

Catharsis in Literature

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the concept of catharsis in classic Greek tragedy. It is the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art. In the first part, it traces historical context of this expression particularly through the work of Aristotle. It looks into Aristotle's Poetics and Politics, which are the only works where he mentions catharsis. After research of the Aristotle's texts, the study presents variety of interpretations that have arisen over centuries, examines them and derives an elementary understanding of catharsis. Part of this work tries to trace catharsis in a sample of preserved tragedies of main Greek dramatists. It investigates tragic characters, plot and tragic emotions (i.e. pity and fear). The scope is to compare Aristotle's theory with how catharsis in any context is significant today to help to manage our emotions in real life. Catharsis in literature works a lot like therapy does in real life: by giving readers the opportunity to experience intense emotions from a distance, it allows them to 'let it all out'. Cathartic works are especially good at tapping into repressed emotions—that is, emotions that a reader or audience member may not typically allow themselves to feel. For instance, a person may be disinclined to cry over their own feelings of grief because ignoring their pain makes it feel more manageable, but if that person watches a character in a film break into tears at a funeral, they may find themselves unexpectedly moved to tears. Last but not the least the study concludes by bringing forward an evaluation of this approach to the theory of Aristotelian catharsis.

Keywords: *Catharsis, Aristotle, Cleanse, Purge, Manage, Real life*

Introduction

'Art is a form of Catharsis and there's something about a Catharsis that is very important.'

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A Catharsis is an emotional discharge through which a person can achieve a state of moral or spiritual renewal or a state of liberation from anxiety and stress. It is a Greek word which means cleansing. In literature it is used for the cleansing of emotions of characters. It can also be any other radical change that leads to emotional rejuvenation of a human being. In other words, it is the release of strong emotions either in a character or in the audience by way of an artistic experience.

Aristotle explains a tragedy as a complete story featuring high-stakes circumstance. Tragedy must also be told through pleasing language and performed onstage rather than read. Finally, 'through pity and fear,' the audience should leave feeling cleansed emotionally (catharsis). Actually, that's one tall order, but a precisely appropriate one by Aristotle.

Aristotle called this kind of experience catharsis, he actually coined the term catharsis, that is - when literature provides strong emotional experiences that ultimately result in a sense of purification. It is the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art. Like a toddler playing quietly after a tantrum, tragedy (and comedy) can make us feel cleansed of emotions. While Aristotle was speaking specifically about catharsis and theater, we know that all types of art can make us feel deeply, from Shakespeare's tragedies to blockbuster movies to the vivid paintings of Marc Rothko. We seek those feelings out because they make us feel good in the end, even if they make us feel sad first.

Objective

The aim of this paper is to present a wide range of ideas and approach towards the concept of catharsis. Today, the word 'cathartic' is often used to refer to just about any experience that provides someone with a feeling of emotional release—even as the term also retains the original connotation of an experience in the arts. Although, the concept of catharsis is specific to literature, some of the same principles may apply generally to other forms of cathartic experience. For example, somebody who gives away a box of things that once belonged to an ex-boyfriend might describe the experience as cathartic because it gives them a feeling of release from emotions of pain or resentment—but that would depend on their having formed a strong bond of attachment to the objects in the box, just as readers must form a bond of attachment to characters in a cathartic work of literature.

The Greek Connection

The word catharsis comes from the Greek word *kathairein*, which means 'to cleanse' or 'purge'. It explains the release of emotional tension that Aristotle believed spectators experienced while watching dramatic tragedy. He created the definition of literary term catharsis based on medical use of purgative drugs or herbs which cleansed the body. He used this symbol for literature cleansing the emotions and/or mind. Presently, the word 'catharsis' can be used in reference to any experience of emotional release or cleansing brought about by a work of art.

Initially, this word was used as a metaphor in Poetics by Aristotle to describe the impact of tragedy on audiences. He believed that catharsis was ultimate end of a tragic artistic work and it marked its quality. He also believed that an audience's ability to feel the similar emotions as those displayed by actors onstage is an integral part of the experience of watching theatre, and that through this experience audiences can learn to better regulate their emotions in real life. An audience is far more likely to have a cathartic experience if they form a strong attachment to-or identification with-the characters, whether in a play or book. This word 'catharsis' used to explain emotional release outside the realm of art. For example, people often speak of psychological or social catharsis.

A cathartic experience-whether in theater or literature-is an experience in which the audience or reader experiences the similar feelings that the characters are experiencing on stage or on the page. It follows, then, that a cathartic work is any work of literature that gives readers this experience. Through an example this phrase can be explained in better way: a book about a young boy who loses his mother to cancer. Such a book might not be cathartic for everyone, but for someone who has lost a friend or family member to cancer, reading such a book may be an extremely emotional experience, in the sense that such readers may find themselves feeling the character's grief or anger as though it were their own. This illustration serves to highlight a significant part of what makes a work of literature cathartic: the reader must have developed a strong identification with the characters. In other words, if readers aren't able to 'assume themselves' in the characters—if they feel they don't have any qualities or experiences in common-then they probably won't

achieve the level of emotional investment necessary to have a cathartic experience in response to the work. It generally takes a great deal of skill and experience on the part of author to produce a truly cathartic piece of literature.

Aristotle's definition of catharsis was specific to the experience that audiences have watching theater, or to people reading literature. According to that definition, only audience members and readers can experience catharsis-and not the actors or characters themselves. Though, it's sometimes the case that literary characters *do* have cathartic experiences. Aristotle further said in *Poetics*:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; . . . through pity [eleos] and fear [phobos] effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions" (c. 350 BCE, Book 6.2).

'*Oedipus the King*' by Greek playwright Sophocles was considered a tragedy by Aristotle and had all the components. King Oedipus seeks the advice of a prophet who says he must find the man who killed the previous king, King Laius, at a crossroads. Closer inspection into Laius' killing, though, reveals that - Oedipus also killed a man at a crossroads. Eventually, Oedipus figures out he was the one who killed Laius and that Laius was his father. Since Oedipus' wife, Jocasta, is Laius' widow, it is showed that she is both Oedipus' wife and his mother. High-stakes situation, indeed. Then, as if that wasn't enough, Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus pokes out his own eyes. It's enough to make us feel both pity and fear, especially as we watch these scenes performed onstage. It was the Ancient Greek equivalent of watching an Oscar-winning drama.

As quoted by Bruno Bettelheim, in his *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* - "*The myth of Oedipus . . . arouses powerful intellectual and emotional reactions in the adult-so much so, that it may provide a cathartic experience, as Aristotle taught all tragedy does. A reader may wonder why he is so deeply moved; and in responding to what he observes as his emotional reaction, ruminating about the mythical events and what these mean to him, a person may come to clarify his thoughts and feelings. With this, certain inner tensions which are the consequence of events long past may be relieved; previously unconscious material can then enter one's awareness and become accessible for conscious working through. This can happen if the*

observer is deeply moved emotionally by the myth, and at the same time strongly motivated intellectually to understand it.'

The tragedy of Oedipus the King has many aspects, a chief one being that he doesn't heed the prophecies and brings down his own fate upon himself. It is one of the key plays that Aristotle was considering when he created his theory of catharsis. And indeed, the end of *Oedipus Rex* brings the audience a catharsis example because here Oedipus is overcome with memories, which we as the audience can only imagine as being those prophecies he did not pay enough attention to. Oedipus Rex was held as a model of catharsis by Aristotle but traditionally in literature catharsis has taken on one of these three varieties – purgation, purification and clarification. In a lot of ways catharsis projects what we as an audience feel after the unfolding of the events of a play or a novel. Desmond Tutu feels that 'Catharsis is about cleansing and healing at one and the same time - healing memories and attitudes, healing the spirit and the heart.' In dramatic art the term describes the effect of tragedy (or comedy and possibly other artistic forms) mainly on the audience (although some have made speculations about the effect on characters in the drama as well). Nowhere does Aristotle explain the meaning of 'catharsis' as he is using that term in the definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*. The precise definition of catharsis has often been reinterpreted in literature throughout history which reflects the concerns of contemporary society in trying to define emotional release. Ultimately, catharsis in literature is our participation with tragedy.

Classical Greek drama from Sophocles and other Ancient Greek and Roman playwrights set the stage, so to speak, for Shakespeare's tragedies of the Elizabethan era (1558-1603). *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are some of his best-known examples. Like *Oedipus the King*, they contain high-stakes plots, typically resulting in the deaths of at least four characters per play.

Significance of Catharsis in Literature

There are two ways in which catharsis is important in literature. The first is the classical definition of catharsis in which reading a particular work of literature, such as a tragedy, allows the reader to experience intense emotions in an indirect way (i.e., nothing bad is happening to the reader) and thus feel a cleansing of emotions.

An author also may choose to show a character going through a cathartic event of his own. When a character goes through catharsis, we may expect that character to act differently afterwards or experience an intellectual clarifying. Catharsis in either case asks the reader to identify strongly with the main character(s) and experience those strong emotions at a safe distance. Catharsis is often linked with tragedy, but a good cry isn't the only way to feel emotionally cleansed. When choosing a movie or a genre of music after a hard day, we pick something to lighten our mood. Often set in opposition to tragedy, comedy represents the other end of the emotional spectrum. While comedic literature doesn't make us feel 'pity and fear,' that doesn't mean we can't be changed by the experience.

Often, catharsis in comedy relies on the audience's identification with the main character. When a character in a romantic comedy is embarrassed in front of their crush, we can laugh and cringe at their all-too-familiar experience from a safe distance. For children also fantasies and fairy tales bring about catharsis. As quoted by Maurice Sendak ' . . .from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, they continually cope with frustrations as best they can. And it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming Wild Things'.

We experience catharsis in many different ways in our everyday lives. Whether the experience is tragic or comic we feel totally cleansed emotionally and changed by the emotional experience. Believe it or not this feeling makes one more relaxed and more at peace with himself. Some common examples of catharsis in daily life are -- When a relationship ends, one or both parties might choose to 'purge' the other out of his/her lives by throwing away mementos and getting rid of shared objects.

When a loved one dies the family might wish to scatter the ashes together in a significant place to feel a renewal of spirit.

When a significant life stage is over, such as college, there is a ceremony that encourages strong emotions so that they may be released. Edward Zwick has said- "Sometimes when we weep in the movies we weep for ourselves or for a life un-lived. Or we even go to the movies because we want to resist the emotion

that's there in front of us. I think there is always a catharsis that I look for and that makes the movie experience worthwhile.”

Fariha Khan the implications of catharsis and defines it as an emotional cleansing or purification where emotional tension is released after an overwhelming vicarious experience. Shakespearean tragedies are great examples to illustrate her point. She talks about the tragedies of Shakespeare as the rise and fall of a great soul. ‘They first electrify our emotions and then elevate our mind and broaden our vision. Tragedy liberates us from ourselves. Hence comes the refinement of our feelings and we find our mental frontiers opening up new horizons.’

A theoretical paper exploring the roles catharsis plays, written by Calli Armstrong. The paper explores the possibilities of finding catharsis within work with fairy tales and how a therapeutic use can be made of this possibility for the treatment of children with anxiety. The author explains the connections between catharsis and fairy tales and considers the eventuality of making it beneficial in drama therapy for children with anxiety. The article defines catharsis as the process of emotional discharge that results in release of emotional tension. The research uses qualitative and theoretical methods and concludes that fairy tales are appropriate psychotherapeutic tools to cure anxiety symptoms in children.

Examples of Catharsis in Shakespeare

William Shakespeare wrote two of the famous examples of catharsis. One of these catharsis examples is his tragic drama ‘Macbeth’. This play presents a great example of catharsis. The audience and readers of Macbeth usually pity the tragic central figure of the play because he was blinded by his destructive preoccupation with ambition.

In Act one he is made the thane of Cawdor by King Duncan, which makes him a prodigy, well-regarded for his valor and talent. Though, the era of his doom starts when he, like most people, gets carried away by ambition and the supernatural world as well. Subsequently, he loses his wife, his veracity and eventually his life. The temptation of ambition robs him of the essence of his existence as a human being and leaves behind nothing but discontent and a worthless life. In Act V, Macbeth (5.5.24-28) gathers this idea in his soliloquy. He says while speaking of his life

:“...a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing”

In “Romeo and Juliet” by William Shakespeare when Romeo ends his life-

“Here’s to my love! [Drinks] O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die. [Falls]”

In this play, Romeo commits suicide by drinking the poison that he erroneously thinks Juliet had tasted too. The audience usually finds themselves crying at this particular moment for several reasons. Primarily because losing a loved one is a feeling that all of us share. Watching or reading such a scene triggers the memories of someone we have lost (either by death or by mere separation) and because we are able to relate to it, we suddenly release the emotions that we have been repressing.

At the end of William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, just as in every other tragedy that Shakespeare wrote, many characters die. The true tragedy of *Othello* is not just the deaths of the characters Desdemona and Othello, but that Othello realizes his mistake too late. He understands only after he has killed Desdemona that Iago has led him astray. Therefore, his catharsis must come in the form of suicide, and he stabs himself after his final line. The catharsis for the audience comes in the fear of being betrayed by a friend, feeling that intense remorse on Othello’s behalf, and witnessing his death, perhaps with a pledge never to be so taken in themselves by a friend’s reassurances and stories.

Other Examples

John Green’s novel for young adults, *The Fault in Our Stars*, was also immensely popular with adults primarily because of its reputation of being an example of catharsis. The two main characters, Hazel and Augustus, meet because they are both teenagers with cancer. It is a given, just as in any ancient Greek or Shakespearian tragedy, that these main characters will die. In this quote from near the end of the book, Augustus has died and Hazel is reflecting on their love. The moment is cathartic both for her and for the audience because it is an affirmation of the intense strength of her feeling for him, and rather than

succumbing to sadness she feels gratitude toward Augustus for having existed at all.

The *Harry Potter* series comes to an end in dramatic fashion in the seventh book (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by J K Rowling) with many deaths on both sides of the battle. However, perhaps no death is quite as tragic as that of Severus Snape, who has been woefully misunderstood for the entirety of the series. This moment of catharsis comes after Snape is already dead and Harry is gazing back into Snape's memories. It is revealed here that Snape never stopped loving Harry's mother, Lily, and everything he did was to honor her memory. This catharsis allows the audience and Harry to feel the intense sadness of Snape's life and perhaps think to which lengths they would go to honor a loved one's memory.

Function of Catharsis: Dramatic Uses

In dramatic art the term catharsis explains the impact of tragedy, comedy or any other form of art on the audience and in some cases even on the performers themselves. Aristotle did not elaborate on the meaning of "catharsis" and the way he used it in defining tragedy in the *Poetics* (1449b21-28).

According to G.F. Else, the conventional and the most prevalent explanation of catharsis as "purgation" or "cleansing" does not have a basis in the *Poetics*. It has rather stemmed from other non-Aristotelian and Aristotelian contexts. Such confusion regarding the origin of the term has led to assorted interpretations of its meaning.

Conclusion

An authoritative version of the *Poetics* by D.W. Lucas thoroughly covered, in an Appendix dedicated to "Pity, Fear, and Katharsis", the different shades of meaning and aspects inherent in the interpretation of the word (Aristotle: *Poetics*, Oxford, 1968, pp. 276-79). Lucas identifies that there is a chance that catharsis may have some aspect of meanings like "purgation", "intellectual clarification" and "purification".

However, the kind of discussion he conducts on these terms is not as precise as other leading scholars would want it to be. He does not consider any interpretations other than his own and rather takes a different approach. His approach is centered on "the Greek doctrine of Humours", which was not

received too well. Catharsis in literature works a lot like therapy does in real life: by giving readers the opportunity to experience intense emotions from a distance, it allows them to "let it all out." Cathartic works are especially good at tapping into repressed emotions—that is, emotions that a reader or audience member may not typically allow themselves to feel. For instance, a person may be disinclined to cry over their own feelings of grief because ignoring their pain makes it feel more manageable, but if that person watches a character in a film break into tears at a funeral, they may find themselves unexpectedly moved to tears. In this sense, sometimes *feeling somebody else's feelings* proves to be a lot easier than feeling your own—and catharsis has a way of making use of that fact to help people experience emotional release. True believers in dramatic catharsis (as Aristotle defined it) would say that experiencing emotions like pity or fear in response to an artwork can even help people to better handle these emotions in real life.

The most common interpretations of the term are *purgation* and *purification*, and are still widely used. The most recent interpretation of the term catharsis is 'intellectual clarification'. In a more explicit way and when used in literature, catharsis is the release of emotions such as pity, sadness, and fear through witnessing art. Catharsis involves the change of extreme emotion to lead to internal restoration and renewal. Though, we cannot nullify the original connotations of Catharsis when it was first linked to drama, especially to tragedy, by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The theory was that, through viewing tragedy, people learned to display emotions at a proper amount and lessen excessive outbursts of emotion in daily life, thus incorporating catharsis in our daily lives.

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