

# The Role of Literature in Shaping Identity: Insights from Plato, Aristotle, and Horace

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**Abstract:** *This research explores the role of literature in shaping personal identity, as examined through the lens of classical philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Horace. The study critically analyzes their respective views on how literature influences morality, emotion, and rationality, providing insight into their varying perspectives on the relationship between literature and identity formation. The paper compares their philosophies, highlighting the enduring significance of these ancient theories in contemporary discussions of literature and self-identity. The study is significant as it bridges classical and contemporary discussions on the influence of literature on identity formation, offering a historical perspective that enhances our understanding of the cultural and psychological impact of literary works.*

**Keywords:** identity formation, literature, Plato, Aristotle, Horace

## 1. Introduction

Interestingly, in a world of dramatic ideological, scientific, industrial and technological transformations, where almost every figment of human imagination has been materialized into reality, the philosophical questions on the concept of identity posed by classical philosophers remain unresolved. Flying carpets have been transformed into planes, magic mirrors into video cameras, yet the simple question of “who am I?” raised in antique times is still perplexing modern philosophers and psychologists. This article aims to explore how classical philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Horace perceived the role of literature in shaping human identity, examining the implications of their theories for contemporary thought on identity formation.

Since the time immemorial literature has been acknowledged as the most powerful force in shaping human identity and morality. As humanities and science first took shape in BCE Greece, it has become customary in Western Anglo-European culture for scientific research on any topic to begin with referencing to the pillars of the western civilization. When it comes to literary theories Plato (428/427 BCE- 348/347 BCE), Aristotle (384 BCE- 322 BCE), and Horace’s (65 bc-27, 8 BC) ideas are believed to have largely established the framework of thought about literature from the ancient world until the Renaissance (with the exception of a few late Roman and early medieval writers who contributed to the discussion of theories about literature, such as Plotinus (204–70), Boethius (480–524), St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), and Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). (Klages, Literary Theory A Guide for the Perplexed, 2006)

### Plato’s perspective on the role of literature in identity formation

Plato’s groundbreaking philosophical works are also literary masterpieces in its own right (if the fact that, obviously, the original work has undergone distortion through the centuries before reaching the printing era is not counted.) However, his ideas on the merit and virtue of literature is notably negative. By choosing dialogue form instead of poetry or prose that Hellenic literary canon dictated, Plato endeavors to remain true to Socratic values, as writing in the form of conversation is similar to Socrates’s viewpoints on literature. In the middle dialogue “Phaedrus” by Plato, the main character Socrates claims that writing, in contrast to speech, is the death of living

communication. In “Phenomenology of Spirit” Hegel applauds Plato’s pursuit of reason and knowledge through conversations which resembles Socrates’s method of questioning. (Hegel, 1977 (Original work published in 1807)).

Plato’s literary theories on mimesis, censorship, and emotional effect of literature explain psychological and moral impact of fiction on a person and society at large. In his key work “The Republic,” Plato introduces the notion of imitation, or mimesis, which is an essential element of writing and the arts. He asserts that literature could mold, and potentially distort the identities of readers. According to Plato, literature is a mirror of the world of forms and simply represents the physical world, which is merely a shadow of ultimate reality. Literature, Plato argues, is two steps apart from reality and truth. This concept is eloquently explained through Socratic dialogue in “Beware of imitations: Image recognition in Plato” by Verity Harte: “Socrates claims an additional experience is necessary, namely “one have in mind whether or not (the reminding thing) is lacking in respect of likeness to that of which it reminds one”.74a6-7 ... this experience is elaborated as that “having in mind” that what one sees “wants to be as some other thing” but falls short and is incapable of being such as that is “inferior” 74d9-e2 (Harte, 2006)

Plato’s disapproval of mimesis stems from its potential to be misleading. He argues that authors often deceive readers about virtue, justice, and the good life by portraying appearances rather than realities. This deception can lead to the development of erroneous values and beliefs, hence forming an identity based more on lies than on the truth (Plato, 1991).

Plato also criticizes literature because of its tremendous emotional pull. He feels that reading literature—especially poetry—has the power to arouse intense feelings that disturb the soul’s rationality. He addresses how poetry can evoke emotions in “The Republic,” causing people to behave immorally and irrationally. An identity that is conflicted and unstable and driven more by illogical emotions than by reason may emerge from this emotional disturbance. (Plato, 1991). Friedrich Nietzsche expressed his disapproval of Plato’s views on the role of literature in “The Birth of Tragedy” claiming that subordinating artistry and creativity to rational

thinking meant stifling the irrational and emotional features in human identity.

Plato emphasized reason as the most desirable form of thought and preferred method for conveying cultural knowledge. He believed that reason was a logical deduction, while stories, poetry, and drama appealed to emotions. He maintained that truth could only be apprehended through rational thought, as seen in mathematics and geometry. (Klages, 2006)

Plato's worries over the moral implications of literature constitute a major part of his critique. He is especially against how gods and heroes are portrayed in Greek literature, especially in the works of Homer and Hesiod, where they are frequently shown to commit immoral activities. According to Plato, these portrayals may harm readers—especially the young—by encouraging them to imitate similar actions. He is concerned that reading material that is morally reprehensible could cause people to develop defective personalities and unethical identities. In his ideal state, Plato supports censorship as a way to reduce these hazards. Plato contends that books should only be permitted if they encourage moral behavior and sound reasoning. Citizens would develop a morally upright and logical identity as a result of this deliberate exposure.

Amos Okafor addresses the same issue from political perspective claiming that Plato draws parallels between literature and politics. When analyzed in a societal context, politics and literature both have the same purpose, which is presumably to sway the beliefs and behaviors of their respective audiences. According to Plato, the writer can easily deceive or influence the reader through his work which indicates that rhetoric is identical to literature. Hence, the author is a demagogue emphasizing a specific viewpoint that he finds comfortable. He is a marketer who persuades the reader to purchase an item based just on its appearance, regardless of its actual worth. (Okafor, 2017)

In conclusion, Plato established fundamental concepts in Western ideology important part of which is his priority of rational thought over art, his emphasis of the potential risks of mimesis, and emotional impact, and moral corruption of literature on human's identity formation. Despite being contentious, his support for censorship demonstrates his dedication to promoting a moral and responsible society.

#### **Aristotle's views on the role of literature in identity formation**

In contrast, the other Greek "founding father" of Western philosophy is more interested in the conventions of writing than in its substance. Plato begins his theory of literature by briefly discussing the role of poets and poetry in his Republic, whereas the first comprehensive work in the Western tradition devoted exclusively to literary criticism is Aristotle's Poetics. The two thinkers recognized the profound impact of literature, but they presented contrasting ideas about how literature shapes identity. In addition, even though Aristotle's writings lack Plato's eloquence and elegance, they are methodical in a way that Plato's writings had never been. From a contemporary standpoint, Plato's dialogues consistently traverse the boundaries between various

philosophical and scientific disciplines as they transition from one topic to another. In fact, it was Aristotle who first introduced the concept of an intellectual discipline during his Lyceum days. (Anselm H Amadio, 2024 )

Aristotle argues that art is not an imitation of nature, but rather a process that enhances or completes nature through words or paint. He believes art reveals truths differently than rational deduction and that the pleasure we take in representations conveys another type of truth.

In addition, Aristotle and Plato differed in their understanding of reality. Aristotle believed that reality is an ever-changing world of appearances and perceptions, with form appearing only in concrete instances. Plato believed that objects were imitations of ideal forms, while Aristotle believed that form exists in concrete examples. Aristotle's philosophy focuses on discovering the rules and principles that govern how things work and take on meaning in our material world. Sean Coughlin argues challenges Aristotle's teleological interpretation of the claim "art imitates nature" by examining similarities in early Greek medical and philosophical works. The claim suggests that art follows the pattern of nature, and artists learn from it by imitating its processes. However, nature itself is self-taught or self-ordering. The author of Hippocratic Epidemics claims that people's natures are doctors in cases of illness, and that natural methods are derived from natural processes. (Coughlin, Sean Coughlin)

Aristotelian thought, rooted in Western philosophy, is the foundation of science. Aristotle's science focuses on observing specific phenomena and deducing rules governing behavior. His approach catalogs and classifies the material world, identifying similarities and differences in form. This system of organization is the basis for biological classification systems, such as kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species. Interestingly, it was Aristotle's scientific and philosophical system that served as the foundation and mode of expression on equal measure for both medieval Islamic philosophy and Christian scholasticism. Aristotelian ideas persisted in Western thought even after the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment.

While Plato focused on moral criticism, analyzing a work's impact on its audience, Aristotle focused on genre criticism. Aristotle's Poetics examines literature's internal structure, focusing on drama and comedy and tragedy. Aristotelian criticism aims to identify essential qualities of different literary forms and determine their proportion to form a unified work. Plato's philosophy emphasizes the importance of artists in imposing order on the chaotic natural world. Art and literature, in particular, create narrative order and provide meaning to sensory experiences. Aristotle sees art and literature as positive social forces, rather than dangers. They create order and system, helping citizens find pleasure in the representation of an understandable and meaningful reality, rather than arousing emotions that threaten reason. In the essay "To Plato Literature is politics and to Aristotle literature is science" Amos Okafor maintains that Aristotle introduces the concept of organic unity, which he believes is essential for the structure of tragedy, that includes plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. This model is

widely adopted by creative writers, emphasizing the interdependence of subject, form, and content in a work of art. (Okafor, To Plato, Literature is politics while to Aristotle literature is science, 2017) Aristotle's more integrated perspective on the role of emotions in moral life is contrasted by Nussbaum with Hellenistic ideas, particularly with regard to the role that emotions like fear and fury play in moral instruction and ethical reasoning. For instance, Nussbaum draws a comparison between Aristotle's theory that, under the right circumstances, emotions might be rational and ethically desirable and the Stoic objective of eradicating feelings. (Nussbaum, 1994)

Plato and Aristotle influenced Western thought on art, leading to the emergence of two fundamental traditions: moral criticism, focusing on content and effect, and formal or aesthetic criticism, focusing on form and unity. These strands have evolved significantly, with subsequent critics following one or the other.

In summary, Aristotle and Plato's divergent perspectives on literature and the identity formation emphasizes a deeper philosophical disagreement about the role of reason and emotion in human existence. Aristotle recognized that literature may arouse strong emotions in readers, but he also considered this as a benefit for moral instruction and self-awareness. But Plato was cautious about the emotional manipulation that is inherent in literature asserting it could lead to distorting people's understanding of their selves.

### Quintus Horatius Flaccus's perspective on the role of literature in identity formation

Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus, better known by his pen name Horace, was mostly recognized for his lyric odes and satires. His views on the craft and art of poetry are outlined in his verse correspondence, especially in "Ars Poetica: Epistle to the Pisos". His explanation of the function of poetry, or literature in general, as "dulce et utile", or sweet and useful, is his primary contribution to the traditions of literary theory. Contrary to Plato's concerns, Horace maintains that literature can be enjoyed in addition to serving the educational aim.

Horace's view that literature serves both educational and entertainment purposes suggests that literature is essential in forming people's moral and intellectual identities. Horace asserts that literature can improve a reader's moral character and serves as a medium for ethical instruction. He highlights the need of decorum, or appropriateness, in literature and makes the case that it can help readers develop morally upright and well-rounded identities by upholding social norms and values. The transforming potential of literature is emphasized by Horace's "Ars Poetica", which states that poets should combine enjoyment with practical lessons to have a significant impact on their audience. His belief that literature plays a crucial role in developing ethical and aesthetic sensibilities—two aspects of one's identity—is reflected in this dual goal. (Pfeiffer, 1968)

Like Plato, Horace believes that poetry should primarily come from nature, but he also contends that poets should emulate other writers. Thus, Horace demonstrates the significance of

a poet being aware of literary heritage, honoring inherited patterns and traditions, and producing original poetry. In fact, Horace's legacy demonstrates strong influence by Greek poets particularly Alceo, Sappho and Anacreon. He is considered as the pioneer of translating Aeolian poetry into Latin while emulating Greek meter and poetic topics. (Horace, 2024)

Although Horace, Plato, and Aristotle agree that literature has a big influence on identity, they have different opinions about what literature is and how it affects people. Horace's viewpoint, which emphasizes literature's enjoyable and instructive roles in forming a well-rounded identity, is in line with Aristotle's. Both saw literature as a tool for moral and emotional growth, but Aristotle offers a more organized framework with his ideas about ethos and catharsis. Contrarily, Plato's mistrust of literature is rooted in his concern for reason and veracity. His concerns contrast dramatically with the more upbeat perspectives of Aristotle and Horace, who he believes might be corrupted by the emotive and imitative aspects of writing.

## 2. Conclusion

Plato, Aristotle, and Horace largely shaped literature theory from ancient times to the Renaissance. The European Renaissance, marked by art, literature, and science, sparked a plethora of literary texts and discussions on its purpose, form, and importance. The Renaissance discourse on literary theory was influenced by the rediscovery of Aristotle's Poetics.

In conclusion, a diverse range of viewpoints are presented in the traditional discussion of literature's significance in the creation of identity. Horace's conviction that literature serves as both a source of pleasure and education is a cogent argument that highlights the medium's capacity to mold morally upright and accomplished people. Plato, on the other hand, emphasizes the hazards associated with literary impact, whereas Aristotle takes a more balanced approach that takes into account both the risks and the significant advantages. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints offer a thorough grasp of the literature's ongoing influence on the formation of human identity.

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