes that the objects of imitation are people in action and portray them as "better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are" (*Poetics* II.1; XXV.1).

"Action" is an essential term for understanding μίμησις. As Paul Ludwig notes,

> *When he refers to tragedy as an imitation of men in action, the reference is not primarily to an external or physical process. There are three actual objects of imitation: ήθη, which like the Latin 'mores' constitute the temper, the moral character, the native disposition; πάθη, which are the transient emotions, the passive conditions of the affections; and finally πράξεις,*

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unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it. It will differ in structure from historical compositions, which of necessity present, not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the events may be (*Poetics* XXIII.1). By extrapolation, I then also include sermons. There are obvious differences, but it is the similarities of *poetic imitation* in *narrative form* that invites my speculation.

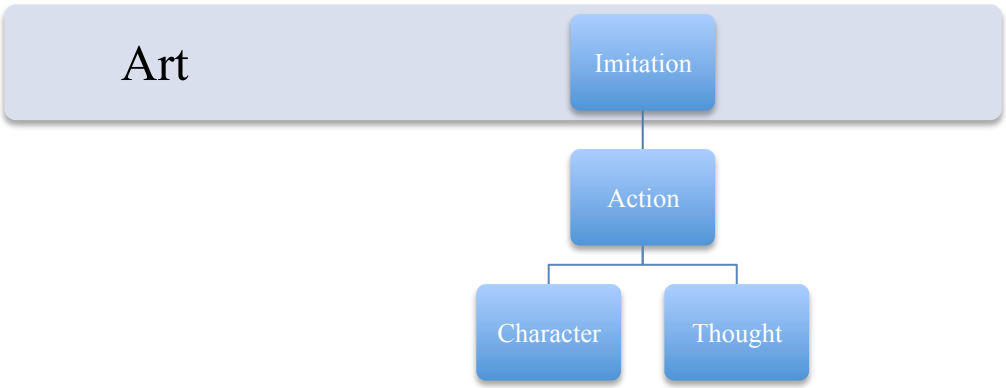
[5] The potential intersection of drama and religion is probable. Aristotle in *Politics, VIII* notes that the tragic play is analogous to religious rituals in their symbolic enactments, initiation processes, and socialization functions. See Francis Fergusson discussion of the origins of tragedy in the introductory essay, *Aristotle's Poetics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 37-39. Ferguson notes that in "Jane Ellen Harrison's *Themis, A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion, ... contains a note by* Gilbert Murray, 'The Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy,' (page 341)" that one of the options that emerged from religious rituals was "A Messenger. For this Pathos seems seldom or never to be actually performed under the eye of the audience. … It is announced by a messenger." Likewise, Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 4 includes "religious service" as a beginning point.

[6] Various synonyms include dramatist, screenwriter, writer, or scriptwriter.

[7] Aristotle differs from Plato's more idealist approach who saw art as a mere copy of reality or a copy of the appearance of things. Plato did not value art as a worthwhile activity and emphasized the work of artisans who made useful objects. Aristotle is also unlike philosophers who primarily focus on the representation of an idea. Aristotle was not an idealist but a materialist who saw everything in process and subject to change. Aristotle saw an object's form and function as essential to its being. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 28, 320, emphasizes the representation of the "universal" aspect of the object and how the universal comes to expression through human action. Plot is the heart and soul of such universal representation of the human condition.

> *or actions in their real inward sense as functions of the will. Thus 'action' includes everything that expresses the mental life or reveals a rational personality.*[8]

In *Poetics* VI, Aristotle details what he means by action. Actions (as represented in both divine and human life) arise out of both character and thought. Character represents the customary behavior or habits of a person and is seen in the choices they make (the protagonist). And the sum total of all character choices is the essential raw material for a plot. A person's "character disposes him [her] to act in certain ways, but he *actually* acts only in response to the changing circumstances of his life, and it is his thought (or perception) that shows him what to seek and what to avoid in each situation. Thought and character together *make* his actions."[9] "Action (*πράξις)* does not mean deeds, events, or physical activity: it means, rather, the motivation from which deeds spring. … [T]he whole working out of a motive."[10] Complete action therefore refers to rational purpose and intentional behavior emerging from who one is. For the purposes of preaching and given the definition of action that I pursue below, a sermon will re-present the intersection between the actions between the two characters, the divine and the human.[11]



While in *Poetics* the representation of an object is more broadly defined, I believe the above definitions allow for the following teleological delimitation. While Poetics describes the work of plays, it is in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* that he describes the good life worth pursuing (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1). Aristotle addressed the question how one should live, maintaining that a conversation between virtue (arête) and *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία; human flourishing; fully flourishing human being) lead to the telos of a good life that is doing well and living well especially as he understands the word "contemplation". Eudaimonia implies a telos of a positive and divine state of being that humanity is able to strive toward and possibly reach.

Analogically, Judeo-Christian teleological approaches to the goal or purpose of life revolve around various concepts including:

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[8] Paul Ludwig, "The Poet and the Preacher" *Theology Today* 2 (Oct 1945): 360.

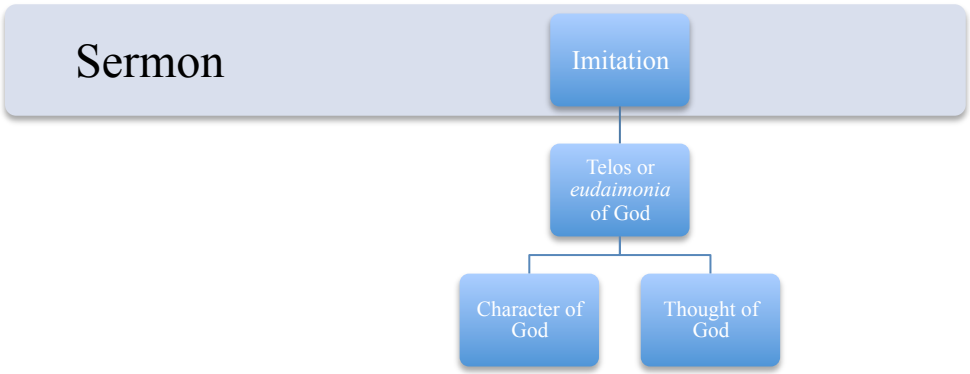
[9] Ferguson, 8.

[10] Ibid., 8-9. Ferguson goes on to describe a richer definition of action that includes three modes: doing, making, and contemplation. Or three forms of *ένέργεια: πράξις, ποίησις, and θεορία.* While *Poetics* primarily deals with *ποίησις* (making), Aristotle's other writings are inclusive of all three modes of action. Similarly, in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, an object's *έργον* (work) is constituent to an objects form, function, and *τέλοσ*.

[11] Access to the divine life comes by way of experience, the incarnation, and revelation.

1. *Tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם or תקון עולם): humanity's shared responsibility to heal, repair, and transform the world.
2. *Shalom* (שָׁלוֹם): seeking peace and welfare.
3. *Theosis/deification:* becoming like God or attaining union with God. Closely related to the doctrine of godliness is the call to Christians to be conformed to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:17-18; 2 Pet 1:4).
4. *New creation* or restoration of the world aligned with God's desired future for humanity. New creation theology begins with God's intended telos of the first creation. In relationship with the human, being created in God's image (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2; 9:6) connects with being transformed into the image of Christ who is the image of God (Col 1:28-29; 2:9-10).
5. And other theological concepts including *glorification, sanctification, holiness,* etc.
6. Furthermore, Christians understand the nature of virtue (a word Paul only uses once) differently than the Greeks. For Christians, the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love take center stage. Humility is no longer a vice but a window into understanding a kenotic God and a cruciformed life. And the *ecclesia* is a different way to understand the *polis* of God.

While preaching may agree with Aristotle and portray the realities of life as they are (*hamartia*) and the heartaches of life when people live lives that are "worse", a primary purpose in preaching is to call people to the life of God's intended future, Aristotle's "better than they are" and his "possible," "universal," and "credible" action. In other words, a sermon is a plotted action of the human imitation of the realities of God's life that God calls persons to share. The preacher is a maker of these plots that imitate the human telos of the action of God.[12]



So, how does Aristotle say art (or preaching) can imitate this flourishing life? In a word, plot.

[12] Ludwig, 353, suggests the same correlation for preaching when he says, "It is an expression of the 'universal'; that is, the universal element in human life. … What else is the task of the preacher than to offer to a world of 'men who are doing and suffering' the story of a God who is likewise 'doing and suffering' on our behalf? If the denominator of our job can be reduced at all, it is simply that we address ourselves to underlying universal factors in human life." Ludwig, 356, goes on to say, "The real point is that the poet describes what may happen, the historian only what has happened. Poetry is of a much higher order than history. If we were using a term more compatible to religion, we would speak of the prophetic quality of poetry, expressing itself in universals rather than particulars; presenting the permanent, catholic possibilities of human nature, rather than the story of the individual life; transforming facts into truth."

A play has six parts: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song (*Poetics* VI.7).[13] From the poet's perspective, the structure of the plot plays the pivotal role in the function of a play (*Poetics* VI.14b). Aristotle talks about how plot expresses what may happen, the possible (according to the law of probability or necessity as applied to the incidents),[14] the universal (not the particulars of history), and the credible (*Poetics* IX.1-6). In the narrative description of the life of God intersecting human life, plot is the imitation of the actions that unfold in terms of the possible, the universal, and the credible.

By plot, Aristotle assumes by definition the arrangement of the incidents or the episodes that occur in the unfolding narrative action (*Poetics* VI.6, 9). Every step in a good plot is connected by "but", "therefore", or other significant transition words or phrases. Plot creates a clean and logical line of action that is "whole", "complete", and of adequate "magnitude" (*Poetics* VII.2). By "whole", Aristotle means the play has a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning leads to something but does not follow something else. The middle follows something as some other

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[13] Since this essay is emphasizing plot, little will be said about the other five categories. Ethos or character is the second most important part of a play in view of the action of life that is represented. Character depends on the action that is portrayed in the plot. Character is the means by which we ascribe certain qualities to agents. Thought refers to the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in a given circumstance. Character and Thought help preachers speak the language of life. Character and Thought reveal moral purpose, showing what kinds of things a person should choose or avoid. Thought is third in importance and relates to the language of what is being said and best discern through Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (*Poetics* XIX.1). Thought includes every element to be produced by the speech (proof and refutation, excitation of the feelings, the suggestion of its importance or its opposite) (*Poetics* XIX.2).

Diction, the expression of the meaning in words, is fourth. "One branch of the inquiry treats of the Modes of Utterance. But this province of knowledge belongs to the art of Delivery and to the masters of that science" (*Poetics* XIX). Diction comprises eight elements: Phoneme, Syllable, Conjunction, Connective, Noun, Verb, Inflection, and Utterance (*Poetics* XX). Metaphor, analogy, and newly formed words are powerful tools to support plot. Metaphor has an eye for resemblances (*Poetics* XXI.4-9; XXII.9). The language should include the following parts in general: letter, syllable, connecting words, nouns, verbs, and sentence or phrase. In *Poetics* XXII, Aristotle says, "The clearest style is that which uses only current or proper words." *Poetics* XXI: The kinds of words we use matter, but occasionally we are allowed to reimagine the words or create them altogether. Common words are necessary, but metaphors and new words stir the imagination. Using common language in engaging ways is more compelling than using complex words in a plain way. Preachers are wordsmiths, and word choice, turn of phrase, and performance turns the mundane into the beautiful.

"Of the remaining elements Song holds the chief place among the embellishments" (*Poetics* VI.14). The chorus (or for my purposes, the larger liturgy) should be regarded as one of the actors and integral to the whole play. For drama the chorus is closer to the narrative voice. The chorus shares in the action and is not simply an interlude between episodes (*Poetics* XVIII.7; see also *Poetics* XII).

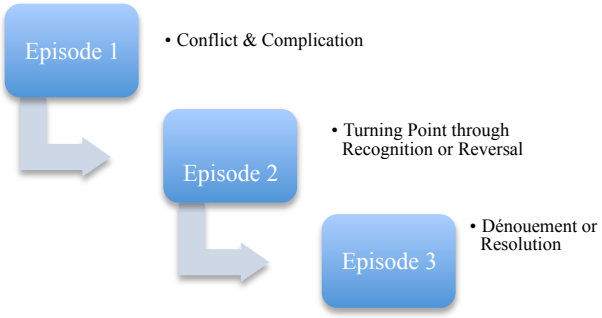
"The Spectacle has an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry." Spectacular, the presentation or performance on stage is last in giving meaning and depends more on the directors, actors, and stagers more than the poet. The "power" of the script is "felt" even apart from the performance (*Poetics* VI.14-19). He notes that spectacular works but is best done with plot so that even if the story is told without the aid of the eye, the one who hears it is moved (*Poetics* XIV.1-2). In other words, performance without plot, character, and thought is meaningless. Yes, some people love it for it "tickles their fancy" and it "scratches their itching ears" but when it stands alone, it has no lasting moral value (think *Transformer* movies; all dazzling pyrotechnics with little story). Unlike Aristotle's poet, preachers need to consider seriously diction and spectacle. However, I agree with him that they still play a lesser role in successful preaching.

[14] Aristotle talks about "probability and necessity" (cause and effect) about eleven times indicating the importance of logical flow, but maybe he is also describing what he often saw missing in the plays of his day.

thing follows it. The end naturally follows some other thing but has nothing following it (*Poetics* VII.2-3). In other words, there is a connected flow and logic between the episodes. The connecting transitions between the episodes carry the weight of movement from one scene to the next. Movement often follows the flow of cause and effect. By "complete", the movement also must flow towards a significant dénouement.[15]

Aristotle's "magnitude" refers to the size of the play. It is not too small or too big for the memory to take in. The imagination of the audience cannot be left empty or overloaded with details and facts. A well-written plot will be narrow and unified in its focus by revolving around a single action. The plot, therefore, will imitate one action that is organically connected (*Poetics* VIII.4, XXIII.1). For example, a sermon on fruits that talks about the fruits of the Spirit in Gal 5, the fruits of good works in Col 1, and the fruits of evangelism from John 4 contains multiple actions and violates the notion of a single plot. A topical sermon works when it focuses on a single action. A single pericope also may have multiple actions (and support multiple sermons). However, the sermon (whether topical or exegetical) should only preach one sermon with a single point of entry and a single point of view on any given Sunday.

Plot is best understood as beginning with complication and moving to a turning point in the story. Often a look at life and society all around us shows the antithesis of a flourishing life. The conflict of how life is and how life ought to be churns the emotions in our hearts. Only when we recognize an alternative can there be resolution (see catharsis below). From the turning point in the narrative, the plot moves to an unraveling of the plot (dénouement) (*Poetics* XVIII.1).[16] From complication to dénouement, the plot still represents only one single action. The unraveling of the story and complication of the story should carry the same weight within the plot so that you create "identity" (*Poetics* XVIII.3).



[15] "Everything in a plot strains forward anticipating the end, working toward its consummation. Sermons are not propelled by powerful beginnings; they are evoked by significant endings. … Sermons are not characterized by the unfolding of that which is already apparent, but by the anticipation of that which will be." Thomas G. Long, "Shaping Sermons by Plotting the Text's Claim Upon Us," in *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture* (ed. Don M. Wardlaw; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 88. Or, that which is tied (complication) must be untied (dénouement).

[16] I must confess that Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative,* (vol 1) trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) use of three mimetic activities (prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration) neatly fits into a three episode sermon where each episode represents the "action" and/or narrative of human life, God's life, and a proleptic life. See also Tom Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 46-50; and Lance Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

When writing a plot, first see the scene as a whole (from a distance). Knowing the whole of the plot will enable you to overcome inconsistencies and incoherencies. Therefore, sketch out the whole plot, then fill in the parts and amplify the details (*Poetics* XVII.1-5). Ludwig quotes no other than Edgar Allan Poe on this subject saying,

> [I}n his *Philosophy of Composition* wrote: 'Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation.

In other words, it is in the sketch work that the details gain significance and purpose. When discussing the plotting of a drama, Aristotle demonstrates that giving short descriptions of each episode can quickly summarize the *Odyssey*. These descriptions, when read together, provide a succinct outline of the epic. This can be a useful method for story-boarding a plot. If each move can be summarized in one short statement, and if when reading those statements together the sermon says what the preacher intends to say and functions the way a preacher intends the sermon to function, then the storyboard is likely decently constructed.

Avoid multiple plots or as Ludwig says, "a sermon within a sermon."[17] Aristotle contrasts the single plots of tragic plays with epic plays. Epic stories look at duration of time by telling all the possible plots within its purview. The problem is that these epic plots portray different actions. The only time you can use multiple plots in the same play is when they represent the same action forming a convergence or synergy that maintains the unity of the piece for the audience (*Poetics* XVIII.4; XXIII.1-2). Aristotle does not directly talk about the "present, past, or future" tense. When Aristotle talks about a single action in a particular time, I would add, "told in the present tense." Narratives have a backstory that reflects the specific experiences or contexts that have a direct bearing on what transpires in the present and plays out in the future. It is often the nature of the backstory that has an implied destination in the future, or the idea of 'narrative imperative.' Practically speaking this means when we preach in the Present tense, it's more than just capturing the vibrancy and immediacy of the moment, it's also about Present-Past and Present-Future: That is each move feels the push of the past and the pull of the future. There is no such thing [or should not be] a static moment in a sermon. Even explanation or argumentation should function to propel thought to an intended dénouement. While tragic plays, and by analogy sermons, speak often of past tense actions, their function is to speak to the assembled audience in the present tense in order to affect the future. In other words, the present tense of a sermon, while emerging from the past, calls the audience into a proleptic future. So, the sermon should have a single plot representing a single action in the present tense.

Aristotle drives home his commitment to single plots with a stern judgment. "Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (*Poetics* IX.10). For Aristotle, "unity of action" is not just about a story being about one thing, it must also have a flow from scene to scene, event to event, that is as well both probable and necessary. "Episodes are not forbidden; the correct procedure includes their use, but they are to be kept relevant … and brief. … The episodic plot, then, is one in which the episodes are irrelevant or inorganic … and outgrow their

[17] Ludwig, 363.

proper size: they are too numerous or too long in proportion to the rest of the play. In short, we can define an episodic play as one in which the episodes overshadow the plot."[18]

In the 21st century world of hypertext and multi-linear lives, an episodic life is becoming more prevalent.[19] Episodics resemble the private iTunes playlist as compared to a designed album by the artist. Often, only the creator of the playlist can make the connection from one song to the next. But a well-scripted album often follows narratival rules. On the one hand, I grant the possibility of needing sermons that speak the language of a new generation.[20] But on the other hand I contend, to break rules of plot and to avoid the label of "worst" Aristotle is so quickly to judge, a preacher should be well versed in the rules that are being intentionally broken. The sermonic plot should, like good drama, flow naturally from one move to the next, so that all the pieces work together to function in the way the preacher intends for the sermon to function. An episodic sermon would be one in which the sequence isn't necessary, where one idea moves to the other without obvious connection and in such a way that it doesn't add to the cumulative effect of the sermon. To overcome the pitfalls of an episodic plot while still connecting to new forms of how knowledge is processed and discerned, much could be learned from Hollywood where plot is sometimes successfully circumvented (sometimes not). Even then, the action the sermon intends to imitate should be intricately tied to the intent and affect of the sermon.

A key to understanding tragedy involves seeing how Aristotle talks about *hamartia* and its relationship to *pathos*. The character in plot will be displayed as a representation of human action (especially as it is being contrasted and in conflict with divine action). The character flaw the protagonist brings to the story is the point of contact that arouses the audience's emotion. The "final cause" or purpose of tragedy is to use the audience's connection (identification) to provide a way forward through emotions to enhance a flourishing life. Identification happens when the audience connects with the "familiar" concrete situations of life and persons more than some anonymous or distant event or person (*Poetics* XIV.4). And in those particulars, we will glimpse something common to us all (the universals).

Plots work best when they contain "reversal" of a situation or "recognition" of a situation that affects the emotion of the audience profoundly (*Poetics* XI.1-4).[21] And through the recognition of that which is represented, humans by nature learn, infer, and delight. Through recognition, humans not only feel but also embrace growth and change (*Poetics* IV.1-5). Change in the protagonist is closely related to change in the audience. *And to define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events,*

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[18] Else, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 325.

[19] See the discussion of episodic culture in Long's *Preaching from Memory to Hop*e, 12, 14. For a discussion of hyperlink scripts or multi-linear storytelling (think the movie *Crash* or *Memento*) see http://gointothestory.blcklst.com/2012/11/reader-question-how-to-approach-writing-a-story-with-multiple-main-characters.html. See also Linda Aronson, "Parallel Narration," in *The 21st-Century Screenplay: A Comprehensive Guide to Writing Tomorrow's Films* (Australia: Silman-James, 2011), 165ff.

[20] By looking at poetry as a fixed and objective form, Aristotle fails to note the ways in which art often progresses precisely by overturning the assumed laws of a previous generation.

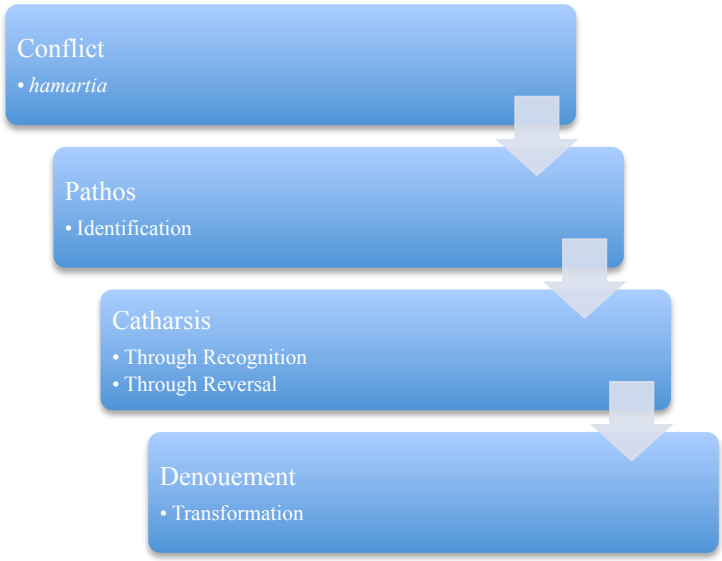
[21] For example, in *The Sixth Sense*, the audience identifies with the protagonist's fear and confusion. When the recognition occurs, it is both surprising and cathartic producing a change in the protagonist and the audience.

according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad (*Poetics* II.1). Change, either positive or negative, must occur.[22]

Additionally he states,

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is a serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in a 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 of these emotions (*Poetics* VI.2).

Emotion (often reduced to "pity" or "terror" in *Poetics* [or at least to that range of emotions]) is the feelings that arrest the mind in the presence of whatsoever is constant in the human experience and unites us with the human experience. Sometimes as we encounter art we even feel these emotions physically (our stomach churns, our heart races, our face flushes). The "purgation" or "catharsis" or even the satisfaction of our emotions (resolution, wonder, and peace) happens when we identify with the action imitated on stage or in the script.



Aristotle says the best plots happen when the affect produced comes by the combination of the inevitable (cause and effect) and the unexpected (surprise) (*Poetics* IX.11). As sermons re-present action, identification is also achieved when there is some distance that creates a safe spot for congregants to experience vicariously what is re-presented (overhearing the Gospel). Through identification the sermon can achieve its intended function leading to catharsis and transformation for the listener. Now the audience is ready for resolution and a proleptic dénouement imaginatively gives them a new way of being in the world.

Conclusion:

The above exploration of Aristotle's *Poetics* proposes that the preacher plot sermons that

[22] Recognition can be achieved by using "signs", "a turn of an incident", "invented at will", "depends on the memory" by awakening a feeling, "a process of reasoning", and from "the incidents themselves" or natural means (*Poetics* XVI.2-8).

represent (μίμησις) the human and divine life (both object and action) so that the performance of the text fosters transformation. The sermon is a plot of the representation of the divine life designed to create human identification in order to realize transformation.

While novel to the pedagogy of preaching, nothing in the above essay proposes new homiletical theory or practice. Often, many homiletical works have eclectically borrowed from Aristotle. In relationship to *Poetics,* most previous works refract Aristotle through Ricoeur or other secondary sources. However, asking students to read *Poetics* unfiltered and consider its implications for homiletics can create distance from the sermon writing task and result in the articulation of "universals" that are also "possible" and "credible". With an image driven Hollywood generation, using *Poetics* as an entry point with first time preaching students also opens conversations with current narratival homiletical musings. Students not only make connections with their own experiences, the narratival logic of Aristotle enables them to see preaching in a new way.