

Aristotle's concept of catharsis

Aristotle in his *Poetics* has used the term catharsis only once, but no phrase probably in ancient or modern literature has been handled so frequently by commentators and critics, and by poets. Most varied and ingenuous explanations have been given. Catharsis has been taken to be a medical metaphor, 'purgation', denoting a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine on the body. By some critics the process has been likened to homeopathic treatment with the like curing the like. Thus it is said that the rousing of pity and fear results in the purgation of these emotions. Used in the medical sense, Catharsis implies relief following previous excitation of the tragic emotions. Important critics like Twining and Barney are also of the view that Catharsis is a kind of homeopathic treatment. Freud and other psychologists also support this interpretation, when they say that by helping patients to recall painful childhood experiences, neurosis can be cured.

In the Neo-classical era, catharsis was taken to be an allopathic treatment with unlike curing unlike. The arousing of pity and fear was supposed to bring about purgation or evacuation of other emotions like anger, hatred, pride etc. If the suffering is caused by emotions like anger, hatred or impiety towards the gods, the audience is 'purged' of such undesirable emotions because one realizes their evil consequences. Thomas Taylor in his introduction to the *Poetics* holds this view.

Humphrey House on the other hand rejects the idea of purgation in the medical sense of the term, and is the most forceful advocate of the purification theory, which involves the idea of moral instruction or moral learning. It is a kind of "moral conditioning" which the spectators undergo. In his scholarly and penetrating discussion on the whole question, Humphrey House points out that, "Purgation means cleansing". Now cleansing may be "quantitative evacuation" or "qualitative change" in the body brought about by a restoration of proper equilibrium. The stage of health depends on the maintenance of this equilibrium. Tragedy, by arousing pity and fear, instead of suppressing them, trains them and bring back the soul to a balanced state. House regards Catharsis as an educative and controlling process. Tragedy rouses pity and fear from potentiality to actuality through suitable stimuli. It controls and trains them by directing them to the right objects in the right way and exercises them within the limits of the play. Thus according to purification theory catharsis implies that our emotions are purified of excess and defect, are reduced to intermediate state, trained and directed towards the right object at the right time and in this way tragedy brings in a sense of moral conditioning.

Now, in contradiction to such an interpretation of catharsis, O.B Hardison points out that, the indications of Aristotle's meaning of catharsis are provided in the *Poetics*. Hardison, along with critics like Leon Golden and G.E Else advocate the clarification theory. While writing about the pleasure of imitative art in chapter IV, he says that the pleasure produced is associated with learning and that, it is a pleasure enjoyed by men in general as well as by the philosophers. He points out that well imitated pictures, even of corpses and ugly animals give pleasure. The paradox of pleasure being aroused by the ugly and repellent in everyday life is also the paradox involved in tragedy. Tragic incidents are pitiable and fearful. They include even such horrible events as man blinding himself, a wife murdering her husband, or a mother slaying her children. Such incidents, instead of repelling us, as they would so in real life, produce pleasure peculiar to tragedy. This is the tragic paradox; this is the pleasure peculiar to tragedy. Thus catharsis according to the clarification theory refers to the tragic variety of pleasure.

The clarification theory has many merits. Firstly, it interprets catharsis with reference to the technique of the tragedy and not with psychology of the audience, and thus recognizes the true nature of the *Poetics* as a technical treatise. Secondly, the theory is based on what Aristotle says in the *Poetics* itself, and needs no help and support of what Aristotle has said in his other works on *Poetics* and *Ethics*. Thirdly it relates

catharsis both to the theory of imagination outlined in chapter I –IV, and to the discussion on probability and necessity in chapter IX.

To conclude, Aristotle's conception of catharsis is mainly intellectual. It is neither didactic, not theological. Aristotle's catharsis is not a moral doctrine requiring a tragic poet to show that bad men come to bad ends, nor a kind of theological relief arising from the discovery that God's laws operate invisibly to make all things work out for the best. There are many connotations of the experience which are not covered by Aristotle's treatment and which cannot be rationally explained. But the clarification theory comes closer to defining the essential quality of the tragic experience than the didactic and theological explanations.