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Abstract

Catharsis is integral to tragedy. Tragic art precludes active emotional and psychological involvement of the audience in the staged action. But there is little agreement among scholars and critics on either the exact meaning of the term catharsis or the range of its application. The diversity of speculations about catharsis can broadly be divided into three basic categories: clarification, purgation, and cleansing. But regardless of the dispute, it is a settled opinion that catharsis is preeminently related to the function of tragedy and provides some sort of positive relief to the emotions disturbed on account of staged tragic action. It also paves the way for clearer/better understanding of the events and protagonist's predicament. This study provides a detailed account of the development of thoughts on catharsis over the years. It also argues that modern tragic art as represented by O'Neill can not provide cathartic relief for variety of reasons. The most prominent being his preoccupation with particular psychic conditions and behavioral regression. One particular aspect that obstructs purgative and therapeutic effect on the readers/audience is that of failure on the part of O'Neill's dramatis personae to achieve a cathartic and therapeutic progression in their behavior in the course of the plays.

Keywords: Catharsis, Tragic Effect, Modern Tragedy, O'Neill's Drama

Introduction

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relief for variety of reasons. The most prominent being his preoccupation with particular psychic conditions and behavioral regression. One particular aspect that obstructs purgative and therapeutic effect on the readers/audience is that of failure on the part of O'Neill's dramatis personae to achieve a cathartic and therapeutic progression in their behavior in the course of the play.

The theory of tragic effect as a matter of fact has existence in classical thoughts on tragedy and could be traced in Aristotle's *Poetics and Rhetoric*. Theater can be simply defined as the interaction between actors on the stage and audience in a performance and one obvious factor in the whole debate is that the concept of catharsis with its provisions of pity and fear is directly related to the reader/audience and how they respond to the tragic action.

Catharsis: Meanings

As stated earlier there is no conformity among scholars on either the exact meaning of the term or the range of its application. What does the term mean? Some commentators believe catharsis is a moral or intellectual clarification or enlightenment for the audience, while others take as a medical term having potential to relieve the audience of distressing emotions. Brunius (1966) asserts that this single element had inspired as many 1,425 different interpretations and that too prior to 1931 and many more after that date. The diversity of speculations about catharsis can broadly be divided into three basic categories: clarification, purgation, and cleansing. Each of these views has strong supporters and admirers. The first interpretation stresses catharsis as a process of clarification or enlightenment. Gassner (1965) for instance argues that it is the intellectual and moral clarification we experience while watching a tragedy which separates this form from melodrama and enables catharsis to take place. House (1956) interprets it in terms of moral cleansing/balancing. The second point of view, catharsis as emotional purgation or therapeutic relief assumes that pity and fear are in many respects disturbing and uncomfortable emotions. Therefore, they should be eliminated from the reader/audience as they interact with the staged action or the word on the page. In viewing/reading a tragedy, uncomfortable emotions are raised to a pitch, and when they are finally relieved, the disturbing element is purged off. Butcher (1973) for example contends that "as the tragic action progresses, when the tumult of the mind, first roused, has afterwards subsided, the lower forms of emotion are found to have been transmuted into higher and more refined forms". The homeopathic understanding has much to recommend it. According to Berys (1975) tragedy expels cathartic emotions: fear and pity and others from the spectators. But "catharsis is not an intellectualization or cleansing of the emotions" argues Berys, "but a purgation of them" and "tragedians thus heal the soul much as doctors, often, heal the body: by getting rid of bad things in it". The third understanding, catharsis as cleansing or purification identifies the concept catharsis as a function of plot or a product of mimesis. Schaper (1982) for instance supports that "it would be entirely un-

Aristotelian to think of the *telos* of something in terms other than structural. Kitto (1966) likewise considers catharsis as an aesthetic "cleaning up" of the "distressful" "raw material" of the tragic event, or an artistic representation which removes the "uncertain, contingent, [and] purely accidental," so that the action is rendered "clear-cut and significant."

Further Views on Catharsis

The debate over Aristotle's meaning has not resolved, and it continues to adopt new dimensions and aspects. In the preface to the original edition of *Nicomede*, Corneill (1998) commenting on the singularity of his play argues that it aroused admiration rather than compassion (1998). He also discusses the role of the marvelous and of surprised astonishment and writes that both can be used to heighten pity and fear. Thus he provides Aristotelian basis for including admiration in the category of the tragic emotions.

In post modern theatre, catharsis continues to occupy importance in theories and performance with a different color. Artaud's experiment in theater for instance emphasizes a different view of effect of drama on the audiences. In the first place he is strongly critical of Renaissance drama especially Shakespeare and Racine and terms it "purely descriptive and narrative theatre", where the actor are on one side and audience on the other side, divided by the stage. This made the spectator "into perverse 'peeping tom' of the character psychology at a safe 'disinterested' distance. . ." (Pizzato, 1998, 66). He did not also believe in the effectiveness of cathartic power of plays like Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* for the contemporary audiences. He is all praise for presence of plague epidemic in the play, "but its poison is ameliorated by 'a manner and language that have lost all touch with the rude and epileptic rhythm of our time'" (Mauriac, 1959). "Up until the time of his confinement in 1937, Artaud supported theatre as an instrument of civilizational catharsis and he equates theatre with plague, alchemy, metaphysics, and cruelty—doubles all" (Cohn, 1995). The core of his theoretical belief regarding catharsis and theatrical effect is based on "philosophical maxim that the complete liberation of evil forces (even beyond the libido) would bring about the good" (Arnold

1963, 115-29). He put greater emphasis on action and stage effect to shake the audience and show the full impact of evil. Thus action remains the focal point of Artaud's productions. He called for a theatre of participatory action:

We need above all a theatre that wakes us up nerves and heart. . . .In the anguished, catastrophic period we live in, we feel an urgent need for a theatre which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times (Artaud, 1958, 84).

Conceiving a Theatre of Cruelty, he outlined its function in relation to its audience:

The Theatre of Cruelty proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets. The theatre must give us everything that is in crime, love, war, or madness, if it wants to recover its necessity. In a word, we believe that there are living forces in what is called poetry and that the image of a crime presented in the requisite theatrical conditions is something infinitely more terrible for the spirit than that same crime when actually committed (Artaud, 1958, 85).

According to Artaud, the Theatre of Cruelty would be a theatre that induces trance..... furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pours out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior (Artaud, 1958, 92).

While admitting man's perversity and the existence of evil in the world, Artaud believed that man's nature was basically heroic. The Theatre of Cruelty would ennoble society by purging it of its irrational appetites:

The action of theatre like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; . . . and in revealing to collectivities of men, their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it (Artaud, 1958, 31-32).

Artaud's conception of the "place" where the Spectacle of Horror would be presented is spectacular:

We abolish the stage and the auditorium, which will be replaced by a single site, without partition or boundary of any kind, and this will become the theatre for the action. Direct communication between spectator and spectacle will be restored.... We will take some hangar or barn which will be rebuilt by methods which have resulted in the architecture of certain churches or holy places, and of certain Tibetan temples (Arnold, 1963, 15-29).

Artaud continues to argue that special positions will be reserved for the actors and for the action at the four corners of the room. However he continues to write , there will be a central area set aside, which, although not strictly speaking a stage, will permit most of the action to be concentrated and to be brought to a climax whenever that is necessary (Arnold 1963). He also writes of the spectacle:

The spectacle ... by elimination of the stage ... will physically envelop the spectator and immerse him in a constant bath of lights, images, movements, and noises. . . . And just as there will be no unoccupied point in space, there will be neither respite nor vacancy in the spectator's mind or sensibility. That is, *between life and the theatre there will be no distinct division, but instead continuity*. Anyone who has watched a scene of any movies being filmed will understand exactly what we mean (Arnold 1963, 15-29).

In the 20th century interpretations, the term catharsis has also assumed therapeutic orientation for the clinically sick in hospitals and other such places. Scheff (1982), for instance regards catharsis as "the discharge of the distressful emotions . . . as largely internal, involuntary processes with invariant external indicators, such as weeping, shivering, cold sweating and so on". Scheff's description of the cathartic process has three parts: the arrangement of the stimuli, which are optimally distant; the participant's response; catharsis; and decrease in tension. Moreno also explains a therapeutic role of drama which is similar to the social situation of the patient. Here the patient is asked to re-live a past experience by "expression through gestures, words, and movements, and if necessary, to act with a group who represents the auxiliary egos who represent to the patient certain roles played by member of his social atoms". The psychodramatist through constant encouragement asks the patient to act, who in the process undergoes "slackening and loosening" to revive certain mental states that he was unaware before the acting. The psycho-dramatic starter and guides of the patient, on the one hand in to the psychotic realms and on the other hand in to gradual integration and control of roles he played during the psychotic attack (1939, 1-30). Jones (2007) in his book *Drama as Therapy: Theory Practice and Research* works on drama as a therapeutic technique, effective not only in theoretical position but also in practice. He defines drama therapy as "involvement in drama with a healing intention" (8). The healing process is defined as a relationship "between the enacted fictional self and the client's usual identity, and this dynamic, active relationship is seen as the basis of therapeutic change in role based work within drama therapy" (9). Drama therapy primarily involves actor/character. But the same may be extended to the audience as they interact with the actor, show understanding of his crises or distance themselves from his predicament as it clashes with their social, cultural values and beliefs.

Living in age of socio-economic and religious crises of discreet nature, it is imperative to have literature that facilitates cathartic relief to the stressful mental/emotional states. Kristeva (1989) writes about a social destructive order

affecting the psyche of the individual "whose diagnoses are being refined by psychiatry_ psychosis, depression, manic-depressive states, borderline states, false selves etc" (457). In view of the prevalent state globally and impending social, spiritual and psychological crises, there is a need to revive theater that could have cathartic and even therapeutic effect on the readers. Tragedy in this context has a particular educative and intellectual value. Poole argues:

Tragedy is inherently provocative and interrogative and the reason why Greek tragedies have survived the rough passages of time and translation is that they have harboured a stubborn power to ask difficult questions. They put this question in flesh and blood and spirit, giving body and soul to question about the value and value of pain (11).

O'Neill's Tragic Art and Catharsis

O'Neill's tragic art presents a grim dilemma in terms of cathartic effect. Its emotional effect is definitely there, but it is mostly on the negative and regressive side and on account of the peculiar nature of his drama, there is every possibility that it will generate feelings like psychic strains, depressiveness, and world-weariness. Moments of relaxation in his plays are very rare. Predominantly his characters are representation of mental and psychic stasis. Folk refers to psychic paralysis of O'Neill's characters:

. . . the inert paralyzed state of mind of the characters in the last three plays___ a condition from which death alone can bring release is one logical conclusion to be drawn from the philosophy that life is suspended between hopelessly divergent opposites. But the entire process of formulation of such a theory springs not from logic, but from the necessity of a sick mind to fulfill its own needs (41).

It can be said that his dramatic world is a world of absolute preoccupation with death, disease, and psychologically pathological. Therefore it creates terribly tense and frustrating, defeatist and regressive account of human struggle to strain readers' sensibilities or create ambivalence and psychic incarceration. This

pattern governs the entire range of his art. In his early sea plays like *Bound East for Cardiff* and *The Moon of the Carribies* for instance life has been dramatized as a purposeless drifting voyage without any possibility of its termination. In *Moon of the Carribies* sailors appear as a group of lost souls and “all that follows is in a sense a logical conclusion of anarchy which lies below the surface in this world of lost souls” (Bigsby 1982, 49). In plays like *Desire under Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, life is explicitly a sexual hell that combines with familial decadence to bring forth a devastatingly depressive and dark worldview and human predicament. His *Strange Interlude* dramatizes deadly unconscious conflict of the deprived and torn personalities who are involved in essentially psychopathological struggle without any concern for moral and emotional imperatives. *Iceman Cometh* is play that dramatizes something beyond narrow confines of repressive theory. It deals with the disreputable and broken down characters, living in past, hopes and “pipedreams”. All these visit Harry Hope’s saloon for drink, do nothing except quarrel and indulge in loose, purposeless talk. Among them Hickey, Slade and Parrit are in particular the embodiment of pronounced psychopathological states like depressiveness. Bloom highlights their psychopathology thus:

Hickey, who preaches nihilism, is a desperate self deceiver and so a deceiver of others, in himself appointed role as evangelist of the abyss. Slade, evasive and solipsistic, works his way to a more authentic nihilism than Hickey’s. Poor Parrit, young and self-hunted, cannot achieve the sense of nothingness that would save him from puritanical self condemnation (5)

They are all victims of illusion. They are in a situation where life and even death is an illusion for them. Slade takes up death as “a fine long sleep” (*Iceman Cometh*, 16). In their present situation, death is only a state of non existence in a mechanical, animalistic, depressed world. They are escapists, sick of life, and the play is about the stripping of the illusions of the each character who “taken together represent mankind in the last harbour (Lee, 1987, 61).” They are as stated above a group of lost soul maintaining an appearance of life through their “pipe dreams”. As far as the subject of the pipe

dreams is concerned, it is unimportant. Its value lies in the fact that it forms a part of the illusion that gives life to the whole degenerated lot of dreamers. To this world comes Hickey, the Iceman, who is as Day writes, “a foil to the bridegroom of the scripture i.e. Christ and unlike him signifies death and personal annihilation as a parable of the destiny of man (1987, 12).” Similarly the play *Long Day’s Journey* is an effective example of a psychological dramatization. It contains an exact exposition of various depressive psychological states that appear quite spontaneously as a response to a particular factor ___ emotional, biological, environmental and temperamental ___ thus creating a gallery of psychotic and paranoid characters. It becomes obvious that here O’Neill has left behind the much talked about Freudian perspectives on human nature and psychology. He has grown out of making sexual drives as the determining cause of bringing about individual, social, cultural, mental and temperamental regression. The characters are not only grouped into torn personalities at war within themselves, but they are also locked in mutual antagonism, conflict and confession of guilt and crime that they have done against each other. This technique of showing them at war both at the individual and family levels renders them open to close psychological scrutiny and analysis. Interpersonal conflict in reality make them express their inner, long lasting repulsion and love, sympathy and empathy against each other in a language that itself becomes an important tool of evaluating their schizophrenia befittingly. Their mind then functions both as a womb where they retain their original self as well as a medium of channelising their subconscious and unconscious selves to each other and to the readers. For instance sense of guilt, failure in life and the resultant anxiety have driven both Jamie and Edmund to drunkenness. Jamie in particular “the cynical tempter of innocent youth, pan, Mephistopheles Can . . .” (Carpenter 1979, 155) is a miserable failure “always sneering at some one, always looking for the worst weakness in everyone”(*Long Day’s Journey* 61). He is mainly jealous of his younger brother. Adler (1928) in his *Understanding Human Nature* lists jealousy as one of very aggressive character traits which, according to him, “occurs almost universally

among children with the advent of younger brother or sister who demands more attention from parents, and gives an older child an occasion to feel like a dethroned king (223).” Once the trait is fully established in the child, it adopts various modalities, and shapes of expression. It may result in what Adler terms self destruction, obstinacy, senseless opposition, curtailing of other’s freedom and his constant subjugation (223). Jamie is an representation of this destructive jealousy and therefore stands virtually ruined in the play. On the other hand all the family members locked in the cycle of love, resentment and even vicious repulsion against each other. The important thing is that O’Neill maintains this characteristic ambivalence throughout the play from the first to the last act with remarkable consistency. Brustein (1987) argues:

The four members of the family react to each other with bewildering ambivalence – exposing illusions and react to each other with bewildering ambivalence-exposing illusions and sustaining them, striking a blow and hating the hand that strikes. Every torment is self-inflicted, every angry word reverberating in the conscience of the speaker. It is as if characters existed only to torture each other, while protecting each other, too, against their own resentful tongues (27).

Collectively all the members of Tyrone family suffer from guilty conscience for betraying each other in the past. Effect on the audience in this case is not one of purgation, or purification or admiration, but to create psychic strains, depressiveness without feeling any state of empathy for the deprived and regressive characters or undergo a cathartic process as the action unfolds on the stage.

Characters and Cathartic/ Therapeutic Process

One particular aspect that obstructs cathartic and therapeutic effect on the readers/ audience is that of failure on the part of O’Neill’s characters to achieve a cathartic/ therapeutic progression in the course of the play. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a clear instance of how a character undergoes cathartic process from grief, pain, or “madness” (Knight, 1977) to

achieve a level of improvement in emotive states and thinking processes. Jorgenson (1963) analyses this in terms of a psychotherapy that pertains to regaining of the sanity and moral greatness at the end of the play. Hamlet writes Jorgenson had displayed these virtues in the middle of the “of those wandering on crooked ways of hypocrisy, dissimulation, and untruth”. His sensible, conscientious, and circumspect nature is opposed in strong contrast to the unprincipled conduct of all the others, and to the heartless or thoughtless heedlessness of their actions and their consequence”. The process of recovery, writes Jorgenson (1963) works through his grand soliloquies. He appears seriously broken down and grief stricken early in the play, rarely speaking to other people. All anger and condemnation is directed against himself. But By the end of III.ii, Hamlet is no longer a victim of melancholia and self condemnation. He turns his hatred upon the one person who has most cruelly betrayed him and his father. In the closet scene, his overt anger is the most explicit. Here he speaks no longer to talks to himself, but to her. In the final act Hamlet regains full potential by directing his anger against the aggressors, and not against himself. The new insight that Hamlet develops in the course of his aggression against the aggressors is a representation of his therapeutic recovery.

Macbeth also presents a process that can be explained and interpreted in terms of improvement from state of absolute dejection to emotional strength and valor in the face of impending gloom and crises. Macbeth’s tragic experience in the play is an embodiment of purely Renaissance culture for greater lust for fame, power and knowledge. Gaining the crown is regarded as devoid of luster if it is not perpetuated through the succession. Therefore Macbeth’s ascendancy to power through murder lacks the taste as the forces that promised him throne had equally promised of its succession in Banquo’s lineage. Mere thought of power being transferred to Banquo’s family stretched out to infinity utterly deprives him of joy associated with the assumption of power. Entrapped in this area of deep concern, Macbeth puts himself on the path of infamy. Bloodshed proceeds from his desperation to stop fulfillment of this part of the prophecy. But

murder upon murder not only brings notoriety, but adds to his desperation leading to total nihilism expressed in no uncertain terminology:

Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, 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. (5.5. 23-28).

This huge despair and expression of life's utter futility is not left to its own. Convulsed as Bradley remarks by conscience (1958, 324), and promptness to face Macduff's threatening forces at the end, Macbeths achieves certain degree of firm dignity and respect. This nobility arising in a murderer after the declared nihilism and futility informs his character with cathartic recovery from state of utter nihilism to firm courage and strength against odds.

In O'Neill's plays the characters present an image of absolute entrapment in their unconscious motivation and desires. As the unconscious in almost all of his literary representations is governed by guilt, incest and depressiveness with variable degrees, no stable progression or movement towards resolution of what troubles them is apparent or made prominent in the plays. O'Neill's indebtedness to psychoanalyst Freud is not a hidden fact (Nugent, 1991) as many of his characters exemplify some of Freud's concepts, especially the Oedipus complex (Bogard 1988, Moorton 1991). This factor although provides the readers an opportunity to delve into the characters unconscious, but at the same time it imparts quite a limited approach to the entire mode of a character's behavior in the plays. From artistic view point such a representation imparts a deterministic and inert impression to the whole representation. Arguing about Freud's interpretation of human nature, Gabriel argues:

Freud's investigations led him to view man as a socially repressed and self repressing animal, an animal who repressed his innermost desires to the unconscious regions of his mind ... and an animal who seeks consolation from

the miseries of life in socially sponsored illusions (19).

From this perspective man is an animal who represses his fantasies to bring destruction to himself. The views take man to the states of Darwinian existence struggling perpetually to come to terms with realities of life. In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud considers sources of human motivation other than libidinal/sexual energy and comes out with what he calls life (Eros) and death instincts (later termed Thanatos) that are constantly in war with each other, and despite their equal validity ending on the victory of death instinct. In Menninger's (1938) opinion death patterns in Freud as an assumption that "the life and death instincts (which he calls as constructive and destructive tendencies) are in constant conflict and interaction as are similar forces in physics, chemistry, and biology. To create and to destroy, to build up and to tear down, these are the anabolism and catabolism of the personality . . . (6). O'Neill's plays are an exact instance of the perpetual conflict between Eros and Thanatos. Elsewhere (Karim, 2010) the personas' behavior has been analyzed in terms of trauma and post traumatic stress disorder. It is important to note that the traumatized behavior has a lot to do with the past that is replete with torturous memories that continue to impinge on their life in the present. The study focused on this factor for two reasons: one the past that determines their present is individual and not collective and second it is always painful, and personas conduct is rendered psychopathological due to its traumatized effect. It has also been argued that O'Neill's treatment of trauma through art carries one very significant limitation of failure of his to provide possible strategies for coping with the trauma, post traumatic stress disorder. Therefore the ultimate impression is one of psychological standoff that leaves the protagonist paralyzed and neurasthenic in the end.

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