

Catharsis

Catharsis Definition

A Catharsis is an emotional discharge through which one can achieve a state of [moral](#) or spiritual renewal, or achieve a state of liberation from anxiety and stress. Catharsis is a Greek word meaning “cleansing.” In literature, it is used for the cleansing of emotions of the characters. It can also be any other radical change that leads to emotional rejuvenation of a person.

Originally, the term was used as a [metaphor](#) in *Poetics* by Aristotle, to explain the impact of [tragedy](#) on the audiences. He believed that catharsis was the ultimate end of a tragic artistic work, and that it marked its quality. He further said, in *Poetics*:

“Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; ... through pity [eleos] and fear [phobos] effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions” (c. 350 BCE, Book 6.2).

Examples of Catharsis from Literature

Example #1: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare wrote two famous examples of catharsis. One of these catharsis examples is his tragic [drama](#) *Macbeth*. The [audience](#) and readers of *Macbeth* usually pity the tragic central figure of the play because he was blinded by his destructive preoccupation with ambition.

In Act 1, he is made the thane of Cawdor by King Duncan, which makes him a prodigy, well-regarded for his valor and talent. However, the era of his doom starts when he, like most people, gets carried away by ambition, and

the supernatural world as well. Subsequently, he loses his wife, his veracity, and eventually his life. The temptation of ambition robs him of the essence of his existence as a human being, and leaves behind nothing but discontent and a worthless life. In Act V, Macbeth gathers this idea in his [soliloquy](#). He says, while speaking of his life:

“... 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.”

Example #2: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

“Here’s to my love! [Drinks] O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die. [Falls]”

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo commits suicide by drinking the poison that he erroneously thinks Juliet had tasted too. The audience usually finds themselves crying at this particular moment for several reasons. Primarily because losing a loved one is a feeling that all of us have experienced. Watching or reading such a scene triggers the memories of someone we have lost (either by death or by mere separation), and because we are able to relate to it, we suddenly release the emotions that we have been repressing.

Function of Catharsis: Dramatic Uses

In dramatic art, the term catharsis explains the impact of tragedy, [comedy](#), or any other form of art on the audience – and in some cases even on the performers themselves. Aristotle did not elaborate on the meaning of “catharsis,” and the way he used it in defining tragedy in *Poetics*.

According to G. F. Else, the conventional and the most prevalent explanation of catharsis as “purgation” or “cleansing” does not have a basis in *Poetics*. It has rather stemmed from other non-Aristotelian and

Aristotelian contexts. Such confusion regarding the origin of the term has led to assorted interpretations of its meaning.

An authoritative version of *Poetics* by D. W. Lucas thoroughly covered, in an appendix dedicated to “Pity, Fear, and Katharsis,” the different shades of meaning and aspects inherent in the interpretation of the word (Aristotle: *Poetics*, Oxford, 1968, pp. 276–79). Lucas identifies that there is a chance that catharsis may have some aspect of meanings like “purgation,” “intellectual clarification,” and “purification.”

However, the kind of discussion he conducts on these terms is not as precise as other leading scholars would want it to be. He does not consider any interpretations other than his own, and rather takes a different approach. His approach is centered on “the Greek doctrine of Humours,” which was not received too well.

The most common interpretations of the term are purgation and purification, which are still widely used. The most recent interpretation of the term catharsis is “intellectual clarification.”