

Interpretations of Aristotelian Catharsis in respect of Facebook Status Updates

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Abstract:

Aristotle's concept of catharsis has been subjected to various interpretations over the years and the debates with respect to it are still an ongoing process. Catharsis and its interpretations have found their way not only into drama, literature, religion and films but also social media. This paper concerns itself with the ways in which the theory of Aristotelian catharsis and its various interpretations can be applied to Facebook status updates. The paper will attempt to analyze status updates on Facebook as texts that yield themselves to approaches to the study of the various interpretations of Aristotelian catharsis.

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In his *Poetics*, Aristotle's theory of catharsis has been applied only to tragedy. In Chapter 6 of the book, Aristotle discusses the concept rather briefly and has not clearly explained what exactly he meant by it.¹ All the controversy surrounding the term has arisen from this. The fact that most of us have access to *Poetics* through its translations further problematizes the issue as it is not clear whether catharsis applies to emotions of the audience or incidents in the drama. However, this controversy has also led to a proliferation of theories regarding catharsis, and such theorizing has enabled the term to be interpreted not only outside the realms of drama but also outside the realms of tragedy. Catharsis is now sought and obtained in writing, reading, film-making, music, blogging and even making certain utterances on Facebook which popularly go by the name of 'status updates'. First and foremost, this paper will attempt to show how Facebook status

updates can be studied with regard to the most established interpretations of Aristotelian catharsis. Since we are looking at Facebook as a medium of cathartic outpourings, I shall not restrict my observations to the catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear but also of other emotions. The central assumption in this paper is that the idea of relief and calm through expression or experience is inseparably connected to the concept of catharsis. "As the term was discovered throughout history, it has always been interpreted to fit the age", so says Gerald R. Lucas in his essay entitled *Catharsis in the Aristotle's Poetics*.² I have tried to use this view to my advantage, as far as possible, for this paper, for it indeed cannot be denied that this particular concept of Aristotle will always have contemporary relevance, primarily because it offers such a huge scope for interpretation and reinterpretation.

The Purgation Theory is one of the most popular theories that have been advanced to explain the working of catharsis in drama. According to this theory, the rousing of pity and fear in the minds of the audience through the tragic spectacle has the effect analogous to that of medicine in the body. This theory has been interpreted in two ways. The first is where catharsis is seen as a process similar to homeopathic treatment with the like curing the like. This theory suggests that the pity and fear we feel for the tragic protagonist allows a release of the latent pity and fear that we have and feel in our own life. This theory can very well be seen to be working with respect to status updates on Facebook. As an example, I shall quote here, a status update of a homesick student who is pursuing her higher studies in India: “Take me back Home. Back to Saudi, back to my friends, back to where I belong.” In the ‘comments’ section of this update, one of her friends says, “Now, WHY would

you post something like that?” followed by a sad emoticon and another writes: “And please take me in your luggage”. What is clear from the responses to this post is that the people who are making the comments are also in a similar situation, that is, that of being away from one’s homeland. They let out their anguish through an expression of their identification with their friend’s predicament. Here, a purgation of emotions is facilitated through like curing the like, that is, sharing of similar emotions on a common platform. Since the update shared cannot really be regarded as a tragic one, the purgation that takes place is not one of pity and fear but of other emotions like longing and nostalgia. A ‘purgation’ does happen, nevertheless, through expression (by the person who makes the status update) as well as through experience (by the people who comment on it). This purgation also brings about a definite sense of relief. Some calm of mind is achieved, and some passions, if

not all, are spent, which is why I liken this process to the cathartic one. In fact, a Facebook wall is no less than a veritable drama. Of course, likening it to a dramatic act (or even multiple dramatic acts) only strengthens its association with catharsis and its various interpretations. While the person posting the status update may be seen as the actor, the people reading the update and commenting on it can clearly be seen as readers and audiences. Here, two kinds of cathartic experiences may be seen, depending upon the nature of 'audience' response. Some of the people on the person's 'friends list' will only read the update and feel some kind of identification with their own situation, if any. These people will undergo a passive sort of catharsis. This catharsis is similar to that of the audience that sits and watches a play and silently undergoes a purgation of its emotions. However, a more active kind of catharsis will be felt by the people who

actually make the effort to voice their opinion in response to the statement made by the one who posts the status update. Catharsis has also been seen as an equivalent of allopathic treatment with the unlike curing the unlike. This view was in vogue in the neo-classical era. According to this view, the emotions of pity and fear that are aroused on witnessing the tragedy help in purging such negative emotions like anger and hatred. Such instances of emotional cleansing through unlike curing the unlike can, again, be observed on the Facebook wall. For example, hate speeches written as Facebook updates are often pacified by people who make comments on those updates in such a way as to try to reason with them or calm their anger. Also, sad and morose expressions are calmed and soothed with balming responses. As a case in point, I quote an update from a deadline-inflicted soul who expresses her angst on the Facebook wall, thus: "My Dear Deadline

with your Dreadful and Disgusting Capital D, please count me as DEAD.” While the act of writing this update itself is cathartic as mental pressure is partially released through making an utterance of the problem and also sharing it ‘virtually’ with people, the interpretation of catharsis being similar to allopathic treatment also holds good here when one reads the comments to this update. One virtual friend observes, “We actually start meeting deadlines right from the time we are born. We have no choice but to go about meeting them.” Another comment says: “As if we all don’t have deadlines to meet? Stop groaning and start working to meet your deadline, instead!” This is more of a rebuke, but will probably also serve to give some reality check to the person who has chosen Facebook to bemoan her difficulty in coping up with work pressure, thereby providing some calm of mind.

Besides the purgation theory, the psychological interpretation of Aristotle’s

catharsis is also widely applied. According to this theory, when the emotions of pity and fear arouse in the audience in the theatre, they express these emotions freely as audiences which they cannot do in real life. The theatre thus provides an outlet for the expression of pent up emotions, thereby giving relief to the audience. Facebook, like theatre, is a virtual world where repressed emotions are often vented out and relief is obtained in the process. Rather, on Facebook, the venting out of repressed emotions is sometimes expressly done for the purpose of obtaining relief, which is to suggest that relief is not necessarily the outcome here but often, the very motive of expression. This is especially true of those status updates that are actually written to tell a personal tale, but without any specific references to a person or situation. The person posting the update gets the much-needed relief by making a public declaration of his/her source of woe or dismay, but the

reader gets an equal amount of cathartic pleasure through identification. This identification may be because the reader has actually experienced such a situation or even through vicarious experiencing. For example, a status update from one of my acquaintances on Facebook status: “Some clowns never realize that people are laughing at *them* and not at their jokes.” This statement is almost like a universal truth. This quality of the statement ensures catharsis in two ways. First, the writer experiences a catharsis by expressing his/her problem and ridiculing the source thereof without even having to name it. Secondly, the reader gets pleasure by realizing that such ‘clowns’ exist in his/her life as well and the remembrance of such a ‘clown’ that the reading of the update has facilitated helps the reader to vent out his/her personal frustrations (in the ‘comments’ section) that the antics of a similar ‘clown’ in his/her life may have caused. Expression through

Facebook here allows for cathartic relief without getting into a direct confrontation. Facebook, thus, becomes a medium for individual as well as shared catharsis. In fact, catharsis on Facebook achieves its uniqueness from the fact that different kinds of catharsis may be seen to happen simultaneously in this medium. However, the kind of ‘relief’ that a cathartic outlet facilitates, or rather, whether it is a relief at all or not has been a highly contested issue.³ Psychologists have pointed out that letting out negative emotions only helps to increase negativity in the long run rather than reducing its impact.⁴ However, my argument regarding catharsis on Facebook is with respect to the temporary relief experienced from the medium through the status update and not its long term effects.

Critics of Aristotelian catharsis have also propounded the Purification Theory. Adherers to this theory, associate catharsis with moral instruction. They hold the view

that through catharsis, our emotions are purified of excess and defect which enables us to become better human beings. This concept of catharsis being an instrument of moral learning can also be applied to certain kinds of status updates on Facebook. This happens mostly in the case of some inspirational words or quotes used by the person who writes the status. Both the writer and the readers here may undergo such moral cleansing. For example, a status update uses the following words: “Be mindful of what you throw away, be careful of what you push away, and think hard before you walk away.” Such words can help in imparting moral instruction. However, as with all moral teachings, the impact of the moral will only depend upon the receiver’s willingness to understand and appreciate it. Responses to such posts on Facebook show both such willingness and the lack thereof. Some readers ‘like’ the posts, and express their agreement with the

content. They are the ones who probably undergo the kind of catharsis from reading the status as suggested by the critics of the Purification theory. However, there are others who find such posts to be needless sermonizing and ignore or deride them. The potential cathartic effect of such posts is lost to them. In case of Facebook, thus, catharsis may be volitional for some readers and incidental for others.

The ‘Clarification Theory’ of catharsis has often been regarded as the most ‘correct’ interpretation of this much debated concept. According to this interpretation, catharsis has been taken to mean clarification of the essential and universal significance of the incidents depicted which leads to an enhanced understanding of the pleasure that comes from such learning. Such knowledge on Facebook may come from a single status update or may even be a combined effect of various status updates on Facebook. For

example, if one chooses to become just a silent spectator for a day in the virtual world of Facebook, the sum total of experiences and illuminations that can be derived from a careful observation of the various status updates can lead to a profound discovery. Such a catharsis of discovery, of knowledge gained is a case in point, in one of the status updates that I read on Independence Day. It says: "Facebook is the best place to observe the sharply differing perspectives of the independent Indian citizens on their Independence Day." This observation proved to be profound indeed when I went on to observe the varying points of view expressed on independence. One status that was downright cynical read: "This day should be observed as Fools' Day. In a country like India, where corruption rules, the celebration of Independence is ridiculous!" while another seemed more optimistic and patriotic in proclaiming: "May we all be the change that we want to

see" Happy Independence day". A happy note of counting the blessings rather than the curses was sounded in the update of another user: "Let's think freely and live life freely, our independence and freedom are the best gift we have got, so let's enjoy this freedom meaningfully....." Yet another update had a mixed tone of hope and doubt: "To bring true Independence in the nation, the mind first needs to be free from bias, prejudice, superstition, greed and then can we dare to utter the meaningful words 'Happy Independence Day' " On a completely different track is this other update which is full of irony and on a rather appropriate occasion: "For the first time in the history of mankind "Need", "Comfort" and "Luxury" are sold at the same price in India! Onions Rs. 80, Petrol Rs. 80 and Beer Rs. 80!" What is indeed clarified here is the utter subjectivity of views regarding the concept of independence for the citizens of independent India. This contentious view of

independence is what may be regarded as forming the essence of modern India. Such and other clarifying perspectives may be reached when one tries to gauge the cumulative impact and significance of these differing points of view made on a common day by people sharing a common nationality and a common platform for self-expression.

Masahiro Kitano, in *Aristotle's Theory of Comedy* has talked about the extremely interesting concept of 'comic catharsis' which is also extremely relevant to this paper. Kitano contends that "catharsis as emotional purgation holds well for the comic laughter that comes from the ridiculous in comedy".⁵ Status Updates on Facebook are often deliberately comic and sometimes satirical. Such expressions allow a sort of group catharsis to take place as various people read it and express their shared catharsis through shared laughter. For example, among the teaching community on Facebook, it is often seen that on, a status

update that in a serious-comic tone talks about a teacher's frustration regarding some ridiculous misinterpretation and misrepresentation of a text by a student, other teachers comment not just by laughing at the past but also by sharing anecdotes of similar experiences. This shared expression of the ridiculous, certainly allows emotional purgation through laughter. As an example, I quote an update from one of my colleagues who wrote a status on Facebook regarding one of her student's interpretation of Lady Macbeth's famous prayer to "unsex" herself in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The update reads: "Lady Macbeth decided to go in for a sex change in order to be able to kill Duncan." – so says one of the answer scripts. I don't know whether to laugh or to cry." " Despite what the closing sentence says, it is clear that the teacher has decided to laugh at the misconception and even wishes to share that laughter with those who would understand the absurdity of it.

Comments pour in, as expected, with some filling in the ‘comments’ space with laughter and grinning smileys and others making comments like: “This is what you must have taught in class, LOL”, “I once received an answer insinuating that Lady Macbeth wanted to kill Macbeth because she had an illicit relationship with Duncan”, “One of my students writes in an answer on Tintern Abbey: When Wordsworth was riding on his bike with his beloved, his mood was calm and peaceful.” This seems like a good example of comic catharsis through shared laughter. The realization of absurdity and ridiculousness is what endows the comic perspective with a cathartic illumination.

The space on Facebook which invites the user to describe the state of his/her mind with the significant words, “What’s on your mind?” may actually be seen to be an invitation to seek, experience and share catharsis through the act of expressing one’s feeling on a virtual public platform. Incidentally, it also leads to catharsis for those who read and comment. The entire concept of Aristotelian catharsis may thus be viewed in a different light with respect to Facebook, which in turn becomes a potent site for opening newer avenues on the cathartic process.

Endnotes

¹Aristotle. *On the Art of Poetry*. Trans. Ingram Bywater. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print

² Lucas Gerald. “Catharsis in the Aristotle’s *Poetics*”. *Gerald R Lucas*. Gerald R Lucas, 14 April 1996. Web. 29 September 2013

³ “Catharsis Theory and Media Effects”. *JRank Articles*. Net Industries. Web. 29 September 2013

⁴ McRaney David. “Catharsis”. *You Are Not So Smart*. David McRaney, 11 August 2010. Web. 29 September 2013

⁵ Kitano Masahiro. “Aristotle’s Theory of Comedy”. *Bulletin of Gunma Prefectural Women’s University* 22 (2001): 193-201. Web. 29 September 2013

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11. "On Comic Catharsis". Trans. *Littératures Classiques*. 27 (1996): 183-93. Web. 29 September 2013.