

# Catharsis



## DEFINITION

What is catharsis? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Catharsis is the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art. Aristotle coined the term catharsis—which comes from the Greek *kathairein* meaning "to cleanse or purge"—to describe the release of emotional tension that he believed spectators experienced while watching dramatic tragedy. Today, the word "catharsis" can be used in reference to any experience of emotional release or cleansing brought about by a work of art.

Some additional key details about catharsis:

- Aristotle (the ancient Greek scientist and philosopher) believed that an audience's ability to feel the same emotions as those displayed by actors onstage is an integral part of the experience of watching theater, and that through this experience audiences can learn to better regulate their emotions in real life.
- An audience is far more likely to have a cathartic experience if they form a strong attachment to—or identification with—the characters, whether in a play or book.
- You may have heard the word "catharsis" used to describe emotional release *outside* the realm of art. For instance, people often speak of psychological or social catharsis. While these additional meanings do exist, this guide will focus specifically on catharsis in literature.

## How to Pronounce Catharsis

Here's how to pronounce catharsis: kuh-**thar**-sis

## Catharsis Explained

A cathartic experience—whether in theater or literature—is an experience in which the audience or reader experiences the same emotions that the characters are experiencing on stage or on the page. It follows, then, that a cathartic *work* is any work of literature that gives readers this experience. Imagine, for example, a book about a young boy who loses his mother to cancer. Such a book might not be cathartic for everyone, but for someone who has lost a friend or family member to cancer, reading such a book may be an extremely emotional experience, in the sense that such a reader may find themselves feeling the character's grief or anger *as though it were their own*. This example serves to highlight an important part of what makes a work of literature cathartic: the reader must have developed a **strong identification** with the characters. In other words, if readers aren't able to "see themselves" in the characters—if they feel they don't have any qualities or experiences in common—then

they probably won't achieve the level of emotional investment necessary to have a cathartic experience in response to the work. Because of this, it generally takes a great deal of skill and experience on the part of the author to produce a truly cathartic piece of literature.

Aristotle's definition of catharsis was specific to the experience that audiences have watching theater, or to people reading literature. According to that definition, only audience members and readers can experience catharsis—and not the actors or characters themselves. However, it's sometimes the case that literary characters *do* have cathartic experiences. For example, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay reads a tragic book by Sir Walter Scott, and the emotional impact it has on him leads him to feel a greater sense of clarity about his own life and his relationships with other characters in the book.

## Catharsis Outside of Literature

Today, the word "cathartic" is often used to refer to just about any experience that provides someone with a feeling of emotional release—even as the term also retains the original connotation of an experience in the arts. Although this entry deals specifically with catharsis in literature, some of the same principles may apply generally to other forms of cathartic experience. For example, somebody who gives away a box of things that once belonged to an ex-boyfriend might describe the experience as cathartic because it gives them a feeling of release from emotions of pain or resentment—but that would depend on their having formed a strong bond of attachment to the objects in the box, just as readers must form a bond of attachment to characters in a cathartic work of literature.



## EXAMPLES

### Examples of Catharsis in Literature

Shakespeare's tragedies are some of the most famous examples of art that produce catharsis in audiences. Some authors—such as Chinua Achebe who wrote *Things Fall Apart*—have modeled their own work after classical Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, in an effort to create contemporary works that create cathartic experiences for readers.

Works that produce catharsis often involve the death or downfall of the main character, though they don't absolutely have to. Speaking more generally, most plots that produce feelings of catharsis do usually involve a character losing something very dear to them, as this can play an important part in the process of eliciting an emotional response from readers.

### Catharsis in Shakespeare's *Othello*

In *Othello*, an ambitious, resentful, and just plain malicious soldier named Iago brings about the downfall of his captain, Othello, by making it look as though Othello's wife is cheating on him. Othello goes mad with jealousy and eventually kills his own wife. After learning his wife was in fact faithful, Othello then delivers this monologue in Act 5 Scene 2 after learning the truth, just before taking his own life:

I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme. Of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe.  
...  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him, thus.

Othello's suicide is cathartic for readers for a number of reasons. First and foremost is that Othello is the play's [protagonist](#)—a good-natured and honest person—so readers naturally identify with him and want the best for him. This strong sense of identification that readers feel makes it all the more painful for them when Othello takes his own life, but they're able to experience his death with a strange sense of emotional release because they *also* understand the unbearable pain that any good person would feel over having killed his own wife. So *Othello* is a cathartic work not only because readers feel Othello's pain, but *especially* because readers vicariously experience Othello's feeling of being *released* from that pain through his suicide.

### Catharsis in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In Act 5, Scene 3 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo discovers Juliet's sleeping body in the Capulet tomb. Juliet took a sleeping potion in order to make her parents think she was dead, so that she could avoid marrying her suitor Paris and remain with Romeo, whom she married in a secret ceremony without her parents' knowledge. Romeo doesn't realize that Juliet is, in fact, still alive—and poisons himself out of sorrow:

From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last!  
Arms, take your last embrace! and, lips, O you  
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss  
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!  
Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide!  
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on  
The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark!  
Here's to my love!  
[Drinks]

O true apothecary!  
Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.

Watching Romeo encounter his true love, whom he believes to be dead, might call to mind similar experiences of loss for the audience. According to the classical idea of catharsis outlined by Aristotle, experiencing or re-experiencing the emotional trial of a loved one's death through Romeo would have provided the audience with some release, allowing them to work through any lingering feelings of grief in their own lives.

### Catharsis in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

*To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's portrait of the Ramsay family and their friends, in which she writes an account of the family's summer vacation at their house on the Isle of Skye, off the coast of Scotland. Mr. Ramsay is a scholar who feels that the happiness and comfort provided by his family have prevented him from reaching his full intellectual potential. After a dinner at which he feels intellectually slighted by his guests, Mr. Ramsay experiences *catharsis* while reading Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary*:

And he went on reading. His lips twitched. It filled him. It fortified him. He clean forgot all the little rubs and digs of the evening, and how it bored him unutterably to sit still while people ate and drank interminably, and his being so irritable with his wife and so touchy and minding when they passed his books over as if they didn't exist at all. But now, he felt, it didn't matter a damn who reached Z (if thought ran like an alphabet from A to Z). Somebody would reach it—if not he, then another. This man's strength and sanity, his feeling for straight forward simple things, these fishermen, the poor old crazed creature in Mucklebackit's cottage made him feel so vigorous, so relieved of something that he felt roused and triumphant and could not choke back his tears. Raising the book a little to hide his face, he let them fall and shook his head from side to side and forgot himself ... forgot his own bothers and failures completely in poor Steenie's drowning and Mucklebackit's sorrow (that was Scott at his best) and the astonishing delight and feeling of vigour that it gave him.

In this passage, Mr. Ramsay experiences Aristotle's classical model of catharsis: by vicariously experiencing tragedy in the lives of literary characters Steenie and Mucklebackit, he's better able to deal with his own emotions. He emerges from his reading feeling "relieved...roused and triumphant."

### Catharsis in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* tells the story of Okonkwo, leader of the Igbo community of Umuofia in Nigeria. Okonkwo, who embodies the values of a traditional Igbo warrior, is infuriated when British colonists and Christian missionaries begin to interfere with his community's way of life. So when a British messenger tells Okonkwo that he and his men have to disband a meeting, he kills the

messenger in anger. Seeing that none of the other clansmen will stand in support of his action, Okonkwo hangs himself. In the following passage, a group of clansmen (including Okonkwo's good friend Obierika) ask the British District Commissioner to help them take down Okonkwo's body for burial:

"Why can't you take him down yourselves?" he asked.

"It is against our custom," said one of the men. "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers."

"Will you bury him like any other man?" asked the Commissioner.

"We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land."

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog..." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words.

Achebe employed the form of classical Greek tragedy to tell the story of Okonkwo's fall. After a lifetime of honoring his community's traditions, Okonkwo is driven to kill himself, an act that his community considers to be a major offense. However, Okonkwo's death also represents a kind of triumph: although he's unable to save his community from the encroaching power of the British colonists, his suicide forces the British to observe Igbo customs to bury him, creating a moment of justice and dramatic catharsis in a narrative of loss.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Catharsis in literature works a lot like therapy does in real life: by giving readers the opportunity to experience intense emotions from a distance, it allows them to "let it all out." Cathartic works are especially good at tapping into repressed emotions—that is, emotions that a reader or audience member may not typically allow themselves to feel. For instance, a person may be disinclined to cry over their own feelings of grief because ignoring their pain makes it feel more manageable, but if that person watches a character in a film break into tears at a funeral, they may find themselves unexpectedly moved to tears. In this sense, sometimes *feeling somebody else's feelings* proves to be a lot easier than feeling your own—and catharsis

has a way of making use of that fact to help people experience emotional release. True believers in dramatic catharsis (as Aristotle defined it) would say that experiencing emotions like pity or fear in response to an artwork can even help people to better handle these emotions in real life.

Some writers, like the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, have taken a less optimistic view of the benefits of catharsis. Brecht was a twentieth-century writer and a Marxist who believed that the highest purpose of theater was to serve as a forum for political ideas and to inspire spectators to take political action. He thought that works that seek to inspire catharsis were nothing more than cheap, undemanding entertainment for the masses, and that spectators lost their ability to think and judge for themselves when they became too emotionally involved in a play. To combat what he believed to be the harmful effects of catharsis, Brecht purposefully wrote plays that didn't come to an emotional resolution. His idea was that instead of giving audience members the release they'd come to expect through the play itself, he'd have spectators leave the theater full of unresolved emotions, which would then spur them to seek emotional release in real life—through their own actions.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Catharsis:** An [explanation](#) of the term summarizing different interpretations of its meaning.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Catharsis:** A [definition](#) and etymology of the term.
- **Shakespearean Catharsis on Youtube:**
  - The [final cathartic scene](#) of Oliver Parker's 1995 film adaptation of *Othello*, starring Laurence Fishburne.
  - Romeo's [farewell to Juliet](#) in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 movie *Romeo and Juliet*. (Not for the faint of heart!)

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Scopa, Sally. "Catharsis." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

### Chicago Manual

Scopa, Sally. "Catharsis." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/catharsis>.