

Study Material

Module No: 3

Faculty Name: Satabdi Roy

Semester: Semester IV (Hons)

Topic: Catharsis

Catharsis (from Greek κάθαρσις, *katharsis*, meaning "purification" or "cleansing" or "clarification") refers to the purification and purgation of emotions—particularly pity and fear—through art or any extreme change in emotion that results in renewal and restoration. It is a metaphor originally used by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, comparing the effects of tragedy on the mind of a spectator to the effect of catharsis on the body.

Dramatic uses

Catharsis is a term in dramatic art that describes the effect of tragedy (or comedy and quite possibly other artistic forms) principally on the audience (although some have speculated on characters in the drama as well). Nowhere does Aristotle explain the meaning of "catharsis" as he is using that term in the definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* (1449b21-28). G. F. Else argues that traditional, widely held interpretations of catharsis as "purification" or "purgation" have no basis in the text of the *Poetics*, but are derived from the use of catharsis in other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. For this reason, a number of diverse interpretations of the meaning of this term have arisen. The term is often discussed along with Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis.

D. W. Lucas, in an authoritative edition of the *Poetics*, comprehensively covers the various nuances inherent in the meaning of the term in an Appendix devoted to "Pity, Fear, and Katharsis". Lucas recognizes the possibility of catharsis bearing some aspect of the meaning of "purification, purgation, and 'intellectual clarification,'" although his approach to these terms differs in some ways from that of other influential scholars. In particular, Lucas's interpretation is based on "the Greek doctrine of Humours," which has not received wide subsequent acceptance. The conception of catharsis in terms of purgation and purification remains in wide use today, as it has for centuries. However, since the twentieth century, the interpretation of catharsis as "intellectual clarification" has gained recognition in describing the effect of catharsis on members of the audience.

Purgation and purification

In his works prior to the *Poetics*, Aristotle had used the term *catharsis* purely in its literal medical sense (usually referring to the evacuation of the *katamenia*—the menstrual fluid or other reproductive material). The *Poetics*, however, employs *catharsis* as a medical metaphor.

F. L. Lucas opposes, therefore, the use of words like *purification* and *cleansing* to translate *catharsis*; he proposes that it should rather be rendered as *purgation*. "It is the human soul that is purged of its excessive passions." Gerald F. Else made the following argument against the "purgation" theory:

It presupposes that we come to the tragic drama (unconsciously, if you will) as patients to be cured, relieved, restored to psychic health. But there is not a word to support this in the "Poetics", not a hint that the end of drama is to cure or alleviate pathological states. On the contrary it is evident in every line of the work that Aristotle is presupposing "normal" auditors, normal states of mind and feeling, normal emotional and aesthetic experience.

Lessing (1729–1781) sidesteps the medical attribution. He interprets *catharsis* as a purification (German: *Reinigung*), an experience that brings pity and fear into their proper balance: "In real life", he explained, "men are sometimes too much addicted to pity or fear, sometimes too little; tragedy brings them back to a virtuous and happy mean." Tragedy is then a corrective; through watching tragedy, the audience learns how to feel these emotions at proper levels.

Intellectual clarification

In the twentieth century a paradigm shift took place in the interpretation of catharsis with a number of scholars contributing to the argument in support of the intellectual clarification concept. The clarification theory of catharsis would be fully consistent, as other interpretations are not, with Aristotle's argument in chapter 4 of the *Poetics* (1448b4-17) that the essential pleasure of mimesis is the intellectual pleasure of "learning and inference".

It is generally understood that Aristotle's theory of mimesis and catharsis are responses to Plato's negative view of artistic mimesis on an audience. Plato argued that the most common forms of artistic mimesis were designed to evoke from an audience powerful emotions such as pity, fear, and ridicule which override the rational control that defines the highest level of our humanity and lead us to wallow unacceptably in the overindulgence of emotion and passion. Aristotle's concept of catharsis, in all of the major senses attributed to it, contradicts Plato's view by providing a mechanism that generates the rational control of irrational

emotions. All of the commonly held interpretations of catharsis, purgation, purification, and clarification are considered by most scholars to represent a homeopathic process in which pity and fear accomplish the catharsis of emotions like themselves. For an alternate view of catharsis as an allopathic process in which pity and fear produce a catharsis of emotions unlike pity and fear, see E. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*. Princeton, 1992, 260 ff.

Literary analysis of catharsis

The following analysis by E. R. Dodds, directed at the character of Oedipus in the paradigmatic Aristotelian tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, incorporates all three of the aforementioned interpretations of catharsis: purgation, purification, intellectual clarification:

...what fascinates us is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Oedipus might have left the plague to take its course; but pity for the sufferings of his people compelled him to consult Delphi. When Apollo's word came back, he might still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated; but piety and justice required him to act. He need not have forced the truth from the reluctant Theban herdsman; but because he cannot rest content with a lie, he must tear away the last veil from the illusion in which he has lived so long. Teiresias, Jocasta, the herdsman, each in turn tries to stop him, but in vain; he must read the last riddle, the riddle of his own life. The immediate cause of Oedipus' ruin is not "fate or "the gods"—no oracle said that he must discover the truth—and still less does it lie in his own weakness; what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth.

"Catharsis" before tragedy

Catharsis before the 6th century BCE rise of tragedy is, for the Western World, essentially a historical footnote to the Aristotelian conception. The practice of purification had not yet appeared in Homer, as later Greek commentators noted: the *Aithiopsis*, an epic set in the Trojan War cycle, narrates the purification of Achilles after his murder of Thersites. Catharsis describes the result of measures taken to cleanse away blood-guilt—"blood is purified through blood", a process in the development of Hellenistic culture in which the oracle of Delphi took a prominent role. The classic example—Orestes—belongs to tragedy, but the procedure given by Aeschylus is ancient: the blood of a sacrificed piglet is allowed to wash over the blood-polluted man, and running water washes away the

blood. The identical ritual is represented, Burkert informs us, on a *krater* found at Canicattini, wherein it is shown being employed to cure the daughters of Proetus from their madness, caused by some ritual transgression. To the question of whether the ritual obtains atonement for the subject, or just healing, Burkert answers: "To raise the question is to see the irrelevance of this distinction".

Study Material

Module No: 4

Faculty Name: Satabdi Roy

Semester: Semester IV (Hons)

Topic: Mimesis

Mimesis

Mimesis is a term used in literary criticism and philosophy that carries a wide range of meanings which include imitatio, imitation, non-sensuous similarity, receptivity, representation, mimicry, the act of expression, the act of resembling, and the presentation of the self.

In ancient Greece, mimesis was an idea that governed the creation of works of art, in particular, with correspondence to the physical world understood as a model for beauty, truth, and the good. Plato contrasted mimesis, or imitation, with diegesis, or narrative. After Plato, the meaning of mimesis eventually shifted toward a specifically literary function in ancient Greek society, and its use has changed and been reinterpreted many times since.

One of the best-known modern studies of mimesis, understood as a form of realism in literature, is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, which opens with a famous comparison between the way the world is represented in Homer's *Odyssey* and the way it appears in the *Bible*. From these two seminal texts, the *Odyssey* being Western and the *Bible* having been written by a variety of Mid-Eastern writers, Auerbach builds the foundation for a unified theory of representation that spans the entire history of Western literature, including the Modernist novels being written at the time Auerbach began his study. In art history, "mimesis", "realism" and "naturalism" are used, often interchangeably, as terms for the accurate, even "illusionistic", representation of the visual appearance of things.

Mimesis has been theorised by thinkers as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, Philip Sidney, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Adam Smith, Gabriel Tarde, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Erich Auerbach, Paul Ricœur, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, René Girard, Nikolas Kompridis, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Michael Taussig, Merlin Donald, and Homi Bhabha.

□ Classical definitions

Plato

Both Plato and Aristotle saw in mimesis the representation of nature, including human nature, as reflected in the dramas of the period. Plato wrote about mimesis in both *Ion* and *The Republic* (Books II, III, and X). In *Ion*, he states that poetry is the art of divine madness, or inspiration. Because the poet is subject to this divine madness, instead of possessing "art" or "knowledge" – *techne* – of the subject (532c), the poet does not speak truth (as characterized by Plato's account of the Forms). As Plato has it, truth is the concern of the philosopher. As culture in those days did not consist in the solitary reading of books, but in the listening to performances, the recitals of orators (and poets), or the acting out by classical actors of tragedy, Plato maintained in his critique that theatre was not sufficient in conveying the truth (540c). He was concerned that actors or orators were thus able to persuade an audience by rhetoric rather than by telling the truth (535b).

In Book II of *The Republic*, Plato describes Socrates' dialogue with his pupils. Socrates warns we should not seriously regard poetry as being capable of attaining the truth and that we who listen to poetry should be on our guard against its seductions, since the poet has no place in our idea of God.

In developing this in Book X, Plato told of Socrates' metaphor of the three beds: one bed exists as an idea made by God (the Platonic ideal, or form); one is made by the carpenter, in imitation of God's idea; one is made by the artist in imitation of the carpenter's.

So the artist's bed is twice removed from the truth. Those who copy only touch on a small part of things as they really are, where a bed may appear differently from various points of view, looked at obliquely or directly, or differently again in a mirror. So painters or poets, though they may paint or describe a carpenter, or any other maker of things, know nothing of the carpenter's (the craftsman's) art,^[5] and though the better painters or poets they are, the more faithfully their works of art will resemble the reality of the carpenter making a bed, nonetheless the imitators will still not attain the truth (of God's creation).

The poets, beginning with Homer, far from improving and educating humanity, do not possess the knowledge of craftsmen and are mere imitators who copy again and again images of virtue and rhapsodise about them, but never reach the truth in the way the superior philosophers do.

Aristotle

Similar to Plato's writings about mimesis, Aristotle also defined mimesis as the perfection, and imitation of nature. Art is not only imitation but also the use of mathematical ideas and symmetry in the search for the perfect, the timeless, and contrasting being with becoming. Nature is full of change, decay, and cycles, but art can also search for what is everlasting and the first causes of natural phenomena. Aristotle wrote about the idea of four causes in nature. The first, the formal cause, is like a blueprint, or an immortal idea. The second cause is the material cause, or what a thing is made out of. The third cause is the efficient cause, that is, the process and the agent by which the thing is made. The fourth, the final cause, is the good, or the purpose and end of a thing, known as telos.

Aristotle's *Poetics* is often referred to as the counterpart to this Platonic conception of poetry. *Poetics* is his treatise on the subject of mimesis. Aristotle was not against literature as such; he stated that human beings are mimetic beings, feeling an urge to create texts (art) that reflect and represent reality.

Aristotle considered it important that there be a certain distance between the work of art on the one hand and life on the other; we draw knowledge and consolation from tragedies only because they do not happen to us. Without this distance, tragedy could not give rise to catharsis. However, it is equally important that the text causes the audience to identify with the characters and the events in the text, and unless this identification occurs, it does not touch us as an audience. Aristotle holds that it is through "simulated representation", mimesis, that we respond to the acting on the stage which is conveying to us what the characters feel, so that we may empathise with them in this way through the mimetic form of dramatic roleplay. It is the task of the dramatist to produce the tragic enactment in order to accomplish this empathy by means of what is taking place on stage.

In short, catharsis can only be achieved if we see something that is both recognisable and distant. Aristotle argued that literature is more interesting as a means of learning than history, because history deals with specific facts that have happened, and which are contingent, whereas literature, although sometimes based on history, deals with events that could have taken place or ought to have taken place.

Aristotle thought of drama as being "an imitation of an action" and of tragedy as "falling from a higher to a lower estate" and so being removed to a less ideal situation in more *tragic* circumstances than before. He posited the characters in tragedy as being better than the average human being, and those of comedy as being worse.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Mimesis, or imitation, as he referred to it, was a crucial concept for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's theory of the imagination. Coleridge begins his thoughts on imitation and poetry from Plato, Aristotle, and Philip Sidney, adopting their concept of imitation of nature instead of other writers. His departure from the earlier thinkers lies in his arguing that art does not reveal a unity of essence through its ability to achieve sameness with nature. Coleridge claims:

[T]he composition of a poem is among the imitative arts; and that imitation, as opposed to copying, consists either in the interfusion of the SAME throughout the radically DIFFERENT, or the different throughout a base radically the same.

Here, Coleridge opposes imitation to copying, the latter referring to William Wordsworth's notion that poetry should duplicate nature by capturing actual speech. Coleridge instead argues that the unity of essence is revealed precisely through different materialities and media. Imitation, therefore, reveals the sameness of processes in nature.