

## The Hamburg Dramaturgy by G. E. Lessing

Pages: 696

*“Because nothing is great that is not true.”*

### **Background information:**

The Hamburg Dramaturgy is not a systematic textbook on drama, like the Poetics of Aristotle, which he abstracted from the plays of his time, but a series of theater reviews that Lessing wrote as the dramaturge of the first German national theater in Hamburg. Lessing's individual theater reviews sometimes seem out of date from today's perspective, they lack the current reference, but the fundamental considerations on dramaturgy that Lessing derives from his reviews have created a new understanding of drama and are to this day the basis of bourgeois theater culture. Until well into the 18th century, the works of classical authors were considered ideal. Criticism of contemporary theater plays was limited to examining whether the classical rules were formally observed. Lessing allowed neither ancient ideals nor the prevailing tastes of the aristocracy to serve as foundation for a valid criticism and evaluation of theatrical pieces. He put criticism on a rational basis.

Lessing's literary criticism is to be understood as a socially critical instrument within the framework of the bourgeois Enlightenment. He wanted to expand the intellectual freedom within the absolutist state. His reinterpretation of the Aristotelian rules established "a bourgeois-humanitarian theory of drama." Lessing's rule that tragedy should arouse fear and pity and thereby achieve a cleansing effect makes the theater a "school of the moral world." In it, Compassion has been made a virtuous skill. Lessing's "doctrine of catharsis" became so popular that its source, Aristotle, was forgotten or, worse, Aristotle was translated using Lessing's words. Lessing's doctrine of catharsis is basically a misinterpretation of the Aristotelian core terms Eleos, Phobos and, above all, Catharsis. Aristotle had no philanthropic sentiments in mind. He wanted theater to create horror, not moral fear, he wanted the viewers to feel with the hero and not to be compassionate about the virtues she or he displayed. In Aristotle's work, Eleos has nothing to do with Christian compassion, but can be translated as empathetic emotion that overwhelms the viewer in the face of an undeserved suffering.

With the Catharsis, Aristotle did not, as Lessing assumed, strive for a moral purification in order to produce a better person. Aristotle was concerned with a very real, physical cleansing. The viewer should be freed from physical and emotional excitement, these should be excreted through shudder and sadness. But Lessing's misunderstanding was also productive: his criticism of contemporary drama not only created a theory of bourgeois theater in the sense of the Enlightenment. The moral claim formulated by Lessing made drama the most important literary genre of the 19th century. Lessing's formal expectations of a drama are still effective today.

The book is a theatrical guide through the 18th century. Lessing uses a pointed, at times polemical and yet entertaining style. A large part of his dramaturgy is already contained in the detailed descriptions of the plays listed. The theoretical explanations are therefore scattered and not systematically recorded. It's not always easy to consume. But it is definitely worth reading the original and not one of the many interpretations and summaries.

### **Definition of drama:**

"Actions are the real subject of poetry," says Lessing in his treatise on the piece "Laocoon." He declares drama to be the most poetic of all literary genres, since it ideally combines a spatial idea with movement in time and thus creates a message. In this way a maximum illusion is achieved and the greatest possible effect on the viewer. Like Aristotle, he sees the task of dramatic poetry in imitating actions. Acting people should arouse passions in the viewer by generating pity and fear in order to purify them. "The dramatic form is the only one in which pity and fear can be aroused; at least in no other form can these passions be aroused to such a high degree. "

### **Structure of the drama:**

"It is true that I wanted to be done soon with Aristotle's reputation, if only I knew how to come to terms with his reasons." It is not so much Aristotle's reputation as the reasonableness of his system, which conforms to the rules of nature and reason, that justifies Lessing's high esteem for the philosopher. Lessing's criticism, imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment, evaluates Aristotle's "Poetics" as "a work just as infallible" as the elements established by the mathematician Euclides: "These principles are as true as they are certain." In the "Poetics" Lessing sees the outline of every drama represented, so that "one cannot step away from Aristotle's guideline without straying just as far from its perfection."

In Lessing's detailed interpretation of Aristotelian doctrine, however, many significant shifts in emphasis become clear: Earlier Italian, French and German commentators saw the theater as a courtly art of representation. Therefore, in "Poetics" they focused on strict observance of the courtly rules and the class clause. Lessing, on the other hand, only deals with those rules that have an effect on the viewer, to whom he then assigns their formal aspects. "The unity of action was the first dramatic law of the ancients; the unity of time and place were only consequences of that." In contemporary French theater plays, Lessing consequently criticizes the mechanistic adherence to the rules, because they often lead to confused and improbable actions. In his review of "Merope" by Voltaire, for example, he says that you have to accept too many inconsistencies just so that all events can take place in one day: "Of course, it is not impossible to court a woman and be married to her within 12 hours; especially if you can drag her by brute force in front of the priest. But it is self-evident that a person who has only a spark of reason in themselves would actually never act in this way."

What is required is rather a “simplifying of the action itself, as had been done in antiquity, separating everything superfluous from it so carefully that it, reduced to its essential components, becomes nothing but an ideal of this action. The most happily developed form is the one that requires the least addition of circumstances of time and place. ”

The course of action must be designed in such a way that time and space coordinates naturally and probably result from them. Naturalness and probability are the criteria with which Lessing tries to determine the relationship between reality and drama in ever new attempts.

### **Basic dramatic principles:**

For Lessing, art is not limited to the faithful imitation of nature: it is not enough “to imitate the nature of phenomena without paying the slightest attention to the nature of our sensations and forces of our souls.” For Lessing it is “the determination of art” to organize the diversity of nature through isolation and concentration into a beautiful whole that corresponds to human comprehension and arouses feelings. A good tragedy is a “natural representation of human life”: this is based not only on a mechanical following of the “units”, but also on the “natural course” of the action, which must appear as a “chain of causes and effects in everything that happens so that it cannot happen otherwise.”

In the structure of the work, the natural corresponds to the probable, i.e. the totality of events must appear just as necessary and consistent as the order of nature. Only the probability guarantees the recognition of the depicted real life and the credibility of the depiction. Therefore Lessing excludes everything that is “intricate and novel-like, wonderful and heavenly”, but expects an action to be “simple and natural, true and human” so that the passions arise in front of the viewer, the illusion grows and he sympathize. For Lessing, compassion is at the center of his catharsis interpretation: “This is the purpose of tragedy, it should expand our ability to feel pity. It should not only teach us to feel compassion for this or that unhappy person, but it should make us feel to such an extent that the unhappy person must move us and win us over at all times and in all shapes. The most compassionate person is the best person, the most inclined to all social virtues, to all kinds of generosity. So whoever makes us compassionate makes us better and more virtuous, and the tragedy that does that also does this or - it does that in order to be able to do this.”

The emotional experience should develop socio-ethical habits through compassion. Lessing criticizes the plays of the French playwright Corneille, because in them “everything breathes heroism” and of the Christian tragedy he says that the martyrs like madmen “throw themselves to their deaths without any need, with contempt for all their civic obligations.” That is contrary to “the voice of common sense”. The bourgeois tragedy does not call for supermen, but rather middle characters who deserve our compassion. Lessing sees fear as the only necessary complementary term to compassion. Only fear guarantees the perfect

effect of the tragedy. Fear, Lessing assumes, is an affect that does not relate so much to the hero, but rather is directed to the viewer him- or herself, increasing compassion: "It is the fear for ourselves that arises from our resemblance to the suffering person; it is the fear that the misfortunes which we see inflicted upon them may also affect us; it is the fear that we can become the pitied object ourselves: in a word: fear is compassion related to ourselves."

With fear being defined as self-centered compassion, the Aristotelian mean character takes on bourgeois traits, all the more when Lessing demands that the playwright let him "think and act as we would have thought and acted in his circumstances, in short describe him as very similar to us." Lessing also demands the portrayal of nobles as normal people who speak passionately instead of ceremonial, to be shown in private rather than in public circumstances, because this is the only way to evoke emotions in the audience. "If we have pity on kings, then we have it with them as human beings, and not as kings." Of course, not every misfortune and not every character is dramatically effective. There are enough people who combine pathetic contradictions. "But for that very reason, these cannot be objects of poetic imitation. for they are not emblematic. A character that lacks being emblematic lacks also intention." They lack the firmness of character and determination that Aristotle demanded of a dramatic character, and thus they miss the purpose of drama and art.

Lessing does not go into more detail about the Aristotelian concepts of the change of luck (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis); they certainly make the dramatic fable more complex and interesting, but for him they are "not essential pieces of the fable." For Lessing, the decisive characteristic of tragedy is that it arouses passions in order to develop our philanthropic emotions.

Lessing also sees the purpose of improving people as realized in comedy. "Comedy seeks to improve through laughter; but not just to laugh at something or someone; not exactly those bad habits at which it makes us laugh, still less just those in which these ridiculous bad habits are found. Their real general benefit lies in the laughter itself; in exercising our ability to see the ridiculous."

Molière's "The Miser" will never improve a miser, but it is enough for comedy "if it cannot cure desperate diseases to fix the healthy in their health. A preventive agent is also a valuable medicine; and the whole of morality has nothing more powerful or effective than the ridiculous. "

### **Creation of a drama:**

"So what should the poet do? He succeeds in ensuring that we perceive nothing but the most natural, orderly course everywhere; that with every step that he lets his characters take, we must confess that we would have taken it ourselves, with the same degree of passion, under similar circumstances; that nothing alienates us except the imperceptible approach of a goal from which our makes our imagination cringe, and at which we finally find ourselves, full of deepest compassion for those who are carried away by such a fatal stream, and full of horror

at the realization that we ourselves could be carried away by a similar stream; To commit things that we believed were far away from us when seen in cold blood." The genius knows how to neither weaken the interest through entanglements, nor to generate losses in probability: "to put oneself as the narrator in the very shoes of each person; not describe the passions, but rather "let them arise" before the eyes of the spectator."

Lessing also opposes a superficial concept of action: "Showing characters who act on purpose is what distinguishes genius from the lesser artists who only write poetry to write poetry, who only imitate to imitate, who are content with the little pleasure associated with the application of their resources." In the theater we should not learn what this or that person has done, but what every person of a certain character will do under certain given circumstances." He justifies the encouragement that aristocrats should use a natural language which, beyond pomp and etiquette, "should transform machines in real people again," as follows: People who talk in the privacy of "their four walls" do not need the rhetorical language of public representation; even noble people in a state of passion would speak with an eloquence "inspired by nature only." Only nature bears witness of these sensations and only nature can arouse those sensations.

The drama is not about historical memories or facts, but about what is typical and possible in human terms: "In poetic imitation, all persons without distinction should speak and act not as they could on their own, but as each of them would and should speak or act in the same circumstances." The recording of history is therefore limited to the uniqueness specialness of an event, the dramatist, on the other hand, aims at humankind itself: he has to show how each and every person would act under similar circumstances. The playwright can freely deal with the facts, the historical circumstances, as he wants," as long as they do not contradict the characters." The facts are not conceivable without people who act, and what is instructive is precisely that "these characters, under these circumstances, tend to and must produce such facts."

Therefore, the characteristics of historical personalities must not be chosen or changed for no reason. The historical name is associated with certain typical ideas of their character that go beyond the unique life story. In comedy, eloquent names can indicate what is typical of the characters, while in tragedy the dramatist has to work out precisely what elevates the character above the particular fate of the individual. So the playwright chooses the subject because of the real characters who made history, but "the dramatic poet is not a historian": he is not so interested in historical truth as he has "a very different and higher purpose". History is only a means for him to do this. He reduces the complexity of the story to a "well-arranged fable" in order to deceive the viewer and "trigger compassion through deception". Only the illusion as the true appearance of art enables identification and compassionate feelings. The difference lies in the fact that history reports what happened or what certain personalities have experienced or achieved, while poetry depicts "the nature of what happened and what was possible according to probability or necessity." On the basis of this generalization, Lessing justifies, in agreement with Aristotle, that "poetry is more philosophical and consequently more instructive than history." When choosing the title, Lessing recommends

restraint: "A title does not have to be a recipe. The less it reveals about the content, the better it is."

### **Chinatown according to the rules of G.E. Lessing**

Lessing based his formal criteria heavily on Aristotle, so that with regard to the structure of the plot, reference can be made to the analysis using Aristotle's criteria. However, due to a misinterpretation of his ancient role model, Lessing set a completely different focus: for him, the intention of a dramatic work is to arouse pity and fear, which should contribute to a moral training of the human being. Chinatown fully meets this requirement:

Evelyn Mulwray's incestuous past, her struggle for her child and her death in the end are events that arouse compassion. The compassion generated arouses fear of the nefarious, completely amoral Noah Cross whose victim Evelyn is. The audience also feels sorry for the smart, arrogant and too self-absorbed J.J. Gittes. Gittes believes to be an expert, one who "has seen it all." When Gittes realizes that Noah Cross is an adversary several orders of magnitude too big for him, it is too late. Even if Gittes is not the most sympathetic kind of character, the viewer is able to identify with him and asks himself whether he doesn't run the risk, too, of overestimating himself and grossly underestimating the mercilessness of an "evil god" like Noah Cross.

In addition, it was Roman Polanski's intention to portray his characters entangled in corruption in an opaque but superficial world. To a certain degree everybody in this story is in way over their head, yet they all suffer from the fatal delusion to be in control. Obvious parallels with our contemporary world trigger a frightened and compassionate reaction in the audience.

Chinatown breaks with the Hollywood convention of the victory of good over evil, the "happy ending", and makes the film almost a classic heroic tragedy. Gittes, the hero, makes the mistake of overestimating himself. He thinks he's an expert on the opaque balance of power in the city and knows which buttons to press. His grave misjudgment of who really rules and even what rules really apply costs him and Evelyn Mulwray their lives.

Lessing's claim to educate the viewer to be a better person through emotions is fulfilled here in the most direct possible form. The viewer translates his sympathy for Mulwray and Gittes' fate into a lesson for himself: Never overestimate your limited ability to fight true evil. In addition, the story triggers a higher socio-ethical sensitivity to existing social structures.

Lessing's requirement to use the story only as a blueprint so that emblematic characters can appear is also met. The water scandal described actually happened in Los Angeles in the 1920s. It was of course much more complex and there is no incest story recorded in the context that would have played a role in it. However, the violence that Noah Cross inflicts on his daughter is, in the most effective way, a symbol of the violence that the actors of the capitalist system are wielding against the population by making the basic service, water, a commodity that they control in order to generate profit.

Roman Polanski's distanced portrayal of the characters also puts the "teaching," that is, their symbolic function, in the foreground: Gittes is the tragic hero, Mulwray is the innocent victim, many others are willing pawns of the antagonist, Cross, or assistants of the tragic hero. Polanski's unpretentious style harbors a high degree of authenticity: emotions are never exaggerated. Only well chosen dramatic circumstances force the characters to react emotionally. Little by little they become more understandable, more credible, more human in their actions. Lessing's other important demand is also fulfilled: At the end of the day, the viewer has to admit that he probably would have acted in the same way as Gittes or Mulwray.

The language used is authentic and always appropriate: Private Eye Gittes fluctuates between a formal, elegant style and a colloquial language. He shows that he is an expert in the various milieus in the city. Evelyn Mulwray's pronounced speaking style becomes simple and open in dramatic and emotional moments. In these moments she does not appear explicitly as a representative of the upper class, but as a real person who deals with real emotions and makes it easier for the audience to identify with her. Lessing's demand to "depict kings as human beings" and "let them speak as such in their private settings" is thus also fulfilled.

The laws of the unity of time and place are observed in Chinatown, as demanded by Lessing, without their observance leading to absurd situations: the spatial unit, the area of Los Angeles and County, is determined by the local water scandal. The temporal unit is indicated by adequate means: Gittes always wears the same suit, the blue eye of the cheating wife, or also Gittes' famous cut on the nose, show us that there is a rather short period of time between the beginning and the end. The plot of the detective story begins with the assignment and ends with the revelation, all steps that Gittes takes, from whose perspective we experience the events, are logically and consequently built on one another. The film fulfills Lessing's demand that events do not simply follow one another, but are causally connected with one another. The process surprises the viewer again and again. For example, it is not immediately clear what Gittes is looking for in the godforsaken place in the Central Valley until he is almost killed by the masses of water and the viewer realizes that Gittes believes he has tracked down a gigantic scandal.

All in all, it can be said that Chinatown perfectly fulfills Lessing's demands for dramatic poetry in almost all points. It is certainly one of the reasons for the worldwide success of the film that it wants to convey a "message" in the best Lessingian sense by confronting its audience with the tragic consequences of a deeply moral dilemma.