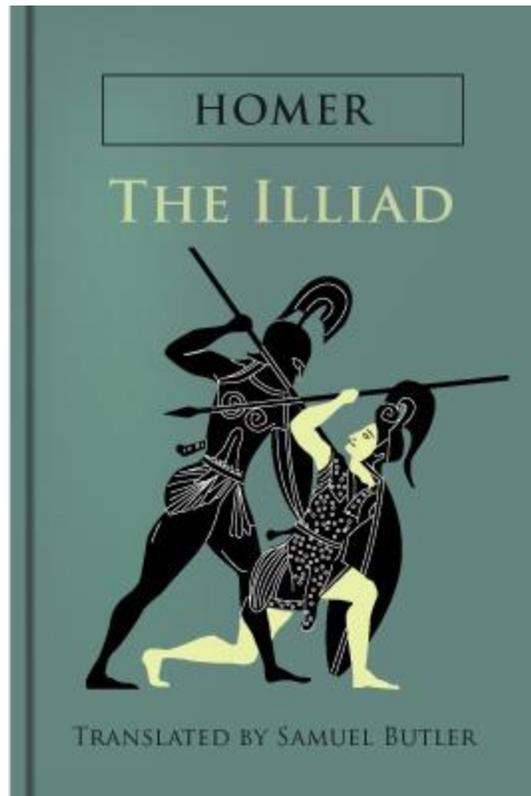


The Classicists' Myopia and the Neo-Classicists' Foresight in Perceiving the Superiority of Epic over Tragedy: A Critical Survey

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to present before the readers the relative merits of epic and tragedy that are handed down the timeline and enable the readers to establish the superiority of epic over tragedy. In order to render justice to the objective aimed at, the paper traces and presents to the readers a critical survey of the variegated critical aspects of the critics such as Plato (427-347 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), John Dryden(1631-1700), Joseph Addison (1672-1719), and Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784).

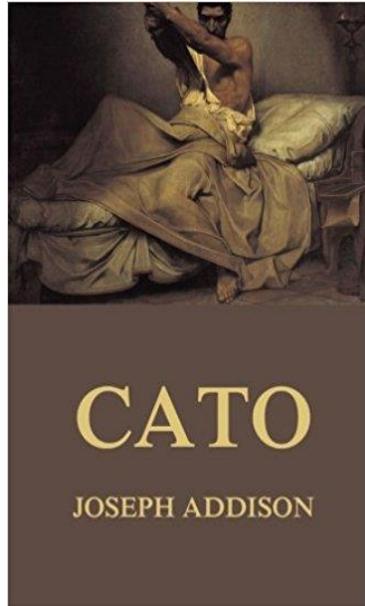
Keywords: *Republic*, *Poetics*, epic vs tragedy, classicist myopia, neo-classicist

Introduction

Scholars agree on the fact that the art of criticism began in ancient Greece in the Age of Pericles which was the golden age of remarkable creative and intellectual awakening (Wimsatt & Brooks 3-5). In Europe, the art of criticism began in ancient Greece. The exact time cannot be stated. But in the 4th or 5th century B.C., it positively attracted the attention of the scholars. Scholars and learned men discoursed freely on Religion, Philosophy, Morality, Politics, Art and Literature. Though scholars like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates and Aristophanes lived during this age, criticism was not systematic before Plato. Literary Criticism was developed into a systematic study first by Plato and followed by Aristotle and others. Plato's *Republic* and in Aristotle's *Poetics* are known for their scientific observation and analysis. They draw examples and conclusions from Greek literature in order to apply them to all literatures. The purpose of their writing was to sort out principles for making a good writer.

Constituent Components of Epic and Tragedy

The reader can come across the following observations on epic and tragedy from Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Addison's *Tragedy and The Spectator* and Johnson's *Rambler*, *Rasselas*, the *Preface to Shakespeare* and the *Lives of Poets*.



1. Metre

Experience has shown that the heroic hexameter is the right metre. Were anyone to write a narrative poem in any other metre or in several metres, the effect would be wrong. The hexameter is the most sedate and stately of all metres and therefore admits of rare words and metaphors more than others, and narrative poetry is itself elaborate above all others. The iambic and the trochaic tetrameter are lively, the latter suits dancing and the former suits real life. (Aristotle's *Poetics*, Section 1459b)

Thus, epic poetry agrees with tragedy only insofar as it is a metrical representation of heroic action. But it has a single metre and narrative in form that makes it different from tragedy, which is dramatic in form. By compelling an epic to confine itself only to heroic metre and by offering unlimited liberty to tragedy to adopt any metre, Aristotle has exercised his bias in favour of tragedy.

2. Length

Tragedy is only a fragment of epic poetry. That is why it is short in length and falls within a single revolution of the sun or slightly exceeds that. Epic is not a fragment of tragedy. That is why it is lengthy and unlimited in time.

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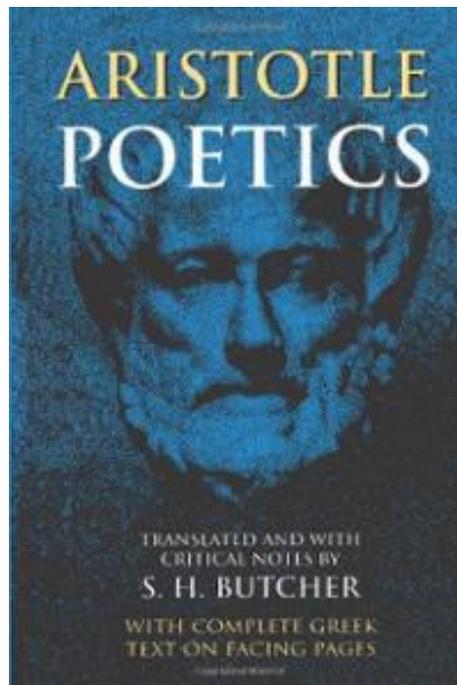
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Epic differs from tragedy in the length of the composition and in metre. ... Epic has a special advantage which enables the length to be increased, because in tragedy it is not possible to represent several parts of the story as going on simultaneously, but only to show what is on the stage, that part of the story which the actors are performing; whereas, in the epic, because it is narrative, several parts can be portrayed as being enacted at the same time. If these incidents are relevant, they increase the bulk of the poem, and this increase gives the epic a great advantage in richness as well as the variety due to the diverse incidents; for it is monotony which, soon satiating the audience, makes tragedies fail. (Aristotle's *Poetics*, Section 1459b)

3. Plot and Unity of Action

Even though some of the constituent parts of tragedy are the same with epic, the components such as song and spectacle are assigned only to tragedy and not to epic poetry. Consequently, tragedy is endowed with all the elements of epic poetry and epic poetry is denied song and spectacle (Aristotle's *Poetics*, Section 1447a).



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He also points out that “An epic must be ‘simple or complex,’ or else turn on ‘character’ or on ‘calamity.’ The constituent parts of epic and tragedy are the same except the components of song and spectacle in a tragedy (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1459b). But poets have converted these disadvantages which arise because of the series of rules to be adhered to into advantages. Thus, Aristotle has endowed tragedy with a single plot, which is very easy to deal with; whereas, he has endowed epic with a complex plot, which is very difficult to deal with.

With regard to Unity of Action, Aristotle praises Homer for having practised unity of action in the plot of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1451a). In spite of its complex plot and unlimited length, epic poets do endow their plots with unity of action. The suitable example is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

4. Character

Concerning delineation and depiction of characters, Aristotle recommends that the character should be good, appropriate, life-like, and consistent (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1454a). Aristotle not only praises Homer for having depicted the character of Achilles in *Iliad* and Odysseus in *Odyssey* but also Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the Greek Tragedians, for having depicted the character of *The Suppliants*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Heracles*. Aristotle wants to reiterate the point that the character depicted should be true to life and yet more beautiful (idealized or ennobled).

All these are used by Homer for the first time, and used well. Of his poems, he has made the one, the *Iliad*, a ‘simple’ story turning on ‘calamity,’ and the *Odyssey* a ‘complex’ story—it is full of ‘discoveries’—turning on character. Besides this, they surpass all other poems in diction and thought. There must, however, be nothing inexplicable in the incidents, or, if there is, it must lie outside the tragedy. (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1454b)

The reader should remember the fact that though William Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are life-like, they are not good, appropriate and consistent.

5. Thought

Epic and tragedy should deal with sublime thought.

6. Diction

With regard to diction, Aristotle recommends that it should refer to “(1) things as they were; (2) things as they are; (3) things as they are said to be; (4) things as they seem to be; (5) things as they ought to be” (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1461b). He also warns the writer that “Too brilliant diction frustrates its own object by diverting attention from the portrayal of character and thought” (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1460b).

Furthermore, Aristotle exercises his bias in favour of tragedy as follows:

... epic appeals to a cultivated audience which has no need of actor’s poses, while tragedy appeals to a lower class. If then it is vulgar, it must obviously be inferior.

... Moreover, tragedy fulfils its function even without acting, just as much as epic, and its quality can be gauged by reading aloud. So, if it is in other respects superior, this disadvantage is not necessarily inherent. Secondly, tragedy has all the elements of the epic—it can even use the hexameter— and in addition a considerable element of its own in the spectacle and the music, which make the pleasure all the more vivid; and this vividness can be felt whether it is read or acted (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1462a).

Another point is that it attains its end with greater economy of length. The plot of an epic is spread over a long period. The art of the epic has less unity. It means an epic is made up of several separate actions. But one epic can make several tragedies. Epic has a certain magnitude. And yet, the better of the two is tragedy.

... (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Section 1462b).

Based on the afore-cited Aristotelian poetics, the similarities and dissimilarities between epic and tragedy are crystallized and enlisted as follows:

Points of similarities between the structure of the plot and content are applicable to both

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| epic and tragedy. |
| a. Plato says that all rules that apply to Poetry apply equally to Drama (Prasad 5). |
| b. According to Aristotle, as Epic is an imitation, it resembles Tragedy. |
| c. It has either complex or simple plot. |
| d. Four of its parts are also the same: plot, character, thought, and diction/ language/ dialogue. |
| e. It has the unity of action, tragic happenings and produces cathartic effect. Epic is not curtailed with the rules of three Unities such as place, time and action. It does transcend all these limitations. Since epic does not come under the limitation of time, it does not delude the readers and the listeners. |
| f. Epic has a complication, a turning point and a denouement. |
| g. Epic, as the noblest product of mankind, softens pride and soothes affliction. The tragic hero is a virtuous man who struggles in misfortune (Prasad 131). |
| h. Epic teaches the most important truths of life. |
| i. The incidents and character should be necessary and probable. |
| j. The protagonist is overcome by some superior force or circumstance; excites terror or pity. |
| k. The character is of higher and nobler type. |
| l. The hero embodies the values of the civilization. |
| m. It shows divine intervention on human affairs. |
| n. The structure of epic should be modelled on dramatic principles of tragedy. |
| o. It should have proper beginning, middle and end. It should have complete organic whole. |
| p. The characters and incidents of an Epic are fictional and should be presented in a way that would captivate the interest of the readers and the spectators. They should convince the audience that they are true. |

| Points of Dissimilarities between the Forms and Contents of Epic and Tragedy | |
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| Epic | Tragedy |
| 1. The plot of an Epic is constructed on dramatic principles like that of a Tragedy | 1. Tragedy is the most developed form of Poetry. Poetry, Comedy, Epic, Lyric and |

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| (Potts 51-52). | Balled are parts of tragedy. |
| 2. It has unity in its plot. In this regard, epic is given more freedom than tragedy. | 2. It has unity in its plot. In this regard, tragedy is not given more freedom than epic. |
| 3. Epic imitates life by narration. It communicates through reading and recitation. | 3. Tragedy imitates life by its dramatic action and speech. It communicates through action, events and dialogue. |
| 4. Its length is not restricted. Though it is longer in length than tragedy, its pleasure is spread over a long time and very much diluted. It must be written only in heroic metre (Potts 52). It imparts an implausible air to incredible fiction (Potts 55). | 4. Its length is restricted. It is shorter in length than epic but grapples interest of the audience. It can be written in different metres (Potts 52). It imparts an implausible air to incredible fiction (Potts 55). |
| 5. John Dryden affirms that epic's lengthy mode of expression is a boon rather than a bane because epic includes everything and it succeeds to make a deep impression. | 5. Dryden affirms that tragedy's shorter mode of expression is a hindrance rather than an aid because in order to limit itself to the prescribed length, tragedy has to leave out much, and it fails to make a deep impression as epic (Prasad 117). |
| 6. It doesn't make use of song and spectacle. | 6. It makes use of song and spectacle. |
| 7. Owing to its narrative form, it can depict many events simultaneously. | 7. It cannot show on stage whatsoever happens. |
| 8. Through its varying episodes, epic can produce grandeur of effect, avoid satiety, and promote interest. | 8. Though it introduces varying episodes, it cannot avoid satiety and promote interest. |
| 9. Poets have lot of scope for the use of the improbable or the marvelous because it is pleasing. It can be perceived by imagination and it passes unnoticed. So, | 9. Playwrights cannot use the improbable or the marvelous because there is no scope for it. It can be perceived by the eyes of the spectators. So it appears |

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| the poets should prefer probable impossibilities. | absurd, and the playwrights should prefer probable impossibilities. |
| 10. The epic mode of imitation is not higher than that of the tragedy. Moreover, the epic imitation has less unity. | 10. The tragic mode of imitation is higher than that of the epic. |
| 11. Epic does not have all the elements of tragedy in it. Though limitless in length, it appeals to a more refined readers and listeners without theatrical aid but through imagination. | 11. Tragedy too appeals to cultivated audience when merely read. When it is performed on stage, though limited in length, it affords greater pleasure. So, it attains its end more perfectly than the epic (Prasad 23 – 25). Tragedy is the highest art because it has all the epic elements. It can make use of epic metre also. Tragedy as an art fulfils its specific function in a better manner than epic poetry (Prasad 24-25, Potts 59 – 61). |
| 12. The mode of imitation may have lesser unity of time, place and action. Enforcing the three unities is less possible in the lengthy epic. | 12. The mode of imitation may have greater unity of time, place and action. Enforcing the three unities is more possible in the shorter tragedy. |
| 13. Poets have a lot of scope for the use of the improbable because it cannot be perceived by imagination of the reader and listener. It is pleasing, and therefore, it passes unnoticed. | 13. Playwrights do not have a lot of scope for the use the improbable because it can be perceived by the eyes of the spectators. So it appears absurd and so the playwrights should prefer probable improbabilities. |

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| <p>14. Aristotle praises Homer, the epic poet, more than Sophocles, the Greek tragedian. Yet, he assigns epic a lower rank.</p> | <p>14. While praising Homer more than Sophocles and arguing that there is no difference between epic and tragedy, he assigns tragedy a higher rank than it deserves.</p> |
| <p>15. John Dryden says that it is entirely the poet's work and so the poet alone deserves the credit for it.</p> | <p>15. It is the playwright's work as much as the actors', and so the playwright alone does not deserve the credit for it (Prasad 117-118).</p> |
| <p>16. In an epic poem, scenes hateful to sight or putting a heavy strain upon the readers' and listeners' power of belief are reported rather than acted. The epic can portray many things like big armies through pen-pictures and it will be very effective.</p> | <p>16. In a tragedy, scenes hateful to sight or putting a heavy strain upon the spectators' power of belief are acted and big armies that cannot be shown on stage are reported. So the play won't be very effective (Prasad 108, 117-118).</p> |
| <p>17. Readers can leisurely read and relish many subtleties of aesthetics that are embedded in the epic.</p> | <p>17. Viewers cannot leisurely witness the play and they cannot relish many subtleties of aesthetics that are embedded in a play during the enactment of it (Prasad 117-118).</p> |
| <p>18. Mere reading and listening of the epic alone is not a sure test of its merit. If the epic is not well-read, well-rendered and carefully listened, even a worthy epic may miserably fail to create the desired impact on the minds of the readers and the listeners.</p> | <p>18. Mere performance of the play is not a sure test of its merit because even a worthless play may succeed in the theatre, if it is well-acted and well-presented through technical devices (Prasad 117-118).</p> |
| <p>19. Its action is great, its structure is more elaborate, its characters are more dignified, its language is more exalted, its episodes are more varied, and its effects are more</p> | <p>19. Its action is great, its structure is not more elaborate, its characters are not more dignified, its language is not more exalted, its episodes are not more</p> |

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| <p>lasting (Prasad 118).</p> | <p>varied, and its effects are not more lasting.</p> |
| <p>20. In <i>The Apology for Heroic Poetry</i>, Dryden points out that the style of the epic is heightened from that of natural speech, just as its action and characters are above those of common life. In order to do this, the poet makes use of the various rhetorical devices such as metaphor, hyperbole, disordered narrative and the like. He also says that the epic has sublime subjects which are expressed in the sublimest manner. It is this sublimity which has aroused a lasting interest for the epics (Prasad 118-119). Thus, Dryden finds epic superior to tragedy.</p> | <p>20. Dryden's views on tragedy are based on Aristotle's definition of tragedy. According to Aristotle, tragedy evokes fear and pity and purges of those two emotions in our minds (Prasad 112; Baldick 32). According to Paul de Rapin's explanation, pride and want of commiseration are the prominent vices of mankind. In order to cure man of these two vices, the inventors of tragedy have chosen to work upon the passions namely fear and pity. In other words, fear cures man's pride, and pity cures man's want of commiseration or hardness of heart. To Aristotle, the ends of tragedy are pity and fear. But Dryden claims that the true ends of tragedy are the punishment of vice and reward of virtue. Pity and fear are only means to make man love virtue and hate vice by showing the rewards of one, and punishments of the other. He doubts the power of tragedy in bringing purgation within a few hours (Prasad 112-113). Thus, Dryden finds tragedy inferior to epic.</p> |
| <p>21. Joseph Addison exhibits and vindicates John Milton's greatness in the light of the</p> | <p>21. As for tragedy, Joseph Addison was influenced by Aristotle, Horace and the</p> |

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| <p>ancient writers of epic. The reader can observe in <i>Paradise Lost</i> “all the greatness of plan, regularity of design, and masterly beauties which we discover in Homer and Virgil” (Bond 85).</p> | <p>French neoclassicists. He defines tragedy as the noblest product of mankind, because it softens pride and soothes affliction. The tragic hero, he says, is a virtuous man struggling with misfortune (Prasad 131).</p> |
| <p>22. With regard to the plot and characterization of <i>Paradise Lost</i>, Joseph Addison observes that the fable or plot of <i>Paradise Lost</i> conforms to Aristotle’s view that it should be single, complete and great. It is single because it deals with only one action i.e. the fall of man. It is complete because it has a beginning, middle and an end, i.e. the conspiracy in hell, its execution on earth, and its punishment by heaven. It is great because it comprises the fate of whole mankind, and not of just a single person or nation (Bond 62-64). On the whole, it is a great work of art and it closely follows the classical models namely the <i>Iliad</i> and the <i>Aeneid</i> (Prasad 133).</p> | <p>22. Addison wants violent deaths to be reported rather than presented on stage (Prasad 131).</p> |
| <p>23. Literary craft, according to Joseph Addison, is not a mere matter of rules. Sometimes, rules even hamper fine writing. There is more beauty in the works of a great genius, who is ignorant of the rules of art, than the works of a little genius, who knows and observes those rules (Prasad 133).</p> | <p>23. Shakespeare’s plays, in spite of violating the rules, are appealing more than the works of any playwright who has observed all the rules (Prasad 133).</p> |

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| 24. According to Dr. Johnson, an epic poet deserves the first praise of genius because to write an epic, the poet should have all the powers, which are singly sufficient for other compositions. | 24. In order to write a tragedy, the playwright need not have all the powers, which are singly sufficient for other compositions. |
| 25. According to Dr. Johnson, the epic poet exalts narration and description into a noble art and animates it by introducing dramatic energy and diversifies its effect by retrospection and anticipation and puts them to poetic use through imagination. | 25. The playwright exalts narration and description into a noble art and animates it by introducing dramatic energy and diversifies its effect by retrospection and anticipation and puts them to theatric use. |
| 26. The subject of an epic poem is an event of great importance (Ramaswami and Sethuraman 228-229) and Milton wrote <i>Paradise Lost</i> when he was blind and this marks the greatness of the poet and the epic poem (Prasad 146-147). | 26. In Dr. Johnson's opinion, only a few playwrights, such as Shakespeare, have succeeded in presenting a faithful mirror of manners and of life (Enright and Chickera "Preface to Shakespeare", 135). |

Based on the arguments of Plato, Aristotle, John Dryden, Joseph Addison and Dr. Samuel Johnson in connection with the relative merits of epic and tragedy, the reader can arrive at the following points:

| Dissimilarities between Epic and Tragedy | |
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| 1. An epic is a long narrative poem which recounts in elevated style the deeds of a legendary hero, especially one originating in oral folk tradition. | 1. Tragedy developed into an art-form from the improvisation of the leader of choral dithyrambs-hymns sung and danced in praise of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. |
| 2. Epic is a heroic drama and it is presented in the form of a long narrative poem. | 2. Tragedy is a heroic drama and it is presented in a short dramatic form. |

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| 3. The setting is vast, covering many nations or the world. It refers to the universal. | 3. The setting is not vast, not covering many nations or the world or the universe. It refers to single place and the individual. |
| 4. It portrays less vulgar or unrefined elements. | 4. It portrays more vulgar or unrefined elements. |
| 5. It pleases refined audience. | 5. It pleases all sort of audience. |
| 6. The epic and tragedy are different in length. The greater size of an epic allowed it more grandeur and dignity in the treatment of its incidents. | 6. Tragedy is more concentrated, simple and compact. For this reason, its size is much more limited than that of the epic. It is based on the principle that it is short enough to be grasped as an artistic whole. |
| 7. Each and every incident is highly elaborate and elevated. | 7. Incidents in tragedy must necessarily be shortened and more concentrated. |
| 8. The elements of music/rhythm and spectacle are missing. | 8. The elements of music/rhythm and spectacle are included. |
| 9. The epic allows greater scope for the marvellous within the action. | 9. Tragedy can't make too much use of the marvellous within the action. |
| 10. Epic can relate the marvellous because it is not going to be represented on stage before the eyes of the spectators. So, it is left to the imagination of the readers. | 10. But in tragedy, it is not possible to a greater extent. |
| 11. The epic uses the mode of narration. | 11. The tragedy uses the mode of dramatic presentation. |
| 12. Vividness of character is missing in epic. | 12. Vividness of character is easy to achieve in Tragedy. |
| 13. Epic can be read, visualized, enjoyed and experienced by the literates. The illiterates can only listen to the reading of it, enjoy and experience by visualizing it. | 13. Tragedy can be read, witnessed, enjoyed and experienced (Prasad 117) both by the literates and the illiterates. |
| 14. It is longer than the tragedy in length and | 14. It is shorter than epic in length and so it |

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| yet it can grapple the interest of the audience over a long period of time. | can grapple the interest of the audience only for a short time. |
| 15. Since epic cannot be witnessed, it cannot offer visual appeal directly. It can impart unlimited impact because it is coupled with the imagination of the readers and the listeners. | 15. Since tragedy can be witnessed, it can offer pleasure through visual appeal directly and also through reading and listening to it indirectly. It can impart only limited impact because it is not coupled with the imagination of the audience, the readers and the listeners. |
| 16. Epic pleases the readers and the listeners of all countries of all times. | 16. The tragedy that pleases the audience, the readers and the listeners of one country need not please the audience, the readers and the listeners of another country. |
| 17. The poet, through the vivid narration and description, is able to achieve verisimilitude by encouraging the readers and the listeners to imagine. It unleashes unlimited capacity to the human mind to visualize anything beyond the expectation and belief of the writer. It transforms the acts of reading and listening not only into pleasurable but also pressureable experiences. | 17. The playwright, by depicting the scene or character on stage, does not encourage the viewers to visualize the scene or character on their own. He makes witnessing a play into a pressureable and not a pleasurable experience for the onlookers. |
| 18. Anything that is invisible entices one's attention and the unfamiliarity of the thing breeds liking. The scenes and the characters that are delineated through description and the events that are narrated in the epic do not satiate and cloy the aesthetic appetite of the readers and the listeners; rather they encourage them to read and listen to the | 18. As the proverb which says, "Familiarity breeds contempt," the scenes and the characters that are presented do satiate and cloy the aesthetic appetite of the onlookers and discourage them to witness the play further. It does not create room for the onlookers to imagine and visualize the events that are depicted |

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| beauty of the things that are narrated and described forever and ever. | on stage. |
| 19. Any single epic makes several tragedies (Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i> , Section 1462b). | 19. Tragedy cannot certainly contribute to several epics. In this case, tragedy is inferior to epic. |
| 20. Epic appeals to a cultivated audience. | 20. Tragedy appeals to a lower class (groundlings). If so, it is vulgar, it must obviously be inferior. |
| 21. According to Dryden, only a more gifted poet can write an epic, and that is why there are only a few epic poets in the world of whom again a few have succeeded (Prasad 118). | 21. Even a mediocre playwright can write a tragedy, and that is why there are many tragedians in the world of whom again many have succeeded. |
| 22. Dryden, Addison and Dr. Johnson find epic superior to tragedy. | 22. Dryden, Addison and Dr. Johnson find tragedy inferior to epic. |

Conclusion

From the afore-said points, the readers of the paper can clearly understand the fact that Aristotle assigns Tragedy a higher rank than it deserves. Aristotle's theories are primarily based on the Greek literature of his own times. He drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides. Aristotle deals more with the form of literary type than their (epic and tragedy) content, and lays down rules only for forms. Therefore, his concepts of epic and tragedy are lopsided and they are not based on objective evaluation of their relative merits (Prasad 23).

The readers of this paper can also understand the fact that Aristotle's treatment of epic is slight compared to his treatment of tragedy. The concept of the superiority of epic over tragedy is established based on the similarities and dissimilarities between the structure of the plot and content of epic and tragedy. It is successfully done by highlighting the limitations of Aristotle's critical theories objectively. The arguments are based on John Dryden's arguments against Aristotle's treatment of epic and tragedy. Joseph Addison's views on *Paradise Lost* and on the

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aim of writing it are exhibited to vindicate John Milton's greatness in the light of the ancient writers of epic. The greatness of Homer and Virgil with regard to their plan, regularity of design, and masterly beauties can also be discovered in Milton. Addison's definition and views on tragedy are also discussed. Dr. Samuel Johnson's views on epic and drama are enlisted. The paper enumerates the points and does establish the superiority of epic over tragedy by rendering apt arguments in the form of a critical survey.

From the above-mentioned arguments, it is proved beyond any doubt that epic (Heroic poem) is the greatest work of human nature. Therefore, it can be concluded with the words of Isaac Newton that if the Neo- Classicists are able to perceive the superiority of Epic over Tragedy, it is "by standing on the shoulders" of the Classicists.

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