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Aristotle And The Paradox Of Tragedy

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The paradox tragedy in simple terms may be stated thus: human misery is repulsive to us in real life, yet it somehow pleases us in tragedy. Indeed, tragedy is considered by many to be man's highest art form, and to classify a play as a tragedy is to predicate value of it. Why do we get pleasure from reading or watching drama in which our fellow human beings are portrayed as suffering? If anyone would object that we do not take *pleasure* in tragedy as in a sizzling steak, let him substitute some other word. Why do we receive *satisfaction* from tragedy, or why do we *want* to see tragedy?"

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ARISTOTLE AND THE PARADOX OF TRAGEDY

By John Morreall

The paradox of tragedy in simple terms may be stated thus: human misery is repulsive to us in real life, yet it somehow pleases us in tragedy. Indeed, tragedy is considered by many to be man's highest art form, and to classify a play as a tragedy is to predicate value of it. Why do we get pleasure from reading or watching drama in which our fellow human beings are portrayed as suffering? If anyone would object that we do not take *pleasure* in tragedy as in a sizzling steak, let him substitute some other word. Why do we receive *satisfaction* from tragedy, or why do we *want* to see tragedy?

The oldest attempt to explain the pleasure of tragedy is contained in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Written in the fourth century B.C., this work has greatly influenced past thinkers on the problem, such as Milton, Corneille, and Racine, and is still highly regarded today. It is the purpose of my paper to try to answer the question of why tragedy pleases by investigating Aristotle's theory, criticizing any shortcomings I may find in it, and using what is valuable in it to come closer to an answer.

Let us consider Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

> A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

A tragedy, first of all, is the imitation of an action. Exactly what Aristotle meant by imitation is unsure; but we do know that he did not mean an exact copying of human actions, for the language is in verse and is embellished, there are music and song, and the stage is not made to be completely realistic. The tragedy may even produce its effect without being viewed, by merely being read. In both reading the play and in watching it performed, however, the words have a meaningful content; they reproduce in the mind sense images, ideas, and emotions. So in this way tragedy can imitate actions, by using language to create likenesses of actions in the mind of its reader and spectator. (Henceforth I shall use the word *spectator* to include both the play-reader and the play-watcher.)

Here, for Aristotle, was one source of pleasure, not only in the tragic poem, but in all poetry, the pleasure of imitation. The spectator in contemplating the likeness "finds himself learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' " If he has not seen the original, the pleasure will come, not from imitation, but from "the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause." Man's instinct for imitating and enjoying imitations and his instinct for 'harmony and rhythm' were what led him to create poetry in the first place.

The other and proper source of the pleasure of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is "the incidents arousing pity and fear" whereby the tragedy accomplishes "its catharsis of such emotions." This phrase concerning catharsis is probably the most disputed in all the *Poetics*. Although some interpretations of it have made catharsis a process taking place within the characters of the tragedy, it seems fairly evident from the rest of the *Poetics* that Aristotle thought of it as taking place within the spectator.

To better understand what Aristotle meant by *catharsis*, we shall first investigate his idea of emotions. In the *Nichomachean Ethics* he defines emotions or feelings as "all states of the mind attended by pleasure or pain." Pity is a painful state caused by the threat of pain or destruction to a person undeserving of suffering them, evils of the kind that one might himself expect to suffer, and again if they appear close at hand. Fear is a mental state of pain caused by an imagination of an impending evil which will be destructive or painful. We do not fear all evils, but only those which promise major pain or damage to us, and even those only when they appear to be close at hand. So pity is for another's suffering; when similar pain seems imminent to ourselves, we fear.

There are several ways in which Aristotle's catharsis of these emotions has been thought to operate. Many see it as a psychic cleansing, similar to a physical purge, aimed at an unwholesome condition of the mind. John Milton viewed catharsis in this way:

> Tragedy (is) said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is, to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated.

This interpretation of catharsis as a homeopathic cure says that the emotions are aroused in the spectator by the incidents of the tragedy and that when the emotions are released, a pleasurable purge is effected wherein they return to a normal level. Another view of catharsis is that it operates as an allopathic cure of excess emotion. Pity and fear are aroused and, as opposites, cancel each other. This latter interpretation seems invalid as Aristotle's meaning of catharsis, for in his mind pity and fear were not opposites and did not oppose the effect of one another. On the contrary, these two emotions reinforced each other and built upon one another to heighten the total emotional effect.

Aristotle's probable meaning of *catharsis* was as a homeopathic cure. Let us now examine it in this light, keeping in mind his definitions of emotion, pity, and fear. Are pity and fear necessary to and characteristic of our response to tragedy? Certainly we do not react to tragic suffering exactly as we would if such misfortune were happening to us or to those around us. In real life, pity could lead us to try to stop the suffering, but in tragedy all practical action is ruled out. Some sort of feeling for the hero does seem necessary, however, for a total aesthetic appreciation of the tragedy. If our pity remains within the context of the play, it can be aesthetically valid; and theoretically, the more of our powers that enter into the aesthetic experience, the richer that experience will be. A merely intellectual understanding of the hero's suffering unaccompanied by sympathy seems a less full way to appreciate the tragedy than by using both our intellect and emotions.

But what about fear? Certainly fear does not always have to accompany pity; pity may exist alone. To pity another's pain I must know what pain is; and although the imminent prospect of pain to myself will arouse fear, it is not necessary, for the experience of pity, that I should experience or imagine fear. Does not the tragedian, moreover set up the tragedy so that I will not experience fear? The characters are often set in the past, they are idealized, their speech is not ordinary, their clothing is different, there is music, and the scenery is not totally realistic, as was said before. The very fact that the spectator is at the theater or reading the book makes him aware that the action is not real and that there is no danger to him. All these factors help to establish a proper "psychological distance" between the action and the spectator. For if we, as spectators, thought that some suffering were about to strike us, as does the small child in watching the horror movie, our attention would no longer be wholly object-centered or aesthetic. We would turn to self-concern as does the child in covering his eyes and screaming at the appearance of the twenty-foot tall fire-breathing armadillo in the horror movie. Fear is necessarily a self-concerned emotion, hence opposed to the aesthetic attitude.

How could such fear, moreover, be a source of pleasure? Let us pretend that after returning home from watching one of the *Oedipus* tragedies, our friend Aristotle went to bed and began to dream. In his dream he had killed his father and mother and was now gouging out his eyes. Would such a dream give the old Philosopher pleasure or aesthetic satisfaction? No. He may have enjoyed such suffering in the tragedy and he may even enjoy telling his friends about the

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dream on the following morning, but he did not enjoy the suffering when it was so immediate to him in the dream. In the former two cases the necessary element of distance separated the spectator from the pain, making an aesthetic attitude possible; but in the latter this element of distance was absent, making both an aesthetic attitude and a pleasurable experience impossible.

Even if we were to invent a new meaning for Aristotle's word *fear* and say that in tragedy we fear "for the hero," such an emotion would still not be necessary to and characteristic of the ideal tragic response. For the hero's fate in the tragedy is necessary and the ideal spectator is aware that what will befall the hero must happen. But Aristotle himself admits that "fear sets us thinking what can be done, which of course nobody does when things are hopeless." The person who knows that what will happen is inevitable does not fear. So fear, even "for the hero," of the inevitable would be impossible in the ideal spectator, and therefore could not properly be part of a definition of tragedy.

Aristotle's idea of catharsis as the function and proper pleasure of tragedy, like his notion of fear, leads to many difficulties. As was said before, catharsis as Aristotle saw it was probably a homeopathic cure of emotion. In a person's emotional states there are mean conditions in which the feelings are in a proper balance. Sometimes, however, the emotions build up like water behind a dam and demand release. Enter tragedy. In viewing a tragedy the person's emotions of pity and fear are released in a controlled and pleasurable way, thereby restoring them to a healthy, balanced level.

Is this view acceptable? Do pity and fear build up within a person when they are not exercised? Do most people suffer from an excess of these emotions? Even if a person were heavily inclined to pity, would not the exercise of this emotion in the tragedy make him more, instead of less, compassionate? Upon seeing suffering in the real world after viewing a tragedy, would he not be more inclined to pity? And what about the person whose emotions are well-balanced? By Aristotle's definition he would not seem to be able to fully enjoy the tragedy, or else he might come out "in the red" with not enough pity and fear. It seems strange that a definition of tragedy would not assume normal states of mind and feeling in the spectator.

Even if such a catharsis of pity and fear did take place, should it be made the function of tragedy to re-establish healthy emotional states in its spectators? Certainly a person who went to see a tragedy for the expressed purpose of having his emotions purged would not have an aesthetic attitude. Should not the definition of an art form define that art form without making some incidental benefit the function of the art? Must tragedy or any other art have a function?

Perhaps our difficulty in understanding Aristotle's definition lies in our taking him out of his immediate situation and assuming that he had or should have had a totally aesthetic attitude. The Greek tragedies, which were all that Aristotle knew, were performed exclusively at annual civic festivals, which were religious and patriotic events, the great occasions of the Greeks' communal life. The Greeks did not adopt an isolating attitude towards these tragedies. To the great tragic poets, the chastity of art was not the supreme consideration; they took for granted that art exists for life's sake. The doctrine that art should be considered exclusively as an art form would have bewildered them.

The attitude that tragedy like all art must have some use has continued throughout art's history right to our own day. Is it any wonder that we find Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. with a less than perfect aesthetic attitude?

Another factor in Aristotle's positing the purgation of pity and fear as the function and proper pleasure of tragedy is his relationship to Plato, who had charged in the *Republic* that poetic drama encouraged anarchy in the soul by feeding the passions instead of starving them. Aristotle, in refuting Plato's position, tried to show that the tragic effect did justify its social worth, that it did more than just stimulate our idle feelings. He argued that our harmful emotions are best controlled by a periodic release of them, and that tragedy, by providing a healthy relief of excess emotion, is not harmful but rather very useful. After being purged of pity and fear in the tragedy, we will be less troubled by these emotions on real occasions of misfortune. Plato's charge, in concentrating on the effects of tragic poetry upon its spectators, had been unaesthetic. Aristotle's defense of the social worth of tragedy was also unaesthetic. The trouble is that Aristotle included this unaesthetic and, as was previously shown, inaccurate element of catharsis in his definition of tragedy as its function and proper pleasure. To have mentioned the purgation of pity and fear outside the definition as a possible beneficial side effect of tragedy would have been an acceptable place for such a statement. But to make catharsis the characteristic and necessary function of tragedy seems to me to be incorrect and unaesthetic.

Even if Aristotle's approach to the pleasure of tragedy is not completely correct, however, let us see what worth it does have in helping to answer our question. Aside from the pleasure of imitation common to all poetry, what is the unique tragic pleasure? The emotions, at least pity, seem to be part of the answer, as was shown before. But perhaps Aristotle's shortcoming is the stress he places upon the emotions in the tragic pleasure without considering sufficiently the role of the intellect. Without the intellect's operation, the emotions mean very little. Is not our objection to the shallowness of melodrama based on the fact that its appeal is almost solely to our emotions, without a corresponding and complementary appeal to our intellect?

Let us investigate further the operation of the intellect in the aesthetic appreciation of tragedy, and especially its relationship to the emotions and to the tragic pleasure. In the tragedy the spectator witnesses a conflict between the power of inevitable evil, the physical necessity of the hero's fate, and the reaction of the hero's self-conscious effort to the necessity. If the hero merely suffered as a passive animal, all we could do is pity him. Do we not complain when a "tragedy" is nothing more than a passive character suffering assorted hardships? Indeed, we see such a play as merely a cruel story which appealed to nothing but our sense of pity. We almost instinctively realize that this type of drama is incomplete, that the mere release of pity is a waste of time. If tragedy were no more than the expenditure of unpleasant emotion, it would indeed be a needless suffering on our part.

What must be added to the hero's unavoidable suffering to make the play worthwhile is his conscious response to his fate. This response shows forth the hero's great human spirit in the face of his suffering; it is the nobility or the *grandeur d'ame* of the hero that appeals to our intellects. We know that necessity will win out over the hero on the physical level; he must suffer and probably die in the end. Hence we can pity him. But we can also understand that his noble human spirit, his *grandeur d'ame,* is not broken in his defeat. On a higher spiritual level the hero is victorious, and his unconquered spirit is the object of our admiration. It seems that here is the source of our pleasure in tragedy—our enlightenment about and admiration for the almost sublime human spirit of the hero.

It is evident that our admiration for the hero's response to his suffering could not have come about unless he actually suffered. His nobility is shown only in the context of his trials. Here is where the emotions come in. Our emotions, especially pity, support our admiration of the hero's *grandeur d'ame.* Without a sympathy for his suffering, our appreciation of his noble spirit would be as shallow as is emotion unaccompanied by intellect. Without the emotions the meaning of a tragedy would be superficial and fleeting. Intellectual enlightenment unrooted in the emotions and unevoked by them would be something imposed from without. But together, the somewhat painful emotions and the enlightened intellect achieve a meaningful, satisfying, aesthetic experience.