

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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# 136

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—Mortimer Adler



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## CRITICISM AND TASTE \*

**As applicable to motion pictures, in 5 parts.**

*by Mortimer Adler*

### **Part 2**

I. We shall deal first with the standards of good narrative style. For the most part, these are the same for all of the arts of fiction. In briefly summarizing them, our aim, therefore, must be to emphasize those aspects which are peculiar to cinematic narration.

(1) *Primacy of plot.* To understand this principle, we must first distinguish between the theme of the plot and the developed plot. The theme of the plot is the matter of the story: the particular action being imitated. [1] Only two points are needed to determine the theme: a beginning and end, the beginning stated by the problem of the action and the choice, the end by the ultimate consequences of this choice. What lies between these two points is, as we shall see, the body of the story. The theme of a plot can be stated in a sentence or two. The fully developed plot cannot be stated except by the whole narrative. Thus, Aristotle states the theme of the *Odyssey* as follows: “A certain man is absent from home for many years; he is jealously watched by Poseidon and left desolate. Meanwhile his home is in a wretched plight—suitors are wasting his substance and plotting against his son. At length tempest-tost, he himself arrives; he makes certain persons acquainted with him; he attacks the suitors with his own hand, and is himself preserved while he destroys them.” [2] The theme of *Crime and Punishment* can be even more briefly stated: A man commits a crime and, after a period during which there is a growing suspicion of his guilt, is apprehended and punished. It is clear that many different narratives may have the same theme. When it is said that there is only a small finite number of original plots, themes are meant. An

enumeration of the themes of fiction could probably be made. It would be a classification of the particular types of action which fiction can imitate. The number of themes would be small because the number of moral problems is small and the variety of consequences following upon moral choices is limited. A story-teller's originality depends upon the way in which he develops the theme he has taken. When Aristotle says that the poet is a maker of plots, he does not mean that he is a maker of the themes of fiction, but of their development. The themes are not made. They are discovered or selected. The poet makes a plot by taking a theme and adding to it all the particulars of narration: the incidents and episodes of the action the delineation of character, the expression of thought. The best illustration of this point can be found in the Greek tragedies, many of which have the same theme. The three *Electra-Orestes* plays reveal that the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as plot-makers consisted in the development of the same theme: a son and daughter facing the problem of knowing or suspecting that their mother, aided by her lover, murdered their father, choosing revenge and reaping the consequences of matricide. This is the theme of *Hamlet* also, and of countless other plays, notably in recent years O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. These dramatic narratives differ in their treatment of the same theme: they all have differently developed plots.

This distinction between theme and development is important, negatively, in showing that the criticism of fiction should not be concerned with the theme. It is not a relevant point in criticism to say of a story that its plot is not original, if what is meant is its theme. Since an artist is a maker, originality is relevant to the criticism of his work, but the originality we must look for in fiction is in the plot-development. It should be noted in passing that ethical criticism is similarly misdirected if it judges a story in terms of its theme. On the positive side, this distinction is important as showing that although theme is separable from character and thought, as well as from the incidents of the action- the developed plot involves not only the addition of

all the incidents, but also of character and thought. The incidents of the action cannot be detailed without revealing character and thought. Aristotle at one point makes the extreme statement that a tragedy is possible without character, but not without action. This must be interpreted to mean that a plot cannot be developed without detailed incidents of action, but that the character of the agents or their thought need not be similarly detailed. Illustrations of such plot development can be found in most melodramatic narratives, in detective and mystery stories. The Russian film *Potemkin* is an extraordinary example of a well developed plot without character or thought or, at least, with a minimum development of these elements. The extremity of Aristotle's statement is, however, merely a way of insisting upon the primacy of plot. It should not be interpreted to mean that character and thought are not integrally related to the development of the plot through its constituent incidents.

That the plot is the primary element in narration depends upon the object of imitation. If a story were not the imitation of action in the political dimension, and of character and thought only as they are involved in such action, plot would not be primary. As we have seen, action necessarily includes character and thought as its causes and effects. Character and thought are habits or intrinsic operations which express themselves in the extrinsic behavior. The primacy of plot means, therefore, that character and thought should be revealed by means of external action, and not directly and apart from action. But it may be objected that the primacy of plot depends not merely on the object of imitation, but also upon the manner of imitation; that it must be primary in the drama, but need not be so in the epic. We have previously considered the psychological novel as an exception, or better as a paradoxical species of fiction in which character and thought become the primary objects of imitation because the epic manner affords the writer direct means of describing the introspective realm. A psychological novel is possible without action, or with the incidents of action given in a

minimum of detail. But whatever be the solution of the question whether such novels constitute a proper species of epic narration or whether they are violations of the art of fiction, it is at least clear that the dramatic manner of narration makes the psychological play either impossible or undesirable. The critical problem in the case of motion pictures is thereby solved. The cinematic manner of narration is more like the dramatic in that it cannot, without great difficulty, reveal thought and character directly. It should do so by means of the incidents of action, including, of course, the speeches. [3] It follows, therefore, that the first criterion of good narrative style in motion pictures is the primacy of plot: it is an imitation of action through the incidents of action, and of character and thought subordinately by indirect means of revelation.

#### NOTES

1. The theme stands to the episodic details and the incidents as the form of the plot to its matter. It is in this sense that the theme is said to be the essence of the plot. Many plots may be identical in theme, differing individually in their accidents.

The universality of the theme, in contrast to the singularity of the thematic development, indicates that the object of imitation is, as Aristotle says, a sort of universal. It is not, in the case of poetry, a particular action but a kind of action. The same theme is common to many plots. This means that many stories imitate the same type of action. A type of action is a uniformity *experienced*, a universal in the imagination resulting from many perceptions and memories. It is not an explicit universal, fully *abstracted* and intellectually grasped. Each of the many stories sharing the same theme is individuated by the accidental details of plot development, an individuation due, not to the object of imitation, but to the artist's unique composition of the elements of his medium. The object of imitation is never individual. If, in the case of the narrative arts, it were individual, there would be no distinction between fiction and history. The *possible*, which fiction *imitates*, must be *universal*. The *actual*, which history *reports*, must be *individual*.

2. *Poetics*, 17, 1455b18-2Z. Aristotle adds; "This is the essence of the plot the rest is episode."

3. Direct discourse is, for the novelist, an indirect way of revealing thought and character. He can describe them directly by indirect discourse. Many commentators on the film disagree with this judgment about the restriction of the cinema to dramatic surfaces. They think that the cinema has much greater power than the stage for psychological penetration.

\* Excerpted from his book *Art and Prudence*.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Why is it that schools are, even when they are successful, are less successful than they might be? I believe the issue is one of organization, of hierarchy. A school ought to be a formed by a group of teachers who share the same philosophy of education and have confidence in one another's abilities. Teachers as professionals, as owners of the school rather than as employees and members of a trade union. What might the consequences be? Teachers coming together to form a professional association, bringing in associates to refine their abilities and eventually become a full teaching partner. No non-teaching board of trustees, board of directors or elected school board. Administrators hired by the teachers to perform tasks to support teaching. Professional associations competing with one another for students based on their demonstrated success in providing a constructive and successful learning environment. This, I suggest, is a real vision of educational opportunity.

If we are to ask taxpayers to tax themselves to subsidize the cost of educating children, I suggest that we think about a needs-based voucher system. It hardly seems just that everyone who happens to own a home or other type of building absorb the costs. If we are going to ask people to contribute to this public fund, then the use of the funds ought to be distributed based on financial need. Not a perfect solution, but much more in the direction of fairness and equity than current arrangements.

Edward J. Dodson,

Director School of Cooperative Individualism “where the  
idea of liberty thrives”

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**We welcome your comments and questions.**

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