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ENG 271

18 April 2018

In part 6 of “Poetics,” Aristotle describes good tragedy as “a representation of serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, (...) represented by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions” (Aristotle Ch. 6). Many modern plays, movies, TV shows, and other forms of entertainment have carried forward these basic characteristics, though some aspects may come in new forms. The 1989-1998 sitcom, *Seinfeld*, based on real-life comedian Jerry Seinfeld, is an unexpected example of just how suited “Poetics” is to many successful “tragic” narratives. Although the show *Seinfeld* is a comedy, it represents nearly all of Aristotle’s qualifications for a good tragedy, including characteristics of plot; character; reasoning; diction; song; and spectacle, as outlined in “Poetics,” proving that his ideas on good entertainment still hold true thousands of years later and many miles away.

The **plots** of most individual episodes of *Seinfeld* are “representation[s] of serious, complete action which has magnitude” (Aristotle Ch. 6) While a show that is meant to be humorous doesn’t strike one immediately as serious content, it can be relatively serious within the context of the show. In S5 E4 - “The Sniffling Accountant,” all of the members of the group are facing situations which would not be funny to the person experiencing them. George has been out of work and living at home, but gets a lead on a job as a bra salesman; Elaine is ruining another relationship with “the perfect man,” who got her attention by “feeling her material;” and

the main storyline features Jerry and Kramer's worry that their accountant, the person who handles all of their money, is on drugs ("The Sniffing Accountant"). The content of the show is serious when removed from the comedic diction and spectacle and all of it is handled and wrapped up in a 22-minute episode.

Some could argue that, even if the incidents are serious to the players involved, they are trivial and therefore do not hold much magnitude. It is true this episode holds just a couple of the conflicts and traumas the group deals with, but they are not trivial. Based on the reception of the show, it is considered a classic at this point; it is reasonable to believe that viewers are commiserating with the gang on a large scale. Many issues of the time period, big and small, are dealt with within the show. Part of a good plot is also considering your characters in order for them to execute "plausible actions." Some dramatization of emotion takes place for the characters, but that is how the plot is able to realistically move forward and it makes the events and character interaction entertaining to watch. Though it may not be the most probable outcome for an adult relationship to end over a lack of exclamation points, it is plausible.

Aristotle's idea of plot as a means of representing life and action, rather than people also holds true in this iconic TV show. We get to know the characters and their personalities are amusing, but the emphasis on the "situational" in situational comedy show the importance of plot in each of the episodes. Although the gang manages to dig themselves some deep holes, they are often responding to a difficult situation that they have been put into or to something that has happened to them, thus the name "Situational Comedy." Almost all of the issues that arise can be traced back to a source outside of their group, such as a parent, a boss, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or an altogether stranger.

The plot of each *Seinfeld* episode follows Aristotle's plot structure qualifications as well. Each show begins with a **prologue**, Jerry's epigraph-esque stand-up segments where he discusses a topic similar to that of the coming episode, but doesn't directly mention the events of the episode. Then follows the actual episode, or **body**, a strain of related events with its own beginning, where the outside issue of Elaine's perfect boyfriend is presented, in this case, and Jerry runs into his "sniffing accountant" at the coffee shop; middle, where they investigate the accountant, George's job interview plays out, and Elaine goes exclamation point crazy; and a plot-heavy ending full of reversals and recognitions which I will mention later. The characters **exit** on the final outcome with the accountant; the show closes with the **choral**, a sort-of processional where Jerry goes back to his stand-up on a related topic and the **stationary song** where the slap bass and onomatopoetic theme play over the credits ("The Sniffing Accountant").

The plot of an episode of *Seinfeld* is nearly algorithmic. In each episode, Jerry starts out as a good character with relatively good fortune, a good beginning to a tragedy, but something unfortunate happens to him. It is dealt with for 15 minutes of narrative time, and usually ends in at least one case of **reversal and recognition** and has a consequence of some sort, be it losing a sum of money, missing out on an event, or relationship conflict or dissolution. In the case of "The Sniffing Accountant," the main line of action comes from the encounter with the accountant in the coffee shop,

sniffing

JERRY: What d'ya got a cold?

ACCOUNTANT: No (...) Say, where's the bathroom?

JERRY: Bathroom's over there (*accountant leaves table*) Did you see that?!

ELAINE: See what?

GEORGE: Yes, I saw that!

JERRY: What was all that sniffing? Do you think-

ELAINE: No, come on Jerry.

GEORGE: He was definitely sniffing!

JERRY: I mean what if – this guy’s got all my money, plus he’s got some of Kramer’s money! He can write checks to himself from my account!”

ELAINE: I’ve known this guy since college, he doesn’t do drugs.

GEORGE: Then what was all that sniffing?

ELAINE: Maybe it’s the cold.

JERRY: Today’s not cold!

From here, Jerry tells Kramer of the encounter,

KRAMER: What’re you saying, Jerry?!

JERRY: I’m just saying, what if –

KRAMER: Drugs?! You think he’s on drugs?!

JERRY: (...) It doesn’t necessarily mean anything.

KRAMER: Well, what else?! Was he nervous? Did he use a lot of slang? Did he use the word ‘man’? I mean, when he was leaving, did he say “I’m splittin’”?

JERRY: No, he didn’t use man, but at one point, he did use the bathroom, you think that’s a bad sign?

KRAMER: Yes! They live in the bathroom!

This chain of events causes great **suffering** for the friends, as do its parallel chains of George getting a job then offending the boss by trying out the flirting technique of “feeling her material,” and Elaine’s conflict over the missing exclamation point at the end of the message, from her boyfriend, about the birth of her friend’s baby,

ELAINE: You see how I’m talking right now?! I would put exclamation points at the end of all of these sentences! On this one! And on that one!

BOYFRIEND: Well you can put one on this one: I’m leaving!

The friends determine that to end their suffering and speculating, they should just call the accountant to see if he sniffles on the phone; by doing so, they find out from his receptionist that he is in South America for the week, furthering their suspicions.

GEORGE: Who goes to South America?!

ELAINE: People go to South America.

JERRY: Yeah, and they come back with things taped to their large intestine!

KRAMER: I say we go and get our money right now!

NEWMAN: South America, what kind of snow blower did you set us up with?!

They set up a “sting” at a bar, where Kramer goes in to investigate, while Jerry and Newman wait in the car. The car scene brings to mind many scenes from Shakespearean tragedies, where the working-class storyline crosses with the story of the nobility; where guards or jesters might witness an important plot point while joking. This is often where much of the comedy in these plays takes place. Similarly, we are hit with a steady stream of jokes in this scene from *Seinfeld*. The sting heightens the friends’ suspicions and results in them writing the accountant, Barry Profit, a letter saying, “Dear Barry, please consider this letter the official termination of our relationship immediately.”

“Exclamation point! ” yells Kramer.

Newman offers to mail the letter and exits Jerry’s apartment. A pizza delivery boy enters and starts sniffing due to his allergy to the mohair in Jerry’s old sweater, which he or Kramer had been wearing in each of the previous scenes with the accountant. This is the first recognition, a change from ignorance to knowledge, that they have and they fear it is too late to reverse their actions and stop the letter from being mailed. The next twist comes as what they think is their good fortune; Newman fails to mail the letter after being chased away from the mailbox by a woman whose material he attempts to feel. Now that they have returned to giving the accountant the benefit of the doubt, the final recognition comes when Jerry has to meet with his lawyer over a letter from the accountant’s lawyer which says he is filing chapter eleven,

ELAINE: What’s going on? Why’s he filing chapter eleven?

JERRY: Bankruptcy! Bankruptcy! As in “I’ve taken your money and spent it on drugs!”

ELAINE: What do you mean? I thought it was the sweater.

KRAMER: Alright, what about the money?

JERRY: What about the money?! Apparently if I’d dissolved my relationship with him prior to his filing chapter eleven, I could’ve gotten the money back, which I would’ve done if a certain imbecile could’ve gotten to a mailbox and mailed the letter!

At this point, there is no more opportunity for reversal and viewers are relieved to experience the **catharsis** of finally settling on the suffering of lost money, rather than the anxiety of not knowing (“The Sniffling Accountant”).

After plot, Aristotle lists **character** as the second-most-important category in a tragedy; some of the issues brought up concerning character are **vice and virtue**, **character alignment**, **consistency**, and **probable action**, all of which are represented by the characters in *Seinfeld*. They represent Aristotle’s “type b.)” of ways in which media can represent something; they are all represented by actors “in action and activity” (Aristotle Ch. 3).

Each character in *Seinfeld* has their own set of vices and virtues. The many reversals in the show can sometimes change whether a trait appears to be working for them, a virtue, or against them, a vice. In the case of “The Sniffling Accountant,” Jerry’s vice appears to be letting his friends sway his judgement and his virtue is good instincts. Elaine’s tendency to give people the benefit of the doubt appears to be a virtue at some points, but turns out to really be working against her, a tragically pessimistic occurrence. George’s virtue in this episode is his apparent sociability, which he doesn’t always have an easy time with, but it is counteracted upon by his vice, a beautiful woman.

Aristotle tells us that a character with a vice or vices isn’t always considered bad, but that there are three types of characters, ones better than us, ones similar to us, and ones worse than us. Typically, comedy represents people worse than us and tragedy represents people better than us. This is kind of a foggy area when analyzing *Seinfeld* because the characters do not fit completely into one category. Jerry, George, and Elaine are not always nice in the way they talk about other characters, they can be quite judgmental sometimes, which tends to get them into trouble. But,

we also know that is part of what makes them relatable, they don't pretend to be perfect. These characters may not always act it, but they are fairly well-off; Jerry has become famous for his comedy, Elaine works for a publishing house, George ends up with some good gigs including one for the Yankees, and, most of the time, they all have pretty decent apartments and cars in New York City. Kramer is the opposite of the others, he's much friendlier, but doesn't work and therefore has a lower standing. So, it really comes down to whether Aristotle was referring to character or status in society when he discussed these better or worse characters. I think it is fair, though, to argue that, either way, the characters in *Seinfeld* are not inherently worse than the average person/viewer, directing the show more toward a tragedy than a comedy ("The Sniffing Accountant").

According to Aristotle, a good tragedy has characters, whether good or bad, who are consistent in action, thus acting in ways which are necessary and probable for their character. This is where action relates to character under the name **reasoning**, "being able to say what is probable and appropriate" (Aristotle Chs. 6, 9). Since much of a plot's action is centered in how the characters respond to certain situations, it is important that they act consistently and reasonably for their character. The characters in *Seinfeld* act very consistently. Jerry's intolerance for things which aren't normal or clean, Elaine's tendency to find problems with every boyfriend, and George's social awkwardness with women become apparent quickly to a viewer. After a few episodes, it is easy to tell what action, usually by a character outside the group, will set the plot into motion. Another bit relating character to plot probability is the use of real names. Using Jerry Seinfeld's real name and playing a character similar to himself, makes these made-up events feel, to the viewer, that they are more likely to occur.

One of the biggest sources of comedy in this show with so much suffering comes from Aristotle's third and fourth most emphasized elements; the **diction** and the way in which the **dialogue** is delivered. In this way, *Seinfeld* uses a lot of traditional aspects of a comedy, such as the mocking, criticism, irony, sarcasm, and satire found in the ancestors of today's comedy, the lampoon and the invective. The main characters are always giving each other a hard time. In this episode specifically, George is the target of mocking based on his difficult living situation with his parents,

ELAINE: I was wearing my sling-back pumps.

GEORGE: What are those anyway?

ELAINE: Ask your mother... You live with her now... don't you?

Later on, the show feeds off of George's suffering more when his parents are criticizing him for losing his bra salesman job offer,

MR. COSTANZA: What d'you mean you felt her material?! Between your fingers, like this?!

MRS. COSTANZA: Who goes around feeling people's material?! What's to gain from feeling people's material?! It's INSANE!

There are also many cases where they appear to have acted maliciously toward another character, but it is only a misunderstanding, this is where the irony comes in ("The Sniffling Accountant").

In Aristotle's section on diction in "Poetics," he also breaks down the parts of words and inflection among other things; this stood out to me in relation to *Seinfeld* because of what I said before: how the content of the show can be relatively serious, but the ways in which it is presented, i.e. inflection, rhythmic back-and-forth dialogue, and catchphrases, que us in to the satirical element of the show. This lets viewers know that it is okay to laugh at the suffering of the characters, that despite the somewhat tragic content, *Seinfeld* is a comedy. Where, if the show had a different delivery of the material, it may not be appropriate to laugh at people losing jobs,

breaking up, or having money stolen from them. Aristotle defines “laughable” as “error and ugliness which is not painful or destructive” (Aristotle Ch. 5). The errors we see in *Seinfeld* are often painful or destructive to the characters; they always make it to the next episode because they’re fictional and necessary to the franchise, but the balance of event and presentation is where *Seinfeld* really walks the line between comedy and tragedy.

The second to last concept Aristotle applies to tragedies is **song**. In his time, many tragedies would’ve been plays in which a chorus would often play a large role, therefore having people singing in the show would not have been out of place. Today, a musical TV show would not be taken seriously; for this reason, *Seinfeld* includes very little music. That being said, it does have a very generic, but widely recognized theme song, as I mentioned before. The song doesn’t take itself too seriously, but also doesn’t come with a cheesy credit montage, so it fits the tone of the show nicely, providing smooth transitions between scenes as well.

Where *Seinfeld* is a TV show, it does utilize **spectacle**, named as Aristotle’s least favorite element of a tragedy, to add to the entertainment, but it does not rely on it solely. Aristotle believed that terror and pity could come from spectacle, but that a more noble source of these feelings is plot, “For the plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, someone who hears about the incidents will shudder and feel pity at the outcome” (Aristotle Ch. 14). *Seinfeld* succeeds in this, as it achieves the same effect while listening from another room while doing dishes as it does while sitting down and watching. Even just the summary and dialogue I’ve presented can evoke the levels of pity and laughter that watching the episode itself would.

Aristotle was clearly an expert in the field of tragedy and put an enormous amount of effort into his clear, detailed analysis of what makes a tragedy a tragedy, and what elevates some above others. According to Aristotle, *Seinfeld* would be tragic in content, but comedic in reception through its use of deliverance, and probably would be considered horrible in his mind for being episodic. That being said, each individual episode does make for neat little tragedy in itself. This expertise of Aristotle's could be used to analyze many forms of entertainment beyond *Seinfeld* to determine their quality of structure for their intended impacts.

Works Cited

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