

*Reflection Statement for*

***Expulsion, Equilibrium, Elucidation***

**An Examination of Literary Catharsis in American Literature of the 1940's and 50's**

The literary concept of catharsis was established by Aristotle in his dramatic theory, ‘*Poetics*’<sup>41</sup>, in which he metaphorically employed the term to explain the culmination of tragedy’s affect upon the audience. It subsequently became identified as a convention of Classical tragedies, and, due to the role of Classical texts in instituting transcendental conventions, pervaded the substrata of literary convention.

My major work, ‘*Expulsion, Equilibrium, Elucidation*,’ seeks to explore the ways in which catharsis manifests in American literature of the 1940’s and 50’s as a result of Classical tragedies, and in relation to the multitude of interpretations that have arisen since Aristotle initial theorisation. Underlining this is my desire to extrapolate the impact of Classical texts in establishing universal literary convention, while simultaneously sustaining philosophical discourse on the subconscious effect of literature upon those exposed to it. I have aimed for my critical to act as a catalyst for audience introspection. This interiority is facilitated through my discussion upon the influence and effects of literature upon the psyche and the catharsis they evoke.

Throughout my critical response, I have analysed three alternate philosophical interpretations of catharsis: purgation, purification, and intellectual clarification, throughout a range of 1940’s and 50’s American literature. The texts include: Billy Wilder’s film, ‘*Sunset Boulevard*’<sup>42</sup>, (1950); Alfred Hitchcock’s film, ‘*Vertigo*’<sup>43</sup> (1958); Tennessee William’s play, ‘*A Streetcar*

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<sup>41</sup> Halliwell, Stephan, and Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. (1998).

<sup>42</sup> Brackett, Williams. *Sunset Boulevard*. Directed by Billy Wilder. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures. (1950).

<sup>43</sup> Hitchcock, Alfred. *Vertigo*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures. (1958).

*Named Desire*<sup>44</sup> (1947); Arthur Miller's play, *'Death of a Salesmen'*<sup>45</sup> (1949); and Patricia Highsmith's novel, *'The Talented Mr. Ripley'*<sup>46</sup> (1955). My underlying philosophical argument will be informed by the Classical texts: Sophocles' tragedy *'Oedipus Rex'* (c. 429BC) and Aeschylus' tragedy *'Oresteia'* Trilogy (c. 458BC), which shall be compared to the American literature to establish the impact of Classical literature, and its resulting effects, upon later texts.

The critical form brands my major work as unsuitable for a wide demographic, however, the specificity of the content appeals to a niche, informed audience. Academics studying the impact of Classical literature upon subsequent periods, scholars analysing the multitude of philosophical interpretations associated with catharsis, and individuals engaging in philosophical discourse concerning the pathological functions facilitated by literature will be able to associate and find relevant, intriguing facets within my major work. Furthermore, psychologists, as well as theatre and film critics, and students will also have an interest in the subject nature of the critical due to the texts involved and the underlying concepts.

Much of the inspiration for the construction of my major work and the concepts throughout, stem from the coursework of the Advanced and Extension English courses. Through analysing the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge<sup>47</sup> and other Romantic composers in Extension 1 English, I developed an interest in the Romantic paradigm of freedom of expression of emotion, in response to Neoclassical control, which informed my interest in the ways in which catharsis can impact individuals beneficially. Furthermore, in Advanced Module A, the comparative

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: New Directions. (1947).

<sup>45</sup> Miller, Arthur. *The Death of a Salesmen*. New York: The Viking Press. (1949).

<sup>46</sup> Highsmith, Patricia. *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. New York: Penguin Books. (1955).

<sup>47</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, and Ernest Hartley Coleridge. *The complete poetical works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: including poems and versions of poems now published for the first time*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (1912).

study of Shakespeare's '*Julius Caesar*'<sup>48</sup> and Machiavelli's '*The Prince*'<sup>49</sup>, alongside the work from the contemporary poet, Judith Wright<sup>50</sup> in Module C, and Charlotte Bronte<sup>51</sup> in Module B, provided a holistic view of literature from varying mediums and contexts. This catalysed an interest in the commonalities that ran throughout literature that wasn't attached to the traditional influences of authorial and historical context. Additionally, it created an interest in the impacts of Classical literature upon the development of literary conventions. The Advanced and Extension English courses were pivotal in the initialisation of my major work as majority of my inspiration has stemmed from their course content and the concepts discussed therein.

Extensive investigation has aided in the development of the concepts and form of my major work. Through the collection of scholarly articles, "*Theory of Literature*,"<sup>52</sup> by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, I have acquired insight into the form of an effective critical analysis. These articles exemplified the necessity of stratifying my analysis into distinct subsections, to provide a cohesive argument, while simultaneously heightening the sophistication of my work. Thus, I chose to orientate my critical response around the three predominate philosophical interpretations of catharsis: purgation, purification, and intellectual clarification. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate a highly informed perspective upon catharsis, and its underlying aesthetic philosophy. Additionally, the article, "*Irony in the Drama: An Essay on Impersonation, Shock, and Catharsis*,"<sup>53</sup> by Robert B. Sharpe, illustrated the role of comparison in illuminating a clear

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<sup>48</sup> Shakespeare, William, Burton Raffel, and Harold Bloom. *Julius Caesar*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (2006).

<sup>49</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolò, and David Wootton. *The Prince*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co. (1995).

<sup>50</sup> Wright, Judith. *Collected Poems, 1942-1985*. Carcanet. (1994).

<sup>51</sup> Bronte, Charlotte, and Margaret Smith. *Jane Eyre*. London: Oxford University Press. (1973).

<sup>52</sup> Wellek, René, and Austin Warren. *Theory Of Literature*. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. (1956).

<sup>53</sup> McKenzie, Ruth H., and Robert Boies Sharpe. "Irony In The Drama: An Essay On Impersonation, Shock, And Catharsis". *Educational Theatre Journal* 11 (3): 243. (1959).

understanding of concepts and texts, while also representing a holistic understanding of the influences exerted upon the texts being examined and, subsequently, how this moulds the purpose and depiction of concepts. Due to this understanding, I am incorporating distinct comparisons between the 1940's and 50's texts, while simultaneously contrasting them against the Classical texts, and macrocosmically comparing the interpretations of catharsis against one another.

The specific texts which have informed my comprehension of catharsis are: "*The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*"<sup>54</sup>, "*The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*"<sup>55</sup>, and "*The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English*"<sup>56</sup>. These informed my initial understanding of catharsis, allowing me to learn of its fundamental properties and its role in aesthetics through accessible information removed from the prerequisites of prior knowledge. The scholarly articles, Edward G. Ballard's "*Art and Analysis: An Essay Toward a Theory on Aesthetics*"<sup>57</sup>, Adnan K. Abdulla's "*Catharsis in Literature*"<sup>58</sup>, Jean M. Vives' "*Catharsis: Psychoanalysis and the Theatre*"<sup>59</sup> and M. S. Silk's "*Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*"<sup>60</sup> expanded upon my basic understanding to incorporate the multifaceted interpretations and impact of catharsis on the audience, characters, and form of texts, enabling me to provide

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<sup>54</sup> Gaut, Berys Nigel, and Dominic Lopes. *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. 1st ed. Routledge University Press. (2005).

<sup>55</sup> Kemp, Linda. 2013. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry And Poetics*. 4th Ed. Princeton, NJ And Oxford: Princeton University Press. (2012).

<sup>56</sup> Cavanagh, Dermot. *The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature*. 1st ed. Edinburgh University Press. (2010).

<sup>57</sup> Margolis, Joseph, and Edward G. Ballard. "Art And Analysis; An Essay Toward A Theory In Aesthetics.". *The Journal Of Philosophy* 58(5): 137. (1961).

<sup>58</sup> Ross-Daniel, Dalia, and Adnan K. Abdulla. 1986. "*Catharsis In Literature*". *World Literature Today* 60 (3): 524. (1986).

<sup>59</sup> Vives, Jean-Michel. "Catharsis: Psychoanalysis And The Theatre". *The International Journal Of Psychoanalysis* 92 (4): 1009-1027. (2011).

<sup>60</sup> Phillippo, S. "Tragedy And The Tragic: Greek Theatre And Beyond. MS Silk". *The Classical Review* 48(1): 74-77. (1998).

insightful discourse upon the intricacies of catharsis in 1940's and 50's American literature. Furthermore, the excerpts of Aristotle's dramatic theory, "*Poetics*," in which he coins the term 'catharsis'<sup>61</sup> have proven vital in my personal understanding of purgation, purification, and intellectual clarification, as the ambiguity of his statement has facilitated the rise of alternate perception of catharsis, but also enabled my personal perspective to be formed. Overall, these sources have been pivotal throughout the investigative process in amplifying my conceptual understanding and developing the structure of my response.

Essentially, '*Expulsion, Equilibrium, Elucidation*' seeks to effectively portray the impact of Classical literature on subsequent periods, the multitude of philosophical interpretations surrounding literary catharsis, the effect of the homeopathic process on one's pathological state, and the ways in which it manifests within literature depending upon interpretation. This will be accomplished through comparison, analysis and discussion concerning all of the concepts at hand, while hopefully initiating a heightened understanding of literature holistically as well a catharsis.

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<sup>61</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. 1449b