



ELECTRYONE
ΗΛΕΚΤΡΥΩΝΗ

ISSN 2241-4061



9 772241 406118

Psychodrama and Sociodrama: Aristotelian Catharsis Revisited

Dina Abd Elsalam

Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Arts

University of Alexandria

dinasalam2000@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In the 4th century B.C, Aristotle was to highlight the healing power of drama. He argued in the *Poetics* that drama has a therapeutic effect on the spectators, since it exposes them to a high level of emotional pressure, so much so that when the dramatic tension is resolved, the spectators eventually attain catharsis. His formulations were basically a reaction against Plato's vehement attack on poetry. In the 20th century, Jacob L. Moreno, an Austrian-American psychiatrist, who is widely recognized as the founder of both psychodrama and sociodrama, realized the therapeutic effect of drama on his patients and was to use it as a means of treatment. Despite the fact that Aristotle and Moreno are separated by many centuries, their theories seem to converge as both stress the remedial influence of drama and its cathartic effect. Moreno, however, argued that there were differences between

psychodramatic catharsis, on the one hand, and Aristotlean catharsis on the other, as the former drew on dramatic sources from the Near East. It is the aim of this paper to highlight how Aristotle and Moreno came to formulate their respective theories concerning catharsis, discussing the similarities and differences regarding their proposed catharses, and tracing Aristotlean echoes in Moreno's theory.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Plato, *Poetics*, catharsis, Jacob L. Moreno, Freud, psychodrama, sociodrama.

Plato's Formulations against Poetry

Plato was the first to introduce the mimetic theory of poetry. It is noteworthy that the term poetry originally means "making" in Greek, and was used as a sort of an umbrella term for literature at his time. Plato propounded that poetry imitates or copies the imperfect world which we inhabit. Accordingly, he banished the poets from his Republic, and severely censored their works, as he considered them dangerous minds that were likely to corrupt the perfection of his Utopia, since their works were nothing but a mere copy of the imperfect world, which is essentially a poor copy of the ideal world, hence far removed from the true; "men poets and story-tellers are guilty of making the gravest misstatements when they tell us that wicked men are often happy, and the good miserable; and that injustice is profitable when undetected, but that justice is a man's own loss and another's gain-these things we shall forbid them to utter, and command them to sing and say the opposite" (Plato *Republic* 79). In other words, poetry depicts what he considered the imperfections of this world, thus, in his view, poetry was nothing but a poor copy of a secondary, impoverished reality. He also dismissed poetry as it depicted the gods in an anthropomorphic light with debased human attributes. In so doing, it propagated misleading information about the true nature of divinity, which he believed was perfect and complete. His attack was of that sort to be "made on the artist by the philosopher who will not admit that there is any other road to the truth but his own"¹. In addition, he believed that poetry watered the emotions of the spectators, which had to be curbed rather than nurtured. The latter can be easily understood in light of Plato's spiritual inclinations,

¹ Kitto (1991) 201.

for he regarded the soul as superior to the body, hence introducing the division between the body and the soul to Western thought. It is for the above-mentioned reasons that Plato dismissed the poets from his Republic, including Homer, whom he dismissed sadly. Surprisingly enough, Plato himself was once a poet, and his attack on poetry seems to be a reflection of the conflict “most of all in Plato’s own soul”².

Aristotle’s Reaction to Plato

Though Aristotle was Plato’s student from the time he came to Athens at the age of seventeen until the latter died some twenty years later³, he was not his disciple. He reacted against his teacher’s excessive idealism and moralizing attitude, and was to take a more realist approach towards poetry. Unlike Plato, he realized the importance of poetry and was to write an elaborate analysis of it in the *Poetics*, which is considered “a treatise on tragedy”⁴. In the latter, he only reserved Plato’s definition of poetry as imitation or mimesis, but he was not against copying as Plato was. In fact, “the *Poetics* can be seen as a refutation of Plato’s attitude to poetry”⁵, as it probes the nature of drama to formulate some critical tenets by which one is able to assess and understand this form, and as such the *Poetics* is considered one of the earliest attempts at formulating literary criticism.

Aristotle’s Formulation of his Theory in reaction to Plato

i-His Answer to the Charge that Poetry is a Copy of an Imperfect World

If Plato was against poetry because it copied the imperfect world instead of the absolute and transcendental one, Aristotle “unlike his master Plato, did not regard the material world and ordinary, unphilosophic activities as trivial”⁶. In fact, he argued that poetry provided us with universal truths related to the real world and the way it functions, and as such he found for poetry a higher status: “not the reporting of factual details but the understanding of underlying generalities. Again, this is a rebuttal of Plato and his view”⁷. Being the realist he was, Aristotle was not interested in copying a transcendental, perfect world; instead he was concerned with the real world and its

² Ibid. 201.

³ Lucas “Introduction” (1968) xx.

⁴ Sommerstein (2002) vii.

⁵ Harland (1999) 10.

⁶ Lucas “Introduction” (1968) xii.

⁷ Harland (1999) 11.

particularities, be they good or bad, perfect or imperfect. This then was Aristotle's answer to Plato's charge that poetry is immersed in this world and stained with its imperfections, which leads to the following point about the influence of poetry on the audience, since that influence springs primarily from the fact that poetry is related to the real world, hence its ability to induce feelings in the spectators, who can relate to what they watch on stage; if poetry was about Plato's ideal world, the spectators would have been unable to relate to it, since it would be far removed from their realm.

ii- His Answer to the Charge that Poetry has the Ability to Induce Feelings

As far as emotions are concerned, Aristotle, unlike Plato, was in favour of the emotional influence of tragedy. According to him, tragedy induced both pity and fear, causing "the cleansing of these states of feeling" (*Poetics* 26). The word fear could be "a range of feelings extending from mild apprehension to terror", and pity "covers a span from distant sympathy to empathetic misery"⁸. However, Harland explains that "[w]hat is to be aroused is a fear-charged kind of pity as sentimental pathos; and what is to be aroused is a pity-charged kind of fear rather than fear as self-centered terror"⁹. Both pity and fear are mutually aligned and are simultaneously invoked. The reason why these two rather different feelings are invoked at the same time can be traced back to the personality of the tragic hero, who is capable of arousing those two feelings simultaneously because of the kind of character he has, and this brings us to Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. According to Aristotle, the character of the tragic hero plays a central role in invoking these feelings.

It is clear first that decent men ought not to be shown changing from good to bad fortune (since this is neither frightening nor pitiable but (36) repellent) and people of bad character ought not to be shown changing from bad to good fortune (since this is the most untragic thing of all, for it has none of the things a tragedy needs, since it neither arouses love for humanity nor is it pitiable or frightening); someone of extremely bad character ought not to fall from good to bad fortune either (for while this sort of the organization of the story would have a love for humanity in it, it would not have either pity or fear, since one of these has to do with someone's suffering misfortune while not

⁸ Sachs (2006) 5.

⁹ Harland (1999) 13.

deserving it, the other with his being like us, pity being for a person undeserving of misfortune and fear for one like us, so that the result will be neither pitiable nor frightening). Therefore, what remains is the one between these. This is the sort of person who is not surpassing in virtue and justice, but does not change into misfortune through bad character and vice, but on account of some missing of the mark. (Aristotle *Poetics* 37)

As the quotation makes it clear, the tragic hero is not an angelic being as this would make one unable to relate to him or identify with him, and would make one feel that his downfall is neither fair nor justified; ideal heroes, the ones Plato would approve of, are not fit subjects for tragedy, according to Aristotle. Moreover, villains are not to be shown as going from bad to good fortune as this is untragic, and would definitely arouse neither pity nor fear. He is also not a villain, such as a tyrant or an evil killer, because in this case no one would have feelings for him. Moreover, one would feel that his downfall is well-deserved as he got his due. Thus, the tragic hero has to be of a certain character, which is capable of inducing an amalgam of pity and fear; neither is he an immaculately pure angel, nor is he a vicious villain, who has a vice or depravity. He lies somewhere between these two kinds, and his tragedy has the ability to arouse those two feelings because he “misses the mark”. It is in this case that one will be able to identify with the tragic hero, and experience both pity and fear; pity for his situation and tragic downfall and fear to be in his place one day and face the same doom.

Traditionally, the word *hamartia* has been translated as a tragic flaw of error. S. H. Butcher, for instance, says in his translation of the *Poetics* that the downfall of the tragic hero “is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty”¹⁰. This view has been so dominantly accepted and circulated among scholars and critics. Henry Ansgar Kelly’s confirmation that Aristotle “gives his full approval to only one kind of fall — that of a man not thoroughly good falling because of some defect (*hamartia*)”¹¹ would be a case in point. By contrast, Joe Sachs argues that this is far from what Aristotle had in mind:

¹⁰ Butcher (1895) 10.

¹¹ Kelly (1993) 3.

The word *hamartia* is used in many ways but its root sense, and its image that is never absent from its metaphorical extensions, is that of missing a mark with a spear or an arrow. No ancient Greek brought up on the *Iliad* would ever hear the word without that resonance. If the idea of the “tragic flaw” is that the central figure by some lapse does some uncharacteristically bad thing, then that idea turns Aristotle’s account of tragedy upside down.¹²

According to him, Aristotle would have never meant flaw by *hamartia*, and that this word has been mistranslated in some versions and misused wrongly ever since. He argues that one such authority is S. H. Butcher’s book *Aristotles’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (1895), in which he mentions that one of the meanings of the word *hamartia* is a flaw¹³.

At any rate, and despite this debate concerning the true meaning of the word *hamartia*, and whether it means the tragic hero has a flaw, or misses the mark, or perhaps that he misses the mark because of a flaw, it is important to note that the character of the tragic hero and the choices he makes in the course of the play are crucial to evoking both pity and fear. This is because, according to Aristotle, he is neither a villain nor an angelic character, but a person who misses the mark, as some critics say, or has a flaw (or error) that leads to his downfall, as other critics argue, and as such it becomes easy to fully identify with him; to pity him and to fear to be in his situation one day.

According to Aristotle, those two feelings, which exert a great deal of pressure on one’s psyche, eventually lead to *catharsis*: “the cleansing of these states of emotions” (Aristotle *Poetics* 26), which is basically the release of shut-in feelings, a therapeutic relief through the expulsion of all the pressurized feelings which were aroused during the play. This, then, is Aristotelean catharsis, or perhaps, the traditional way it has often been interpreted, as will be shown later in this paper. As has been mentioned earlier, Aristotle’s passionate apology for poetry sprang primarily from his desire to refute Plato’s attack on poetry and to defend its immersion in real life, instead of his mentor’s excessive idealism, which brought poetry closer to the people’s minds and hearts, and made it possible for them to interact with it and respond to it.

¹² Sachs (2006) 8.

¹³ *Ibid.* 7-8.

Moreno's Life and Achievement

Jacob Levi Moreno is considered the father of psychodrama and sociodrama. He was born in 1889 in Romania. At the age of 6, his family moved to Vienna, Austria, where he eventually went to medical school at the University of Vienna. However, “[p]ost-war Austria was chaotic and could not support Moreno's experiments in applied social science and therapeutic theater”¹⁴; that is why he considered emigrating to either Russia or to the United States, but opted for the latter as he believed it would offer him more freedom to continue his work¹⁵. He died in 1974, at the age of 85, in New York.

His lifetime vocation was psychodrama, which came to be classified as a brand of psychiatry which uses drama for therapeutic ends. He proposed that the therapist would turn into a director, who would ask the patient to act out his/her problem in front of a small group of people, which would also take part in the drama by playing other roles that would assist the main actor (patient) in presenting his problem and bringing it to light. He treated his patients using that method and actively engaged with them in those dramas.

He aimed at using the dynamics of the small group, which he believed were based on love, cooperation and friendship, for therapeutic ends. He believed that those healthy feelings within the small group could be used to the full advantage of each and every person within the group. In this sense, his “active, highly personalized, group-oriented focus was a radical turn for psychiatry in the 1920s and 1930s”¹⁶. Later, towards the end of the 1930s and early 1940s, he developed sociodrama, which targeted the group and its relations. The main difference between psychodrama and sociodrama is that in the former, the focus is on the individual and his own private concerns, whereas in sociodrama, the focus is on the group, its interrelations, and collective cultural and social concerns. Moreno explains this as follows: “It is the group as a whole which has to be put upon the stage to work out its problems, because the group in sociodrama corresponds to the individual in psychodrama” (Moreno *Who Shall Survive?* 88).

¹⁴ Blanter (2000) 18.

¹⁵ Ibid. (2000) 18.

¹⁶ Fox (1987) xiv.

Before his decease, Moreno was to choose an understandably telling epitaph that best describes his achievement in the field of psychiatry: "The man who brought joy and laughter into psychiatry"¹⁷, which clearly refers to the way drama breathed life and energy into the traditional methods of Freudian psychiatry.

Moreno's Refutation of Freud's Work

On his arrival to the United States, Moreno found a pervasive interest in psychoanalysis. During his study of medicine at Vienna, he was already familiar with Freud's approach, but disapproved of it. Freud was already a generation older than Moreno. Interestingly, when he got the opportunity to meet Freud, he openly expressed his criticism of his work. Moreno recounts their meeting as follows:

I met Dr. Freud only on one occasion. It occurred in 1912 when, while working at the Psychiatric Clinic in Vienna University, I attended one of his lectures. Dr. Freud had just ended his analysis of a telepathic dream. As the students filed out he asked me what I was doing. "Well, Dr. Freud, I start where you leave off. You meet people in the artificial setting of your office, I meet them on the street and in their home, in their natural surroundings. You analyze their dreams. I try to give them the courage to dream again. I teach the people how to play God." Dr. Freud looked at me as if puzzled. (Moreno *Psychodrama* 5-6)

His words clearly express his criticism of psychoanalysis, and pinpoint the direction his future work would eventually take, as it would be "more interactional and group-centered rather than therapist-centered"¹⁸. In other words, Moreno aimed at integrating the individual into a larger circle of people so that he could express his problems and concerns openly before them, and in so doing, he would be able to make the best out of the positive feelings which the group offers. His interest in groups relied heavily on sociometry (the study and measurement of society and relationships):

Sociometry starts practically as soon as we are in a position to study social structure as a whole and its part at the same time". Here the individual is not seen on his/her own, but is seen as a part of a larger

¹⁷ Blanter (200) 23.

¹⁸ Blanter (2000) 19.

shape or structure, which leads to both descriptive sociometry, which is concerned with the function of specific parts, and dynamic sociometry, which analyses the impact of one part on the other and its relation to the whole structure. (Moreno *Who Shall Survive?* 52)

Having understood and analysed the sociometric relations of the group, Moreno orchestrated them for the welfare of the individual patient. He integrated his understanding of sociological relations into psychology, hence blending the two sciences together and making the utmost of what each offers. Moreno was to sum up the main contribution of psychodrama as “the chief turning point away from the treatment of the individual in isolation to the treatment of the individual in groups” (Moreno *Psychodrama: Vol. 1* 10).

Another major difference between Moreno and Freud is that Moreno was against “the verbal emphasis of psychoanalysis”¹⁹. So instead of lying on a couch and relating his/her dreams, the patient would act out his dreams through role playing. In this sense Moreno’s approach can be seen as a clear “refutation of psychoanalysis”²⁰, particularly its methods and means, for though they share the same goal, which is to achieve therapy for the patient, they go about it in a different manner and use different mechanisms. Moreno’s inroad into psychiatry using drama and its collective experience of role playing, action, dialogue, confrontation, encounter, spontaneity and creativity offered a new way of dealing not only with psychiatry itself but drama as well. In a psychodramatic session, after a process of warming up, the patient would be encouraged to act out his/her own private life. He would be asked to do that spontaneously, without any prior preparation. He would not do that only verbally, but through action as well. The other dramatis personae are either “the real people of his private world, his wife, his father, his child, etc., or are actors portraying them, auxiliary egos” (Moreno *Who Shall Survive?* 83). The director in this case becomes the “producer, counsellor and analyst” (83). At times he dominates the performance, and at other times, he withdraws and lets the actors take over. Eventually, the patient is to attain catharsis. The relationship between the patient and therapist is not always smooth, as the situation is rather stressful and tense. Thus, unlike traditional Freudian psychoanalysis, psychodrama and sociodrama are both immersed in action, of which

¹⁹ Fox (1987) xiv.

²⁰ Ibid. xiv.

dialogue, or verbal engagement is only a part, and this is another major difference between Freudian and Morenian psychoanalysis.



Moreno in a psychodramatic session in 1964

Moreno's Concept of Catharsis

According to Moreno, the subject (patient) attains catharsis of integration in psychodrama, which is different from catharsis of abreaction. The former being a cognitive kind of catharsis, which makes the subject able to come to terms with himself and to understand it better; in this sense, he is able to integrate his different parts together as things start falling into place and making more sense after a psychodramatic experience. Catharsis of abreaction, on the other hand, is an emotive release or relief; it is a kind of emotional equilibrium which the subject attains, after his feelings have been exposed to so much pressure and heightened in intensity.

Moreno argued that the subject also attains “group catharsis”, which happens when the members of the audience start relating their own personal experiences, and their reactions to what they have experienced in the production, right after the subject has finished his performance. They are encouraged by what the subject has done earlier in the production, and their contribution is based on a sense of bonding, love and friendship, which replenishes the subject and is therapeutically fulfilling as well, hence cathartic.

The subject (patient) is not the only one to attain catharsis. Speaking of the role of the audience in psychodrama, Moreno argues that it has “a double purpose” (Moreno *Who Shall Survive?* 84); it could either help the subject, or the audience itself could be helped by the subject so that it “sees itself, that is, one of its collective syndromes portrayed on the stage” (84). In this sense, the audience comes to identify with the

subject as his performance is a sincere reproduction of a past trauma. They are touched by the sincerity of the subject and they do obtain some sort of catharsis in the process.

If these are the catharses which psychodrama offers, sociodrama offers a different kind of catharsis; Moreno argues that “[t]he psychodramatic approach deals with personal problems principally and aims at personal catharsis; the sociodramatic approach deals with social problems and aims at social catharsis” (Moreno *Who Shall Survive?* 88). In other words, in sociodrama, the cultural and social orders are reenacted by the group, in an attempt to expose all the cultural and social tensions that weigh upon the participants, and are about to burst or erupt in different social or cultural contexts such as workplaces, neighbourhoods, local gatherings, ethnic communities, etc. The members of the sociodramatic group, who are loaded with these cultural and social tensions, are asked to reproduce them spontaneously and creatively, and in so doing, they are able to bring their problems to light and attain collective social catharsis for them.

Morenian Catharsis versus Aristotlean Catharsis

Despite the fact that Moreno acknowledges Aristotlean catharsis and realizes its important legacy, he tries to dissociate psychodramatic catharsis from it. He argues that Aristotlean catharsis targets only the spectators and is limited to their emotive, rather than cognitive side:

The spectator can sympathize with acts which take place on the stage just as if they were his own acts, but they are not his; he can experience with the actors all the pain and the torture, all the misery and joy which they go (225) through—and still be free of them. The degree to which the spectator can enter into the life upon the stage, adjusting his own feelings to what is portrayed there, is the measure of the catharsis he is able to obtain on this occasion”. (Moreno *Mental Catharsis* 226)

According to Moreno, one reason why the spectator can experience catharsis is the novelty of the whole experience. Repetition kills this feeling of catharsis. So if the spectator were to view the drama several times, he would no longer be able to experience catharsis. The degree of catharsis obtained is proportional with the degree to which the spectator identifies with the situation of the actor and his dilemma. He

also argues that the playwright might have experienced catharsis during the process of writing itself. The actor, too, might have experienced catharsis, but that is limited to certain conditions. First, if there is a certain affinity between the actor and what he is acting. Secondly, he can experience catharsis only at the beginning of his encounter with the drama as novelty introduces catharsis, whereas repetition kills it; the fact that the actor acts his part over and over, through frequent readings and rehearsals, makes the experience lose its cathartic effect on him.

Thus, Moreno finds that though the playwright, and actors may experience catharsis in conventional drama, under certain conditions and for a limited period of time, the main target of Aristotlean catharsis is the audience; according to him, the playwright, or actors are not to be touched by it, and Aristotle seems not to have had them in mind, while proposing the concept of catharsis.

He argues that “[t]his concept of catharsis has undergone a revolutionary change since systematic psychodramatic work began in Vienna in 1920. This change has been exemplified by the movement away from the written (conserved) drama and toward the spontaneous (psycho) drama, with the emphasis shifted from the spectators to the actors” (Moreno *Mental Catharsis* 209). He finds that psychodrama has taken the drama and the stage from the Greeks, but has derived “the Near East’s view of catharsis; the actor has been made the locus of catharsis. The old locus (the spectator) has become secondary” (Moreno *Mental Catharsis* 227). Eastern catharsis is related to religious rituals in which the subject, the saint, has to engage in a ritual to save himself, and as such it is a form of active catharsis, like the one that is obtained through psychodrama, when the patient actively acts out his own problem. By contrast, in traditional drama, the actors act out the roles, which are written in the script.

Moreno also differentiates between the kind of catharsis which the audience attains in a traditional drama and that of the audience in psychodrama. The main difference lies in the subject. The reason being that the subject in a psychodramatic performance honestly presents real-life situations that are loaded with his conflicts and problems in an attempt to attain psychological relief, peace and equilibrium: “The spectator in the conventional theatre and the spectator of a psychodramatic performance can be compared to a man who sees the motion picture of a (Moreno *Mental Catharis* 236) volcano in eruption and a man who watches the eruption from the foot of the mountain itself” (237). These words clearly highlight the intensity and immediacy of

the performance of the subject in a psychodramatic performance and the strong influence it has on the spectators, unlike that of an actor who is acting out a prescribed role for him.

In case of sociodrama, the spectator's catharsis would also be deeper, since the drama they engage in addresses pressing social and cultural issues, which hamper them and weigh them down. Their active engagement in the drama triggers a stronger cathartic effect in them.

Thus, Moreno finds Aristotlean catharsis to be different from psychodramatic catharsis on two major levels; first, since the spectator is the target of Aristotlean catharsis not the actor himself. Secondly, even when it comes to the catharsis of the spectators, Moreno believes that they attain a truer and deeper sense of catharsis in psychodrama, because of the immediacy of the performance and its sincerity.

Additionally, the subject's catharsis in psychodrama is not a catharsis of abreaction, a ventilation of unhealthy feelings, but a mental catharsis, that enables the subject to integrate his traumas, and rearrange his different conflicting parts, hence achieving cognitive equilibrium.

Aristotlean Echoes in Moreno's Theory

It becomes obvious from Moreno's words that he believes that his work has diverged from Aristotlean catharsis on a number of points. One reason for that is that Moreno takes the conventional interpretation of Aristotle's catharsis, and builds his theory on it. Interestingly, many critics have started challenging received interpretations of Aristotlean catharsis. Among such critics is Christopher Shields who argues that there is not a "received understanding of Aristotle's meaning"²¹ of the word catharsis. He starts with what he calls a "naïve" interpretation of catharsis, which happens to be the mainstream interpretation of Aristotlean catharsis:

'catharsis' means purification, and the purification in question pertains to the members of the audience, whose fear and pity are first agitated and then released by means of their empathetic involvement with the

²¹ Shields (2007) 386.

plot and characters of the tragedy. Thus, a tragedy first invites, and then agitates, and then releases powerful emotions in the members of the audience; at the resolution of the performance, the audience members leave the theatre emotionally purified, with enhanced appreciation of the human condition, in all its brittle brilliance”.²² (387)

He finds this interpretation naïve as it readily makes three naïve assumptions: first, that tragedy targets the spectators solely, second, that catharsis itself means only purification, and third that emotions are the crux of catharsis (387).²³ He argues, however, that the term catharsis defies limitation and is more of an exclusive term that has many layers of meaning, rather than being limited to a single interpretation, which has been parroted over the years by many critics and scholars alike. Catharsis, then, could mean any, or all, of the following:

Thus, one might in principle treat (i) the subject of the catharsis as (a) the audience members, as in the naïve interpretation; (b) the characters of the tragedy; or (c) the plot elements of the tragedy, that is that the plot itself grows complex, reaches crescendo, and resolves into a simpler state. (387) Similarly, one might take (ii) the nature of the catharsis as a kind of (a) purification, as in the naïve approach; or (b) purgation, drawing, as many scholars do, on Aristotle’s occasional reference to medical models of purification (*Phys.* 194b36; *HA* 572b30; *Prob.*864a34; *Met.* 1030b1). Finally, in reflecting on (iii) the matter of the catharsis, the options include (a) the emotions, as the naïve interpretation contends; (b) intellectual or cognitive attitudes; (c) undifferentiated human attitudes, whether cognitive or emotive, or some admixture of both; and (d) the tension of plot features. Now, since these axes can be in principle mixed and matched, as well as variously augmented, the possible interpretive permutations are manifold. ²⁴(388)

What Shield offers here is a widening of the traditional understanding of this term, since he finds the traditional approach rather limiting, as it is only concerned with the

²² Ibid. 387.

²³ Ibid. 387.

²⁴ Shields (2007) 388.

emotions of the audience in particular, and is only believed to offer some sort of purification for the psyche of the audience. He finds instead that catharsis is more of an umbrella term, which includes a wide range of possibilities; its target could be the spectators, or actors, or the plot elements; its essence could be either purification or purgation; and finally its matter could be the emotions, or the intellect, or both of them at the same time. In so doing, he offers new inroads into Aristotle's *Poetics*, hence casting it in a richer light.

Shields goes on to argue that Aristotle's catharsis has to be understood in light of his entire corpus and not just the *Poetics*. Catharsis could also have a medical and ritualistic dimension, and in this case it would mean purgation, which is the "cleansing of impurities and infections in the body" (388)²⁵, which brings it closer to catharsis of integration, rather than catharsis of abreaction (purification). The difference between purification and purgation is that the latter "seeks to rid (388) the subject of some unwanted stuff, whether infection or bloodguilt, whereas purification seeks only to refine and make unsullied something which may be fundamentally healthy in itself, but out of balance or corrupted by admixture"²⁶ (389). In this sense, Aristotlean catharsis would be a process of purgation, as it purges the self of its malaise, and rids it of its pathological disturbances and tormenting residues. The subject becomes capable of integrating its different parts together and achieving equilibrium, unlike catharsis of abreaction (purification), which only offers an emotive release to balance the psyche of healthy individuals. In this sense, Aristotlean catharsis could be taken to mean catharsis of integration rather than abreaction. In fact, Aristotle himself mentions this in the *Poetics*, when he says that the audience are to derive delight from "understanding and reasoning" (23), which is a clear reference to the cognitive rather than emotive side of the audience; when they understand and reason, they are likely to rearrange their psychological disturbances and attain mental catharsis.

Shields is not the only critic to have offered a new interpretation of Aristotlean catharsis. His argument was used here as an example of those critics who have defied received interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* in general and Aristotlean catharsis in particular. Christopher Lucas's extensive interpretation of the term catharsis in his

²⁵ Ibid. 388.

²⁶ Ibid. 388-389.

Appendix to the Poetics, would be a case in point, so would be D. Kessey's "On Some Recent Interpretations of Catharsis", and the list goes on.

Conclusion

Critics have conventionally believed that Aristotle's catharsis only addresses the audience, particularly their emotive side. One reason which seems to have fostered that view was that Aristotle elaborately described the kind of character that the tragic hero ought to have in order to be able to excite feelings of pity and fear in the audience. As has been shown above, the tragic hero's character, which is neither angelic nor villainous, makes the spectators able to identify with him; his hamartia, be it his flaw, or the fact that he misses the mark, also humanizes him and makes the spectators readily identify with him. Critics have adopted that view for so long and Moreno himself seems to have accepted this traditional view of Aristotle's catharsis.

Received interpretations of Aristotlean catharsis have also read it as a form of emotional rather than cognitive relief, which is also the interpretation which Moreno seems to have adopted in his view of Aristotlean catharsis. Thus, despite paying tribute to the latter's contribution, he dissociated the kind of catharsis he proposed from Aristotlean catharsis; his was concerned with the actors, in this case the patients, and it was cognitive, rather than emotional. The audience would also get their share of catharsis, whether in psychodramatic or sociodramatic performances, but according to him, it would be deeper and more genuine than that of traditional drama.

What remained of Aristotle's corpus, however, is so rich that it defies categorization. In fact, there are nuances in his work, which keep revealing his ideas in a new light and adding new dimensions to them that it becomes difficult to pin down his view of catharsis to one interpretation. Aristotle's application of the idea of catharsis to tragedy is, in itself, a huge achievement, which has changed the way people viewed drama ever since his time, and which still continues to be a rich source of inspiration up until today.

D.A.E.

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