

Original Research Article

Aristotelian Tragedy and the Art of Caravaggio A Comparative Study Based on the Concept of Catharsis

Fatemeh Sarkarati¹, Reza Alipour^{2*}

1. Art Research Department, Electronic Unit, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

2. Department of Art, Abadan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Abadan, Iran.

Received: 21/07/2020 ;

accepted: 23/01/2021 ;

available online: 22/05/2022

Abstract

Problem statement: Hallmarked by dramatic lighting against dark backgrounds, life-size figures, and raw emotions—in other words, a visual style resembling a thoroughly realistic play—Caravaggio’s paintings look like scenes of a tragedy and can therefore inspire catharsis in the viewer. Catharsis is not limited to drama and is found also in other art forms, including painting, music, and sculpture. This study attempts to understand how a painting can evoke tragedy and, in turn, produce catharsis.

Research objective: The study aimed to compare Aristotelian tragedy and the art of Caravaggio from the standpoint of catharsis.

Research methodology: In this descriptive-analytical study, data was collected through a desk research method, and five Caravaggio paintings were selected at random for visual analysis and comparison.

Conclusion: The study found that a Caravaggio painting is a completely realistic “theater of contradictions” in which light and darkness, youth and old age, life and death, and strength and weakness are portrayed simultaneously. The painter arranged his scenes with an extraordinary display of faces expressing raw emotions. Based on a comparison between Aristotle’s definition of tragedy and Caravaggio’s paintings, his art is tragic in form and capable of effecting catharsis in viewers.

Keywords: *Painting; Caravaggio; Aristotle; Tragedy; Catharsis.*

Introduction and problem statement

As scientific progress ushered in the Age of Enlightenment¹ and the decline of religious thought in 17th century Europe, Greek mythology gained new popularity among some painters and printmakers, who began incorporating its cathartic qualities into their portrayals of old tragedies and contemporary events. Among these 17th-century artists was Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio.

What stands out the most in his paintings are their black backgrounds and unique lighting, which make the artworks remind the viewers of staged plays. Caravaggio employed the techniques of chiaroscuro² and tenebrism³ to accentuate the primary elements in his scenes, namely human figures. He paid less attention to background details and instead focused on his almost-life-size characters, who displayed raw emotions, were modeled on ordinary people, and appeared like actors enacting a tragedy.

* Corresponding Author: alipourart@yahoo.com, +989163330530

If we define tragedy as containing peripeteia and anagnorisis and as an imitation of a serious, complete, significant action expressed in embellished language, then it can only be presented through acting rather than narration, and it will effect catharsis by inspiring pity and fear. Once we view the works of Caravaggio through the lens of tragedy, his figures become actors enacting a tragedy, as they immerse the viewer in the scene and inspire him with a sense of fear or pity and, eventually, catharsis by expressing raw emotions.

This article attempts to examine the tragic form of five Caravaggio paintings and explain how catharsis gives rise to it. The research question is: "How does a Caravaggio painting work as a tragedy and, in turn, effect catharsis in the viewer?"

Literature review

This study seems to be the first of its kind in terms of comparing Aristotelian tragedy and the paintings of Caravaggio from the standpoint of catharsis; the relevant literature, reviewed below, deals either with Aristotelian catharsis or Caravaggio's art.

In his book *Aristotle and the Poetics*, Zarrinkoub (2014) looks at the life and work of the Greek philosopher and provides an annotated translation of his *Poetics*. In addition to poetics and other topics, the book also discusses the definition and characteristics of tragedy through experiential and scholarly observations as well as literary theory.

The book *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, written by Julian Young (2016), reviews the theories of various philosophers from the past 2,500 years, presenting their definitions of tragedy and examining what it means to be "tragic."

In his article "Catharsis in Music and Drama, and Its Reflection in Painting and Printmaking," Soltan Kashefi (2018) explored catharsis in a series of paintings and explained how catharsis was created in viewers through the visual arts.

Piravi Vanak & Niknafs (2010) investigated the tragic elements in the Iranian genre of religious drama known as ta'zieh, as well as the occurrence of "tragic action," in their article "Ta'zieh Plays and

Tragedy: A Comparative Study Based on Aristotle's Theories." They concluded that ta'zieh should be considered a form of an epic rather than tragedy.

Taking into account the findings of previous research, the current study compared five Caravaggio paintings with the characteristics of tragedy as defined by Aristotle, explored catharsis, and concluded that the painter's art is tragic in form.

Theoretical basis

Aristotle's theory of catharsis and his understanding of tragedy form the theoretical basis of this article, and this calls for a degree of familiarity with the thinking of artists who incorporated cathartic qualities into their art. Here, we will first explore what "catharsis" actually means.

Many scholars believe that the term catharsis was first used in its metaphorical sense by the famous Greek author, and philosopher Aristotle⁴ in his treatise the *Poetics*. Aristotle introduced the concept into his theory of art and used it in the *Poetics* to mean "purification or purgation of the self from desires," postulating that through catharsis, the self becomes a shiny mirror that reflects wisdom (Saliba, 1987, 233). He stated that the purpose of art, especially tragedy, was to affect the catharsis of terror and pity. The word catharsis comes from the Greek root *katharos*, meaning "pure," "clean," "immaculate," or "flawless," and was used in religious-political rituals in Ancient Greece. It has been translated into Persian as *ravān pālāee* ("purification of the psyche"), *tat'heer* ("purgation"), *tasfeeyeh* ("refinement"), *talkhees* ("purification"), *tazkeeyeh-yeh nafs* ("cleansing of the self"), *hamzāt-pendāree* ("identification," in the psychological sense) (Zeimaran, 2019, 76).

According to Aristotle, tragedy imitates actions that aim at good and virtue, and it never shows those with insignificant purposes. Tragedy chooses actions aiming at the highest good (ibid., 70).

Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical in terms of

scope, and secondary in terms of data collection. The data was collected through a desk research method. In line with the research objective, five Caravaggio paintings were selected randomly, analyzed visually, and compared to Aristotle's definition of tragedy.

Tragedy and catharsis in art

It is well known that a work of art deals intelligently with what it highlights or what it hides. In other words, it shows instead of telling and it matters what general knowledge—or knowledge in its Platonic sense—a thinking spectator receives from the artwork. As a genre and an art form, tragedy tells us important facts about human nature or, more accurately, human dispositions. Freud believes that “The benefit conferred by a well-constructed tragedy is to allow the spectator to ‘identify himself with the [tragic] hero’” (Young, 2016, 78). Through such identification, the audience of a tragedy experiences the hero's fear and, when the tragic catastrophe arrives, an intense degree of pity (ibid., 79). Aristotle does not assume that tragedy eradicates terror and pity, but rather believes that it regulates them and, by arousing them, cleanses the mind from them and other such emotions. In other words, tragedy softens and adjusts fear and pity to the right level through a kind of pleasure that is triggered by reading or watching well-imitated emotions (ibid., 81). This is the process known as catharsis. A well-established concept in drama, catharsis evokes fear and pity in the audience of tragedy and eventually purifies their emotions. The term was originally used within the context of the dramatic arts but later found its way into other artistic domains, including the visual arts. The ultimate goal of the visual arts—as with music, theater, and cinema—is to inspire the same thing as drama that is catharsis in its audience. Paintings and prints from the distant past often depict mythical and religious themes, as well as the evolution of social movements, and can inspire the purification and purgation of the self.

Exaggeration generally played a substantial part in Greek tragedy. Myths that were turned into plays

portrayed flaws, sins, treacheries, and hostilities. Greek tragedy challenged the dominant thinking of its day and deconstructed social norms; therefore it was allowed to be enacted only for a short period (Zeimaran, 2019, 60).

To Aristotle, every aspect of human existence has a unique purpose, and achieving some good is an end shared by all human actions and behaviors. While every action has its own goal, all actions are aimed toward “the highest good,” which, according to Aristotle, is eudaimonia. By this term, he means happiness that comes from virtue and ability, and he sees virtue as requiring moderation (ibid., 63–64).

Aristotle argues that tragedy imitates actions aiming at good and virtue and that it refrains from showing those of insignificant goals. Tragedy chooses actions aimed at the highest good (ibid., 70).

In the Poetics, Aristotle offers a general definition for tragedy: “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle, 1990, 36).

Based on Aristotle's definition, a tragedy can be said to have these main characteristics: (1) It is realized by imitation and action, it is complete and of a certain magnitude, and it effects the catharsis of pity and fear after arousing them; (2) it follows a pluralistic worldview; (3) it has a serious and profound content; (4) it starts with a prologue; (5) it has ritualistic origins; (6) its protagonist is an individualized character; (7) the causal relations in it belong to the “intelligible world;” (8) it features intra-character trait conflicts; (9) it has a plot; (10) it tries to stay within a time frame of about a year as much as possible; (11) it takes place within a fixed setting; (12) it is accompanied by music; (13) it features tragic elements; (14) it eventually leads to a catastrophe; (15) its protagonist seeks pride and absolute values; (16) its protagonist's pride

contributes significantly to his tragic fate; (17) it allows the spectators to identify with its protagonist, and by arousing their emotions, purifies their characters; and (18) it primarily focuses on dramatic action. Moreover, Aristotle identifies six elements of tragedy: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song (*ibid.*, 36–46).

The life and art of Caravaggio

As developments in science ushered in the Enlightenment and the decline of religious thought in 17th century Europe, some painters and printmakers took a fascination with Greek mythology and began incorporating its cathartic qualities into their depictions of old tragedies and the events of their day because they recognized that the visual arts—as with music, theater, and cinema—ultimately aimed to do the same thing as dramatic literature, namely effecting catharsis in its audience.

One example from this era is Caravaggio's portrait of Medusa,⁵ a character in Greek mythology decapitated by Perseus.⁶ The first of its kind, the painting bears cathartic qualities (*Fig. 1*).

Nicknamed after his hometown of Caravaggio, a small town near Milan, Caravaggio (1571–1610) was an innovative Italian painter whose realism

inspired many Baroque⁷ painters. He was trained under a Mannerist⁸ painter in Milan before moving to Rome in 1593, where he worked for other painters for some time while living in poverty and having a criminal record. In circa 1596, however, his life took a turn for the better. He was truly a peerless artist. From the very beginning of his art career, he made it clear that, unlike Renaissance artists, he was not searching for “idealized beauty” and would look to nothing for reference but nature itself. He worked from live models directly onto the canvas and chose his models from the common people—even in religious paintings, he depicted them as they were; these perfectly demonstrated his departure from tradition. Even so, he should not be viewed as a thorough naturalist painter, as he transcended mere representation by using unique lighting and other dramatic effects. In fact, his use of strong light-dark contrasts was an innovation at the time and inspired the term tenebrism in painting (*Pakbaz, 2011, 393*). Caravaggio was a violent and bad-tempered man who would quickly seek revenge and occasionally even resort to the sword. He found it deplorable to fear ugliness and sought truth—which he could well see personally—first and foremost. The painter was uninterested in classical models and had no regard for idealized beauty. He wanted to free himself from all conventions and approach art from a new angle. Some of his contemporaries believed that his real aim was to impress the viewers and that this was the reason why he had no regard whatsoever for beauty and tradition. But in reality, Caravaggio was too great and serious an artist to want to spend his time trying to impress people. He did what pleased him, with a total disregard for his critics. More than three centuries after their creation, his artworks are still as audacious and sharp as they were in his day. One may even argue that he pursued what Aristotle called eudaimonia.

Caravaggio had undoubtedly read the Bible many times and meditated on its every word. He was one of the greatest artists who, just like Giotto⁹ and Dürer¹⁰ before him, liked to visualize Biblical



Fig. 1. Medusa, Caravaggio, 1597. Location: Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Source: Via Guttuso, 2005, 103.

events as though they were happening next door to him, and would do everything in his power to portray characters from the old text as realistically and tangible as possible, using even light and shade to serve this purpose. His style of lighting does not make the human figure attractive; it uses hard light and enralls the viewer by making strong contrasts with the darks. The lighting style aids a brutally honest representation of a strange scene and produces a sense of deep fear and pity and thereby catharsis. Few of his contemporaries could comprehend this, but it nevertheless profoundly inspired later artists (Gombrich, 2000, 383). His paintings *Death of the Virgin* and *The Entombment of Christ* are great examples of this style (Figs. 2 & 3).

The figures in *Death of the Virgin* are nearly life-sized. Clad in a simple red dress, Mary lies reclined as her lolling head, hanging arm, and swollen, spread feet depict her mortal remains in a raw and realistic fashion. Being the central subject of the painting, the



Fig. 2. *Death of the Virgin*, Caravaggio, 1606 Location: Louvre, Paris. Source: Guttuso, 2005, 135.

Virgin is surrounded by the rest of the composition (Fig. 2).

Here, Caravaggio has suppressed all anecdotal details and instead invested the scene with an extraordinary atmosphere through the mere presence of the figures and the intensity of their emotions. By making use of the nuances of light and shadow, he has modeled the volumes of the figures, objects, and clothing. Most importantly, however, he has accentuated, via this process, the physical presence of Mary, who is illuminated by a dazzling light. The painting contains five of Aristotle's six elements of tragedy, namely plot, character, diction, thought, and spectacle. The emphasis on dramatic action stands out the most here, and the artwork is enriched with cathartic qualities.

Caravaggio painted *Burial of Christ* for one of the chapels in the church Santa Maria in Vallicella. In a scene of mourning, the piece depicts a diagonal cascade of mourners and cadaver-bearers descending to the body of Christ and a bare stone slab. The composition leads the viewer's eye from its upper, darker portion down to the body, emphasizing the dead Christ's inability to feel pain. The scene is not a burial in the traditional sense, as the body of Christ is not being lowered onto a tomb but rather being laid on the slab stone by Nicodemus and John the Apostle as three holy women stand behind them (Fig. 3).

The women are the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Clopas, the last of whom is raising her hands and gazing at the heavens in dramatic gesticulation. Here, the hero's pride has contributed substantially to his tragic fate, and the emphasis on dramatic action and the portrayal of a tragedy define the scene.

The art of Caravaggio and tragedy: a comparison
An outstanding feature of Caravaggio paintings is the use of *chiaroscuro*—a technique in which light seems to emerge out of darkness—and of *tenebrism* (also known as dramatic illumination); these impart in the artworks pronounced contrasts of light and dark. Employing dramatic effects, his



Fig. 3. Burial of Christ, Caravaggio, 1604 Location: Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City. Source: Guttuso, 2005, 129.

paintings resemble scenes from tragedies and evoke pity, terror, and in turn, catharsis in the viewer. Caravaggio worked in a time when common people went to church not to learn about aesthetics and art history but to connect with God, so he wanted to make art that would speak to them. His paintings were as provocative as their creator (Fig. 4).

What takes place in most Caravaggio scenes is a realistic “theater of contradictions” in which light and darkness, youth and old age, life and death, and strength and weakness take the stage together. He carves his source stories down to the essentials, focuses on human disasters, and communicates the emotional weight of his scenes through a limited palette, chiaroscuro, and gesticulation. His figures are nearly life-sized, which, along with the shading, unsettles the viewer and occupies the mind. Where the arms in his paintings point to is key because they smoothly connect the dim areas of the scene to the brighter parts and direct the eye over the figures and

around the composition. The sole presence of faces and the intensity of their emotions invests his scenes with a phenomenal tone.

Here, we will take a look at five paintings by the great Italian master and analyze their tragic form and cathartic qualities.

Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, painted in circa 1598–1599, depicts a scene from the biblical account of the Old Testament heroine Judith, a young Jewish widow who saves her people from the oppression of the Assyrian occupying forces. Serving her people by charming and pleasuring the Assyrian general Holofernes, Judith first seduces the conqueror, then gets him drunk, and finally decapitates him in his tent with her sword.

Caravaggio takes the usual approach here, depicting the story’s most dramatic moment: the decapitation. The painter’s mastery of emotion is reflected by the faces of the three characters, especially Judith’s countenance, which shows a mix of determination and repulsion. Three figures and a red drape in the background: few but very well capable of staging a realistic play of contradictions—of dark and light, old age and youth, death and life, and weakness and strength.

The content of this painting is serious, profound, and of ritualistic origins; each character has opposing traits, and there is a catastrophe taking place. The protagonist’s pride has greatly contributed to his tragic fate, and the viewer can identify with him. The



Fig. 4. Judith Beheading Holofernes, Caravaggio, 1599 Location: Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome. Source: Guttuso, 2005, 105.

scene arouses certain emotions in the viewer and thereby purifies his character. Based on these, the artwork may be argued to feature most of Aristotle's characteristics of tragedy.

A Caravaggio masterpiece painted in 1600, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* depicts the moment Christ inspires Matthew to follow him. The scene is from the biblical account of how Matthew became one of the Twelve Apostles, according to which Jesus, passing by a customs house, notices Matthew, who worked there as a tax collector, and unexpectedly says to him, "Follow me," and Matthew obeys him without a word. Here, the protagonist is an individualized character, and the scene is serious, profound, and of ritualistic origins (Fig. 5).

Here, Matthew's job as a tax collector is indicated by a few coins on the table. A beam of light from an unknown source illuminates Christ's face and follows the direction of his gaze to Matthew. But it is not clear which of the seated men is Matthew. Although the light and Jesus seem to point at the man whose head is lowered, the bearded man is pointing in an ambiguous way that could be interpreted both to be at himself or the man with a lowered head, confusing the viewer. In other words, what we see here is *exis* (Greek for "speech" or "language"). Aristotle argues that the diction of a play must be a combination of prose and verse. In the painting, the beam of light and the hand gestures serve as "visual verses" and help tell the story. Therefore, the scene matches the characteristics of tragedy.

Caravaggio has very cleverly divided the composition into two main "realms," which may be called "the physical" and "the spiritual," or alternatively, "the evil" and "the good." And this has enhanced the narrative quality of the work. In the negative part of the composition, a tax collector has his head down in despair and seems to "carry the weight of the world on his shoulders," while a man in rags, weary and beaten down by life, partially eclipses Jesus. In the positive area, Jesus points in a dignified, confident manner at the bearded man, whose eyes are shining with hope as though he knows he has been saved.



Fig. 5. *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, Caravaggio, 1600 Location: San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Source: Via Guttuso, 2005, 109.

These qualities are amplified by the unconventional lighting, which has light coming from an unknown source instead of the window.

The Baroque master's *Supper at Emmaus*, painted in 1601, is among the more technically-challenging pieces in Christian art. The scene depicts a story from the Bible: Sometime after the crucifixion of Christ, two of his disciples share dinner with a stranger, whom they notice later during the meal to be Jesus resurrected. Here, the apostles are visibly frightened and surprised at the realization, while the restaurant owner, standing behind them, observes the scene with a neutral expression. Caravaggio has, in a way, captured the exact moment of the disciples' shock like a photographer and sent it forward in time to us (Fig. 6).

The painting undeniably has a great dramatic weight, with each figure displaying a unique expression and reaction like actors in a play. Plot and character, two of the six Aristotelian elements of tragedy, are perceivable in the artwork. As with other Caravaggio paintings, the scene is set in a dim, small indoor space, possibly reflecting the gloom of life at the time. But even if this assumption is wrong, Caravaggio's experimentation with light and shadow has added to the work's narrative



Fig. 6. Supper at Emmaus, Caravaggio, 1601 Location: National Gallery, London. Source: Guttuso, 2005, 119.

power. For instance, without verbal clarification, we can understand by just looking at the scene that the restaurant is located in an impoverished village with cold weather and a depressing atmosphere, a village where the food is good but happiness is hard to find.

The painting aims to imply to religious viewers that, through a trancelike state, they can enter the scene and meet Jesus. Caravaggio has chosen a very specific moment here: the exact brief moment when the two apostles realize they are witnessing an unimaginable miracle, the work of extraordinary power. The painter has preserved the moment in his work, enabling us to observe the pair's shock at finding the truth. The Supper at Emmaus inspires catharsis by allowing the viewer to identify with the main characters and by provoking his emotions.

Caravaggio painted the Crucifixion of Saint Peter (Italian: *Crocifissione di san Pietro*) in 1601 for Santa Maria del Popolo, a church in Rome. Depicting the martyrdom of Saint Peter, the painting has ritualistic origins as well as serious and profound content, two characteristics of tragedy in the Aristotelian definition. Ancient and well-known tradition holds that when Peter was condemned to death in Rome, he requested to be crucified upside-down, as he did not believe that he was worthy to be killed in the same way as Jesus Christ: "I beseech you

the executioners, crucify me thus, with the head downward and not otherwise" (Fig. 7). The artwork shows three executioners struggling to straighten the cross, while Peter, bleeding from his hands and feet, is already nailed to it. He is practically naked, which emphasizes his vulnerability. The event eventually leads to a catastrophe, meeting a criterion of Aristotelian tragedy. A bald old man with a gray beard, Peter has an old yet still muscular body, which shows his considerable strength. He is partially rising from the cross with great effort, turning his whole body as though trying to look at something or someone out of the picture—presumably God. The executioners are not the target of his lost gaze. The crucifix is so heavy that it requires three men to raise. One man is pulling it up with ropes as the other two try to help with their arms and shoulders. Crouched under the cross, the workman in yellow pants grips a shovel used to dig a hole into the rocky ground for the stake. The whole process seems chaotic and disorganized as though the executioners did not expect the cross to be this heavy. Their faces are largely obscured to the viewer, making them characterless executors of an injustice ordered by an unknown authority. What looks like a wall of impenetrable darkness in the background is in fact a cliff of rock, and this is an allusion to the meaning of Peter's name: the "rock" that Christ declared his Church to be built upon (Matthew Gospel, 2005, 18).

As demonstrated by these features, the painting allows the viewer to identify with the protagonist and, by exciting his emotions, creates catharsis in him. The artwork also exhibits what Aristotle defines as the main goal of tragedy, namely helping the viewer reach the highest good—*eudaimonia*—through leading him to virtue and ability.

The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, painted in 1608, which depicts the execution of its titular saint, is widely regarded as Caravaggio's masterpiece (Fig. 8). It lays bare death and human cruelty, as its scale and shadow daunt and possess the mind. The scene leads to a catastrophe and features a protagonist



Fig. 7. Crucifixion of Saint Peter, Caravaggio, 1601 Location: Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. Source: Via Guttuso, 2005, 115.

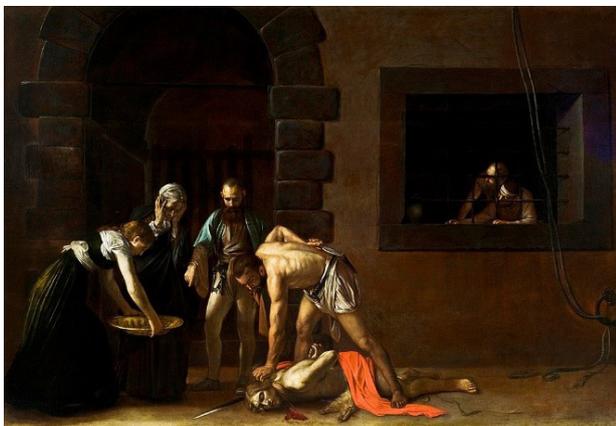


Fig. 8. The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, Caravaggio, 1608 Location: St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta. Source: Guttuso, 2005, 163.

who seeks pride and absolute values; therefore, it matches the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. Common to Baroque-era chiaroscuro, vivid red and warm yellow are the prominent colors in the painting. As John the Baptist is being executed, a maid stands nearby with a golden platter to receive his head. Another woman, identified by some as Herodias or perhaps just a bystander who sees the

unfairness of the act, stands by in horror while the executioner draws his dagger to finish the beheading. This is the only Caravaggio painting to bear his signature, which is placed in the blood flowing from the saint's cutthroat. The largeness of the canvas has allowed the figures to be approximately life-sized despite the considerable empty space in the composition. Caravaggio drew the background from his memories of his time in one of the Knights of Malta's prisons. There is a minimal number of props and prop details in the painting, which is characteristic of his later works.

What stands out the most in the piece is the tragedy. Considering the definition of tragedy—a representation in embellished language of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude—what takes place in the painting qualifies as a tragedy because it portrays such action not through narrative but by using actors as series of nearly life-sized figures who are placed in no special arrangement, express intense emotions, and, above all, gesticulate. Through this tactic, the scene arouses pity and terror, and eventually inspires catharsis in the viewer.

Concluding this section, the following [Table 1](#) offers a summary of the comparative analysis of the paintings.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, painting, as an art form, is very well capable of inspiring catharsis in the viewer, despite its technical differences with dramatic art, which is commonly associated with the phenomenon. Simply viewing a series or sometimes even a single painting enables the elements and mechanisms of catharsis to quickly influence the observer, without there being a need for storytelling. The study examined the extent to which the Aristotelian definition of tragedy applied to the art of Caravaggio and established that his paintings are a completely realistic theater of contradictions, in which light and darkness, youth and old age, life and death, and strength and weakness are staged

Table 1. A comparative comparison of Caravaggio's paintings based on Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Source: authors.

	Analysis of Caravaggio's paintings	Analysis of works based on the characteristics of Aristotle's tragedy
Comparison of Caravaggio paintings to the Aristotelian definition of tragedy	 <p>Judith Beheading Holofernes, Caravaggio</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caravaggio takes the usual approach here, depicting the story's most dramatic moment: the decapitation. • Judith's face shows a mix of determination and repulsion. • The scene is a thoroughly realistic theater of contradictions. • The protagonist's pride has significantly contributed to his tragic fate. • The painting has a serious and profound content as well as ritualistic origins.
	 <p>The Calling of Saint Matthew</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scene depicts the moment Christ inspires Matthew to follow him. • The characters have opposing traits within them. • The composition is divided into two areas, which adds to the narrative quality of the artwork. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The protagonist is an individualized character. • The piece has a serious and profound content as well as ritualistic origins. • There is <i>exis</i> (Greek for "speech" or "language"). Aristotle argues that the diction of a play must be a combination of prose and verse. Here, the beam of light and the hand gestures serve as "visual verse" and help tell the story.
	 <p>Supper at Emmaus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The painting captures the exact moment of the two apostle's shock. • It has great dramatic weight, with each character showing a unique expression and reaction, similar to actors in a play. • Plot and character, two of the six Aristotelian elements of tragedy, are visibly present here. • Caravaggio's experimentation with light and shadow has enhanced the narrative quality of the scene.
	 <p>Crucifixion of Saint Peter</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The piece depicts the martyrdom of Saint Peter. • The scene has ritualistic origins, is serious and profound in content, and leads to a catastrophe. • It exhibits what Aristotle defines as the main goal of tragedy, namely helping the viewer reach the highest good—<i>eudaimonia</i>—through leading him to virtue and ability.

Rest of Table 1.

Analysis of Caravaggio's paintings	Analysis of works based on the characteristics of Aristotle's tragedy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scene lays bare death and human cruelty daunts and possesses the mind, and leads to a catastrophe. • The protagonist seeks pride and absolute values. • The painting portrays a tragedy not through narrative but by using as actors a series of nearly life-sized figures who are placed in no special arrangement, express intense emotions, and, above all, gesticulate.
<p>The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist</p>	
<p>The overall result</p>	<p>All of these artworks enable the viewer to identify with the protagonist, and by arousing pity and terror in the viewer, purify him of these emotions.</p>

simultaneously. Caravaggio carves stories down to the essentials, focuses on human catastrophes, and conveys the emotional weight of his scenes through a limited palette, chiaroscuro, tenebrism, and gesticulation. His figures are almost life-sized, and their scale and shadow daunt and possess the mind. He bridges the dim and bright parts of paintings with a character’s arm, directs the eye over the figures and around the composition, and invests his scenes with an extraordinary aura through the sole presence of faces and the intensity of their emotions. Most of Caravaggio’s artworks are complete, have a certain magnitude, effect the catharsis of pity and fear by provoking them, have a serious and profound content, have ritualistic origins, feature protagonists who are individualized characters, feature intra-character conflicting traits, have a plot, lead to a catastrophe, feature heroes who seek pride and absolute values and whose pride contributes substantially to their tragic fate, emphasize primarily on dramatic action, and feature most of the six Aristotelian elements of tragedy, namely plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. In conclusion, the significant overlap between the features of Caravaggio paintings and Aristotelian tragedy shows that the Baroque master’s art is tragic in form and can therefore produce catharsis in viewers.

Endnotes

1. The Age of Enlightenment (French: *Siècle des Lumières*) was an intellectual and philosophical movement in the West that began in the mid-17th century first in England and later in France, and continued until the end of the 18th century. The movement brought about significant revolutions in science and philosophy, putting an end to the medieval worldview that dominated Europe.
2. Chiaroscuro (Italian for “light-dark”), in painting, is the use of strong contrasts between light and dark in a way that they affect a whole composition. It is also a technical term for the use of contrasts of light to achieve a sense of volume in modeling three-dimensional objects and figures. Similar effects in photography and cinema are also called chiaroscuro.
3. Also known as “dramatic illumination,” tenebrism is a style of figurative painting in which certain elements are illuminated against a predominantly dark setting through chiaroscuro, creating a dramatic effect. Many 17th-century painters, especially those from Spain, the Netherlands, and Naples, used the style and are hence referred to as “tenebrists.”
4. Greek: *Ἀριστοτέλης* (Aristotélēs), pronounced [aristotélɛ:s]
5. Medusa (Ancient Greek: *Μέδουσα*, “guardian, protectress”), in Greek mythology, was a daughter of Phorcys and Ceto, and the only mortal among her two, immortal sisters. Medusa’s gaze would turn those who looked at her to stone.
6. Another character in Greek mythology, Perseus (Greek: *Περσεύς*) was the son of Zeus and Danaë, and one of the earliest greatest ancient Greek heroes. The myths describe him as the founder of the city of Mycenae and the Perseid dynasty. Perseus beheaded Medusa and saved Andromeda from Poseidon’s sea monster, Cetus. He was also the half-brother of Heracles.
7. The Baroque was a period in architecture, painting, music, and sculpture that began in late-16th century Italy and dominated Europe throughout the 18th century before rising to popularity in Central and South Americas. The style was characterized by greater creative freedom as well as the use of large numbers of forms that sometimes blended together. The word baroque comes from the Portuguese term *barroco*, meaning “a flawed pearl.” Some also suggest that the word means “absurd,” “ugly,” “ridiculous,” or “bizarre.” It was in fact originally used to mock the style, because critics believed that one should never design a building that deviated from the principles and elements of Greek and Roman architecture, and described such deviation as “unfortunate bad taste.” However, when the style rose to wider popularity, the word came to be used synonymously with “majestic” and “luxurious.”
8. The term mannerism dominated art and literature in the 17th century and gradually took on different and vague meanings. In the general sense, it refers to the contrived, extravagant, and ostentatious use of artistic techniques. In particular, however, it refers to the period of Italian painting, sculpture, and

architecture spanning from the High Renaissance to the Baroque. It has also been used to describe some of the important styles in European art that emerged after the death of Raphael and lasted until the end of the 16th century. These styles departed from Renaissance classicism and reflected certain historical events, such as the Protestant Reformation and the religious Northern Wars.

9. Giotto di Bondone (1267 – 1337) was a 14th-century Italian painter, muralist, and architect, whose Gothic style and break from Byzantine art initiated a series of great developments in Western art.

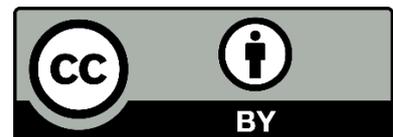
10. Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528) was a German painter, printmaker, and mathematician of the German Renaissance. Hailed as the greatest printmaker of his day, he created inimitable woodcut and steel engraving prints that circulated across the Western world, establishing his far-reaching influence on 16th-century European art. Many art scholars regard him as the greatest German painter of all time. Dürer was a rare figure in the history of art in achieving widespread fame and influence during his lifetime.

Reference list

- Aristotle. (1990). *Poetica* (A. Zarrinkoub, Trans.). Tehran: Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab.
- Gombrich, E. (2000). *The Story of Art* (A. Ramin, Trans.). Tehran: Ney.
- Guttuso, R. (2005). *Caravaggio*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications.
- Matthew Gospel (2005). *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pakbaz, R. (2011). *Encyclopedia of Art*. Tehran: Farhang-e Mo'aser.
- Piravi Vanak, M. & Niknafs, A. (2010). Ta'zieh Plays and Tragedy: A Comparative Study Based on Aristotle's Theories. *The Humanities Journal*, 1(63), 31–54.
- Saliba, J. (1987). *Philosophical Culture* (M. Sanei Darreh Bidi, Trans.). Tehran: Hekmat.
- Soltan Kashefi, J. (2018). Catharsis in Music and Drama, and Its Reflection in Painting and Printmaking. *Dramatic Arts and Music*, 8 (16), 131–113.
- Young, J. (2016). *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (H. Amiri-Ara, Trans.). Tehran: Qoqnoos.
- Zeimaran, M. (2019). *Falsafe-ye Honar-e Arastu* [Aristotle's Philosophy of Art]. Tehran: Matn.

COPYRIGHTS

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with publication rights granted to the Bagh-e Nazar Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Sarkarati, F. & Alipour, R. (2022). Aristotelian Tragedy and the Art of Caravaggio: A Comparative Study Based on the Concept of Catharsis *Bagh-e Nazar*, 19(108), 77-88.

DOI: 10.22034/BAGH.2022.292967.4926

URL: http://www.bagh-sj.com/article_145706.html?lang=en

