

Essay no. 46

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of a noble and complete action, having a certain magnitude, made in a language spiced up by diverse kinds of embellishments brought in separately in the parts of the work. This imitation is achieved through characters, not through narration; and, through pity and fears, it accomplishes the catharsis of such emotion. By 'language spiced up' I mean a language with rhythm, harmony and song; by 'kinds of embellishment brought in separately in the parts of the work' I mean that some parts are worked out in verse only and others with song.

- Aristotle, *Poetics*

The definition of a tragedy from Aristotle's *Poetics* limits the term to a work of art. It has influenced the greatest of Greek tragic playwrights whose works Friedrich Nietzsche characterized as the harmony of the Apollonian and Dionysian element. Except the artistic value, the idea of catharsis allows one to ascribe ethical value to tragedy as defined by Aristotle. However, considering the post-Aristotelian art and history, one might ask oneself whether a tragedy should be limited to art. If so, should it be limited to a specific form and can its value indeed be determined by the quality and complexity of language?

Aristotle's definition of a tragedy insists on a tragedy being "the imitation of a noble and complete action". This implies that a distinction must be made between a tragedy and the actual action it is based on, which corresponds to Plato's idea that art is an imitation of the material world. For Plato, this reduces art to an activity of little value due to the fact that artists imitate the material world which is an imitation of the very essence contained in the realm of forms. However, knowing that Aristotle maintained that the essence, as something general, can only be contained in the being of which it is the essence, one can rightfully argue that defining tragedy as an imitation does not diminish its value since an imitation still represents the essence of the thing it portrays. Furthermore, this seems to emphasize the ethical value of a tragedy. If tragedy is seen as the imitation of a real action, then one can claim it truthfully represents reality. However, since the audience recognize the events taking place in the tragedy, but do not participate in them themselves, they are free to distance themselves in a way which allows them to bring the moral behind the characters' actions into question. Since the actions of the characters imitate the reality, this form of art allows one to question the morality of one's own behavior. Aristotle's definition demands that

a tragedy should imitate “a noble and complete action”. In ancient Greece, the playwrights obeyed the definition by designing characters who strived to a goal higher than themselves and whose virtues represented a set of ethical values one should strive to. Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the main character of the eponymous play, corresponds to Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero. The play presents her struggle against legal authority which puts her life at risk. Yet, she puts herself in jeopardy in order to bury her brother and honor him in a way she believes is right and when she dies, her death can be perceived as tragic due to the fact it resulted from a noble action motivated by autonomous ethics, resulting from the character’s virtue. However, there are plays one defines as tragedies, but which do not follow the definition found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliette* is defined as a tragedy, but neither Romeo’s nor Juliette’s actions can be defined as noble or motivated by a struggle for a cause as noble as Antigone’s. Their death is not predetermined or outwardly inflicted and they do not display any prominent virtues, thus not corresponding to Aristotle’s definition of tragic; yet one cannot deny their death causes emotion of “pity and fear” in the audience. This shows that what one perceives as tragic changes and Aristotle’s insistence on the nobleness of an action is not utterly obliging when trying to achieve tragedy. The question is whether the term tragic should be applied to what people consider tragic now.

Having established that what is defined as tragic changes, one might ask oneself whether tragedy should be bound to drama - is tragedy indeed achieved through characters as Aristotle’s definition claims? Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre insisted on shifting the focus from the characters onto narration, thus still keeping the form of a drama, but abandoning the typical style and structure of a play, thus disregarding Aristotle. Even though they are not defined as tragedies, the very intention of Brecht’s plays, such as *Mother Courage and Her Children*, is to cause a reaction in the audience - to make them perceive something as tragic in the modern sense of the word and to question the ethics behind the actions they encounter in everyday life, but which the play exposes as clearly absurd and wrong. And one can, indeed, see tragedy in such a play. Even though the characters do not fight for a noble cause, the fact that they indeed do represent the reality causes angst and despair, fear and pity in the audience which question themselves. In that way, it is not the characters who are tragic, it is what one is shown about them, that is what one is shown about oneself. Matthew Arnold’s poem *Dover Beach* also expresses the realization that what used to be tragic changed as humanity became occupied with different issues, i.e. with itself. Written in 1860s, following the publication of Darwin’s theory of evolution when humanity began experiencing an existentialist crisis,

Arnold's poem portrays a new idea of tragedy. A man, reminiscing about "the sea of Faith" which "was once at its full", refers to Sophocles and seeks any sort of consolation for the realization he is left to himself, with no interventionist power above him. He does strive to a significant goal - the recovery of faith in anything in order to fight despair - which causes him to struggle, but he follows the values which he honors and finds fit to his ethics and the poem is the imitation of reality of Arnold's time. All of these things correspond to Aristotle's definition of a tragedy. Furthermore, even if this is not a drama written in verse with songs for the chorus, the language does have its rhythm and harmony. One can take this as the suggestion of the possibility of tragedy being achieved in genre other than drama.

Following this idea, Aristotle's definition raises the question of language and necessity of tragedy being bound to art in general. As it has been suggested by pointing out poetry as a genre which employs rhythm and harmony in its language, tragic style can be resumed in genres other than drama. If one supposes that it is the mere skill of a writer which defines the language, then each genre becomes a plausible medium of conveying a tragedy. However, drama has a particular advantage of making the language come to life through the actors, thus allowing a better imitation of reality, which is an important element of tragedy. However, in my opinion, true tragedy requires no big words, but it does require a meaning to which one can relate, a meaning which can later lead to catharsis. For instance, even though it is written in the form of a novel, George Orwell's *1984* portrays a character which can be argued to be tragic. Living in a totalitarian regime with no freedom of either action or thought, Winston decides to disobey a set of values imposed by the legal authority because he finds them faulty, just like Antigone did, and strives to achieve freedom - a noble goal which puts his life at risk and indeed imitates reality of the human kind, as well as reflecting its fears and causing pity. However, the novel is written in a style more simple than Sophocles' or any other tragic playwright - what is important about the language is not the form but the meaning behind it. Ending with a simple sentence: *He loved Big Brother.*, this novel becomes a tragedy because Winston's "victory over himself", i.e. the abandonment of his moral beliefs and his goal equals his death and the death of a tragic hero, such as Antigone. If this is accepted and the meaning is seen as more important than the language, one needs to ask oneself whether art in general is necessary for a tragedy. Could reality not be tragic? Is the death of a civilian fighting for the rights of people in an oppressive regime less tragic than Winston's or Antigone's? Why does one need to imitate actions in order for them to become tragic if the only thing which is different is the language which is not as important as the meaning? If the

catharsis is the aim which tragedy strives to achieve, could it be achieved in other forms or what is it about art that provides one with that experience?

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, a tragedy allows one to experience fear and pity which lead to the catharsis, a sort of cleansing of these emotions. Having accepted that tragedy entails ethical value since it allows one to question the ethical values of the characters and oneself, one can accept that this also allows one to deal with other questions which arise in one's life. Dealing with those in a distanced manner allowed by the form of tragedy leads to realizations which would not have been possible in reality. Therefore, I would agree that tragedy in the form suggested by Aristotle offers the opportunity of catharsis. Friedrich Nietzsche saw it in a similar way, calling the Greek tragedy the harmony of the Apollonian and Dionysian element. If Dionysian is all that is irrational, reckless and chaotic in one, while Apollonian is its opposite - the rational, pure and composed, the union of those in a tragedy is what I personally believe leads to catharsis. If harmony is achieved and one comes to terms with different elements of oneself all of which are present in a tragedy - the irrational emotions which are imitated and develop according to the rational structure, which is predetermined by the playwright but does not negate the irrational - that is when one experiences catharsis and that is the advantage of Aristotelian tragedy. However, one could argue that there are other ways of achieving catharsis and coming to terms with oneself. Jean-Paul Sartre, French philosopher and writer dealt with existentialist problems of human existence, freedom, angst and despair. Even though Antoine Roquentin, the main character in his novel *Nausea*, cannot be defined as a tragic hero, he can be taken as an example of a man who experiences catharsis without witnessing a tragedy. Roquentin struggles to come to terms with his own existence and the realization he is bound to exist and is, paradoxically, compelled to be free causes angst and disagreement within him. However, after hearing a song he loves, at the end of the novel he comes to accept his existence. This moment represents a sort of catharsis because Roquentin is cleansed of angst and despair and achieves a harmony which is what should happen after the experience of an Aristotelian tragedy. This shows that there are ways other than tragedy which allow the experience of catharsis, but these are reminiscent of what a playwright should achieve in a tragedy - a union of different elements which need to be reconciled. Therefore, a tragedy in Aristotelian sense is what leads to catharsis, even though there are other ways to achieve it.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the attributes which Aristotle ascribes to tragedy are not exclusive to that term. Other genres portray actions which are "noble and

complete” and, since what is presented in a tragedy imitates reality, the reality itself offers a display of such actions. The language in tragedy is “spiced up”, but that is also the case with poetry and it is not always about the form, but also the meaning behind the language. This also applies to characters - if they do not convey any meaning, they are not an honest imitation of reality. As for catharsis, it can be achieved in ways other than tragedy. So why did then Nietzsche think so highly of Greek tragedy and why do I tend to agree with him? It is true that all of the elements of Aristotelian tragedy can be found somewhere else, but there is no other form which unites them all and it is all of them combined and in harmony that allow the experience of catharsis, thus bearing utmost significance for one questioning one’s own ethical beliefs and oneself and coming to terms with one’s existence as such.