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Avoiding Hysteria via Catharsis: Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Emotional release can come in different forms and directions depending on the situation and emotion one is dealing with. For example, when bored feelings of shame and guilt are released, when fearful one's body begins to tremble and perspiration begins to occur as a form of discharge and when physically drained, repetitive yawning and deep stretching is the form of release. All these forms of discharge help one's body excrete what is unneeded and help the body avoid worse circumstances. Crying is a form of catharsis which has been defined by Freud and Breuer as a "...involuntary instinctive body progress" (22) directly involves a healing process, one that is clinical and helps therapeutically identify the tragic elements in a character and addresses them accordingly.

Although there has been much debate on the definition and limitations of the term Catharsis, coined by Aristotle. The understanding that this paper will be based on is the following: Catharsis is an elimination of a complex by bringing it to consciousness and affording it expression, purification or purgation of the emotions (such as pity and fear) primarily through art (Aristotle 1). Cathartic crying is the result of overloading tensions and emotions that are difficult to express in a given situation. This route towards emotional relief has been documented and studied by many different philosophers and critics, yet the most prominent notable research

has been done by Aristotle himself and later by Freud and Breuer. In brief, the idea of catharsis, for many philosophers following the Aristotelean concept, would be the cleansing of one's self and soul from the daily stresses of life through the act of releasing emotion. In the particular case of Thomas Hardy's famous tragedy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, crying and/or sobbing have been recurring factors throughout the novel. Tess Durbeyfield, the main character, is a 16-year-old who has experienced a series of unfortunate events and her reaction to almost all her experiences is the discharge of tears, whether heavily or not. By combining Breuer's and Freud's modern Psychoanalytic theory, *Studies on Hysteria*, and Ancient Aristotelean theories of catharsis; an analysis of society and Tess, the protagonist, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* will be used to uncover the process of catharsis, specifically the recurrence of tears, that help discharge heavily packed emotion in the novel.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is already classified as a tragedy, however, to further this argument the novel can be seen as a classical Greek Tragedy in an Aristotelean sense. *Poetics*, lecture notes written by Aristotle on literature, poetry and epics with a focus on the elements of the compilation of a tragedy are coinciding with Hardy's 1891 masterpiece. In order to prove that elements of catharsis actually exist within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, one must prove that the novel is actually a tragedy. Aristotle believed that a tragedy should involve six elements; Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody". The novel directly coincides with all the elements. However, in brief, an Aristotelian concept of what a literature piece must contain to classify as a tragedy, is the following; *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is based on an imitation of the real world, even though Hardy makes up some of the names in the novel, a lot of them exist even in today's world. It's a fifty-nine chapter story and so it classifies as one of the longest novels written by Hardy himself, which directly fits the classification of magnitude. Its language is attractive to readers and invites them to imagine a lot of the scenes, for example, "where

enormous yew-trees, not planted by the hand of man, grew as they had grown when they were pollarded for bows. All this sylvan antiquity however, though visible from The Slopes” (Hardy 44). Lastly, catharsis, the ending of the novel is with Angel Clare, Tess’s ex-husband, marries someone else but still takes care of Tess’s family, which ultimately means a sad ending for Tess and the audience alike.

Since we’ve established that *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is a tragedy, we must now establish the role of the protagonist. According to Aristotle, the protagonist must be a tragic hero. One who is not perfect and has a hamartia; a tragic flaw. The character of Tess who is most prominently known as a “pure woman” who is “faithfully” represented by Thomas Hardy, is by far the only character who doesn’t receive a happy ending (Hardy 1). The reason she doesn’t have a happy ending and the hamartia, or tragic flaw, she has directly relates to her tragic experiences. Her tragic experiences are what cause the overflowing tears and need for relief. This brings us to discuss our main idea in this paper; Tess’s cathartic behaviors. The first instance of tears in the novel begins in chapter two, some of Tess’s acquaintances were making fun of her father. To which Tess replied with in both tears and speech. “If you say any jokes about him!” Tess cried, and the colour upon her cheeks spread over her face and neck. In a moment her eyes grew moist, and her glance drooped to the ground. Perceiving that they had really pained her they said no more, and order again prevailed” (Hardy 21). Concurring with Boelhouwer, in his *Adult Crying: A biopsychosocial approach*, “...people cry most often for reasons that do not rank very high among the situations that are very likely to trigger the crying response. And vice versa, people generally do not cry often for those events that are rated as very likely making them cry”(7). In essence of Boelhouwer’s addition, this scene or situation does not involve the sort of grief one would sob over but considering Tess’s age at this point, this situation combined with her reaction come into perspective.

All three elements that are: age, gender and appearance play a role in the recurring element of Aristotle's catharsis in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It's difficult to base an argument on the misfortune's Tess keeps experiencing without a starting point or reason. Hardy's Tragedy was meant to conjure controversy, both social and political. Perhaps the reason in which catharsis becomes a major element in this novel stands underneath the rubble of morals and ideology that Tess's society behold. With every outcome there is a cause and in this novel; the causes are Tess's gender, age and appearance. Her first hardship, in fact, was solely due to her appearance. Tess was described as a beautiful "milkmaid" on several occasions throughout the entire novel. She was described as a fair young milk-maiden who seems to be catching the attention of many men and women. The start of her misfortune and tragic experiences has, in fact, stemmed from her physical appearance. Alec D'Urbervilles is the initiator of the description of her appearance, this makes Tess become alive as a character in the minds of the readers but also it prepares the reader for an upcoming tragic scene. The description falls in unison with earlier discussed language being a characteristic of a tragedy that enables the reader or viewer to experience and imagine the scenes as they occur. The following is Alec's description:

She had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted (Hardy 48).

This scene is the beginning of all misfortune and tragedy for Tess because it documents an experience where she becomes physically violated. In this case, the result of Tess being physically violated and raped causes a discharge of emotion such as guilt, shame and confusion. Tess doesn't begin sobbing yet, however, she begins by shedding a few slow tears. "The sudden

vision of his passion for herself as a factor in this result so distressed her that, beginning with one slow tear, and then following with another, she wept outright”(Hardy 81). The misfortune that has befallen Tess has led her to the act of discharging her emotions of pain and regret in the form of sobbing. According to W.H Frey, author of *Crying: The mystery of tears* “It is a relief to weep; grief is satisfied and carried off by tears” (232). As mentioned earlier, the act of catharsis occurs specifically when there are few words to be spoken in regard of an unfortunate event. Tess starts out as a 16-year-old girl who travels away from her family home and at this point experiences rape and comes back to her family home four months later claiming that Alec would like to marry her. Eventually her mother understands Tess’s situation completely yet begins to scold her. Tess doesn’t understand how she has not been previously told of the dangers one can experience outside one’s home.

Hardy creates this scene in perfect parallel with the Victorian era. There are two main themes in which a comparison to the Victorian era can occur. The first is the fact that unfortunate events appear as if they don’t actually occur due to how the respective society muffle the tragic news. The second is that women experience more danger outside their homes if given the chance to venture outside of their homes. The contrast that Hardy creates in his novel allows the reader to experience the opposite effect of the Victorian era, where hardships can be talked about and shared with other members of society. “O mother, my mother!” cried the agonized girl, turning passionately upon her parent as if her poor heart would break. “How could I be expected to know?” (Hardy 94). Hardy orchestrates this scene where Tess dramatically cries to her mother. In order to prevail a certain social custom, Hardy composed a scene whereby the reader would become engaged completely. In this particular instance, Tess blames her mother and cries, the mother also cries at her daughters misfortune and her own guilt and the reader too is engulfed

into this dramatic bravado almost without a choice. Aristotelean Catharsis is at hand occurring to all three parties involved.

In addressing the role of the third party within this piece of literature, there's an unsaid understanding that there must be a historical element to further this argument. Considering this being the society of the Victorian Era and that there must be a reaction towards Tess of the D'Urbervilles. According to Aristotle, in order to undergo catharsis one must be in a state of viewing a tragedy. "A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, having magnitude, is complete in itself ... with incidents, arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (95). Tragedies are a compilation of undergoing what can be most commonly known as emotions of fear and pity. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was not always classified as a tragedy, however, in the light of Aristotle's notes in *Poetics*, the novel can be seen as a classic Greek tragedy. The criteria for a novel to become a tragedy, among many qualities, must have the element of creating a cathartic effect. With the many tragic events that occur within the great literature piece the reader or viewer becomes prepared for the dramatic purgatory of emotions at the end. Tess Durbeyfield is a character that harnesses the emotions of both pity and fear in the audience as they read about her experiences. The Victorian era public, therefore begin to undergo the process of catharsis. The hamartia and the agon are two initial steps needed for a piece of literature to be considered a tragedy. These characteristics, hamartia and agon, embody the conflict and flaws that are present in the plot itself (Aristotle). These two elements serve as the drive or movement for certain characters to commit certain actions that lead to a tragic end, which in turn creates an up rise of emotions that consist of fear and pity that eventually lead to the purgation of emotions; catharsis. Tess Durbeyfield is a victim of many tragic events but as previously mentioned the one that sets off the cycle is her rape incident. Mr. Alec leaves Tess with a broken physical chaste and a child to

bear for. Against all social customs of that respective era, Tess bears the child and eventually gives birth to him, only to lose him when it came time to baptize him. This event in Tess's life has resulted in another series of crying and emotional discomfort for both Tess and the reader or viewer. What has resulted of Alec's defilement is a series of unfortunate events in Tess's life that may or may not break her mental state. "O merciful God, have pity, have pity upon my poor baby!" she cried. "Heap as much anger as you want to upon me, and welcome; but pity the child!" (Hardy 106). This scene is especially significant because it conjures emotions of pity from the audience but also from within Tess. She asks for pity from God to be bestowed upon the child. However, there's an unsaid streak of events here that involve asking for pity from the audience also.

The relationship Tess had with her new born was a connection that affected her mental state. According to page 106 in the novel, "...the infant's breathing grew more difficult, and the mother's mental tension increased" (Hardy). Freud and Breuer believed that "...abreaction', however, is not the only method of dealing with the situation that is open to a normal person who has experienced a psychical trauma" (9). Abreaction in this context can be associated with the catharsis that Aristotle came up with, except abreaction is a more detailed account of what people can undergo. The physical trauma is obviously what Tess has gone through with Alec, but also the process of pregnancy and then later losing her child. The process of association, according to Freud and Breuer, is the route one must take to develop a sense of one's worth but only then can the person move on or forget the experience they have endured (10). Tess does gets a chance to reach the process of association because she is constantly experiencing tragic events that affect her directly due to that very first experience. Even though Freud and Breuer believe that abreaction is not the only way to deal with trauma, this is what Tess mostly resorts to. The scientists both believe that abreaction is a force that engages the victim in a way that

helps their mental health. Aristotle believed that there is a third step in catharsis or in a tragedy that involves the process of one's self-awareness.

The character of Tess whom is the tragic hero of this plot reaches a point of insight and self-awareness that allow her to avoid hysteria or damage. Freud and Breuer studied a case of a woman named Dora and it was through her case that they developed the following; the cathartic stage can be achieved through the elements of tragedy in one's life. Combining the tragic hero and the audience through the process from which art transfers to psychoanalysis then helps reveal the classical tragedy and trauma in a given patient (306). Tess was later forced to move and work for Talbothays Dairy so that she can overcome her state of poverty. She then meets Angel Clare, the clergyman's son. For a brief time; Tess experiences relief in a different form. Aside from releasing grief in her usual tearful ways, with Angel Clare she begins to verbally share her experiences. Tess believed that Angel Clare was the "the perfection of masculine beauty" and someone who has a "definite aim or concern about his material future" (Hardy 211). This devotion she feels towards Clare, eventually leads to further issues but in the meantime the plot moves forward when he proposes to her. Tess has "...dismissed the past; trod upon it and put it out, as one treads on a coal that is smouldering and dangerous" (Hardy 211). This is a disassociation, according to Freud and Breuer. "You will- you do say it, I know. You will be mine for ever and ever." He clasped her close and kissed her. "Yes." She had no sooner said it than she burst into a dry hard sobbing, so violent that it seemed to rend her. Tess was not a hysterical girl by any means, and he was surprised" (Hardy 208). Yet again Tess expresses her grief through tears and sobbing, however, interestingly this time the term "hysteria" has been used to describe the extent of her grief. At one point her colleagues congratulate her and she "suddenly tearing away from their clinging arms she burst into a hysterical fit of tears, bowing herself on the chest of drawers, and repeating incessantly, Oh yes, yes!" (Hardy 217). Her

colleagues tell Tess that she is in fact deserving of this great man and marriage and that she is to finally be happy. Tess replies by telling them that she isn't better than them in any way, this then results in hysterical sobbing and bawling. The term again appears; 'hysteria', the implication here that the stress Tess is under could lead to hysteria is evident. Tess dramatically gets stuck in her own past, due to the burden that she is carrying. Her love for Angel Clare could not possibly relieve her of her burden or grief, which is why she resorts to tears. In my opinion, Tess is not looking for a different way of catharsis or even a cause in which she could vent and reveal her deepest burdens and experiences. She is actually looking for acceptance. She becomes overwhelmed by her inner mental conflict of whether or not she should reveal her past to Angel Clare.

When the couple eventually tie the knot, Tess continued to live with an inner mental conflict and guilt. There were instances where random society members would verbally abuse her in the street, which would later cause a big fight between Angel and the perpetrator. This whole cycle added onto the guilt that Tess was already experiencing. Aside from the guilt she was experiencing there was also pity, at the situation that she is in. Only those two emotions combined would create a tragic situation and after all lead up to catharsis, once more. She eventually tells Angel of her past, to which he replies in the utmost traditional sense and rejects her for her tragic experiences. Once more, Tess reaches a point where she is crying but her grief this time around has caused a physical malfunction. She started taking a few unbalanced steps at the rejection she has faced from Angel. "Her eyes filled as she regarded her position further; she turned round and burst into a flood of self-sympathetic tears" (Hardy 249). Angel refuses to forgive Tess still, even though there is nothing to be forgiven, since it's clear that the circumstances are what created the series of tragic events in Tess's life. Boelhouwer states that "There is evidence that adult crying has a communicative function, similar to infant crying which

attracts attention, help, solace and instrumental support from nearby persons”(9). Aside from Boelhouwer helping in the understanding of Tess’s excessive habit of crying when in grief, he also has a background in understanding crying as a form of catharsis. The catharsis in this instance has taken a physical form also, whereby Tess was asked to take a seat by Angel. This scene is not the last scene where Tess expresses catharsis or experience tragedy however it’s a scene that highlights the implications of catharsis against avoiding any hysterical or mental breakdown.

In conclusion, Tess in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* serves as a tragic hero in this tragic novel written by Thomas Hardy, whereby she begins to experience an overwhelming amount of tragic experiences that force a ripple effect taking the course of her entire life. This serial effect of tragedy in her life cause her to resort to non-other but the act of catharsis, alongside the audience or readers of the novel. The act of catharsis is caused by the up rise of two major emotions that are pity and fear. Abreaction, as Freud and Breuer have cited, is a form of therapy devised to document the effect of catharsis on patients who have undergone major physical trauma. The effect of catharsis or abreaction was noted to be the cure to hysterical behavior and basically the antidote to avoid becoming mentally unstable.

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