

Catharsis in Aristotle's Poetics

Kulvinder Singh

Extension Lecturer

Govt. College of Women, Karnal

ABSTRACT:

This paper is focused on the concept of catharsis in classic Greek tragedy. It traces historical context of this term in Aristotle's poetics and the main effort is devoted to Aristotle. It looks closely in Aristotle's Poetics and Politics, which are the only works where he mentions catharsis. The three meanings of catharsis that are purgation or purification or clarification, are discussed in this paper. Only one thing has been argued upon that tragedy arouses pity and fear. 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, but the whole focus of this paper will be solely on the aforesaid three meanings or points of Catharsis. This work tries to trace catharsis in a sample of preserved tragedies of main dramatists. It investigates tragic characters, plot and tragic emotions (i.e. pity and fear). The scope is to compare the Aristotle's theory and practice of dramatists. Last but not least the study concludes by bringing forward an evaluation of this approach to the theory of Aristotelian catharsis.

Catharsis in Aristotle's Poetics

Catharsis is a controversial term. The term "Catharsis" is used only once in the course of Aristotle's Poetics in the fourth chapter, yet there is hardly any other single term which has given rise to so many different interpretation and controversies. In the 'Poetics' while defining tragedy Aristotle writes that the function of tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and in this way to affect the catharses of these emotions. The term 'Catharsis' is a word taken from the Greek word 'Kathaireen' that means 'to cleanse'. In the Greek language it has three meanings: Purgation, Purification, and Clarification. Aristotle uses this word in 'the Poetics' only once. In the age of Aristotle the word 'Catharsis' is also used in the medical sense to denote a therapeutic relief which in the 16th century was interpreted in terms of the 'hardening of the emotions of pity and fear', which in terms equips the spectators to face them boldly in real life. But in the 18th century the term Catharsis was understood in an entirely opposite sense, where it meant 'softening of the emotions of pity and fear'. The term Catharsis occurs in Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

"Tragedy is an imitation in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear affecting the proper Katharsis or purgation of these emotions."

Purgation:-

According to some Renaissance critics and later on critics like Twining and Barney:

"Catharsis is a medical metaphor."

In medical terms, especially in the older sense, purgation means the removal of excess 'Humours'. First there is the pathological theory of the function of tragedy which has expounded by Jacob Barneys. In it, Catharsis has been taken to a medical metaphor, 'purgation' denoting a pathological effect on the body.

"Catharsis is a kind of Homeopathic treatment".

By some critics like Twining and Barney has been compared to homeopathic treatment with 'like curing the like' and thus the arousing of pity and fear results in the purgation of these emotions. Some critics like Herbert Reed and Lucas however, objected and says that:

"The theatre is not a hospital".

Dryden too accepts the purgation theory of catharsis in his 'Preface to Troilus and Cressida'.

He says it is not:

“the abasement of pity and fear, but of such aggressive and evil emotions as pride and anger through feeding and watering of soft hearted emotions.”

Purification:

Humphrey House rejects the idea of purgation in the medical sense of the term, and he is the most forceful advocate of the ‘Purification’ theory which involves the idea of moral instruction and moral learning. One meaning of the catharsis is the purification. Some critics have interpreted the term in the light of this meaning. They comment that purgation means ‘Cleansing’. Now ‘Cleansing’ may be qualitative or evacuations change in the body brought by a restoration of proper equilibrium. Catharsis results in emotional health and is, thus a moral conditioning. It is a purification of the excess and defect in our emotions, so that the emotional equilibrium can be restored. Butcher too, agrees with the purification theory. He observes that Catharsis involves:

“ not only the idea of emotional relief but the further idea of purifying the emotions to be relieved.”

Clarification:

According to this doctrine catharsis means ‘the clarification of the essential and universal significance of the events and situations’ depicted in a tragedy. Some critics have emphasized the clarification theory of Catharsis. According to them catharsis takes place on an intellectual tone, rather than a medical or religious tone. O.B. Hardison holds ‘Purification’ and ‘Purgation’ as merely incidental and secondary elements; Catharsis is a process of learning and therefore pleasurable. Aristotle points out that, if well imitated pictures even of corpse and ugly animals give pleasure, it shows that pleasure is linked with learning. It is a paradox that even the ugly can give pleasure. A similar paradox lies in tragedy. Tragic incidents are pitiable and fearful but produce pleasure. This is the tragic paradox, this is the pleasure peculiar. Catharsis is the process of learning and therefore, pleasurable. According to this theory:

“Catharsis becomes an indication of the function of the tragedy, and not of its emotional effects on the audience.”

Catharsis can be explained as a kind of experience which affects the dissolution of errors and resolution of disturbances and excitements leading to the pleasure of knowledge and learning where we move from ‘pity to sympathy’ and ‘fear to confidence’ which, according to Aristotle, is a virtue.

Psychological Interpretation:

Some critics have tried to give a psychological explanation to the term ‘Catharsis’. Tragedy gives a free outlet to the emotions of pity and fear. The result is a feeling of emotional relief. This, one notes, is quite closely related to the purgation theory. Emotional excess is thus brought to a balance. I.A. Richards also psychologically says:

“fear is the impulse to withdraw and pity is the impulse to approach. Both these impulses are harmonized and blended in tragedy, and this balance brings relief and repose.”

Catharsis is a term in dramatic art that describes the effect of tragedy (or comedy and quite possibly other artistic forms) principally on the audience. Nowhere does Aristotle explain the meaning of “Catharsis” as he is using that term in the definition of tragedy in the poetics (1449b21-28). G.F. Else argues that traditional, widely held interpretations of catharsis as “purification” or “purgation” have no basis in the text of the poetics but are derived from the use of catharsis in other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. For this reason, a number of diverse interpretation on the meaning of this term have arisen. The term is often discussed along with Aristotle’s concept of anagnorisis. In the twentieth century, the interpretation of catharsis as “intellectual clarification” has arisen as a rival to the older views in describing the effect of catharsis on members of the audience.

In his works prior to the poetics, Aristotle had used the term catharsis purely in its medical sense (usually referring to the evacuation of the katamenia –the menstrual fluid or other reproductive material). Here, however, he employs it as a medical metaphor. F.L. Lucas maintains, therefore, that purification and cleansing are not proper translations for catharsis, that it should rather be rendered as purgation.

“It is the human soul that is purged of its excessive passions.”

William Shakespeare wrote two famous examples of catharsis. One of these examples is used in his his tragic drama *Macbeth*. 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 1, he is made the thane of Cawdor by King Duncan, which makes him a prodigy, well-regarded for his valor and talent. However, 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 gathers this idea in his soliloquy.

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

In *Romeo and Juliet*, 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 have experienced. 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.

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 *Poetics*.

According to G. F. Else, the conventional and the most prevalent explanation of catharsis as “purgation” or “cleansing” does not have a basis in *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.

An authoritative version of *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.

The most common interpretations of the term are purgation and purification, which are still widely used. The most recent interpretation of the term catharsis is “intellectual clarification”.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that catharsis is release of emotions, purgation of thought or purification of thought. Catharsis purifies our inner conscience with the reaction on action. It pacifies the characters after they have took revenge on their enemy. And this is used not only in plays but also in the daily life of people. Catharsis can happen in other ways too. Stressed or compressed emotions released by the character are the catharsis. It releases the emotional tensions. Catharsis makes the character feel light, relaxed and comfortable. It gives a sense of relief that helps characters handle daily living in calmer fashion. It through drama leads to a more rational mind sees the extreme of emotion are tapped and left in a safe setting.

References

- Aristotle, The poetics: Translated by S.H Butcher <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

- Butcher, Samuel H., Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, New York,1911.
- Price, James: A Lesson on Criticism from Aristotle on January 22, 2013 in Leadership and Management ([http:// www.refreshleadership.com/index.php/2013/01/lesson-criticism-aristotle/](http://www.refreshleadership.com/index.php/2013/01/lesson-criticism-aristotle/))
- George W. E. Russell (editor), Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1849–88, 2 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1895
- Ransom, John Crowe: The Literary Criticism of Aristotle (Reconsiderations, No. 10),The Kenyon Review , Vol.10,No. 3 (Summer, 1948), pp. 382-402

