

Aristotle's concept of catharsis

Aristotle writes that the function of tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, and to affect the Katharsis of these emotions. Aristotle has used the term Katharsis only once, but no phrase has been handled so frequently by critics, and poets. Aristotle has not explained what exactly he meant by the word, nor do we get any help from the Poetics. For this reason, help and guidance has to be taken from his other works. Further, Katharsis has three meanings. It means 'purgation', 'purification', and 'clarification', and each critic has used the word in one or the other senses. All agree that Tragedy arouses fear and pity, but there are sharp differences as to the process, the way by which the rousing of these emotions gives pleasure.

Katharsis has been taken as a medical metaphor, 'purgation', denoting a pathological effect on the soul similar to the effect of medicine on the body. This view is borne out by a passage in the Politics where Aristotle refers to religious frenzy being cured by certain tunes which excite religious frenzy.

During the Renaissance, another set of critics suggested that Tragedy helped to harden or 'temper' the emotions. Spectators are hardened to the pitiable and fearful events of life by witnessing them in tragedies.

Humphrey House rejects the idea of 'purgation' and forcefully advocates the 'purification' theory which involves moral instruction and learning. It is a kind of 'moral conditioning'. He points out that, 'purgation means cleansing'.

According to 'the purification' theory, Katharsis implies that our emotions are purified of excess and defect, are reduced to intermediate state, trained and directed towards the right objects at the right time. The spectator learns the proper use of pity, fear and similar emotions by witnessing tragedy. Butcher writes:

"The tragic Katharsis involves not only the idea of emotional relief, but the further idea of purifying the emotions so relieved."

The basic defect of 'purgation' theory and 'purification' theory is that they are too much occupied with the psychology of the audience. Aristotle was writing a treatise not on psychology but on the art of poetry. He relates 'Catharsis' not to the emotions of the spectators but to the incidents which form the plot of the tragedy. And the result is the "clarification" theory.

The paradox of pleasure being aroused by the ugly and the repellent is also

the paradox involved in tragedy. Tragic incidents are pitiable and fearful. They include horrible events as a man blinding himself, a wife murdering her husband or a mother slaying her children and instead of repelling us produce pleasure. Aristotle clearly tells us that we should not seek for every pleasure from tragedy, "but only the pleasure proper to it". 'Catharsis' refers to the tragic variety of pleasure. The Catharsis clause is thus a definition of the function of tragedy, and not of its emotional effects on the audience.

Imitation does not produce pleasure in general, but only the pleasure that comes from learning, and so also the peculiar pleasure of tragedy. Learning comes from discovering the relation between the action and the universal elements embodied in it. The poet might take his material from history or tradition, but he selects and orders it in terms of probability and necessity, and represents what, "might be". He rises from the particular to the general and so is more universal and more philosophical. The events are presented free of chance and accidents which obscure their real meaning. Tragedy enhances understanding and leaves the spectator 'face to face with the universal law'.

Thus according to this interpretation, 'Catharsis' means clarification of the essential and universal significance of the incidents depicted, leading to an enhanced understanding of the universal law which governs human life and destiny, and such an understating leads to pleasure of tragedy. In this view, Catharsis is neither a medical, nor a religious or moral term, but an intellectual term. The term refers to the incidents depicted in the tragedy and the way in which the poet reveals their universal significance.

The clarification theory has many merits. Firstly, it is a technique of the tragedy and not to the psychology of the audience. Secondly, the theory is based on what Aristotle says in the Poetics, and needs no help and support of what Aristotle has said in Politics and Ethics. Thirdly, it relates Catharsis both to the theory of imitation and to the discussion of probability and necessity. Fourthly, the theory is perfectly in accord with current aesthetic theories.

According to Aristotle the basic tragic emotions are pity and fear and are painful. If tragedy is to give pleasure, the pity and fear must somehow be eliminated. Fear is aroused when we see someone suffering and think that similar fate might befall us. Pity is a feeling of pain caused by the sight of underserved suffering of others. The spectator sees that it is the tragic error or Hamartia of the hero which results in suffering and so he learns something about the universal relation between character and destiny.

To conclude, Aristotle's conception of Catharsis is mainly intellectual. It is neither didactic nor theoretical, though it may have a residual theological element. Aristotle's Catharsis is not a moral doctrine requiring the tragic poet to show that bad men come to bad ends, nor a kind of theological relief arising from discovery that God's laws operate invisibly to make all things work out for the best.

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