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TRAGEDY AND THE VICIOUS: MORAL EDUCATION IN ARISTOTLE'S
POETICS AND FUTURE APPLICATIONS TO CONTEMPORARY ART

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2016

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ABSTRACT

This project interprets Aristotle's *Poetics* through a morally educative approach. More specifically, expanding on past research of *Poetics* by individuals such as Isaiah Smithson, this project will examine the affective influence of tragedy on morally unknowing audience members of vicious character types. Through the associations between the sensory experiences incorporated in a tragedy and moral messages portrayed in the plot, the vicious character can begin a process of becoming morally knowing subjects. In others words, this experience with morally charged tragedies can teach vicious characters what is morally good. Moreover, the vicious audience members can learn how what is morally good through the observation and interaction with surrounding audience members. By experiencing the reactions of morally knowing subjects in the audience of the tragedy, the vicious character can passively habituate actions of a higher moral character. This project will also explore the ways in which the moral reexamination of *Poetics* can aid in the understanding of the morally educative power of contemporary artworks to illuminate the injustices of racism and homophobia.

Keywords: Aristotle, Aesthetics, Vice, Moral Education, Contemporary Art

Dedicated to my family, friends, and cats

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Abstract	ii
Dedication	
.....	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Vita	v
Sections:	
1. Introduction	1
2. <i>Poetics</i> Synopsis	6
3. The Vicious Character	11
4. Smithson's Argument	14
5. Moral Development Through Aesthetic Understanding	18
6. Conclusion	24
7. Further Research	26
Bibliography	33

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

“The poet being an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be.”

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460b 7-11

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is largely interpreted as an aesthetic treatise that describes the way in which a good tragedy ought to be constructed. This interpretation, though not erroneous by any means, does not explore the ways in which *Poetics* could be connected with Aristotle’s other treatises. Though *Poetics* has been often read in accompaniment with *Rhetoric*, the aesthetic treatise can also be read along with *Nicomachean Ethics*. When relating *Poetics* and the *Ethics*, the aesthetic treatise could be recognized as possessing a moral quality. Moral interpretations of *Poetics* have been proposed in the past. In “The Moral View of Aristotle’s Poetics,” Isaiah Smithson asserted that a moral interpretation of *Poetics* can provide a cathartic experience for audience members to re-evaluate their own moral actions.¹ However, Smithson’s account of the educative nature

¹ Smithson, Isaiah. "The Moral View of Aristotle's Poetics." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 1 (1983): 3-17.

of *Poetics* does not target vicious individuals, for they do not have the ability to *re-evaluate* their moral actions.

I expand on Smithson's proposal that *Poetics* can be interpreted through a moral lens by claiming that *Poetics* can be considered a morally educative tool for the vicious moral character discussed in the *Ethics*. In other words, I argue that the individual of a vicious character can come to know the good through the experiencing of tragedies –both through the interaction with the performance and the interaction amongst audience members viewing the tragedy. To do this, I first offer a short summary of the moments in *Poetics* that support this claim. Then, I briefly describe the characteristics of the vicious individual as spelled out in the *Ethics*. Finally, I argue the ways in which a vicious person can learn to know the good and learn how to develop a better moral character by examining the underlying moral relationship between *Poetics* and the *Ethics*.²

After the conclusion of the segment on Aristotle and *Poetics*, I have added a final section in which I speak of the potential for further research by using this project as a basis to explore the relationship between the audience and artwork in contemporary art. Moreover, I am interested in using this project on the relationship between the vicious audience and tragedy as a basis for understanding how contemporary artworks can have an affective influence on the prejudiced individual who harbors feelings such as homophobia, racism, and sexism towards marginalized individuals. Through the exploration of this relationship, I hope to find effective methods of reshaping the ways in which prejudiced people perceive marginalized individuals, and, ultimately, get rid of the prejudices that they harbor towards others. Though I do not believe that the potential

² This paper is a portion of a larger work in progress that is estimated to be completed in Summer 2016 with Dr. Audrey Anton.

morally educative aspect of contemporary artworks is the teleological function of art, I believe that the acknowledgment of this kind of power that art possesses would aid in future discourse of fields in philosophy that strive to establish theories of social justice.

SECTION TWO

POETICS SYNOPSIS

Aristotle's *Poetics* largely discusses a formula that defines good poetry, i.e. tragedies, comedies, and epics. In this work, I concentrate on the structure of tragedies, which are defined by their ability to arouse feelings of pity and fear in the viewer (1449a 24-26).³ Since the focus of this paper is to examine how viewing tragedies affect the moral character of the vicious person, I first discuss the elements of tragedy which directly influence the affections of the viewer.

The element of imitation, which reflects events that could happen in reality, of a tragedy possesses the power to directly influence the affections of the viewer. Aristotle states that all poetry, tragedy, music, and art are modes of imitation (1447a 15-17). Imitation is a natural means by which human beings learn, and we delight in doing so (1448b 9-16). Thus, through imitation, mediums such as tragedy have both educative and aesthetic value. Particularly, in tragedy, "the objects the imitator represents are actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad –the diversities of human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction, since it is by badness and excellence men differ in character" (1448a 1-4). In other words, the tragedy is *morally* educative because the imitations in the performance reflect real moral actions

³ *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon, 935-1487. New York: Random House, Inc, 2001.

of good and bad characters. The strict illustration of good and bad moral characters in the performance is a crucial point that the audience keeps in mind while viewing the tragedy; this allows the viewers to understand with which characters they should identify and strive to imitate from the tragedy. This understanding of which characters are morally worthy to imitate will eventually relate to the affective influences of the entire tragedy on the viewer.

There are six parts of tragedy that allow the tragedy to fulfill its function: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody (1448a 1-4). The most important part of these six is plot, for it is the combination of all events in the work and is mandatory for all other parts to exist (1450a 15). The plot is the imitation of the moral experiences and actions that can happen in reality. As stated earlier, imitation is a means by which the viewer can come to understand what is morally good or bad through the events that unfold in a tragedy, and eventually relate to the affective influence of the tragedy on the audience. In order for the plot to influence the audience members most effectively, Aristotle defines the ways that the plot must be constructed. The plot must be complete in order for the tragedy to be a good one. In other words, the plot cannot begin or end without necessary events, just as “to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude” (1450b 34-37). Plot is a “definite magnitude” as an independent whole which is greater than the collection of each separate theatrical moment, and the whole of the tragedy should have a duration which can make a lasting impression on the memory of the viewer (1451a 5-6). Because of this, although the character may seem like the most integral part of the tragedy because they are the

elements of the tragedy with which the viewer identifies, the characters are vessels that execute the actions necessary for the plot.

The affective influence of the plot on the audience is best established through incorporating complex plot elements such as reversals of fortune, for they lead to discovery in the viewer. Aristotle defines discovery here as “a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune” (1452a 30-31). Discovery is a means by which the viewer is able to insert themselves into the plot line of the tragedy, for the moment of discovery elicits a reflection of how the viewer’s own life is similar to the plot of the tragedy. The audience member can experience discovery by reacting to the events unfolding in the plot, by reacting to the ways that other audience members react to the plot, through the emotional connection of an event that occurs on stage that is similar to an experience in their own life, or through a reaction and connection to artistic cues in the tragedy such as the reaction to a sorrowful melody incorporated in the tragedy. Through discovery, the viewer is able to transform from a passive viewer, who simply observes the plotline, to an active viewer, who is allowing the tragedy to intrude into their own moral understandings and, in turn, placing themselves into the tragedy.

Aristotle states that “the tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear” (1453b 12-14) and that the arousing of the moral affects of pity and fear is the end goal of all tragedies. Furthermore, Aristotle describes the ways that a poet can construct a tragedy to encourage the audience members to feel the emotions of pity and fear appropriately, for the arousal of pity and fear is not morally worthwhile if they are not felt appropriately by audience members. The feelings of pity and fear stem from the tragic deeds that are

incorporated in the plot. These tragic deeds can occur in three different ways: 1) knowingly and consciously, 2) in ignorance of the relationship with the person wronged and discovered afterwards, and 3) meditated, but in ignorance of the relationship with the person wronged, and have the opportunity to draw back and refrain from carrying through with the meditated ill-doing (1454a 28-38). Concerning the appropriateness and consistency of the plot, the denouement must occur directly as a result of the events of the plot (1454a 37-38), and “there should be nothing improbable among the actual incidents” (1454b 6-7). In other words, the incidents in the performance cannot occur due to luck, for the audience members will need to be able to understand that the moral acts are deserving of just consequences. These strict guidelines of how tragic deeds ought to be portrayed in the tragedy influence the audience members to feel pity and fear appropriately. Moreover, the arousal of the moral affects of pity and fear establishes the connection between the artistic elements of the tragedy such as imitation, plot, and discovery and the moral elements that will directly influence the affections of the audience members.

The individual elements of a tragedy work together to create a whole that is intended to influence the viewers in some moral fashion, which can be observed in the tragedy’s goal of arousing the moral emotions of fear and pity. Because poetry, which includes tragedy, focuses on the importance of a universal and idealistic plot, “poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (1451b 5-7). The distinction that Aristotle is trying to establish here is the ability of poetry to explain how the world ought to be structured, while history merely gives an account of how things

have already occurred. Although tragedies may include historic events and historic characters, it is still able to portray the events through characters in a way that will sway the emotions and cognition of viewers that simple historical facts cannot (1451b 25-26).

This privileging of poetry over the telling of historical facts may arise from the inability of the telling of historical facts to create a cohesive story that affectively influences the audience. For example, the telling of a set of historical facts will not be able to portray the gravity of the historical events on the individuals who actually experienced the event. On the other hand, poetry, and therefore tragedy, possesses the ability to create a grander image of how the various historical events coalesced and describes the moral outcomes of the set of historical events. The whole of the tragedy can be utilized as a telling of how the world ought to be constructed, for the various triumphs and downfalls incorporated in the plot will serve as a guideline of how the consequences of moral actions ought to be handled in reality. The universal actions that are portrayed in a tragedy is a stronger morally educative tool than the particular actions that are told through historical events, for the universal actions portrayed in the tragedy can influence all audience members affectively while the telling of historical events cannot. The educative nature of historical events require that the audience member knows what is morally good to learn from each particular event. On the other hand, the educative nature of a universal plot in a tragedy is able to encompass the moral deed and its consequences and is able to reach audience members that are not aware of what is morally good due to its ability to arouse moral affections that occur despite the understanding of the good.

SECTION THREE

THE VICIOUS CHARACTER

In chapter one, book VII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes three types of moral character that ought to be avoided – incontinence, vice, and brutishness (1145a 14-16). In the interest of my argument, I plan to focus specifically on the moral development of the vicious character through the viewing of a tragedy, for the person with an incontinent character that is already aware of what is morally good and the brutish individual is a character that is not able to alter their moral character. In order to speak of the way in which the viewing of tragedies affects the development of a vicious individual's moral character, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of the vicious moral character.

To understand vice, it is best to first understand how moral virtues are established. Aristotle claims that moral virtue comes about as a result of habit (1103a 16-17). When an individual makes a habit of a moral virtue for the sake of performing the moral virtue, they will begin to develop a moral character that leans towards the virtuous. Once the way to be good is evident to an individual through personal reflection or instruction from a person of a virtuous moral character, one can begin adjusting the ways that they can aim at the morally good through habituation. Since moral virtue is concerned with pleasure and pain, and any moral character types can feel pleasure or pain, virtue is an account of those who can act on pleasures that are nobler than others (1104b 8-10). The

individual attempting to improve their moral character may feel pain at first when committing virtuous acts, for they are not yet habituated to believe that the virtuous acts are good in themselves. However, once one starts to perform virtuous acts for the sake of performing virtuous acts, they will begin enjoying said acts and come to believe that they are intrinsically good. The enjoyment of the acts that were once believed to be painful before the habituation of virtuous acts occurred is self-rewarding, for the knowing that committing acts of nobler pleasures will lead to the development of a higher moral character that will feel more pleasure in pursuing nobler endeavors.

Acting on nobler pleasures and habituation of a higher moral character is a consequence of choice, for all the development of all moral characters is concerned with the choice to act virtuously or viciously (1107a 1-3). This choice to act virtuously is difficult for any individual, for there are many ways to act badly but only one way to be good (1106b 35). As Aristotle states, “it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious” (1113b 11-14). Since acting viciously is in the power of the individual and is a choice, the vicious and unjust acts committed by individuals are voluntary and done for a specific end in mind (1139a 31-35). The vicious person, then, is choosing to act unvirtuously and creates a habit to act unvirtuously. Like the self-rewarding acts that create the habit of being a virtuous individual, the acts that establish the habit of the vicious person will eventually feel rewarding to act in base pleasures. Because vicious acts feel self-rewarding due to habit, the vicious person will fall into a state that will make it very near impossible to not be vicious (114a 19-23). In

summary, moral virtue comes about through the habituation of good acts, and they are products of choice.

Even though the vicious character may seem near impossible to alter, there exists some opportunities for the vicious character to develop a better moral character. In an explanation that all individuals of all moral character types are in a constant state of moral flux, Aristotle specifically quotes a poet that states that “change in all things is sweet,” for the vicious character (1154b 28-30). By this Aristotle means that the vicious character constantly shifts their interests and pursues many different pleasures. Since the vicious person is frequently flitting amongst different pleasures, they may finally anchor themselves to a pleasure –such as the viewing of a tragedy or engaging with music– that promotes the development of a higher moral character. Despite the habituation that has made it so comfortable for the vicious person to keep acting viciously, the vicious individual still possesses the ability to choose to do better even if the better may not bring them pleasure. Though Aristotle speaks of the sweetness that is the change of the vicious moral character to a better moral character, he does not offer a method for the enhancement and development of the vicious character.

SECTION FOUR

SMITHSON'S ARGUMENT

In “The Moral View of Aristotle’s *Poetics*”, Smithson argues that the element of plot gives rise to the moral interpretation of a tragedy.⁴ The plot, as explained earlier, is the most crucial part of a tragedy. The plot depicts the action of the tragedy, and, as Smithson highlights, action is what brings about flourishing and happiness in the development and habituation of a moral character.⁵ He supports his claims by referring back to the teleological nature of Aristotle’s theories that span across his work in many different fields such as ethics, metaphysics, and poetics.⁶ Since the rest of Aristotle’s works rely on some end goal towards the good, Smithson argues that the underlying motivation of *Poetics* should be considered under a moral scope.

Smithson analyzes many aspects of *Poetics* such as the role of plot in a tragedy, the arousal of pity and fear in the audience, and the moment of catharsis in the audience, which all encourage the reader to consider a moral interpretation of the treatise. The analysis of these aspects lead to Smithson’s grander goal –to prove that tragedies offer an educative experience for the audience members. Smithson grapples with the conception that the plot of the tragedy “imitates good actions and, thereby, measures and depicts the

⁴ Smithson p.5

⁵ Ibid., p.7

⁶ Ibid., p.6

well-being of its protagonist.”⁷ This interpretation of the role of the protagonist, a singular element that makes a greater whole in the entirety of the tragedy, is a tool for audience members to learn how to analyze the moral characters of others, for tragedies are an imitation of the actions that can actually occur in reality.⁸

Smithson claims that the ways that audience members can come to understand how the events that unfold in front of them in a tragedy can affect their own lives is through the emotions of pity and fear. This claim is supported through the “self-directed” nature of the emotions of pity and fear. Smithson states, “when members of the audience fear for and sympathize with the dramatic protagonist, they are able to do so only because they envision the disaster before their eyes as befalling them.”⁹ The emotions of pity and fear, which are so closely intertwined with the understanding of moral virtues, establish the connection of *Poetics* to a moral interpretation that Smithson describes. Since the determining characteristic of a tragedy is the ability to invoke the feelings of pity and fear in the audience, Smithson states that “to examine pity and fear is to continue to examine the moral element embedded in Aristotle’s conception of plot.”¹⁰ With this interpretation through the constant observance of pity and fear, Smithson emphasizes the inevitable morally educative experience in audience members even if they do not entirely follow the plot of the tragedy, and, instead, focus on each moral deed performed by the characters.

Smithson’s moral interpretation of *Poetics* seems to work only with audience members that understand what is morally good. This assumption shows through in

⁷ Ibid., p.9

⁸ Ibid., p.16

⁹ Ibid., p.14

¹⁰ Ibid., p.9

Smithson's claims and statements such as the ability to feel pity and fear appropriately is the mark of the good person and "the audience's capacity to sympathize with fear for a protagonist is dependent upon believing that the protagonist is neither bad, villainous, or utterly vicious."¹¹ The capacity to feel sympathy, or feel appropriately, for the misfortunes of the characters in the tragedy does not address the ways in which the tragedy influences the affects of those who do not know how to identify what is morally good. Although Smithson only addresses the morally knowing subjects in the audience, these claims do not exclude the presence of vicious individuals in the audience of a tragedy. However, these claims do exclude the ability of the vicious individuals to undergo the morally educative experience of viewing a tragedy.

Vicious audience members will not be able to undergo this type of morally educative experience because, to the vicious person, the villainous or vicious characters in the tragedy may seem to be good, for the vicious person does not understand what is morally good, both in their own lives and in the imitation of actions that can happen in reality. Furthermore, the vicious audience member will not be able to feel pity and fear appropriately, so they will not feel those emotions at the moments that are intended to conjure moments of realization of the moral message of a tragedy. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that the vicious audience member will not be engaging in the tragedy and feeling some type of pity and fear. If, as stated by Aristotle in the *Ethics*, the vicious person is changeable, then the effects that tragedies hold over the vicious person should be of some morally educative import. In the next section, I will explore the ways that tragedies can offer a morally educative experience for vicious audience members even if

¹¹ Ibid., p.10-11

they are not knowing subjects of the morally good. Though Smithson does not address the effect of the tragedy on vicious audience members, I will expand on his proposal of the morally educative nature of *Poetics*, and more narrowly audience interaction with tragedy, and argue that the engagement of a vicious person with a tragedy may be the only way for the vicious to change and develop a higher moral character

SECTION FIVE

MORAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING

I will focus on the nature of the plot of a tragedy being an imitation of actions that can happen in reality in order to support my claim that the viewing of a tragedy can be an educative tool for vicious audience members. However, this one connection of the moral and aesthetic aspects of *Poetics* does not suffice for those who do not know what is morally good. Because of this, I will also focus on the interactions between audience members that can teach the vicious individual to feel fear and pity appropriately. Lastly, I will focus on moments in *Poetics* and in book VIII of *Politics* that discuss the relationship between the understanding of aesthetic harmony and moral harmony through the relationship between leisure and moral education. Through these points, I will show that vicious audience members can benefit from the morally educative aspect of *Poetics* even though they may not know what is morally good.

Recall that, as stated previously, imitation has an instructive function. The imitation of which Aristotle speaks applies to both the imitation of actions executed or not executed within the confines of the performance and the vicious individual's imitation of the reactions of morally knowledgeable audience members who react correctly during the performance. Since action is the "end and purpose" of tragedy (1450a 22), it would stand to reason that tragedies are an excellent tool for those who are not virtuous or on the road to virtue to learn how to become virtuous and be able to

experience the consequences of vicious actions without having to commit vicious acts themselves. For Aristotle, any act is the start to habituation. Watching a realistic but fictional world play out the consequences that make steps towards vice would offer a beginning for the vicious audience members to break a habituation towards vice. The viewing of tragedies is the only way for an individual to indirectly experience the consequences of actions without having to live in the midst of the action in real time.

Aristotle communicates the methods in which an audience member of a tragedy can learn of the events about to unfold in the performance through the discussion of the modes of discovery. These modes of discovery are not only of aesthetic importance. Although the modes of discovery that Aristotle describes allow the audience member to appreciate the artistic elements of a tragedy, the modes of discovery are crucial in the moral growth of the audience member. The morally knowing subject is already keen on the morally educative aspects of a tragedy, but a vicious individual in the audience does not have the capacity to develop an understanding of the moral message that may be woven into the plot of the tragedy. Because of this, the vicious audience member must rely on the modes of discovery within the tragedy itself and surrounding audience members that are of higher moral character types and their reactions to their own modes of discovery when experiencing the tragedy.

The concept of the interactive audience is crucial in completing the observation that tragedies can be used as a morally educative tool for vicious individuals experiencing the tragedy. When viewing a tragedy, the audience itself is a part of the viewing experience. Because morally unknowing subjects will be in the presence of morally knowing subjects, those who possess a vicious moral character can learn how to react to

vicious deeds, and ultimately how they ought to act morally. This phenomenon can be observed in modern day examples of spectators at a sporting event who are ignorant of the rules of the sport. For example, an individual who is unaware of the significance of certain plays in an American football game may learn when to cheer or groan accordingly to a good or bad play by examining the ways that their fellow audience members are reacting to the game. Though the unknowing spectator may not know exactly what is happening in the game, they will know when and how it is appropriate to act when rooting for their team. Like the unknowing sports spectator, the morally unknowing subjects of the audience of a tragedy most likely will learn to stop cheering for the vicious character in the tragedy if no other audience member is relishing in the acts of the vicious character.

In chapter sixteen of *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the importance of the rapport between the art, in this case tragedy, and the audience (1454b 19-1455a 21). He describes the ways that the audience may react to certain scenes and moments on the stage, and further highlights the reactions that are the best for discovering the moral message of the tragedy. For example, there are reactions of association, in which the audience member hears the sorrowful tune of the harp and is brought to tears because they are reminded of some sorrowful event or are simply moved to tears because of the beautiful melancholic melody. There exists another mode of discovery in which the audience member reacts to the moral acts written explicitly by the poet. For example, the audience may react when seeing a friend betray another friend. This mode of discovery, usually explicitly portrayed by the poet allows the audience member is to discern the severity of the tragic act seen on stage (1455a 4-12).

The viewing of tragedies is the only solution for a vicious character to learn what is truly good. Since there will always be a moral character that knows what is morally good in the midst of the vicious characters, the vicious person will learn to react correctly when they see a good moral act and/or a bad moral act in the tragedy. When the vicious person delights in the actions of a vicious character in a tragedy, they may be perplexed, and possibly even frustrated, when they see that character with whom they identify falls to great misfortune, for Aristotle claims that the vicious character must befall misfortune in a tragedy (1452b 30 -1453a 6). In addition to these feelings of confusion and frustration, the vicious audience member may begin to fear the consequences of vicious actions in the performance and the fate of the vicious character and make an effort not to act in the same way in their own life for the fear of similar consequences.

The relationship between artistic elements such as music and moral education can also be observed in works such as *Politics*. When speaking of education in book VIII of *Politics*, Aristotle claims that education should be equal regardless of moral character (1337a 21-26). In educational programs, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of music and learning how to spend leisure time well in order to continue to flourish even when an individual is experiencing moments of rest (1337b 29-32). The knowledge of how to spend leisure time well reflects a well balanced soul that knows when to act, work, and rest. In the branches of education, the field of music instruction is the most connected to moral excellence. The connection of music to moral excellence begins with the utility of intellectual enjoyment through leisure (1338a 21-24). The allowance of leisure is particularly important in the moral influence of music, since leisure, as Aristotle states, is the first principle of action (1337b 32-34). The incorporation of music in educational

systems, and the further enjoyment of music later in life, will be able to help an individual experience a fine pleasure that comes from music even if they are indirectly bringing about the pleasure as a listener. This passive experience of pleasure and understanding of beauty is crucial in the idea of the habituation and development of a moral character without actually acting themselves when watching a tragedy.

Since, as stated in the majority of chapter five of book eight in *Politics*, music is a pleasure that is felt and enjoyed by individuals of all ages and character types, the vicious person too will understand the aesthetic pleasantness in music. Music is considered to be a noble pleasure for it is connected to the moral aspect of an individual. Aristotle states that music inspires enthusiasm in the listener, and enthusiasm is “an emotion of the ethical part of the soul” (1340a 10-14). This connection of the ability for music to inspire emotions that are morally rooted in an individual provides the vicious person the opportunity to learn what is morally good through the understanding of aesthetic harmony and goodness. If the pleasure that stems from the experiencing of music elicits emotions that are morally noble, then the vicious person can build off of the emotions to indirectly learn what is morally good.

Since the experience of listening to music and enjoying aesthetic harmony will not press the vicious individual to consider the connection between moral and aesthetic harmony, I argue that the viewing of a tragedy is an effective way that will pressure the vicious individual to examine this relationship. In other words, the understanding of the good of music and aesthetic harmony is not enough for the vicious person to learn what is morally good. Though the vicious person will have an understanding of what is musically and aesthetically good, it only serves as a threshold for the vicious person to

become a morally knowledgeable individual. Tragedy utilizes music in performance as an aid in the telling of the plot, which, as Smithson states will always possess a moral nature. Since the vicious person will not be able to identify the moral message or feel pity and fear appropriately in their viewing of the tragedy, the vicious audience member will have to rely on the discoveries that arise from the connections that they make when they hear a sorrowful tune that accompanies the moments in a tragedy that strives to inspire pity and fear in the viewers. This, along with the other affective influence of instances such as the reactions of association to tragic deeds in the performance to their own lives and interacting with other audience members are the only way that the vicious person can learn what is morally good and passively learn how to habituate the actions that are considered correctly vicious or virtuous. The artistic elements of a tragedy alone, such as the music that aids the performance and plot, and the interaction with others that are knowing subjects of the morally good will not suffice as morally educative tools as isolated experiences. Only through the collaboration of all these elements in the form of a tragic performance will they be effective as a morally educative tool for the vicious audience members.

SECTION SIX

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that the morally educative nature of *Poetics* and the viewing of a tragedy is the only method for the vicious individual to develop a better moral character. This method is possible due to the understanding of what is aesthetically good and in forms such as music that will always inspire emotions like enthusiasm that are of moral import. Through the understanding of what is aesthetically good that is morally significant, the vicious person can learn to associate the messages of moral goodness in tragedies through the utilization of aesthetic components in a tragedy. Furthermore, the vicious individual can learn how to feel pity and fear appropriately, and, thereby learn to passively habituate moral excellences through their interactions with subjects in the audience of a tragedy that know what is morally good. These two experiences will always work in tandem in the unfolding of a good tragedy, for the structure of how a tragedy ought to be is specifically defined in *Poetics*. The illustration of how a good tragedy ought to be constructed should be considered as a reflection of how the living of a good moral life ought to be. Like the poet of which Aristotle speaks who portrays how the world ought to be through the tragedy (1460b 7-11), Aristotle helps paint a portrait of how the vicious person can change for the better in *Poetics*. Especially when taking together the moments in the *Ethics* and *Politics* that highlight the importance

of the poet in understanding what is morally good, one can observe the importance of *Poetics* in the moral education of those who do not know what is morally good.

SECTION SEVEN

FURTHER RESEARCH

I pursued this project as a means to connect two of my interests in philosophy during my undergraduate education: Aristotle and the relationship between aesthetics and praxis. This project was half of a collaborative work with my advisor that will later be submitted for publication after her half of the article is completed. In addition to the publication of this essay as its own entity, I look forward to utilizing this project as a means to speak of the relationship between art and the audience in contemporary art. Due to my interests in philosophy's role in social justice, I would like to see this project address the power of art on the correction of racist prejudices in individuals who come in contact with politically charged artworks.

Though there exists literature concerning the affective influence of art on the audience, most of the existing literature on this topic does not explore the ways that art can influence an individual ignorant of their own harmful beliefs such as racism and homophobia. As I have discussed in this project, Aristotle's aesthetic treatise allows for a method to educate the vicious character of the good through the use of aesthetic elements to relay a moral lesson. Though I do not agree wholeheartedly with Aristotle concerning the existence of truly vicious individuals as his definition describes, I do believe that prejudiced individuals are often unaware of the gravity of their racist comments, thoughts, and actions. Despite the number of times that another person can inform the

racist individual of their wrongdoings, the prejudiced individual may refuse to acknowledge that they are, in fact, wrong, and may not even understand that their actions could actually be bad. In this sense, like Aristotle's vicious character, I believe that the prejudiced person is ignorant of the good and will continue to act in ways influenced by their prejudices.

Like this project that speaks of the ways that a tragedy can influence the morally unknowing subjects, politically charged artworks such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross*) created in 1991 holds an affective influence over the prejudiced viewer. Cited throughout literature on the affective influence of artworks on the viewer, Gonzalez-Torres's works have been known to offer new perspectives on the ways that a viewer can interact with an artwork. Gonzalez-Torres's candy spill installation has especially enticed viewers to break the wall in between viewer and artwork by inviting the viewer to take a piece of the work for themselves, usually to be consumed by the audience member. This intimate connection between the artwork and the viewer creates a bond that fuses the two. This bond between the artwork and the viewer allows for the introduction of a narrative that the viewer may not have noticed otherwise.

"*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross*) serves as a monument of the love that Gonzalez-Torres shared with his partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS. For the prejudiced audience, this narrative may be ignored or criticized. However, when the audience is unaware of the particular facts of the gender of the two lovers present in Gonzalez-Torres's artworks, they may regard the bittersweet monument as a great declaration of love. Before learning the fact of the relationship that Gonzalez-Torres had with Laycock,

the audience members interacting with the candy spill may perceive the artwork as an installation worthwhile of their attention and empathy. It is only after the illumination of the particulars of the relationship that the viewer may harbor prejudiced responses to the artwork. However, the story between the two lovers still holds as a loving experience in the viewer.

Although the prejudiced audience may regard the artwork as unworthy of their empathy after learning of the particulars of the relationship between two gay men represented in “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross*), the loving and empathetic moments before prejudiced thoughts permeating the viewer’s experience can serve as an educative tool for the prejudiced individual to correct their hateful beliefs. Like Aristotle’s vicious character, the prejudiced viewer, who is unaware of the detrimental moral impact of their bigotry may learn to view the individuals towards whom they harbor hateful feelings as persons deserving of dignity. Because “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross*) speaks in a language that is intelligible to most audience members who understand the gravity of loving another individual, the prejudiced viewer will be able to view the love between two men as a relationship that is worthy of being meaningful. Like the vicious character learning from the sensory cues available in a tragedy, the prejudiced viewer of “*Untitled*” *Portrait of Ross* can step through the threshold of the sensory experiences that the installation elicits in the viewer. The experience of claiming a piece of candy from Gonzalez-Torres’s work and feeling a connection between the artist’s narrative to their own life is akin to the experience of the vicious figure in the Aristotelean tragedy making moral connections through the visual and auditory elements of the tragedy. Just as the Aristotelean vicious individual may weep at the sorrowful tune of the harp during a moment of moral import

in the tragedy, the prejudiced viewer of Gonzalez-Torres's work can learn the moral and political message of the artist's narrative when they consume the candy and experience the bitter-sweetness of the passing of a loved one represented by the dissolving of the candy that they have claimed for themselves.

A similar type of experience can be applied to moments of correction of racial prejudices through the interaction with an artwork. Such an example would be the audience interaction with an artwork depicting the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in the face of an oppressive system. In the photographic series *Ain't Jokin'* (1987-1988) by Carrie Mae Weems, the photographer captions black and white photographs of black individuals with racially stereotyped comments and "jokes" that illuminate the aggressions that black individuals face in their lives. Out of context of the photographic series, the captions may be a source of humor for the prejudiced audience member. However, in the context paired with each portrait of Weems's black subjects, the viewer's gaze is returned by an unblinking individual. The gaze of the subjects in Weems's photographs do not break until the viewer turns away, and, even then, the subjects of the photographs continue to gaze at the backs of the viewers with the captions echoing throughout the viewer's experience. When a familiar face of a person in fear stares back at the viewer, the viewer, despite the racial prejudices they harbored towards black individuals, will be able to understand the face of fear and the suffering that follows. In this experience, the prejudiced viewer of Weems's photographs may be able to learn from the purely emotional experience of seeing another person's pain to correct their own prejudiced beliefs that they hold against black individuals.

Similar to the ways that the Aristotelean vicious character can learn from the surrounding audience members of a tragedy in order to passively habituate appropriate response to the plot of the tragedy, the viewer of contemporary artworks can observe the reactions of their fellow viewers to passively correct prejudiced thoughts towards the subjects in an artwork. Moreover, the individual can learn of biases that they harbored towards others when interacting with artworks and the viewers that are simultaneously viewing the artwork. In both cases that the viewer interacts with *“Untitled” (Portrait of Ross)* or *Ain’t Jokin’*, there will most likely be other viewers that surround the prejudiced viewer, just as the Aristotelean vicious audience member will be surrounded by morally knowing (e.g. incontinent, continent, and virtuous) subjects in the audience of a tragedy.

In the case of *“Untitled” (Portrait of Ross)*, viewers of the artwork will be compelled to interact with the candy pile by taking a piece of candy to consume or keep for themselves when they see other audience members interacting with the artwork. As the audience members remove and consume the candy from the pile, they are participating in the artists feeling of bittersweet loss of their lover. Though the prejudiced audience member may not initially understand the intended message of the artwork, they may learn from other audience members the meaningfulness of the artwork. Gonzalez-Torres’s installation not only depicts a moment in his own personal history, but a tragic moment in history on a larger scale of the AIDS epidemic. The prejudiced viewer may not have taken the lives lost due to AIDS as moments to be truly lamented due to homophobic thoughts and beliefs. However, through the combination of sensory experiences that *“Untitled” (Portrait of Ross)* elicits in the viewer along with the ways in which other audience members react positively and respectfully towards the artwork, the

prejudiced person may start their progress of ridding of their prejudiced beliefs towards the artwork, and, hopefully, towards members of the queer community.

A similar account can be given for those who view Weems's photographs in *Ain't Jokin'*. In addition to the affective influence of Weems's photographs on the viewer, the viewer can experience the morally educative aspect of viewing the photographs through the observation of the ways in which others react with the photographs. Though the photographs in *Ain't Jokin'* do not possess the same type of power to interact directly with the audience as Gonzalez-Torres's candy spill, the photographs still encourage an interaction amongst audience members who gaze at the portraits and read the accompanying messages in the captions. Whether this interaction between audience members be direct discussion of the subject matter of Weems's work or observations of the ways in which people react to the artworks (e.g. shaking their head in disbelief, glaring at other viewers who laugh at the "jokes" in the captions), the prejudiced viewer may learn that others may reproach them for their racist attitudes to the subject matter and question whether their prejudiced beliefs are morally correct.

Though I speak of the best case scenario in each of these interactions with artworks representing political messages intended to be perceived by the viewers, I understand that some prejudiced audience members may not react as positively to artworks as I have described. Since the morally educative experience between the artwork and the viewer relies mostly on the part of the viewer to discover the moral message of an artwork, I understand that it may take an immensely long period of time and multiple interactions with different artworks for the morally unknowing, prejudiced audience member to begin the process of growing out of their prejudiced background.

However, I believe that the morally educative experience between artwork and viewer is a safe and loving way for the prejudiced viewer to face their own immoral beliefs and practices. Since artworks are already valued by the individuals of a society, the viewers will enter the interaction with an artwork in a respectful and interested state. I believe that this attitude that individuals already possess towards the value and meaningfulness of artworks can permeate the boundaries that exist between human subjects and reconfigure the ways that people perceive one another. If an individual can improve their moral character through the interaction with an artwork and reshape the way they view the artwork into a loving manner, then the individual will be able to learn to perceive those that they previously oppressed in a more loving and respectful manner.

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