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Catharsis

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Abstract:

The term catharsis was first used by Aristotle in poetics. In Greek, catharsis literally means cleansing. Aristotle believed that cleansing our emotion from our body was purpose of tragedy. Catharsis applies to any form of art that makes us feel strong emotions and through catharsis these emotions are purged from our system. Through such experience one feels relieved and better afterwards. Catharsis in Greek can also mean purification, purifying body from negative emotions. It is tragedy that purifies feelings of fear and pity.

In literature, catharsis is release of emotions such as pity, fear, sadness, anger through witnessing art. Art in form of drama, poetry novel allows readers to witness the action in front of them and feel for characters. This way the readers experiences the emotions faced by the character. Viewing art especially tragedy, readers get opportunity to display emotions at proper time thereby lessening the outburst of emotions in daily life. Catharsis thus allows readers or viewers to express extreme emotions which in a way leads to internal renewal and peace.

Keywords: catharsis, purge, purification, pity, fear, renewal.

Examples (Daily life)

1. When a relationship between boyfriend and girlfriend ends, they both prefer to throw away the things shared or given to each other. This way they give vent to their anger. This is catharsis.
2. College reunion among college mates gives them a chance to recollect all the memories shared. By viewing all previous photos or videos from college days gives them a strong surge of emotions. This is another form of catharsis.
3. When a loved one dies; a person feels deep sadness inside and expresses his/her emotions through tears. This way a person is relieved of inner sadness.
4. Expressing anger over some unpleasant situation gives a person cathartic relief although knowing that particular situation cannot be changed by anger.

5. In movie theatre, a viewer sympathises with the protagonist who is facing untoward situation in his life. The viewer even expresses his sympathies through tears although knowing that it is reel situation not real. But tears purge his body of excess emotions.

Literary examples:

1. Oedipus Rex (Sophocles): - The tragedy of Oedipus the king arises from the fact that he doesn't heed the prophecies and brings down his own fate upon himself. It is main play which Aristotle was considering while creating theory of catharsis. He realizes after a long time that he is in fact cursed and he did kill his father.

“O God! It has all come true. Light, let this be the last time I see you. I stand revealed- born in shame, married in shame, an unnatural murderer”.

In this play not only audience but character also undergoes process of catharsis. Cathartic moment for Oedipus is when his search to find the murderer is over. Even audience feels relieved knowing that Oedipus now knows about his cursed fate. Oedipus's realization of committing unforgivable acts leads him to be victimised by realities of curse. Catharsis is displayed throughout the play through Oedipus's punishment to himself. Audience feels pity and fear as the punishment for Oedipus was quite serious. Oedipus poking out his own eyes is enough to make anybody feel pity.

“I stabbed out these eyes. Why should I have eyes? Why, when nothing I saw was worth seeing? Nothing”

In this play, the journey of Catharsis stems from Oedipus's journey to find the murderer, his discovery of truth and finally repercussions caused by his fate.

2. Othello: - In Othello, an ambitious soldier named Iago brings downfall of his captain, Othello. He makes things to look as if Desdemona, Othello's wife is cheating on him. Othello feels betrayed and eventually kills his own wife. After learning that his wife was faithful, Othello delivers monologue before taking his own life.

I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuates,



Not set down aught in malice. Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.

Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe

...

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,

And smote him, thus.

Readers understand and relate to the unbearable pain that Othello goes when he realizes that he has killed his faithful wife. It is more painful to see for readers how Othello takes his own life but cathartic feeling is experienced by both_ character as well as readers when Othello takes his life. This action releases the pain through suicide.

3. Romeo and Juliet: - In order to avoid marrying her suitor, Juliet takes a sleeping potion to make her parents think that she was dead. Romeo discovers Juliet's sleeping body in the Capulet tomb and believes she is dead. Romeo in grief poisons himself out of sorrow.

From this world – Weared flesh. Eyes, look your last!

Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, O you

The doors of breath, seal with a righteous Kiss

A dateless bargain to engrossing death!

Come, bitter conduct, come, Unsavoury guide!

Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on.

The dashing rocks thy sea – sick weary bark!

Here's to my love!

Catharsis

(Drinks)

O true apothecary!

Thy drugs are quick. Thus, with a Kiss I die

The audience/reader finds themselves crying at such a situation losing loved ones in such a situation triggers memories of someone we have lost and guess a cathartic feeling. Then the two families bury the hatchet. This also gives a feeling of relief and peace.

4. Macbeth: - At the start of the play, Macbeth is admired for his bravery and skill. He soon becomes seduced by ambition losing his integrity, wife and finally his life. Macbeth realizes his living a meaningless life and realizes this in his soliloquy. There he speaks of his life as "... 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

Attainment of power leaves many people empty handed at end as they sacrifice much of their humanity over power. Same happens to Lady Macbeth. As Catharsis is purgation of pity and fear, audience/reader after watching/reading Macbeth feels pity for Macbeth and has a feeling of fear that same thing may happen to them if they aspire for power.

Catharsis is a psychological phenomenon through which a person is relieved of unhealthy emotions. Viewing tragedy ignites emotions in viewers and through catharsis ultimately leads to calm feeling. In fact, the main function of emotional expression/catharsis is to leave its viewers calm and refreshed. In ancient Greek, the term catharsis was used to describe cure associated with bringing harmony to four humours that maintain healthy body and mind. So, reading or viewing art especially tragedy expels examine emotions through catharsis and a viewer/reader feels relieved of a burden. Ethical interpretation of catharsis argued that observing tragedy purges mind from vices. Viewer/ Reader will try to avoid imitate characters in tragedy on seeing their outcome



ultimately vowing never to follow passion of their hearts. This way, catharsis brings a positive change in viewer/reader and changes his perspective to look at things around.

Catharsis is process of releasing strong emotions through art. Catharsis can be referred to any experience of emotional release brought by work of art. By experiencing catharsis, audience can learn to better regulate their emotions in real life. In theatre or literature, catharsis experience is an experience in which audience or reader experiences the same emotions that characters are experiencing on stage or on the page.

Role of Catharsis in Psychology: -

According to psychoanalytic theory, the emotional release related to catharsis relieves unconscious conflicts. Rather than vent these feelings inappropriately, the individual releases stress related emotions through catharsis and feels relieved. The term is used in therapy as well as in literature. As therapy, catharsis eases the inner self of an individual and leads to restoration and renewal. The purpose of catharsis is fulfilled when it brings positive change in individual's life. It was Sigmund Freud's colleague Josef Breuer who first used the term for therapeutic use. He developed a cathartic treatment for hysteria. His way of treating involved making patients recall traumatic experiences while under hypnosis. By such experience, Breuer found that his patients experienced relief. Freud believed that catharsis play an important role in relieving symptoms of distress. In their book studies on Hysteria, Freud and Breuer defined catharsis as "the process of reducing or eliminating a complex by recalling it to conscious awareness and allowed it to be expressed. Sigmund Freud believed that expressing negative emotions could build up inside an individual and cause psychological symptoms such as hysteria. He believed that expressing negative emotions was better than holding it inside.

At the end of each play, protagonist has a catharsis – he realises that 'damnation' was bought by his own actions. With this his soul is cleansed and he is whole new individual again. The same feelings are experienced by audience in theatre and leave the place feeling cleansed. Catharsis isn't restricted to play but can be seen in other forms of literature. To understand this, one can take modern day example. The most popular tragic hero would be Lord Eddard Stark. He is a great character whom we see in "A game of thrones" by G.R.R Martin. He refuses to 'Play the game' and pays the price for it with his life. Stark's catharsis is that he realises the importance of

playing the game and falsely admits to his alleged crimes. A reader can identify with a character like Stark and go through their own catharsis while he goes through his.

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