



**Studies in Literature and Language**  
Vol. 11, No. 4, 2015, pp. 45-50  
DOI:10.3968/7752

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]  
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]  
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[www.cscanada.org](http://www.cscanada.org)

## The Aristotelian Catharsis: From Degradation to Salvation: A Study of King Lear and the Metamorphoses of His Character

SONG Fengli<sup>[a],[b],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

<sup>[b]</sup>School of Foreign languages, Xingyi Normal University for Nationalities, Xingyi, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 28 July 2015; accepted 12 September 2015

Published online 26 October 2015

### Abstract

In *The Tragedy of King Lear*, King Lear is always considered as a complex character and hard to be analyzed for his childlike, passionate, playful and sympathetic character. His misfortune comes from his rash haste, his childlike character, his blindness to everything under the control of his passions or affections. His miserable destiny is worth of considering and being analyzed. According to the Freudian Personality Theory, human's personality can be divided into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego. Originally, the personality structure theory is used primarily to treat mental illness, and then it is developed into a critical method in literary criticism. Guided by the theory of personality structure, this thesis attempts to make a thorough exploration of the psychic conflicts and growth of King Lear in the formation of his healthy personality through the storm.

**Key words:** King Lear; Freudian personality theory; Storm; Transformation

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Song, F. L. (2015). The Aristotelian Catharsis: From Degradation to Salvation: A Study of King Lear and the Metamorphoses of His Character. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(4), 45-50. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/7752>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7752>  
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### INTRODUCTION

As the culmination of Shakespearean tragedies, *King Lear* receives many attention and debate with its teeming

with conflicting elements such as good and evil, light and darkness, truth and deceit, loyalty and infidelity, love and hatred. As a man of the Renaissance, Shakespeare presents us his concern with the humanity with describing human plight as it is to the full. *King Lear* is more than a play with a man's life with family problem<sup>1</sup>. In fact, it is not only a play of life itself, but also a play of a man, not just a king. It is a record of the life of King Lear who makes mistakes by dividing his kingdom without understanding what true love of his children is, and later bears the reality deprived of everything and debased to nothing and is tempered and hardened through trials both physical and mental. It is the story of an old man who straggles all the way towards perfection painfully.

King Lear has attracted great attention from the people of many fields. Scholars and critics have analyzed the novel from various angles, such as symbolism, Christian lens, and imagery and so on. Even many critics have examined the play in depth with discussing the topic of the storm as an image central to the play's power and philosophy, but few critics have touched how King Lear changes through the storm from the perspective of psychological theory. This article focuses on King Lear's spiritual progress at three phases of his pursuit of the final inner harmony based on the structure of the personality of Freudian psychoanalytical theories.

My research is based on Sigmund Freud's theory of personality structure, which is the core of psychoanalysis. According to Freud's personality structure, human's personality can be divided into three parts: the id, the

<sup>1</sup> just as T. S. Eliot in his introduction to G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire* (1930) pints out: "The work of Shakespeare is like life itself... something to be lived through. If we lived it completely we should need no interpretation; but on our plane of appearances our interpretations themselves are a part of our living." See Wagner, B. M. (Ed.). (1949). *The appreciation of Shakespeare*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

ego, and the superego<sup>2</sup>. The id follows the Pleasure Principle, and seeks for individual biological needs, and avoids the pain, trying to satisfy the individual instinct and the desire. While the ego, constrained by the Reality Principle, regulates the relationship between the human and the circumstance. Guided by the Morality Principle, the superego is trying to purify human personality and make the relationship of individual and society harmonious. These three parts are contradictory and unified with each other. Each part of the personality is respectively responsible for our thoughts and behaviors. Keeping a balance with one other is the key to forming a healthy personality. In this paper, I state that King Lear experiences the indulgence of id when he divides his kingdom and stay with his two daughters, and display his superego in the scene of storm with the purgatory from the mental and physical and finally come to reason with the regaining of ego under the comforting of love from his little daughter and his loyal courtier.

## 1. BEFORE THE COMING STORM: THE INDULGENCE OF KING LEAR'S ID

In the book *New Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1964), Sigmund Freud defines the id as

a cauldron full of seething excitations [...]. It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. (Freud, 1964, p.105)

It contains the libido, which is the primary source of instinctual drive that does not take the demands of reality into consideration. It “contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth” (Ibid., p.15), and strives to avoid pain motivated by increases in instinctual tension and gratifies our basic drives and needs, such as the drive for life, the need of food, as well as sexual instinct. The id “knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality” (Ibid., p.107) and is based on the pleasure principle. In the light of Sigmund Freud, a man with the id is a selfish individual like a newborn boy without any sense of morality or responsibility. He just pursues pleasure for his own sake without caring about others and acts with the impulse for immediate satisfaction.

In Act1 of King Lear, Lear assembles his nobles and his daughters and two sons-in-law intending to dedicate his kingdom to three daughters. The reason seems

reasonable for “tis our fast intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age,/ Conferring them on younger strengths’, while we/Unburden’d crawl toward death.” (I.I. 33-36) His announcement is indisputable and irreversible. Indulging in his subjective world, Lear sees his kingdom, his throne and his power as a piece of cake, and has no deep thought what kinds of result will be caused by his rash decision. Lear cares about only his own interest, his own intention and his own feeling without considering those of others.

As a king, he does not think how to rule his kingdom wisely and how to bring peace and happiness to his people. Whereas what his desire is the flattering word. “Tell me, my daughters (since now we will divest us both of rule, /Interest of territory, care of state). Which of you shall we say doth love us most”. (I.I. 43-46) Such words are obviously to invite flattery which is his desire. For his pleasure, he plans to exchange “rule, interest of territory, care of states” for his daughters’ love words. He does this before his courtiers just to satisfy his vain pride without caring his responsibility as a king, which proves his childish character. Furthermore, he has no wise judgment about what is true love and can not see beyond the mask that the evil wear. When Goneril and Regan, his elderly daughters, say out their flowery vow of love, he is pleased and give their share of the kingdom. Though Cordelia’s love for her father is deep and rich than her tongue, but she can not speak sweet words, just say “nothing”, Lear gets angry for her words and give her nothing and banished her. When hearing the words of Kent “What wouldst thou do, old man?/ Think’ st thou that duty shall have dread to speak/ When power to flattery bows?/ To plainness honour’s boud/ When power to flattery bows...” (I.I. 140-143), Lear is in his great anger and drives Kent out of his kingdom. From this part, we can see Lear is a self-centered old man. He desires other’s respect and can’t stand other’s offence. What he wants is absolute obedience. In the end, He banishes those who genuinely care for him just for their words offend him, such as his little daughter, and Kent, and surrounded by those who is willing to please him and take advantage of him, such as his two elderly daughters and other courtiers.

William Hazlitt gives the comment on Lear: “It is his rash haste, his violent impetuosity, his blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience o them, that enforces our pity for him.” (Cited in Wagner, 1949, p.79) In the beginning of the play, King Lear is indulgent in his instinct desire for his own pleasure without caring about his responsibility and reality. Later, he is still ignorant of the reality after dedicating his kingdom to his two daughters. He still wants to have a power over everyone without undertaking of any responsibility. He does everything to meet his own will, acting on the pleasure principle and seeks to avoid pain. In the course of pursuing pleasure, King Lear is controlled

<sup>2</sup> The three parts of one’s personality derives from his early period theory: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious which was compared to iceberg. In the iceberg metaphor, “the entire id and part of both the superego and ego would be submerged in the underwater portion representing the unconscious mind. The remaining portions of the ego and superego would be displayed above water in the conscious mind area” -Carlson, N. (2005). *Psychology: The science of behavior* (p.453). Ottawa: Pearson Education Canada.

by the irrational id without the bondage of reason and morality. King Lear's irrational id is always in the upper hand and leads him to his degradation. Under the drive of the pleasure-seeking id, King Lear sinks deeper and deeper in his errors, which finally lead him to filial ingratitude and the coming storm.

## 2. IN THE STORM: THE FORMATION OF KING LEAR'S SUPEREGO

In the book *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1974, p.30) points out that the superego is under the influence of authority, religious teaching, schooling, and reading. According to Sigmund Freud's personality theory, the superego is the moral part of the personality and develops with the guidance of moral rules and ethical codes set by children's parents or their caregivers; the ego is constrained by reality principle while the id try to avoids it for its pleasure seeking; the ego and the id conflict with each other, whereas the superego repress the irrational implies and drive the id back into the ego state, because it has a par with the conscience to decide what is right and what is wrong and urges one's ego to consider reality, morality and social standards. If the ego walk into the id, the superego will punish it and make one feel guilty, anxious and inferior. However, if the ego stands with the reality and meets the moral values of the superego, he will be rewarded with harmony form the inner heart and has a sense of value and accomplishment.

The tempestuous storm in act 3 of *King Lear* is an important element in the play. The Lear who exits from the storm is quite different from the Lear who entered it; and his superego is in the state of becoming while he is in it. The whole world here seems engulfed by the cracking thunder, the whirling gale, the ghostly lightening and the endless darkness. This phenomenon is just like Wagner's description

each thing appears to be torn from its proper place, and to have lost its natural supports and stays, instincts, passions, reason all wretched and contorted, yet each thing in its seeming chaos takes up its place with infallible assurance and precision. (Wagner, 1949, p.461)

Lear appears under such hostile circumstances, groping forward aimlessly, "wandering from light into darkness; stumbling back again from darkness into light; speaking his strength in barren and impotent rages." (Ibid.) The cruel nature here becomes the accomplice of the evil human beings. The poor man becomes the plaything of an inscrutable power without protecting. The tempest dives poor men out of any shelter and bring them face to face with the unfathomable universe. In Act 2 scenes 3, when Lear first face the storm, he seems to identify with the wild power around him, and try to find the strength from it. Whereas his mind is in such confusion with awful fury that he fails to come up with words of logic, and was

drawn towards the boundary of sanity. Lear expresses his vehement emotions with almost every single word stressed, and invites the storm to come more rampantly. He exclaims "Pour on, I'll endure." (3.4. 18) He is also haunted by the idea that he is "a man/ more sinned against than sinning". (3.2. 57-58) "The splendor of the lightning and the menace of the thunder serve only or mainly to relieve or to enhance the effect of suffering and the potency of passion for the spirit and the conscience of a man."<sup>3</sup> (Ibid., p.468) The storm helps him to face the reality and considers his past wrong-doings. Reason begins to come back. The hard trials make him free from his blind passions. And armed with awareness, he was endowed with a clear vision about life and himself; he begins learning to discard his vanities and falsities and seek out those values of goodness and mercy<sup>4</sup>.

Later, Lear hopes to get out from his self-centered fantasy of rightness, "Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart That's sorry yet for thee." (3.2. 70-71) Gradually he turns his feeling out of himself and begins to perceive the sufferings of others. It is his sympathy, which he shows to the poor and the suffered, that marks the wake of his humanity and the forming of his superego. Than Lear realizes what his reckless behaviors bring to the innocent and his self-interest blinds him to care for others. He starts to pray for the poor and the suffered. The sight of poor naked Tom runs Lear out of his mind: he is helplessly mad. "Is man no more than this?" (3.4. 92-93) In Lear's mind, this is the lowest point he can reach. The "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4. 95-96). Whereas the appearance of Gloucester with torch brings light to the interminable darkness of Lear and takes Lear towards humanity and nobility. With Edgar's help, Lear establishes a better vision on the reality of life and begins to have a better understanding of man when he answers promptly "thou art the thing itself." (3.4. 95) This reminds us of "love contest". In love contest, Cordelia is disowned and disinherited for offending her father. She become nothing with nothing in possession. Hers' situations are like that of Edgar. But they have different implied meanings in Lear's eyes. In Cordelia's case, Lear considers her as valueless for his blindness of self-interest, whereas, after he enlightens by his suffering, he views poor naked Edgar with discernment. Lear is endowed with human entity followed by his newly acquired knowledge. "Off, off,

<sup>3</sup> The storm reflects Lear's state of mind which is still in tumult. As Lear is obsessed with tempest within, he forgets the tempest outside and is lost himself in thought.

<sup>4</sup> According to the doctrine of Christianity, people would go through great both mental and corporal suffering in order to realize "spiritual transformation". Just like Montano said: "Being aware of the misery of man's plight means raising one's mind to the thought of God who wants us to be subjected to such a trial, for reasons which escape our understanding". See Mantano, R. (1985). *Shakespeare's concept of tragedy the Bard as Anti-Elizabethan* (p.245). Chicago: Gateway Editions.



your lendings! Come; unbutton here.” (3.4. 97) With this word, the transformation takes place in Lear’s mind. He regards his clothes as redundant and good for nothing, so he tries to tear them off. Thence, the increase of his self-knowledge with simplicity and humility replaces Lear’s pomp and condescension. He sinks in great remorse for the past. And his determination to break with his own past is obvious. He tries to reshape his egoistic self and pursue truth and justice. From passively summing up the implication of his experience by receiving blows to actively seeking the truth out, Lear reaches a higher level. And his utterances, which are formerly composed of orders, denunciations of others, or appeals to the heavens, are now filled in words of reason. “Reason is what we have to fall back on when imagination fails.” (Wagner, 1949) Lear now become sensible and free himself from his subjective world. Plato repeatedly stresses that the great deeds of human is to understand the greatest truth and to shape the soul, otherwise, man will be the same as the animal. He also considers that the human body is evil, easily decayed and the body will erode human soul and prevent the soul from getting the truth. Whereas, as the soul possesses goodness and wit, the soul can obtain wisdom and perfect itself by self-reflection. In the end, the soul may achieve immortality. Therefore, according to Plato’s view, the disengagement of soul depends on the power of rational thought within. In order to win the salvation of God, people must rely on the philosophy of rational thought to purify one’s soul. After Plato, Aristotle has also inherited the idea. The pure rational soul, which is the definition of man, is endowed with “divinity” and the man without rational soul is not regarded as a real man. So who wants to get the soul must rely on rational knowledge which is the only route to get the soul. At the same time, Aristotle also proposed that God’s activity is constituted by thought and meditation, so the man on meditation is the most intimate of the gods and this kind of man is easy to get happiness. Therefore, in order to obtain happiness, human needs to train his wisdom and virtue. In other words, Aristotle’s concept of the soul contains the moral elements<sup>5</sup>.

Due to the losses and suffering, Lear learns to face his agony straightly which is the trial of true life and grows to be strong. His reaction to his misfortune shows he is no more the past one. With his mind become reasonable, he acts no longer irrationally and ferociously, no longer fly into a terrible anger easily. Lear gives up the former practice of revenge and tries to conduct a trial to seek justice and the truth of the matter; he even turns to the

<sup>5</sup> From this, we can see both Plato and Aristotle agree with the Christian doctrine of salvation. However, to get redemption, Plot stresses the philosophy of rational thought, while Aristotle emphasizes on the moral part. Whether it is rational thought or moral part, it is superego to pursue.

medical approach for salvation. He discards his prompt and condescension and seeks for social justice, which shows he has been out of insanity and comes to care for the outcast. He expresses his tender feelings toward the outcast when he experiences great pain, and cries out such lament “Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are, /That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, /How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, /Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you/ From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en/Too little care of this. Take physic, prompt, /Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, That thou mayst shake the super flux to them/And show the heavens more just.” (3.4. 28-36) This shows that his humanity, a sublime feeling that all should cherish, comes to him in the moment of his affliction. The furious storm does not take away the benevolence of Lear, on the contrary, it arouses the tender heart with the affliction both outside and inside. The human love comes to the relentless world and shows its power and warmth. The suffering both physical and mental trial makes Lear to see the world better and get essential knowledge of life. His mind becomes sensible, and he establishes a positive attitude towards human ordeal. With the impact of suffering and ordeal, he begins to contemplate the question of to-be what Hamlet wants to find. And fortunately, he, like Hamlet, finds out the answer. His world view becomes changed and reshaped. In the end, the new Lear with morality and love replaces the old one and step on the path of his formation of superego and his redemption.

### 3. AFTER THE STORM: THE REGAINING OF KING LEAR’S EGO

In the light of Edmund Freud, the ego is the rational part of personality that operates on the “reality principle” and the representation of reason and common sense. It is driven by the id, confined by the superego, repulsed by reality (Freud, 1974). So its task is to find a balance between primitive drives and reality to meet the requirements of the id and superego. It is hard to maintain the balance. When it fails to do this, the ego will step into the state of anxiety. Freud defined the anxiety as three types: neurotic anxiety, moral anxiety, and reality anxiety, which respectively stem from the id, the superego, and the external world<sup>6</sup>. In the light of psychological theory, a man will fall into neurotic anxiety with the feeling of guilt; moral anxiety with shame; and reality anxiety with embarrassment. When he can not control the three kinds of anxiety, he will fall into mental disorder. Freud believes

<sup>6</sup> Jess gives detailed explanation on the three anxiety in *Theories of Personality*: “The ego’s dependence on the id results in neurotic anxiety; its dependence on the superego produces moral anxiety; and its dependence on the outer world leads to realistic anxiety”. See Feisr, J. (2006). *Theories of Personality* (p.33). Leipzig: Higher Education.

the adult personality is determined by the outcome of the interaction between the id, ego, and the superego, which is the core of human's mental disorder<sup>7</sup>. In my view, King Lear's madness as mental disorder is because his ego has a difficult time in trying to satisfy both the needs of the id and the superego. After experiencing the agony from guilt and angry in the storm, King Lear attempts to repress his unacceptable id impulse and push it out of his awareness into the unconscious mind, but he is in such deep sorrow and anger of his fault and his two ingratitude daughters that he can not conduct his id and his superego rationally, which lead him into mind insanity.

Indeed, King Lear is a slave of passions without the capacity to control his strong feeling. His madness is the outcome of the accumulation of his poor management on strong passions, in which the frenzy of rage and grief takes away the strings of reason. His emotion was controlled by the variety of anxiety. Firstly, He suffers from neurotic anxiety which is the unconscious worry that one may lose control of the id's urges, leading to punishment for inappropriate behavior. For he is such a passionate man that his ego goes great length to resist the temptation of his id. Therefore, his suffering is because his ego is in conflict with his id. Secondly, King Lear is enduring the moral anxiety which is regarded as a higher level anxiety with a feeling of guilt or shame. The moral anxiety comes from the fear of violating moral values and being punished for one's immoral behavior. When King Lear's sight come into vision, he come to understand his past faults. He is tortured by such feeling, and regards the rain as a punishment on him. The quest of the root of his misfortune leads him into deep moral anxiety and he is haunted by guilt and conscience of what he has done. His mind begins to be out of control. Finally, Lear is tortured by reality anxiety which is a kind of miserable feeling for fearing dangers in the real world. The cause of this anxiety is rooted in the ego's incapability of dealing with the reality. When King Lear is blamed and controlled by his two elderly daughters, he flies in great rage and goes into a heath facing the bad weather in which he suffers a lot both form mental and physical. From this moment, his life is full of various kinds of uncertainties in the hash world. His reality anxiety comes as he can not meet the demands of his desires and reality. Freud points out that people seek some defense mechanisms to avoid these anxiety of unpleasant feeling. In my view, madness is the defense mechanism employed by Lear's ego to protect the individual from these negative feelings.

Since the ego deal with the reality, so the people in

<sup>7</sup> Freud compares the relationship between the ego and the id to that between a charioteer and a horse: the horse provides the energy and drive, while the charioteer gives direction. These three parts are contradictory and unified with each other. Each part of the personality is respectively responsible for our thoughts and behaviors. Keeping a balance with one other is the key to forming a healthy personality.

the reality world must have an important influence on an individual. Just as Freud says in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1975),

The first is that the individual forming part of a group acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint. [...] a group being anonymous, and in consequence irresponsible, the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely. (p.33)

When the surroundings are in opposition to the impulse of the id, the individual will hold back the impulse and not let it released. Therefore, affected by the persons around him, Lear's mind shift from reality to hallucination moment by moment. Just as Ben Brantley said: "The fool gives Lear his grounding in reality, with the servant articulating the master's unspoken and unconscious thoughts" (Brantley, 2004) The fool is a wise reminder who makes Lear face his faults time and time again, so is Tom and Kent who help Lear become more rational. All of them help him out of his mental madness momentarily. Whereas, he comes to sanity finally due to his little daughter's love :

Cordelia: O my dear father, restoration hang  
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss  
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters  
Have in thy reverence made. (4.6. 26-29)

Here, Cordelia shows his love for his father, she wants to cure the emotion what Lear suffers. But she does not know whether her father has forgiven what she did in the "love contest", when Lear wakes, she let other's speak to him. The doctor assures her "Madam, do you; 'tis fittest" (4.6. 40) It is Lear who regrets deeply that he does not want to believe Cordelia is real at first. Finally, he comes to his mind and asks "Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not. /If you have poison for me, I will drink it. /I know you do not love me; for your sisters / Have, as I do remember, done me wrong. /You have a few cause; they have not." (4. 6. 69-73) Though he is still in his anxiety, Lear begins to face the reality. And Finally Lear wakes and is recovered into sanity form mental disorder with Cordelia's love.

King Lear's awakening and reconciliation with Cordelia in act 4 is always regarded as close to redemption as tragedy ever gets. Here, his ego is consoled by worldly love. When he sees his smallest daughter again, he thinks he catches a sight of "a soul in bliss" and starts to kneel for her blessing as she asks for him. It is so full of repentance, forgiveness and harmony.

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## CONCLUSION

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As one of Shakespeare's most complex characters, it is generally considered as the most difficult character

to be portrayed, for he is childlike, passionate, cruel, kind, unlikable, and sympathetic. However, with the help of Freudian's personality structure, we can explain his character and his actions with proper analysis. It is his rash haste, his childlike character, his blindness to everything but the control of his passions or affections that produce all his misfortunes, which is under the control of his id. At first, he is the slave of the id which acted in accordance with the pleasure principle and avoid the pain. He divides his kingdom according to his pleasure desire and drives the persons who offend him. The irrational id finally lead him to his degradation. However, when he suffers from filial ingratitude and the storm, his superego begin to take the formation. Suffering make him see the world more clearly. And he is punished by a feeling of guilt, remorse and shame in the hash heath and the storm in which he realizes what his reckless behavior brings to the innocent and he begins to show his sympathy to others. With the baptism of the tempest, he repents on his past wrong and begins to set out finding meaning, which is the representation of his superego. After the storm, his ego begins to take over his mind. At first, his mind is in conflict with the anxiety coming from id, ego, and superego. Fortunately, he is daggered out his wild mind by Fool, Tom and Kent. With music, the doctor makes Lear wake and come to his mind; With Cordelia's love kiss, Lear is recovered into sanity, love and peace.

In *The Tragedy of King Lear*, Shakespeare portrays such a rounded and sympathetic protagonist instead of a perfect hero in the play. When readers have observed the transformation of King Lear from degradation and imperfection to salvation and sublimation, but still nothing has changed, for Cordelia and Lear died in the end, they can easily empathize with Lear's deep regret over past mistakes and his death. According to Aristotle, watching a tragedy can make spectators have a corrective and healing effect with his emotional release and cleansing. He defines this process as catharsis. In the light of Aristotle, experiencing catharsis can help the reader to restore harmony in one's heart and produce a wise and reasonable man by moderating passions and discharging strong emotions. Therefore, when readers watch King Lear to walk from indulgence to his salvation, readers themselves experience the same process with pity and fear in their hearts.

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