



Aristotle's Theory of Artistic Mimesis : Beyond Oskar Schindler's Jewish Redemption Presented in Thomas Keneally's Schindler's List

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Abstract

This study attempts to provide a vivid explanation of Oskar Schindler's virtuous act of redemption in the midst of outrageous evil. Employing expository technique, the feelings of pity and fear of Oskar Schindler in Thomas Keneally's **Schindler's List** are analyzed and probed. At the center of the analysis is Aristotle's Theory of Artistic Mimesis, particularly, the concepts of Tragic Mimesis and Catharsis as modified by Jacob Bernays and G. E. Lessing. While many argue that there are inconsistencies in Bernays and Lessing's interpretation of catharsis, their concepts are indispensable in exploring the factors behind Oskar Schindler's virtuous act of redemption and the extent to which these factors sustain the redemption of Schindlerjudens or the Schindler's Jews.

Keywords : Tragic Mimesis, Catharsis

Introduction

Dehumanization is a process by which members of a group of people assert the "inferiority" of another group through subtle or overt acts or statements, which may be directed by an organization (such as a state) or may be the composite of individual sentiments and actions, as with

some types of racism. One of the most common forms of dehumanization born out of the atrocities of the Nazi regime is the **Holocaust**. In his book **Society, State and Nation in Twentieth-Century Europe**, Roderick Philips defines Holocaust as the systematic killing of millions of women, men, and children belonging to groups considered

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by Nazis to be racial, social, or political threats to German government (304). The core of the Holocaust was a network of concentration camps. They were the places where the internment of *undesirables* and opponents of the Nazis were established in Germany in the first days of Hitler's regime (Dawidowicz 198). An undesirable individual referred to people, particularly the Jews, who were considered useless, i.e. too old or too young to work.

As a result of the German atrocities, many writers were inspired to scribble and publish their literary pieces as novels, poems, autobiographies and movies. For instance, **We are Witnesses: Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust** by Jacob Boas employs the genre of autobiography to depict the lives of people and German atrocities during World War II. Lila Perl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan's **Four Perfect Peebles** is a harrowing and moving account about a little girl who is very worried about her family. **The Shawl** by Cynthia Ozick narrates the cruelty of the Nazi regime and its effects on women and children during and after this period. Primo Levi's **Survival in Auschwitz** is a straightforward narrative of the terrible experience Levi had during his journey from Turin, Italy to Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland.

In 1982, Thomas Keneally's **Schindler's List**, the winner of the L.A. Times Fiction and Booker prizes, and the basis of Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film was published. In **Schindler's List**, the true story of Oskar Schindler, the Czech-born southern German industrialist, who risked his life to save over 1,100 of his Jewish factory workers from the death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, is recreated. While it is presented in a series of snapshots, it vividly recounts the lives of the flamboyant profiteer and womanizer Schindler; Schindler's long-suffering wife, Emilie; the brutal **SS** (Nazi Secret Service) commandant Amon Goeth; Schindler's quietly courageous factory manager, Itzhak Stern; and dozens of other Jews who underwent the horrors of the Nazi machinery. At the center of the story, though, are the actions and ambitions of Schindler, who comes to Krakow, Poland, seeking his fortune and ends up outwitting the SS to protect his Jewish employees. What sustains **Schindler's List's** appeal to the readers is that while most novels depicting the Nazi regime concentrated on the hardships and survival of the Jewish factory workers and other victims of the Holocaust, **Schindler's List's** craftsmanship is unique as the author focused on the possibility of doing virtuous acts in the midst of out-



rageous evil. This means that Kenneally's genius is revealed when, instead of putting emphasis on the hardships and survival of the Jews and other Holocaust victims, he explored the possibility of putting Oskar Schindler, the main character of the novel, as the pivotal figure and showing how he was instrumental to the redemption of the Jews.

Specifically, this study would like to answer the following research questions: (a) What factors influenced Oskar Schindler to save the Jews? (b) To what extent are these factors instrumental in Oskar Schindler's act of redemption?

The center of the analysis is Aristotle's Theory of Artistic Mimesis, particularly, the concepts of Tragic Mimesis and Catharsis as modified by Jacob Bernays and G. E. Lessing.

Significance of the Study

The Holocaust is a milestone in the lives of European Jews. As a result, more and more people seek to gain better understanding of this subject matter. Thus, the study on how the Jews were redeemed by a non-Jew provides readers the following benefits.

1. The study is instrumental for the readers' understanding of the lengthy Thomas Kenneally's *Schindler's List*,

specifically, the point-of-view of Oskar Schindler.

2. It could lead to a better appreciation and understanding not only of the remnants of the Holocaust, but also the meritorious act of redemption performed by Oskar Schindler. In short, the study serves as a stepping stone in understanding an individual's perception, imagination and motivation in doing virtuous acts which could be applied in today's life.

3. Through mimesis, some readers could find virtuous representations in their lives, while reading this research, which could be an avenue for doing meritorious acts to their neighbors.

4. Finally, the study could be a guideline for other future studies related to the Jewish Holocaust.

Review of Related Literature and Analysis

The highlights of this chapter include Aristotle's Theory of Artistic Mimesis, particularly the concepts of tragic mimesis and catharsis. Admittedly, different concepts and interpretation emerged as a result of Aristotle's Artistic Mimesis Theory; however, this study concentrates on the interpretation of Jacob Bernays and G. E. Lessing. Other studies related to the redemption of the Jews are also reviewed.



In **The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism**, and in **Aristotle**, Michael Groden (42- 5) and Wheel Wright (291-2), respectively, agree that Aristotle's mimesis describes a process involving the use by different art forms of different means of representation, different manners of communicating that representation to an audience, and different levels of moral and ethical behavior as objects of the artistic representation. They posit further that mimesis is fundamental to our nature as human beings, that human beings are the most imitative of all creatures, those first learning experiences take place through mimesis, and that all human beings take pleasure in mimesis. However, only tragic mimesis and catharsis will be reviewed since they are the most relevant matters in the analysis of the pity and fear felt by Oskar Schindler, a German instrumental in the redemption of the Jews, in Thomas Keneally's **Schindler's List**.

In Aristotle, Wheel Wright defines tragic mimesis as the evocation and representation of emotions such as pity and fear. He vividly defines pity as the painful emotion someone feels toward another person who suffered undeserved misfortune, and fear as the painful emotion someone feels when he realizes that the one who suffers misfortune is someone like him

(296). A concrete example is the tragedy of **Oedipus the King**, which seems to be Aristotle's paradigm of a tragedy. It arouses the reader's (witness) pity for Oedipus' misfortunes at the hands of fate and fear that fate could deal him a similar devastating blow.

An analogous situation is experienced by Oskar Schindler, a German entrepreneur, who happened to dwell with the Jews during the Nazi regime. Thomas Keneally's **Schindler's List**, cites instances such as in Chapter 14 when Oskar Schindler is exposed, for the first time, to the shocking juxtaposition of humans and cattle cars at Prokocim depot. A more vivid picture of the arousal of pity and fear of Oskar Schindler is in Chapter 15. While he was riding a horse with Ingrid, he saw Jewish police armed with truncheons flogging Jews (127). Moreover, in Chapter 19, Oskar notices the insidious Egyptian-looking industry at Plaszow (166). Having witnessed such dispassionate horror, he was plagued with nausea, and his ears were full of an unreal sibilance, as if he had been struck on the head. While viewing this horrible site, Schindler felt an intolerable pity for the Jews (129, 166).

The most memorable and realistic of all that provoked his feeling of pity and fear was when he saw a scarlet child



witnessing a woman shot in the neck. This scene made him see a statement of his government's policy which was not just a temporary aberration. Consequently, a proposition became clear in his mind, i.e. witnesses, such as the red toddler, were permitted to watch the killings since they would be executed anyway.

From the above situations, it is vivid that Oskar Schindler's feelings of pity and fear towards the Jews are representations of his actual experience of seeing Jews suffer, dehumanized, and discriminated. Oskar's feeling of pity is a painful emotion towards the Jews who suffered undeserved misfortune in the hands of the Germans. On the other hand, fear is felt by Oskar upon realizing that the Jews, who suffer misfortune or are treated as a lower class race, are also human beings like him and that this misfortune could possibly befall him and deal him a devastating blow as well.

While under the influence of feeling of pity and fear, as a result of a tragic experience, an individual seeks either to emancipate or purify himself from these feelings. In Chapter 6 of **Poetics**, Aristotle posits that tragic events, by arousing the feelings of pity and fear, provide some sort of therapeutic effect upon the audience's mental health, giving a pleasurable sense

of relief (1449 b 27). Monroe Beardsley, in his book entitled **Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present**, criticizes the sparseness and ambiguity of the Cathartic Concept of Aristotle, which leads to three different interpretations: cognitive, medical and moral (64-65). The last two, which are proposed by Jacob Bernays and G. E. Lessing, and although have loopholes, remain the most accepted interpretations. While both agreed that catharsis refers to the concerned individual's effort to work through the purgation or homeopathic cure of his feelings of pity and fear to a certain occurrence or situation, they differ in their expectations. Jacob Bernays assumes that the audience after witnessing a tragic event suffers from excess emotions of pity and fear which accidentally makes him seek a remedy for this excess through the homeopathic cure with the purpose of eventually eradicating the feelings of pity and fear. On the contrary, G. E. Lessing argues that the goal of any tragic exposure is to experience the feelings of pity and fear virtuously, i.e. in accordance with the proper mean between excess and deficiency. In short, the purgation theory views pity and fear as pathological states that must be removed, while the purification interpretation makes the experiencing of these emotions in the proper amount, which paves a way



to the birth of moral or noble deeds. Taking these two interpretations together creates an ideal foundation in the analysis of Oskar Schindler's act of redemption in Thomas Keneally's **Schindler's List**.

Oskar Schindler's regular exposure to the tragic events befalling the Jews during the Nazi regime forced him to seek a remedy for this excess through a homeopathic cure with the purpose of eventually eradicating the feelings of pity and fear. Resembling Jacob Bernays' interpretation of catharsis, i.e., excessive exposure of an individual to emotions of pity and fear from tragic sources such as from personal experience, and heard stories, Thomas Keneally's **Schindler's List** portrays Oskar Schindler seeking remedies for the tragic excesses he either experienced or heard from the stories told by people around him, through homeopathic cure with the purpose of gradually obliterating these pathologic excesses of pity and fear from his life.

In Chapter 16, Thomas Keneally depicts Oskar Schindler's passion to discover disparate information about the Aktion, the systematic killing of Jews, taking place. He inquired for matters, which he had in the past treated as temporary lunacies, such as the continued atrocities and dehumanizing activities of the Nazi regime (135-37) to satisfy his cravings for

unknown information, which is the underlying cause of his pity and fear for the Jews. This enquiry leads to an influx of tragic information (imbued with feelings of pity and fear) from various reliable sources, which is in a sense a kind of homeopathic cure or a cathartic remedy with the purpose of eventually eradicating the feelings of pity and fear.

Similarly, G.E. Lessing employed homeopathic catharsis with the aim of representing pitiable, terrifying and other painful events that arouses pity and fear in an individual according to his own emotional capacity. Lessing's interpretation differs from Bernays' in terms of the result, i.e. representations stimulate these emotions as to relieve the individual by giving him moderate and harmless exercise, thereby bringing him nearer to the mean in his emotional responses, and so nearer to virtue in his character. Thus, as Lessing says, by responding emotionally to the representation, an individual can learn to develop the correct emotional response. Undoubtedly, the individual's exposures to tragic events whether they be personal experience or heard events have an educative and moral function, that is, they help form the character of the involved individual.

In **Schindler's List**, Oskar Schindler opts and manages to employ a rational



solution to completely obliterate his feelings of pity and fear, i.e., to build a new barracks for the Jews (144). He also unloaded his influx of pity and fear through public announcements or reenactments of what he saw in the camps (135, 148, & 154-5). These precede the inclusion of more than a thousand Jews in a roster called Schindler's List that leads to their temporary shelter but long enough to sustain their survival while waiting for the arrival of the Allied Forces.

While most Holocaust writers such as David Aberbach, Susan Shellie Baum, Steven Aaron Herskovic, R. Ruth Linden, Joy Erlichmann Miller and Sondra Rappaport writer argue that the Jews survived because of their practical skills, knowledge and information, affiliation, attitude, and the like, employing Aristotle's Theory of Tragic Mimesis disproves this claim. Instead, a different perspective is depicted, i.e. an indispensable part of Jewish survival is secondary to virtuous acts of people during the Nazi regime.

Definition of Terms

Catharsis is a kind of purification asserting that the goal of any tragic exposure is to experience the feelings of pity and fear virtuously, i.e. in accordance with the proper mean between excess and deficiency to pave a way to the birth of moral or noble deeds.

(The) Holocaust refers to the killing by the Nazis of millions of Jews during the Second World War.

Fear is a painful emotion one experiences when one realizes that the one who suffers misfortune is a human being like oneself.

Mimesis is an imitation of human life and human nature as a way of expressing a universal element of humanity.

Pity is a feeling of painful emotion toward another person who suffered undeserved misfortune.

Redemption is a virtuous act of doing something that will improve what other people think of you. It could also be the state of being freed from the power of sin and evil.

Schindlerjudens is the German word for Schindler's Jews.



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