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Catharsis in *Oedipus Rex*

The word "catharsis" comes from the Greek word "katharsis," meaning to purge, purify, or cleanse. [Catharsis, in drama and literature](#), refers to a **climactic** moment of a story in which the characters' and/or audience's emotions are released after having been built up throughout the story. In other words, catharsis occurs after the dramatic tension raised by the events of the plot has increased to the point where it boils over. The feeling of release that the characters or audience experience comes from the satisfaction of their expectations. Pity and fear are the most common emotions to be "purged" in catharsis because they are easily built up and easily related to. The climactic moment that causes catharsis usually takes the form of a big reveal, reversal, or plot twist, and often produces a reaction of shock, disbelief, or horror in the audience (other emotions, like happiness and sadness, are also possible, but pity and fear are the most common). Most often, catharsis occurs toward the end of the story because emotion needs time to be built as events unfold over the course of the story.

The ancient Greek philosopher **Aristotle** writes about catharsis in his master treatise on drama, *Poetics*. Aristotle considers catharsis to be one of the main reasons that humans enjoy theater and art. He upholds Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* as a perfect example of catharsis for multiple reasons, including:

- The action of the play leads to cathartic moments in a logical way
- The cathartic moments are observable

These elements have led *Oedipus Rex* to become one of the most widely cited instances of catharsis in tragedy.

Analysis of Catharsis in *Oedipus Rex*

In *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, King Oedipus has been tasked with removing the plague from his city, Thebes. To do this, he must find out who killed Laius, the city's previous king, and kill him or drive him out of the city. Oedipus is told that the killer is in Thebes and he

resolves to do whatever it takes to track him down. Oedipus visits the blind prophet Tiresias to find out what he can about the matter. Tiresias tells Oedipus that he, Oedipus, is the murderer. Tiresias also reveals that Laius is [Oedipus's father](#) and [Jocasta](#) (Oedipus's wife) is Oedipus's mother. Oedipus does not believe him, but as he continues to investigate Laius's murder, he realizes that Tiresias is telling the truth. Oedipus's refusal to believe Tiresias is an example of Oedipus's **hubris**, or excessive pride, which turns out to be his tragic flaw. Oedipus's hubris increases the tension and dramatic irony of the play by delaying Oedipus's inevitable fate, providing more time for his miseries to compound.

Oedipus did not know who his real parents were because he was raised by his adoptive parents, [Polybus](#) and Merope, in Corinth. Oedipus left Corinth after the oracle Apollo told him he was fated to kill his father and couple with his mother. This same prediction was the reason that Oedipus's real parents, Laius and Jocasta, tried to kill him when he was born. When he was a baby, they bound his feet, threw him into the mountains, and left him for dead. However, baby Oedipus was discovered by a shepherd who delivered him to Polybus and Merope. Later on, when Oedipus flees Corinth, fearing that he will kill Polybus and marry Merope, he encounters his real father, Laius, at a crossroads, and kills him because he is in the way.

He continues to Thebes where he marries Jocasta and fathers several children with her. Therefore, the very act of trying to escape his fate is what brings his fate about, which is why Aristotle lauds *Oedipus Rex* as a perfect example of Greek tragedy. Each moment in the play where Oedipus's fate is foreshadowed or alluded to is an instance of dramatic tension building, which is why the catharsis at the end equates to a huge release of emotion. Some of these moments include:

- When Oedipus consults Tiresias (lines 340 - 527)
- When Jocasta tells the story of Laius's death (lines 778 - 830)
- When Oedipus tells the story of his upbringing and flight from Corinth (lines 847 - 928).

Quotes & Catharsis Examples in Oedipus the King

The major cathartic moment in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* occurs when Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus stabs out his own eyes with gold pins. This moment is reported to the audience by a messenger, who states:

And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck,
cradled high in a woven noose, spinning,
swinging back and forth. And when he (Oedipus) saw her,
giving a low, wrenching sob that broke our hearts,
slipping the halter from her throat, he eased her down,
in a slow embrace he laid her down, poor thing . . .
then, what came next, what horror we beheld!
He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins
holding her robes—and lifting them high,
looking straight up into the points,
he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, "You,
you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!
Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen,
blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind
from this hour on! Blind in the darkness—blind!"

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the role of catharsis in tragedy?

In tragedy, the role of catharsis is to release the characters' or audience's emotions, which have built up over the course of the story according to the events of the plot. The climactic moment that causes catharsis usually takes the form of a big reveal, reversal, or plot twist, and often produces a reaction of shock, disbelief, or horror in the audience.

What are two emotions often built up and released in cathartic tragedy?

Two emotions that are often built up and released in cathartic tragedy are pity and fear because pity and fear are easy to build up and easy to empathize with. Other emotions, like happiness and sadness, are also possible, but pity and fear are the most common.