

The Contemporary Manner of the 'Pity' in the Concept of Classical Meaning

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ABSTRACT

The concept of pity has been continually debated as one of the major characteristics of tragedy, as highlighted by Aristotle. Especially, this concept might be changed according to the change of drama characters, relying on times. Aristotle says that 'pity' must be included in the accounts of tragedy along with fear. Historically, divergent interpretations have been understood in different meanings based on the worldview of each era. This thesis attempts to explore 'pity' including how it has been understood and discussed since Aristotle first mentioned it, and search for a way of having pity on a person who undergoes misery until now in the times of losing the tragedy in real meaning.

Keywords: Pity, Fear, Aristotle, Tragedy, the Other.

1. THE SIN BEYOND HAMARTIA

Aristotle refers to 'catharsis' in the *Poetics* and draws the concept of pity and fear. For understanding this concept, it is a prerequisite to make references to other works of Aristotle. Also, the discussions that leave the argument of the future generation should be fully considered. Aristotle says, "the one (pity) is directed towards the man who does not deserve his misfortune and the other [1]," in the chapter 13 in the *Poetics*. He describes the person of pity. "Such is a man who is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake [1]." His reference to the person who arouses the feeling of justice and pity is stated in his other book, *Rhetoric*.

Pity may be defined as a pain for apparent evil, destructive or painful, befalling a person who does not deserve it, when we might expect such evil to befall ourselves or some of our friends, and when, moreover, it seems near. The persons whom we pity are, first, our friends, if they are not very near friends; in the case of near friends, we feel as if we ourselves were threatened. ... Now the dreadful is different from the piteous, and tends to drive out pity, and often serves to rouse its opposite. Again, men pity when the danger is near themselves. And they pity those like them in age, in character, in moral state, in rank, in birth; for all these examples make it more probable that the case may become their own; since here, again, we must take it as a general maxim that all things, which we fear for ourselves, we pity when they happen to others [2].

According to the statements of Aristotle, we have pity on those who are close to us who do not have reason to undergo pain in association with the people who are suffering. This study will examine the meaning of being close to us in a certain respect and elucidate the perspectives and standards about the reason why those persons do not need to undergo pain. This clarification will be conducive to illuminating the concept of 'pity' in the dramatic art.

According to the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, 'the reason why heroes do not need to undergo pain' is that the pain of heroes exceeds the appropriate level, compared to the responsibility of them. 'A certain flaw' of 'the person who falls in misery because of a certain flaw,' stated in the *Poetics*, is the translation of ἀμαρτία (hamartia). The answer to the debate about how human action can occur due to 'hamartia' is found in the moral features of human action, whose type analysis was conducted by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle analyzes the types of actions with ambiguous responsibility in the chapter 1 of the volume 3 in his book, *Nicomachean Ethics*. He puts the standards in distinguishing sin or non-sin from the cause of an action. He maintains that pity or compassion arises in the unknowing action due to the ignorance of several conditions by identifying whether an action is knowing or unknowing, or the motive of an action is inside or outside. An unknowing action is largely divided into 'the act caused by ignorance' and 'the act, committed within ignorance'. Even though the action is conducted by ignorance, the person who regrets his action is classified into the unknowing doer, but the person who does not regret is just a doer because he does not have the intention. The action, committed within ignorance is divided into several cases: 'the case of not knowing what we should do or should not do,' 'the case of not knowing surrounding situations or the object of an action,' and 'the action due to rage or craving.' The first is the

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case of a wicked person, who does not know what is beneficial so that the words 'unknowing' is not used in this case, and the second is the case of not knowing the surrounding situation or object so that the words 'unknowing' can be used in this case. Pity or compassion arises in this case. Lastly, the third is to know general and individual condition, but to act irrationally so that it is difficult to regard it as unknowing. This case deserves to be criticized.

According to his writing, 'harmartia' is not the flaw due to the simple ignorance and misjudgment but it is the moral sin which is caused by idiosyncratic defect, which is accompanied by moral responsibility. On this occasion, we see that a certain character bears the excessive responsibility of his moral sin.¹ For this reason, we naturally take pity on a person thinking that there is no reason for him to undergo responsibility with such thing at the same time.

In addition, as stated in the *Poetics* chapter 13, the fact that a person who makes us have pity on him should be close to us represents that this person is in the middle of 'the virtuous person and the heinous person'. In this time, he should be "one of those who stand in great repute and prosperity [1]," even though he is not superior in terms of virtue and justice. Also, a tragic person should be close to us in a sense that the emotion of fear as well as pity should be presupposed before catharsis. It is reinforced when we see that a person who is similar to us falls into misery.

However, this thesis points out that Aristotle says that the tragic person who is an object of pity is "one of those who stand in great repute and prosperity." For this reason, there have been considerable views about the premise that a tragic person should be a hero. However, it is difficult to find a tragic person who is close to us only if heroic person can be a tragic figure. In relation to this issue, this study will refer to the solution to this view.

2. THE CHARACTER WHO IS NOT DEFINED WITH THE POETIC JUSTICE

Dryden who was a playwright and critic in the restoration of Royal Rule mentioned pity in the preface of *Troilus and Cressida*, written by Shakespeare as following:

... when we see that the most virtuous, as well as the greatest, are not exempt from such misfortunes, that consideration moves pity in us, and insensibly works us to be helpful to, and tender over, the distressed; which is the noblest and most god-like of moral virtues. Here it is observable that it is absolutely necessary to make a man virtuous, if we desire he should be pitied: we lament not, but detest, a wicked man; we are glad when we behold his crimes are punished, and that poetical justice is done upon him [3].

¹ Harmartia is generally used as translation words of flaw, error, tragic defect, error in judgment, mistake and etc. Aristotle does not clarify its meaning in the *Poetics*. If we analyze a moral action of the tragedy based on his other book, *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is seen to be a sin that moral responsibility is accompanied.

As it is stated in the quote, Dryden expresses the person who arouses pity as the most virtuous as well as the greatest. It can cause our misunderstanding that tragic figure is far from us. However, our misunderstanding decreases in the expression like 'we lament not, but detest a wicked man.' The wicked person whom we cannot detest is the antipode of "the most virtuous as well as the greatest," implying that he is not wicked. The reference "we are glad that poetical justice is done" contains meaning that we lament that poetical justice is not equally applied to all men, who are not wicked among the most virtuous as well as the greatest.

3. UNIVERSAL AND BENEFICIAL VIRTUE

There is one principle, which is not recognized by Thomas Hobbs. It is the principle, given to mankind in which strong self-love is reduced, depending on circumstance, and the desire of self-preservation is lessened prior to the emergence of self-love. This principle makes human beings mitigate the desire of self-love from the innate emotion to avoid compatriots' pain. ... It is pity (pitié). It is the propensity of all men who are vulnerable and likely to fall in the misery [4].

Rousseau advocates the virtuous nature of human beings arguing that pity is ahead of all reflecting habits of human beings as well as universal and beneficial virtues. Rousseau maintains that pity is the inherent emotion of human beings that do not want to see compatriots' pain. Compatriot means a person who is vulnerable and likely to fall into misery like us. If we consider this character as both object and subject of pity, we can truly understand that they are close to us.

In fact, what is the generosity or lenience or human love, if it is not the pity which is applied to the wicked or sinner or all human beings? We can reckon that kindness or friendship is derived from the unchangeable pity which is inclined to the specific objects. If we do not want to see that a particular person undergoes pain, it would imply that we want him to be happy [4].

For Rousseau, pity is to contribute to the mutual preservation of entire species. Even depraved public morals are the natural occurrence which cannot be destroyed. In other words, pity is the innate emotion that we hold because we do not want to see others' pain. The pity of Rousseau exists in the source of all social virtue so that it should be sought in the prior state of civilization that does not form the moral concept. Accordingly, the pity concept of Rousseau helps us clarify the person who is close to us who is the object of pity even though we do not know the time when the person undergoes the pain without reason.

4. MAN AHEAD OF SOCIAL STATUS

The pity concept of Rousseau opens the moral possibility of the tragedy to Lessing who is a playwright and critic. For

Lessing, tragedy is to arouse the emotion of pity on human beings in order to make human beings more virtuous and moral. In other words, pity exists for attaining moral purpose. It needs for the audience to feel the pain of a drama character for the emotional touch of audience and pity. In this occasion, empathy of the audience should be premised. In this case, the condition of the hero is that the hero should be the same as one of ourselves.

... this possibility arises, and becomes the more probable, if the poet does not make him out to be worse than mankind in general, if he lets him think and act as we should have thought and acted in his position, or at least as we might have thought and acted; in short, if he portrays him as one of ourselves [5].

However, the insistence of Lessing does not mean the abolition of 'class restriction rule' argued by Martin Opitz. It means that a person who is portrayed by a poet should be equipped with the universal nature, which is intrinsic to human beings. In addition, Lessing accepts 'hamartia' and puts the cause of the tragedy in the mistakes of weakness of a good man.

The outcome of Lessing is to rediscover the error tragedy. He got the tragic plot of error from the tragedy playwright of Athens that the tragic hero prepares the cause of his ruin unknowingly. He also thought that it would be enlightened or enlightening alternatives of experiment tragedy of Rome and the Baroque [6].

Lessing discovers 'hamartia' in the works of tragedy playwrights and applies it into his view of tragedy. He does not confine hero into the heroic figure like the argument of the tragedy theories of citizens while expanding it into the citizen class because he believes that the identification security of stage and audiences might be guaranteed in the moral aspect of man rather than the social status or class. It is confirmed in the statement of Lessing that feudal lords and heroes can be objects of pity and characters of the tragedy in a sense that they are human beings.

5. THE ANPLIFICATION OF PITY AND FEAR

Contrary to the thinking of Lessing that we can be a moral being through pity of the tragedy, Nietzsche says that we cannot grow morally through having a pity on the person in the tragedy but get the pleasure of life through reflecting ourselves.

Nietzsche differently understood what Aristotle had thought. According to the understanding of Aristotle, tragedy removes fear and purifies the dreadful feeling through the rough discharge of emotion. Meanwhile, Nietzsche maintains that tragedy is to obtain the pleasure even including the pleasure of destruction for the realization of permanent pleasure of the creation within us going beyond pity and fear [7].

Nietzsche thinks that the thing that is delivered by tragedy

artists is the fearless state in the face of the fearful and doubtful thing. It is the state to reach the Catharsis of emotion by the event of reminding the reader of pity and fear just as Aristotle mentioned earlier.

Even though all impulses are reinforced through practicing satisfaction for a long time, it is periodically alleviated. It is possible to resolve pity and fear by tragedy in the individual case. Nonetheless, pity and fear can be bigger under the influence of the tragedy [8].

However, 'pity and fear' on the other, arousing the Catharsis of Aristotle, is not appropriate as an instrument for accomplishing the fearless state. Rather, it plays a role to amplify 'self-pity' and fear by disintegrating, weakening, and depressing something that arouses fear or pity like the 'self-pity' which was mentioned by Plato.

6. PITY FOR THE UNIVERSAL PAIN

Nietzsche argues that our pity and fear becomes larger as we approach pity and fear repeatedly and the accumulation of this experience weakens our life. However, the accounts of Nietzsche can be refuted by the views before the times of Nietzsche.

Tragedy portrays the universal pain which is likely to happen to all of us. We feel our vulnerability as well as fear and shudder in front of the size of the pain which is unexpected. However, this feeling can serve as a stepping stone for reaching the pain of other beings if we are not attached to the selfish and self-focused sentiment [9].

Kim Sang-bong criticizes Nietzsche about his selfish and self-focused sentiment which is only apprehensive of self. The maintenance of Kim Sang-bong is consistent with that of Lessing. He says that we can understand others and have pity on them by joining the pain of others in the tragedy. It is the pity on a universal pain which is undergone by all of us going beyond our pity and fear. Thus, contrary to the maintenance of Nietzsche that we can attain permanent pleasure of the creation within us going beyond pity and fear, we can find a reason why we should accept our life in the pure pleasure when we experience of our expansion in life by joining the pain of others.

7. PITY IN A WORLD OF LOSING THE TRAGEDY

Pity, one of principal characteristics of tragedy, has been continually debated since Aristotle. As it is stated in the *Poetics*, Aristotle mentions that we have pity on a person who is severely punished more than the sin that he has committed. Dryden says that we have pity when a lofty and moral person falls into misery. In other words, pity arises when poetical justice is not realized. Rousseau maintains that pity arises because we do not want to see the pain of others who are the same as us. In addition, Lessing notices the pity on a man regardless of social status through the interpretation of the

Aristotle's view. Meanwhile, Nietzsche argues that pity and fear increases under the influence of tragedy. However, we can find the pleasure of positive life through expanding our realms from self by joining the pain of others. Thus, we can find out how the way of considering the concept of pity has changed with the times.

However, there is one fixed despite the changes of the times. Man who we pity is not someone belong in a specific classification but man himself like us. Accordingly, until today, which is the era of tragic loss, we continually have pity on 'the other' who is a person just like us who are under the unreasonable misery.

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