

Emotions in Greek Tragedies

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Abstract

This article will discuss the emotions in the Greek tragedies during the classical period in Athens. It enquires whether emotions in tragedies have a history behind it. Where does emotion originate in the human body? The enquiry involves different interpretations and meanings of catharsis. It will also discuss how the play wrights depict emotions through their characters and connect them with the audience seated in front of the theatre. The focus of discussion is about the tragic emotions in relation with Aristotle's theory of catharsis. Is the principle of catharsis confined with its two important elements, pity and fear or does it have other wider areas which the Athenians used in their tragedies. This will also include the main purpose of the great dramatists in writing their plays with emotions in their tragedy. This article also deals with the question why the great philosophers like Plato, Socrates, Descartes and others rejected emotionalism. It also illustrates the use of emotions with examples from the tragedies of the fifth century Athenian tragedian Sophocles' plays.

Keywords: Dionysus – Festival - Tragedy – Performance – Emotions – Pity – Fear – Wrath – *Anagnorisis* (Discovery) - Lamentation - Catharsis - *Psyche* (Soul) – Purgation.

The aim of the dramatist of the classical period was to win a prize at the Dionysian festival. They also had other important social and political interest to achieve through their tragic dramas. The society of the ancient Athens thought that the Dionysus was pleased with only emotions in the tragedy that touches the soul. During the time of external aggression against their state, it was only the tragedy with extreme emotions that would keep the morale of their warriors. The dramatists tried to get the prize by being the best at giving their audience the pleasure of not only laughing but also crying. The tragedians made them crying by using various dramatic elements. One of the most important elements the dramatists used for being a successful tragedy was emotion. Emotions are so subjective as such the Greeks believed that it is so hard to define exactly. The ancient Greeks and literary critics gave emphasis to the emotional elements in their tragedies. Scholars and critics have studied and discussed it in the light of Aristotle's theory of catharsis. But these studies have been mostly concerned with how to reduce or get rid of emotions in tragedies.

As a result of Aristotle's influence, such discussions have generally been related to the twin aspect of catharsis: pity and fear. But the extent of emotions played on by the tragedians was far wider than that. Although some of the able and influential writers of the modern times have ignored its emotional elements, the ancient critics believed and also recognized that the essence of the tragedy is in its emotions that is expressed and performed. According to W. B.

Stanford, "the Athenian tragedians made their characters and choruses cry with pity, shudder with fear, storm with rage, strain with suspense, dance with joy and spit with hate, and how these representations of emotionalism affected their audiences-an emotionalism that is rarely if ever paralleled in modern performances of tragedy." (2-3) The dramas in ancient Athens were enacted only once in a year. The expectation from the common citizens and also among the citizens of high status used to be very high. The long gap of a year ensured the anticipatory interest which also contributed to emotionalism. In fact, the whole city was involved in celebrating the Dionysus festival and conducting the performances of the plays. So there is no doubt that the dramatists who wrote the tragedies were expected to get more acclaim than the actors on the stage.

Later critics after Aristotle continued to emphasize the emotive elements in drama and oratory. The power of oratory to move audiences by emotive methods was widely recognized in antiquity. It is a fact that oratory is one of the chief weapons in the art of persuasion as oratory which was highly rhetorical and persuasive. Some of the serious votaries of emotional power in tragedies include the earliest historian Herodotus, Xenophon and Horace. Xenophon in his *Symposium* (3, 11) makes historical testimony. He states that "the tragic actor Callipides prided himself on being able to fill the seats with weeping multitudes." (6)

The fourth century philosopher Plato deplored emotionalism in tragedies as well as in oratory for the main reason that the emotional elements in them make the best of the intellectuals surrender their knowledge and wisdom to the irrational power of emotions. Socrates on his part denounces emotionalism in tragedy because he felt that it intensifies passion and takes control of the *psuche*. The literal meaning of *Psuche* in English is soul which has a spiritual and ethereal overtone but in tragic context it connotes the emotional self or intellectual self.

Emotionalism in tragedy was unacceptable to Socrates as it usurps the control of the mind. Richard Kuhns raises a fundamental question in his *TRAGEDY - Contradiction and Repression*: "Why do we positively enjoy watching people chop up one another, perform perfidious acts upon one another, discover in one another the most horrendous wickedness?" and he continues to state, "Great thinkers from Plato through Tolstoy-and along the way we can count St. Augustine and many straitlaced types-found tragedy not only unbearable, but an expression of human depravity that we ought not to witness." (60)

Yet most of us are drawn towards watching acts of horrifying depictions of slaughter and murder in the tragedy. In refuting the argument of Plato, in *Poetics* Aristotle justifies tragic emotions by stating that "the peculiar pleasure of the response to the dramatic representation of the painful can be analyzed, for there is a pleasure *appropriate* to tragedy." (61) A pleasure *appropriate* may mean when the tragedians depicted a serious tragic scene to create a right response from his audience, it should not be looked at mockingly or become a laughing stock. That may mean a tragedy should be a tragedy and the aim of which goes beyond the theatre. In the fourth century B.C. the Athenian tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides had only one common objective to realize from their tragedies was to uphold the dignity, safety and sovereignty of the state against any foreign invasion. As such another important aim of them was to infuse the spirit of patriotism, heroism and valour among the citizens.

R. Darren Gobert has discussed the history of emotions in his article *Behaviorism, Catharsis and the History of emotion*. He argues that the concept of emotion has a history behind it as "critics in different times and places have meant different things when they have written of the emotions in general or pity and fear in particular-even if they have been unaware that their presuppositions about these terms were historically constituted." (110) He based his argument on his understanding of the key theoreticians of emotions in Western thought-such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, David Hum, William James and Sigmund Freud.

In the first half of the fourth century Plato in his *Republic* deplored tragedy's alarming emotional power. He found that even the best among the intellectuals surrendering themselves to the effect of emotionalism. Socrates also joined Plato in deploring emotionalism in tragedies stating that it rouses and feeds and waters passions instead of drying them up: it lets them take control of 'psuche' usurping the control of the mind. The recurrent disagreements have been created due to the different interpretations given time and again on the meaning of emotions and also over the question where emotion originates: in the human body or are they the products of the mind or received from outside.

In his *Frogs*, Aristophanes presented Aeschylus and Euripides attacking and defending each other's tragedies on the basis of their didactic values. Theatre god Dionysus was asked to adjudge but the god was reluctant at first and in the end the god made his decision in favour of Aeschylus, on the grounds that he found more pleasure in Aeschylus. Through his drama, Aristophanes reflects the views of the average Athenians on the question of emotionalism in the fifth century tragedies. Furthermore, there was a historical background attached with the Aristophanes' play. It was performed in the last years of the Peloponnesian War when the Spartan Army was encamped a few miles outside and the attack against Athens was expected at any moment. Gary Day states, "In the competition between Aeschylus and Euripides, the one provides model of heroes, the other of citizens. With the Spartans massing outside the city walls it is the model of the hero that is most relevant. (28) So, the choice of the Dionysus fell on Aeschylus because the god decides on the basis of who among the two is the better one for Athens at the time of war. Athenian audience of the classical period including modern audience still express their feelings noisily and forcefully while witnessing the tragic and heroic end of the hero.

Writing about *The Centrality of Emotions* in his work on *The Greek Tragedy and The Emotions*, W B Stanford states that the emotional attitude in the part of the theatre god Dionysus reflect the views of the contemporary Athenian and also the views of Aristophanes. He continues to argue that "Aristotle in his defence of tragedy did not deny Plato's allegations about its emotional power." Although known for his rational views, Aristotle insisted that the proper pleasure of tragedy was achieved by "means of pity and fear effecting catharsis of such emotions." Aristotle also asserts (*Poetics* 1455a 31-2) that if a poet wants to make others feel the storms of emotions, he must first feel them himself. Horace confirms this in his celebrated maxim (*Ars Poetica* 102 ff.), "if you want to make me cry, you must feel the grief yourself."

Aristotle again assures that tragedy's proper pleasure, that is, the arousal and catharsis of emotions can be experienced without performance, but the actual performance would enhance

the emotionalism. Darren Gobert raises some pertinent questions, "how one understands the nature and structure of emotions... and how one understands-and even translates-*katharsis* with its "complexity of emotion as a concept" and the multiplicity of interpretations published on Aristotle's clause by "rendering *katharsis* a term of art denoting a desirable dramaturgical structure." (110) He also finds the interpretive list heavily lean on the definitions of the word in the Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon: a medical *Katharsis* that discharges emotions, or "purgation"; a religious, lustrative *katharsis*, or "purification"; and a *katharsis* of cognitive illumination, or "clarification." Dorren finds the third definition serves as support for his historiographical thesis. (110-111)

If the problem of what is the pleasure appropriate to tragedy is explained in probable terms, then of course, it will be easier for any scholar to find the context in which Aristotle's catharsis is used. It is in the actual performance of the tragic dramas of the great tragedians, powerful emotions are displayed by the protagonists. Oedipus blinded himself horrifically when he was almost getting the truth that he was indeed the slayer of Laius and then wedded his mother, according to Winnington-Ingram the audience were well aware, "Oedipus was a victim of gods but, when he blinded himself, he was a free agent"(Fate in Sophocles. 174) and that gods had no hand in it. The audience did not witness the cruel act of Oedipus blinding himself. Sophocles as usual used the messenger to bring the horrifying acts of suicide of Jacosta and the self-blinding of Oedipus. It actually intensifies emotional involvement of the audience. This dramatic manipulation of the tragedian Sophocles seems to have achieved the effect of "purgation" or "purification."

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the extreme emotional tragedy of Antigone is exemplified when she is on her way to imprisonment to be buried alive in the cave prison. She bemoans that she is "leaving the radiance of the sun," (869) her "hopes of marriage gone" (981) and appeals to the chorus to look upon her as she goes. Shockingly enough the unkindly response from the chorus upsets the audience and also Antigone who expected at least a show of sympathy from the elders. Instead of joining in her lamentations, they remark on the fame and name she will get for having died for a noble cause burying her brother Polyneices. The irony of her death is that she goes to her death even without knowing that the public opinion is on her side when there was a confrontation between Haemon and his father Creon. If she has reached the cave prison without lamentation, she may not have achieved total sympathy and solidarity from the people of Thebes. In the subsequent suicides of Haemon and his mother Eurydike and the complete destruction of the cruel tyrant Creon, the audience seems to have achieved the effect of catharsis.

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