

Revised Definition: Catharsis  
June 12, 2020

Unit 1:3 is a practice in writing definitions with clarity by understanding how and why it is important to. Students write three definitions (parenthetical, sentence and expanded) on a chosen term from their discipline.

Language utilizes words differently depending on many factors such as context or purpose. The word "catharsis" can be used in many situations or ways. In literature and in a literary context, it has not been formally defined yet but is a significant word and concept with an overarching interpretation, with information and importance on the distinctions.

**Audience and Situation:** A play writer invites their friend to watch a new play. After being immersed in the story and connected with the emotions along with the actors and actresses, the friend feel an intense sensation at the end that cannot quite be fully or simply described. Instead, they come out of the theatre feeling an obvious change in their emotional state. When the play writer asks the friend how they found the play, they say it feels as if something has been "lifted off their shoulders," that they have realized something or feel differently about an aspect of the play that reflected some part of their own life. In return, the play writer realizes their friend has achieved a catharsis and explains what it is.

**Parenthetical Definition:** Catharsis refers to an emotional state a person can reach or experience through consuming art. The word "catharsis" can also mean "purification" or "purging" of feelings.

**Sentence Definition:** Catharsis as a literary term. Catharsis is the arousing of emotions already dormant in someone and the releasing of those emotions through experiencing an Art or connecting with it completely. These emotions evoked, or "drawn to the surface," by the artist and to the forefront of the audience's mind, can often be unwanted emotions such as, in the genre of tragedy, sadness or anger thus when released, is a catharsis. However, catharsis can also be the releasing of positive emotions, such as in the genre comedy, through laughter. It is important to note an audience may have a catharsis through Art while the artist themselves may also experience a catharsis when creating.

### **Expanded Definition:**

Etymology: In Greek, "catharsis" means "cleansing." In literature, it derives from Aristotle's usage of "tragedy" in his book, Poetics though was never explicitly defined. It is a representation (of anything) that when comes to fruition fully, achieves a catharsis.

History: Catharsis and it's purposes or meanings have multiple paths.

- Medically, in the Hippocratic school of medicine, catharsis was a means of "purging" the body of anything that might have been harmful. It was thought, negative emotions could build up in the body and needed to be released. Through intense "therapeutic purgation" (process of cleansing the body through emotional stimulus) and achieving a catharsis, the catharsis heals the body.
- In religion, it is closely related to the idea of "purification." It is meant to free someone of guilt, falsity and "moral pollution."
- Finally, the intellectual interpretation on the term "catharsis" refers to figures such as Aristotle and Plato as well as numerous texts discussing two main explanations: emotional and ethical. The term has continued to develop and has had many interpretations and uses since.

The history is important as it shows there is a blending of all the interpretations when used in literary text. It is an abstract concept, requiring leeway for the metaphysical (existence outside of the human senses and material world), as much as it is a technical idea. For something like an emotion to actualize in many people, through Art, means there is a strong connection which in turn means the presence of empathy and suggests the ability to affect others beyond what can be completely, factually explained.

**Visual:** The Scream by Edvard Munch can be interpreted as either a catharsis or evoke a catharsis in someone.



**Example:**

The original title of The Scream by Edvard Munch in German was Der Schrei der Natur (The Scream of Nature) and in Norwegian, Skrik (Shriek). The description of the sky Munch recalled being "blood red" is especially vivid. Through the composition, there can be an intense feeling, energy or emotion emitted and have an effect on others. The composition can bring forth an emotion in someone that was once suppressed or cause someone to feel a release of the same emotions the Art expresses, having a catharsis. Again, the audience may experience a catharsis through Art but an artist themselves may also have a catharsis. For example,

Munch wrote: "I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature."

**Citations:**

Munch, Edvard. Oslo, Norway, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Scream](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scream).

“The Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition.” The Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition, Edited by Roland Greene et al., Princeton University Press, 2012, DOI: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.1515/9781400841424>