



Literature as a Cause of or Cure for Melancholia

—A Case Study of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

Zhuo Qiu

School of Literature, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710119, Shaanxi, China

E-mail address: 772095646@qq.com

Abstract. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* could be evaluated in its therapeutic effect on melancholia as a classical literary text. To access this therapeutic effect, this essay traces back to Aristotle's conception of *catharsis* and attempts to identify the elements that could contribute to the catharsis of the audience in both texts. As it is suggested by Matthew Bell, 'the underlying aim of most of the psychological treatments was to purge or purify the bodily system,'^[1] this essay attempts to interpret how the text leads to the purgation of an audience's 'fear and sadness' during their reading process. Through the illustration of the such process, this essay also intends to point out the threat of melancholia for a potential melancholic because the purgation process also implies a kind of stimulation and imbalance. Once the purgation process is blocked at the stage of stimulation, it will constitute as a cause of melancholia.

Keywords: Melancholia; catharsis; Goethe; *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

1 Introduction

I would like to start my essay by reassessing the definition of *catharsis* given by Aristotle. *Catharsis* is firstly named by Aristotle as an effect of tragedy. He announces that 'Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude', 'in the form of action, not of a narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis, or purgation, of these emotions.'^[2] Scholars have given comprehensive interpretation of this statement from various perspectives. However, one thing which has seldom been touched is the role of imitation. Imitation here seems to be taken for granted as 'a make-believe series of event.'^[3] Far more than just imitating the real world to persuade the audience to believe, the imitation is endowed with the prosperity that 'excites pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation'. The imitation should contribute to build up the interacting relationship between the audience and the performance and should be persuasive enough to manipulate the audience's emotions so that pity and fear would be inspired. To achieve such persuasiveness, 'a stylizing of reality in which the ordinary features of our world are brought into focus by a certain exaggeration' needs to be presented'.^[4]

To enable the process of catharsis to complete smoothly, a safety zone should be guaranteed by the exaggeration so that the audience would be free to pull away from what he recognizes and whom he identifies with. Furthermore, an audience's recognition depends on 'the form of action, instead of narrative'. To make the circumstance even more treacherous, an audience's desire to execute has been aroused. When the desire is so strong, so urgent and so overwhelming, an audience is inclined to obey it and neglect catharsis. Where such desire would lead the audience to depends on the degree to which he identifies with the plot and the character.

2 Discussion

It is not only the blurry border between the performance and the reality that misleads the audience. While Aristotle intends to create this mutual, distant and innocuous space by imitation, he expects such space to have enough capacity to accommodate 'the law of probability'. When he refers to the mission of a poet, he says 'by the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity'^[5]. Here we could detect that the 'the law of probability or necessity' should be shared by both the poet and the audience so that when 'a person of a certain type' is described by the poet it is recognizable to the audience. In other words, this 'law of probability' is embodied and delivered through a poet's works. The poet is empowered to announce and justify 'the law of probability'. The illustration of 'the law of probability' actually restricts and even eliminates the probability of the reality, as well as sets up the ending of a tragedy as normality and inevitability.

The Sorrows of Young Werther is a typical epistolary novel of single letter pattern. Different from other novels of the same type in that era, Goethe creatively adds the participation of an editor throughout the novel. This editor represents an educated reader. He is supposed to be professional and rational. It is his responsibility to honestly provide the information he knows and make an explanation wherever necessary. What's interesting is we could also find the editor's remarks and revisions through Werther's letters, for example, in the letter of June 16 in Book 1, when Charlotte asserted that certain book was not her taste, something seems to be deliberately omitted and the editor's words in brackets appears: 'We feel obliged to suppress the passage in the letter, to prevent anyone from feeling aggrieved, although no author need pay much attention to the opinion of a mere girl, or that of an unsteady young man'^[6]. This short interruption ideally exemplifies the role of the editor in the novel. First, the editor is authorised by his grasp of information. He occasionally stands out to announce his authority so that a reader would be self-conscious during the reading process. While the style of letters intends to imitate the intimacy and privacy in real life, the presence of the editor functions as the hint of the distance. His existence makes it barely possible for a reader to consistently identify himself with whom Werther was writing to. Second, the editor seems to be very considerate, taking good care of all kinds of potential readers. As it is implied, even authors with reputation would be intrigued by the book. Such concern not only emphasizes on the popularity and universality of the book, but also assures the reader with the fact that he is reading together with an invisible community.

No matter how lonely or depressed he is suffering, as he regards himself as those who 'owing to fortune or through thine own fault, thou canst not find a dearer companion', he doesn't need to be embarrassed to acknowledge it. Because the editor, who is proved to have evaluated the influence of this book before publication, promised him that he is not alone. Such indication encourages a reader to discover and reveal himself, which constitutes the premise of the catharsis of his melancholy.

Coincidentally, the editor has clearly stated his intention of presenting this book, namely the catharsis and relief of the readers. As it is shown in the preface, 'And thou, good soul, who sufferest the same distress as he endured once, draw comfort from his sorrows; and let this little book be thy friend'^[7]. With 'this little book be thy friend', a reader is officially welcomed by the group of melancholic who 'sufferest the same distress as he endured once'. The exposition of Werther's sorrows, as a trigger to 'excite pity and fear' inside the reader, would provide an access for a reader to experience, announce and catharsis. The therapeutic effect of this book is clearly pointed out here by the editor's words.

Paradoxically, the danger of Aristotle's tragedy also appears here. With the editor's remarks of 'The reader need not take the trouble to look for the place thus designated. We have found it necessary to change the names given in the original'^[8], it would be easy for a reader to compare Walheim to anywhere he knows, for instance, where himself exactly stays. When the editor's words are intended to remind the reader of the artificialness, it accidentally expands the capacity and universality of Werther's experience. The specificity of the stories is deprived, and rather than 'take the trouble to look for the place thus designated', a reader could simply trace the symbolic Walheim by its given characteristics, or by his own imagination of 'a snug, comfortable place, which possesses peculiar charms for me.' Meanwhile, if we take 'the law of probability' into consideration, we would easily find that the most important thing that makes the law effective in Werther's case is his excessive attention in his inner world and 'a loss of interest in the outside world'^[9]. Werther uses his wild and unstable perceptions to describe the world. The link between failure of love and suicide is one of the inevitable cause and effect of his philosophy. 'Yes, Charlotte, why should I not avow it? One of us must die: it shall be Werther'. The word 'must' perfectly explains how 'the law of probability' is constructed.

The probability originated from a 'Must' rationalizes a melancholic's choice as if it is inevitable, as if he is forced to so by an intangible force. However, no matter it is melancholia, his inner disease, that cause his illusions to believe so, or it is his self-indulgence that routinely justifies every decision of his by a 'must', this 'must' has been presented to a reader, which means the 'must' fatal to Werther transforms into another kind of 'must' to a reader. Because of 'the structural union of the parts', if a reader ever tries to understand Werther's situation, it would be the first step for him to initialize Werther's law of the 'must'. The existence of such a 'must', which excludes and denies other probabilities, in turn to be surprisingly appealing with its simplicity and inevitability. What's more important, it cultivates a reader to get used to the logic of self-justification, to avoid explaining everything under the excuse of a 'must'. Both the indication of Werther's universality and the initialization of Werther's perspective encourages a reader to start a self-discovery to recognize and identify with Werther, in

other words, to create a Werther combined with his own image. This creation is such a risk not only because Werther's melancholia functions as an invasion to the reader, but also because it would be very easy to blur the distinction between Werther's and his own personality. Because Werther is this kind of a character, 'To his spirit and character you cannot refuse your admiration and love'^[10], it would be reasonable to follow Werther if he is expecting the same admiration and love, or even the pity expressed by the tears you can't deny. All the elements explain why *The Sorrows of Young Werther* serves as a trigger of melancholia. As 'melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love', a reader tends to suffer from such symptoms because the reality disappoints them so much when they have a high expectation for sublimity and purity that potentially exists in Werther's world.

While Aristotle attempts to use imitation as a bait of the audience's catharsis, he does not clarify that this imitation is bidirectional, even though it could be ambiguously detected that the effect of catharsis would never be achieved if the imitation could not be recognized by the audience. But when the audience recognizes the imitation, it is the possibility that he himself is also able to perform in the same way that promotes his recognition. The unconscious blur of the self-image pushes the reader to the inclination of the character whenever he gets confused.

3 Conclusions

To summarize, we could detect that Goethe keeps an open space for a reader to catharsis by his distant but private presentation of Werther's sorrows. However, a potential stimulation is agitated during the process of catharsis because the receiver has to identify himself with the fictional character, which constitutes a potential trigger of melancholia. Such effect could be traced back to Aristotle's identification of catharsis.

References

1. Bell, M., 2015. *Melancholia: The Western Malady*. Cambridge University Press. p 67
2. Fergusson, F., 1961. Aristotle's poetics. Hill and Wang. ebook from <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics>.
3. Daniels, C.B. and Scully, S., 1992. Pity, fear, and catharsis in Aristotle's Poetics. *Noûs*, 26(2), pp.204-217. p206
4. Davis, M., 2000. The politics of philosophy: a commentary on Aristotle's Politics. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. p3
5. Fergusson, F., 1961. Aristotle's poetics. Hill and Wang. ebook from <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics>
6. Goethe, J., 2017. *The sorrows of young Werther*. Satya Books. p18
7. Goethe, J., 2017. The sorrows of young Werther. Satya Books. preface
8. Goethe, J., 2017. The sorrows of young Werther. Satya Books. p9
9. Freud, S., 2005. On murder, mourning and melancholia (Vol. 846). Penguin UK. Ebook from Google Books
10. Goethe, J., 2017. The sorrows of young Werther. Satya Books. preface

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

