

‘Catharsis’: A Note

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As Aristotle defines in the sixth section of *Poetics*, tragedy is “the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself”, and the function of tragedy is to arouse the feelings of pity and fear “wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions” (according to Ingram Bywater’s translation). The notion of “catharsis” as presented by Aristotle in relation to tragedy has always been a moot point in literary criticism precisely due to its semantic ambivalence. As pertaining to the ancient physiological theories, the term “catharsis” signifies “purgation”; Aristotle’s definition too prioritizes the purgative function of tragedy in ridding the spectators of the feelings of pity and fear – which are, however, initially aroused by the tragic spectacle.

The notion of “catharsis” is quite likely to mislead the reader into supposing the effect of tragedy as to “purge” the audience of pity and fear. F.L. Lucas in his study of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy* notes that by the term “catharsis” in the sense of “purgation” is to be conceived “not in the modern, but in the older, wider English sense which included the *partial* removal of excess ‘humours’”. Hence, in the context of a tragic drama, “catharsis” does not imply that the audience’s feelings of pity and fear are effaced. Rather, as Lucas observes, “it means simply that the passions themselves are reduced to a healthy, balanced proportion”. It is because of this particular cathartic effect of tragedy that the audience are kept secure from being overwhelmed with the feelings of pity and fear; and thus they are enabled to introspect more calmly into the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the dramatic performance that is being presented. “Catharsis” implies that the tragic spectacle itself brings about a sort of relief for the audience by helping them purge their excessive passions of pity and fear that were initially aroused by it.

The conceptualization of the cathartic function of tragedy is Aristotle’s counter-argument against Plato’s allegation in *The Republic* that a tragic drama, by inspiring the feelings of sympathy and fear, somehow demoralizes people, and do not teach them virtue and endurance. Aristotle defends tragedy by underlining its cathartic function. He regards “catharsis” as the principal aesthetic goal of tragedy, since it is “catharsis” that maintains the dialectics between the emotional and intellectual aspects of drama, alienates the audience from the dramatic paradigm, and enables them to obtain certain objectivity for a proper appreciation of the dramatic representation of a tragic plot.

➤ References:

- 1) *Poetics* translated by Ingram Bywater (Oxford, 1909),
 - 2) *The Theory of Drama* by Allardyce Nicoll (Methuen, 1974),
 - 3) *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* by J.A. Cuddon (Penguin, 1982),
 - 4) *Tragedy* by F.L. Lucas (Oxford, 1928), and
 - 5) *Tragedy (The Critical Idiom)* by Clifford Leech (Routledge, 2002).
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