

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MUSTANSIRIYA
COLLEGE OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**THE CONCEPT OF CATHARSIS IN
SELECTED PLAYS OF ARTHUR
MILLER AND EUGENE O'NEILL**

**A THESIS
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ABSTRACT

In response to Plato's attack on Greek tragedy for encouraging a shameful indulgence in sorrowful emotion, Aristotle argues that tragedy, on the contrary, allows a healthy release of emotions. The most influential theorist of the genre of drama is Aristotle, whose *Poetics* has guided the composition and critical interpretation of tragedy for more than two thousand years. According to Aristotle, pity and fear are the natural human response to spectacles of pain and suffering, especially to the sort of suffering that can strike anybody at any time. In the *Poetics* (fourth century. B.C.), Aristotle laid out a standard pattern for tragedy, which all latter playwrights have either followed or reacted against. For Aristotle, Catharsis was the prime purpose of a dramatic art, because it cleanses the audience of all their disturbing emotions, such as fear and pity. The audiences are able to suffer with their tragic heroes in an emotional workout that leaves them wiser and even mature human beings.

In modern times, Catharsis expresses itself in new ways as life changes. Modern audiences are not like the Greeks or Elizabethans. The disastrous events of the twentieth century, the two world wars, the destructive use of atomic power and the

disintegration of family and community life have caused a radical diminution of the vision of life, which was embodied by the earlier domestic and political tragedy. Although Catharsis in the Aristotelian sense has undergone an enormous change, its main bases have remained the same.

The classical tragedy may be incompatible with American democracy. Yet Catharsis can be found, namely, in the works of the two modern American playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. This proves that Catharsis is as important and relevant to modern literary criticism as it has always been. As the concept of Catharsis is dynamic, then its investigation will remain vital. The thesis aims at showing that the most effective type of drama is the one which is oriented towards Catharsis, which neither seeks pure thoughts without emotions, nor naked emotions without any thoughts, but rather a balance between thought and feeling. Thus, the present thesis attempts to investigate the concept of Catharsis in the selected plays of the above mentioned playwrights. The thesis falls into three chapters and a conclusion followed by bibliography.

The first Chapter is an introduction that examines the concept of Catharsis in general ; it traces its first appearance in English literature and its development up to the present time. In addition, this Chapter examines the concept of Catharsis in modern American drama.

The second Chapter discusses Eugene O'Neill's opinion concerning the concept of Catharsis. The chapter also deals with O'Neill's contribution to American drama and analyses all the issues that are related to the concept of Catharsis in two of O'Neill's plays *The Hairy Ape* (1922), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The two plays will be analysed thoroughly in the chapter.

The third Chapter deals extensively with the modern concept of Catharsis in the works of the American dramatist Arthur Miller, who is also one of the most famous American playwrights of the twentieth century. The chapter discusses Miller's own definition and employment of Catharsis in his works. His two plays *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) will be discussed as representatives of his prime concern with the element of catharsis in his dramas. The conclusion sums up the findings of the study, which is followed by a Bibliography and The Abstract in Arabic.