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CATHARSIS IN SHAKESPEARE'S MAJOR TRAGEDIES

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ABSTRACT

The word 'Catharsis' has led to numerous discussions and theories which are interesting to those, as R.A. Scott James puts it "concerned with the pathology of arts". Critics talk of catharsis as the purification of the passion. The present paper investigates the meaning and function of catharsis especially with reference to the major tragedies of Shakespeare.

Catharsis implies that our emotions are purified of excess and defects are reduced to intermediate state, trained and directed towards the right objects at the right time. Catharsis in this way is a kind of a moral conditioning where the spectator learns the proper use of pity, fear and similar emotions.

Keywords : Catharsis, Hamartia, Tragedies, Procrastination

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INTRODUCTION

Catharsis is an emotional cleansing or purification where emotional tension is released after an overwhelming vicarious experience. Shakespearean tragedies are great examples to illustrate the process of catharsis. Shakespeare wrote four great tragedies – Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth which according to Edward Albert "are the climax of Shakespeare's art. In intensity of emotion, depth of psychological insight and power of style they stand supreme".

The tragedies of Shakespeare are concerned with only one character, the Hero whose fortunes are its real theme. Shakespeare's tragic hero is a man of many noble qualities but has one tragic flaw called 'hamartia' that becomes the cause of his downfall. The tragic flaw or hamartia in the character of Shakespearean heroes are as follows:

- Hamlet: Procrastination
- Othello : Jealousy
- King Lear : Lack of good judgement
- Macbeth : Ambitious

Function of Catharsis

Tragedy meant rise and fall of a great soul. It arouses our feelings of pity and fear because we identify ourselves with the man's sufferings and thus fear is awakened. The tragedy at first electrifies our emotions and then elevates our mind and broadens our vision. It liberates us from ourselves. Hence comes the refinement of our feelings and we find our mental frontiers opening up new horizons.

In the tragedies of Shakespeare, character controlled destiny and so the violent and vivid action on the stage had its counterpart in the inner conflict of the hero's mind. The great soul in spite of the difficulties and destiny's decision fights with great courage and heroism. So, one gets the feeling of elevation and not the feeling of depression. At the end, the soul comes up with the feeling of pride and catharsis trying to overcome the situation and moving along the road to catastrophe.

A. Catharsis in Hamlet:

The tragic flaw in Hamlet is procrastination i.e. the practice of carrying out less urgent tasks in preference to more important ones. The greatest problem in Hamlet is the problem of Hamlet's delay in avenging the murder of his father. Hamlet demonstrates his ability to react instead of act, throughout the play. I believe that there are at least two points where a reader can reach a catharsis or emotional completion during the play. One cathartic moment is when Polonius died by the hand of Hamlet. Second, at the very end of the play, all the major players die due to hamartia- both inner flaws and outer mistakes. The end of the play is only made sweet when Hamlet finally commits a clean sweep in his terms. He outlives all that "is rotten in the state of Denmark". (Act iv ;Scene iv; Line2) The reader is satisfied that Hamlet died with his integrity intact after having rooted out grievous injustice.

B. Othello and Doubt : A Common Catharsis

Having read Othello I came out with the conclusion that Othello wanted to believe that his wife was untrue to him and even looked for evidences to prove this. It seemed to me that Othello too easily believed Iago's accusations against his wife. For someone like Othello, who loved his wife so much, revered and adored her, how could he, within the course of one conversation be completely convinced of her bedroom betrayal? Iago indeed manipulated Othello but the one who planted the seed of suspicion and jealousy in Othello's mind was Brabantio. Before Othello was leaving for war, Brabantio warned him, "look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: she has deceived her father, and may thee". (1.3, 287-288)

Othello seemed unable to believe that the lovely and pure Desdemona could ever love him and looked for any reason to distrust her. Iago may have been a villain but his actions only succeeded because of Othello's already pervasive doubt. The scene of Desdemona's humiliation is far more painful than even the scene of her murder. Desdemona's love for Othello was absolute, so the death of Othello at the end, gives a justified end to the tragedy, leaving the readers with catharsis.

C. Catharsis in King Lear :

Catharsis helps the readers feel fulfilled and frees them of burden and tension caused by the play. Some people believe that there is no sense of catharsis at the end of the play because of the exceptionally painful conclusion, while others believe that there are few conclusions at the end, which contains somewhat sense of catharsis. Throughout King Lear the readers witnessed Edmund's growing success as a reward for his evil machinations. But when Edgar and Edmund meet in Act V, the duel between them is a conflict that represents the ongoing battle between good and evil, with Edgar's defeat of Edmund signaling the triumph of righteousness over corruption. And yet when Lear enters with Cordelia's body, immediate ideas about divine justice in the minds of the readers, vanishes. The deaths of Cornwall, Edmund, Regan and Goneril lulled the readers into a belief that God would restore order to the chaotic world. But Cordelia's death created new question about the role of divine justice; a just God could not account for the death of this faithful and loving daughter. At the

end of the play, the stage is littered with bodies, some deserving of death while some as the victims of evil. No one feels good at the end of the play King Lear.

D. Catharsis in Macbeth :

In Macbeth the readers felt throughout the play that Macbeth's slaying of the innocent king Duncan was unjust. Even though Macbeth felt guilty, he still went through with this act, which made the readers unconsciously feel that he should be punished and not rewarded with kingship. The readers had a need for closure and to purge all of these emotions about Macbeth. This need ultimately led to the death of Macbeth as it was the simplest and possibly the most satisfying way to purge the emotional baggage associated with Macbeth and he finally got his justice.

Critical Views :

Lucas and Herbert regard catharsis as a kind of safety valve where we give free play to the emotions of pity and fear as we cannot do in real life and this finally is followed by emotional relief. According to I.A. Richards, "fear is the impulse to withdraw and pity is the impulse to approach". Both these impulses are blended and harmonized in a tragedy and this balance brings relief and repose. At the end we come out as virtuous and good. Butcher too agrees of the purification theory and says, "The tragic catharsis involves not only the idea of emotional relief but the further idea of purifying the emotions so relieved".

Summing Up :

With the process of catharsis tragedy helps in the enlightenment our souls where emotions are universalized. Catharsis refers to the tragic variety of pleasure and to provide such a pleasure is the function of tragedy. It should please both – writers and readers.

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